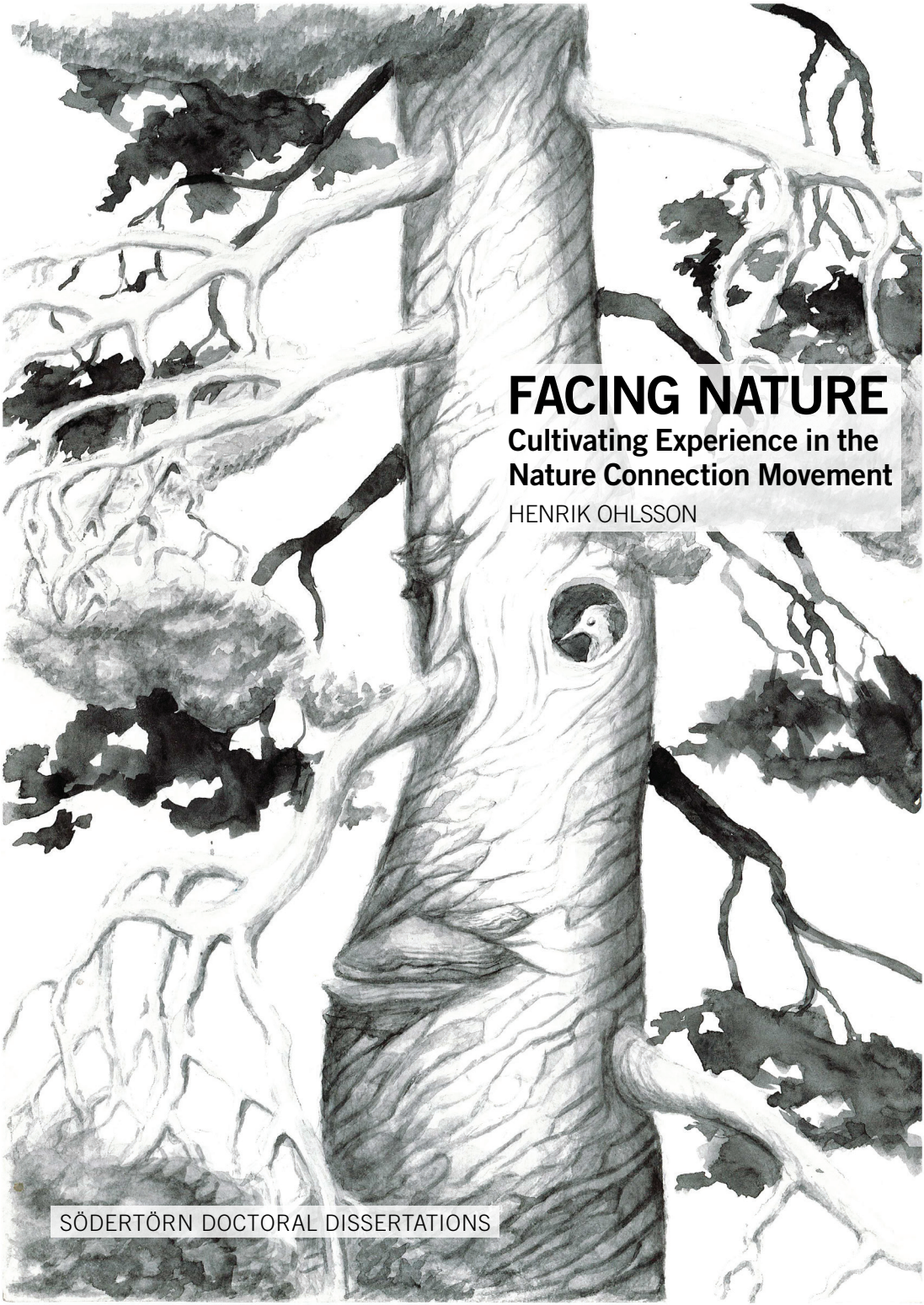

FACING NATURE

Cultivating Experience in the Nature Connection Movement

HENRIK OHLSSON

SÖDERTÖRN DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS

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HENRIK OHLSSON

Södertörns högskola

The Study of Religions
Historical Studies
School of Historical and Contemporary Studies

Södertörns högskola
(Södertörn University)
Library
SE-141 89 Huddinge

www.sh.se/publications

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Cover image: *Dryad* (2022), Henrik Ohlsson
Graphic form: Per Lindblom & Jonathan Robson

Printed by E-print, Stockholm 2022

Södertörn Doctoral Dissertations 204
ISSN 1652–7399
ISBN 978-91-89504-05-9 (print)
ISBN 978-91-89504-06-6 (digital)

Abstract
Through ethnographic fieldwork in Sweden and Finland between 2017 and 2022, I have studied what can best be described as a burgeoning social movement whose main idea is that an in-depth connection with nature can be a means of achieving personal well-being as well as ecological sustainability at the societal level. The movement is built around practices, such as *forest bathing*, *nature awareness*, *natural mindfulness*, and similar practices, mainly consisting of exercises for enhanced bodily presence and sensory attention in natural environment, often conducted within ritualised frameworks.

In the first part of the thesis, ideas, practices, organisations, literature, and practitioners' backgrounds and self-descriptions are analysed in a contemporary cultural context in the borderland between health practices, environmental activism, and spirituality. It is, in this way, a case study of what Bron Taylor (2010) has called *dark green religion*. In this particular case, I have identified three areas of tension. The first is between personal wellbeing and social activism. This tension is to some extent resolved through a holistic ideology in which the self and the world are united. Another related area of tension is that between integration and resistance, that is, between efforts to integrate the practices into conventional healthcare and capitalist business models, and resistance – on personal as well as on social levels – against a social order which is seen as detrimental to health and ecological sustainability. A third area of tension lies in the very concept of nature. The dominant philosophy, in this movement, is monistic, insisting that human beings and nature are one. But dualistic views of nature and culture are also expressed in practices and practitioners' personal experiences.

In the second part of the thesis, a *hermeneutic-phenomenological* analysis is made of participants' personal experiences of nature connection. The active practice, and the social environment in which it is practiced, are understood as a *cultivation of experience*, whereby experiences of nature and its non-human inhabitants as alive and communicative are maintained and enhanced. Such experiences seem to amount to a form of *animism*, which, in a Western context, is often treated as a foreign element, borrowed or appropriated from indigenous cultures or from a reimagined pre-Christian Europe. This thesis challenges the sharp distinction between animist and non-animist cultures by identifying some of the personal and cultural dynamics of what can be characterised at least as animist tendencies, co-existing in a person's lifeworld with different tendencies.

Moreover, research on animism has, for the most part, been focussed on ontology, or on cognitive and perceptual patterns. This thesis aims to develop

a multidimensional understanding, which includes cognitive and perceptual patterns but lays a stronger emphasis on emotional and ethical dimensions. As a basis for this understanding, the thesis applies the concept of *face*, which, in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, signifies a meta-ontological encounter with the Other, a reality which cannot be fully grasped intellectually, and thus not controlled or incorporated by the I in the way that objects can. Through the face, the Other speaks (albeit not necessarily in words) as a living presence in and of itself, and, in this way, urges ethical responsibility. For Levinas, this encounter marks the distinction between the *order of ontology* (consisting of objects which can be understood and classified conceptually) and the *order of ethics* (consisting of subjects, to which we can only relate specifically and ethically). (Levinas 1996 [1952], p. 6; 2004 [1969], pp. 197-8). In this thesis, *face* is operationalised in a way that includes bodily, sensory, cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions. It is used mostly in the verb form, signifying a degree of active agency, in both momentary attitudes and long-term processes where this mode of experience is cultivated. This also means that the division between these two fundamental orders is not fixed but negotiable, and that this negotiation involves some degree of both personal and collective agency. With this concept as a basis, the thesis understands both health and spirituality as states of (relative) openness, on sensory, cognitive, emotional, and ethical levels, toward the world and its human and non-human inhabitants.

Keywords: face, facing, cultivation of experience, nature connection, nature connection movement, animism, compartmentalisation, de-compartmentalisation, hermeneutic phenomenology

Abstract
Genom etnografiskt fältarbete i Sverige och Finland mellan 2017 och 2022 har jag studerat vad som bäst kan beskrivas som en framväxande social rörelse vars huvudtanke är att en fördjupad koppling till naturen kan vara ett medel för att uppnå personligt välbefinnande såväl som ekologisk hållbarhet på samhällsnivå. Rörelsen är uppbyggd kring praktiker, såsom skogsbad, naturvakenhet, naturlig mindfulness och liknande, huvudsakligen bestående av övningar för ökad kroppslig närvaro och sinnlig uppmärksamhet i naturmiljöer, ofta inom ritualiserade ramverk.

I den första delen av avhandlingen analyseras idéer, praktiker, organisationer, litteratur och utövares bakgrunder och självbeskrivningar i ett samtida kulturellt sammanhang i gränslandet mellan hälsopraxis, miljöaktivism och andlighet. Det är på detta sätt en fallstudie av vad Bron Taylor (2010) har kallat *dark green religion*. I det här specifika fallet har jag identifierat tre spänningsfält. Det första är mellan personligt välbefinnande och social aktivism. Denna spänning lättas till viss del genom en holistisk ideologi där jaget och världen förenas. Ett annat relaterat spänningsfält är det mellan integration och motstånd, det vill säga mellan ansträngningar att integrera metoderna i konventionell hälsovård och kapitalistiska affärsmodeller, och motstånd – på personlig såväl som på social nivå – mot en social ordning som ses som skadlig för både hälsa och ekologisk hållbarhet. Ett tredje spänningsfält ligger i själva naturbegreppet. Den dominerande filosofin i denna rörelse är monistisk och ser människa och natur som ett. Men dualistiska uppfattningar av natur och kultur uttrycks också i praktiker och i utövares personliga erfarenheter.

I avhandlingens andra del görs en hermeneutisk-fenomenologisk analys av deltagarnas personliga upplevelser av naturanknytning. Den aktiva praktiken, och den sociala miljö där den utövas, förstås som en odling av erfarenhet (*cultivation of experience*), varigenom upplevelser av naturen och dess icke-mänskliga invånare som levande och kommunikativa upprätthålls och förstärks. Sådana erfarenheter tycks utgöra en form av animism, vilket i ett västerländskt sammanhang ofta behandlas som ett främmande element, lånat från ursprungsfolk eller från ett föreställt förkristet Europa. Denna avhandling utmanar den skarpa distinktionen mellan animistiska och icke-animistiska kulturer genom att identifiera några av de personliga och kulturella dynamikerna i vad som åtminstone kan karakteriseras som animistiska tendenser, samexisterande i en persons livsvärld med andra tendenser.

Dessutom har forskningen om animism till största delen varit inriktad på ontologi, eller på kognitiva och perceptuella mönster. Denna avhandling

syftar till att utveckla en multidimensionell förståelse, som inkluderar kognitiva och perceptuella mönster men lägger en starkare tonvikt på emotionella och etiska dimensioner. Som grund för denna förståelse tillämpar avhandlingen begreppet ansikte (*face*) som i Emmanuel Levinas filosofi betecknar ett metaontologiskt möte med den Andre, en verklighet som inte fullt ut kan förstås intellektuellt, och alltså inte kontrolleras eller inkorporeras av jaget på det sätt som objekt kan. Genom ansiktet talar den Andre (om än inte nödvändigtvis i ord) som en levande närvaro i sin egen rätt och manar på så sätt till etiskt ansvar. För Levinas markerar detta möte skillnaden mellan *ontologins ordning* (bestående av objekt som kan förstås och klassificeras konceptuellt) och *etikens ordning* (bestående av subjekt som kräver ett specifikt och etiskt förhållningssätt). (Levinas 1996 [1952], s. 6; 2004 [1969], s. 197-8). I denna avhandling operationaliseras *face* på ett sätt som inkluderar kroppsliga, sensoriska, kognitiva, emotionella och etiska dimensioner. Det används mestadels i verbformen, vilket antyder en viss grad av aktiv agens, både i momentana attityder och i långsiktiga processer där detta upplevelsesätt odlas. Det innebär också att uppdelningen mellan dessa två grundläggande ordningar inte är fast utan förhandlingsbar, och att denna förhandling involverar en viss grad av både personlig och kollektiv agens. Med detta koncept som grund förstår avhandlingen både hälsa och andlighet som tillstånd av (relativ) öppenhet, på sensoriska, kognitiva, emotionella och etiska nivåer, gentemot världen och dess mänskliga och icke-mänskliga invånare.

Nyckelord: ansikte, ansiktssyn, odling av erfarenhet, naturkontakt, naturkontaktrörelsen, animism, kompartmentalisering, dekompartmentalisering, hermeneutisk fenomenologi

To my father, Ragnar Ohlsson, who stimulated my intellectual curiosity from an early age. Although he passed away when I was about half-way through the work on this thesis, his presence is still strong in my academic endeavours and in many of my other human aspirations.

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Acknowledgments

Working on this thesis, I have enjoyed a great degree of freedom in my work process and with regards to the direction the study has taken. Still, I have never felt alone. This is in large part due to the wise and light-handed guidance of my main supervisor, David Thurfjell. Moreover, this freedom has in no way been compromised by the fact that the thesis has been written as part of a larger project, "The relocation of transcendence: Silence and the sacred of the seculars around the Baltic Sea", made possible through means from the Baltic Sea Foundation. This project also included my second supervisor, Cecilie Rubow, whose keen eye for ethnography and textual composition has contributed greatly to the improvement of this thesis, and Atko Remmel, who was not officially my supervisor but who has also provided ample inspiration and guidance, not least through his expertise in the area of non-religion and secularity. I have benefited immensely from the many inspiring conversations and co-operations within this project. David, Cecilie, and Atko have all been fantastic mentors, conversation partners, and friends. For much of the time, this project group has also worked in close cooperation with the sister project, "Enchanted Ecologies", which included Sofie Isager Ahl, Matti Weisdorf, and Stine Krøijer. With all of these colleagues, I have enjoyed excellent academic exchange and many inspiring evening conversations over a glass of wine or two – often in beautiful natural settings.

As a PhD student at Södertörn University, I have had the privilege of being part of a large and dynamic research environment for the study of religion, which, in addition to David Thurfjell, has included such great colleagues as Fredrik Jahnke, Ingela Visuri, Renat Bekkin, Maria Lindquist, Kateryna Zorya, Douglas Mattsson, Vera Ericson von Bahr, Per Faxneld, Lena Roos, Staffan Nilsson, Ann af Burén, Anne Kubai, Lotta Carlström, Åsa Schumann, Karen Swartz, Jenny Berglund, Simon Sorgenfrei, Göran Ståhle, Linda Vikdahl, Gunilla Gunner, Jørgen Straarup, Mattias Engzell Liljefeldt, and Regina Skarp. All of you have contributed greatly to the completion of this thesis through your comments on my drafts, through learned conversations, and through the general friendliness and supportiveness that I have come to regard as hallmarks of the study of religion research environment at Södertörn. To be granted four years of full-time immersion in a favourite subject

is already an almost unbelievable privilege. And to get to do it at Södertörn has been beyond anything I could have expected.

Apart from the Södertörn colleagues, I want to mention Egil Asprem and Henrik Bogdan, who gave me great input as readers at my 50 % and 90 % seminars, respectively, Anne-Christine Hornborg, who has taken an interest in my project since early on and provided insightful comments on some of my chapter drafts, and Ed Luddite Lord, with whom I have had fruitful exchange during our work on a joint article.

I also want to express my deep gratitude toward all my conversation partners and friends in the world of nature connection, many of whom must remain unnamed for reasons of privacy. You all know who you are, and you should also how much I value your sharing of personal experiences, your comments on my drafts, and all your help in understanding what nature connection is about. There are also some nature connection people who can and should be mentioned by name: those who have contributed through conversations during nature connection get-togethers, and through exchanges via email and social media, not as interviewees but in their official capacities as leading practitioners, developers, and organisers. This group includes leading practitioners and developers of nature connection practice in several countries, Petra Ellora Cau Wetterholm, Henrik Hallgren, Pella Thiel, Josefin Wilkins, Ben Crow Page, Ian Banyard and Alex Gesse, and the core crew of the IFTD conference forum, Heidi Korhonen, Katriina Kilpi, Vitalija Povilaityte-Petri, Heli Leppälammi, Nitin Das, Iwao Uehara, Sara Malve-Ahlroth, and Sini Ótisdóttir Malminiemi. All of you, named and unnamed, have contributed to making this journey both pleasant and enlightening. I have made some good friends and have absolutely loved hanging out in the forest with all of you. I hope for more of that in the future.

Last but not least, I want to give thanks to the forest, as is customary during the tea ceremony that concludes a forest bathing session. All the time spent in beautiful forests around the Baltic Sea, both with the research groups and during nature connection events, has rekindled my love for this landscape.

Bäcken, Tiveden Forest, 4 April, 2022
Henrik Ohlsson

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the artworks of the ancient Minoans of the Aegean archipelago, nature scenes, trees, rocks and animals feature prominently, while portrayals of what can unambiguously be identified as gods are hard to find. What is apparent in these images, however, is an attitude towards the natural elements that implies reverence and communication (Herva 2006a; b). It seems that the Minoans were animists; that is, in Graham Harvey's definition, "[…] people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (Harvey 2006, p. XI).

In our present secular era, many people are (again?) losing their faith in gods, at least as gods have been thought of (or as we now assume they have been thought of) for the last couple of millennia in the cultures we count as predecessors of modern Europe. Instead, surveys and ethnographic research indicate that many people are turning to nature for their existential needs and for celebration of life events (Uddenberg 1995; Ahmadi 2006; Bromander 2008; Jarnkvist 2020; Thurfjell 2020; Rubow 2022). Have we then passed through all of the stages in the linear cultural evolution described by E. B. Tylor (1871), from animistic nature religion, via polytheism and monotheism, to eventually arrive at a rational, naturalistic, scientific outlook on life? Or have at least some of us gone full circle back to some kind of nature worship similar to that of the ancients? Should we understand our contemporary love of nature as a new (or revived) form of religion? Or should it not be classified as religion if it lacks belief in gods? Does it really lack such beliefs? In the case of the Minoans, it has been assumed that a nature goddess played a central part in their culture. However, this may be simply a projection onto the archaeological data by modern scholars who take for granted that religion must necessarily involve gods (and that ancient cultures were necessarily religious). Something in both the Minoan artworks and our contemporary love of nature seems to defy categorisation.

Lisa, one of the people who graciously shared their personal stories with me during the work with this thesis, told me about an experience she had after many hours of wandering around in the forest without direction. Sud-

denly, she felt an intense feeling of love coming from the trees around her. She felt loved and supported by those trees and by the whole of nature. Lisa had a secular upbringing and felt resistance towards religious concepts. Pondering her experience in the forest, however, it eventually occurred to her that "It might be that this is what people are talking about when they talk about God" (interview with Lisa, 30 Nov. 2017).

Deep existential experiences in nature are reported by people from a range of different backgrounds and belief systems, non-religious as well as religious (Ahmadi 2006; Bromander 2008). For some, nature is simply an environment where one can be alone with one's thoughts – and perhaps also with (a transcendent) God. For others, however, the natural landscape itself is central in the existential experience. What is more, nature experiences with an existential dimension are in fact actively cultivated within a wide range of increasingly popular practices, promoted under labels such as forest bathing, forest therapy, and nature awareness, constituting what I will refer to in this thesis as the *nature connection movement*. The express purpose of these practices is often formulated either in terms of personal health or as a way out of the ecological crisis. In fact, these seemingly disparate purposes often seem to merge together. Improved health, in this context, may refer to reduced stress, lower blood pressure, and a strengthened immune system, but also to a more balanced relationship with the Earth and with other beings, both human and non-human. The latter understanding of health is based on a holistic philosophy where humans are part of nature and where the well-being of the parts is dependent on their relationship with the whole. Again, our common categories fall short. There seem to be no clear distinctions between personal wellbeing and societal transformation, or between simple stress relief and deep spirituality.

When I began to explore this field in late 2017, I was aware of only one organiser of forest bathing in Sweden, Petra Ellora Cau Wetterholm, a pioneer of nature connection practice in Scandinavia who had just recently (in 2016) started her company Shinrin-Yoku Sweden. I also knew about Lodyn, an organisation founded in 2015 which, on a basis of ecopsychology, teaches methods for sensory connection with nature and combines this with environmentalist campaigns. Of course, there must have been other practitioners with similar orientations of whom I was not aware. Nevertheless, it is clear that these are burgeoning practices whose popularity has grown exponentially in the years I have been conducting this study. For instance, there are now around 70 forest bathing guides active all over Sweden who have been trained and certified by the Scandinavian Nature and Forest

Therapy Institute (SNFTI),[1] and a few certified by other organisations. Some 40–50 people have gone through Lodyn's one-year training programme "Jorden är själens hem" ("Earth is Home to the Soul").[2] Some of these practices have attracted intense interest from the media and public.

The purpose of this study is threefold: to define and describe the nature connection movement; to understand the long-term impacts of participation in that movement and its practices on the lifeworlds of practitioners; and to explore an experience-based approach to contemporary spirituality.

For this purpose, I conducted an ethnographic study in Sweden and Finland between late 2017 and early 2022, based on participant observations and in-depth interviews with practitioners. Although my field research has been concentrated in Sweden and Finland, the trends and practices I have studied are certainly not confined to this region.[3] In the course of the study, I have been in contact with leading practitioners in several countries outside of the Nordic region, not least through the International Forest Therapy Days (IFTD) conference forum.[4] In this way, I have had the opportunity to closely follow the rapid development of a movement that sits at the junction between some of the most salient trends of contemporary culture; a response, it seems, both to individual needs and to our current civilizational predicament.

I will present my findings in two core parts. In part 1, ideas, practices, organisations, literature, and practitioners' backgrounds and self-descriptions will be analysed in a contemporary cultural (Western and Nordic) context in the borderland between health practices, environmental activism, and spirituality. This first part can be read as a case study of what Bron Taylor (2010) has called *dark green religion*. This particular case stands out somewhat from Taylor's wider field in that it contains a clear health dimension.

I have identified three areas of tension in the nature connection movement. The first is between personal wellbeing and social activism. This tension is to some extent resolved through a holistic ideology in which the self

[1] This figure has been provided in correspondence with SNFTI founder Petra Ellora Cau Wetterholm. See also presentation of organizations in chapter 7.
[2] This figure has been provided in correspondence with Lodyn founder Henrik Hallgren. See also presentation of organisations in chapter 7.
[3] For instance, an important influence on nature connection practice in many Western countries, including Scandinavia, is the US-based organisation ANFT (see presentation of organisations in chapter 7), through which some of the pioneers in the Nordic countries received their training. Thus, it seems that the trend started some years earlier in the US. Of course, it could also be traced back to Japan, where forest bathing, shinrin yoku, emerged back in the 1980s. However, I am approaching what I have termed the nature connection movement in a Western context, which includes several other important influences besides shinrin yoku.
[4] International Forest Therapy Days (see presentation of organisations below).

and the world are united. A second – and related – area of tension is that between integration and resistance, that is, between efforts to integrate the practices into conventional healthcare and capitalist business models, on the one hand, and resistance – on personal as well as on social levels – against a social order which is seen as detrimental to health and ecological sustainability, on the other. A third area of tension lies in the very concept of nature, around which the whole complex of ideas and practices is built. The dominant philosophy in this movement is monistic, insisting that human beings and nature are one. However, as we shall see, dualistic views of nature and culture are also expressed in practices and in practitioners' personal experiences.

In the second part of the thesis, we will become more acquainted with some of the practitioners and look in detail at the emotional, ethical, cognitive, and perceptual dimensions of their personal experiences of practice and participation in the movement. Moreover, emotions, ethical stances, cognition, and perception are all expressed in both mind and body. While many nature connection practitioners – as well as humanities scholars adhering to the embodiment paradigm – strive to get past mind-body dualism, I find that it makes analytical sense to speak of mind and body when we explore different manifestations of emotions, ethics, cognition, and perception. My hermeneutic strategy has been to start out from what I perceive to be common everyday uses of the terms I want to explore, and then pay attention to what meanings they (and related terms) acquire in contact with practices and in conversation with practitioners. In my initial definition, *mind* refers to our reflective consciousness and *body* refers to our sensory and motor faculties.[5] All of the above dimensions constitute what I will speak of as the *lifeworld*. The lifeworld, in my understanding, is both personal and socio-cultural. It unfolds around an individual locus of experience but is in constant connection with collectively mediated ideas, symbols, moods, styles, and modes of expression. This is how a *cultivation of experience* can take place within a collective practice or a social milieu. In the practices and social milieus studied here, which constitute the nature connection movement, experiences of nature and its non-human inhabitants as alive and communicative are cultivated.

This brings the study into the field of research on *animism*, which, in a Western context, is often treated as a foreign element, borrowed or approp-

[5] This use of the terms is also in line with what Philippe Descola calls *interiority* and *physicality*, which constitute the basis of his model of modes of identification. (See chapter 15.)

riated either from indigenous cultures or from a reimagined pre-Christian Europe. This thesis challenges the sharp distinction between animist and non-animist cultures by identifying some of the personal and cultural dynamics of animist tendencies in a contemporary Western and Nordic context, tendencies which do not amount to a fully animist lifestyle but rather co-exist in a person's lifeworld with other, sometimes opposing, tendencies.

I also aim to move beyond the narrow focus on ontology and cognitive-perceptual patterns, which characterises the bulk of research on animism, and develop a multidimensional understanding, which includes cognitive and perceptual patterns but lays a stronger emphasis on emotional and ethical dimensions. As a basis for this understanding, I will apply the concept of *face*, which, in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, signifies a meta-ontological encounter with the Other, a reality which cannot be fully grasped intellectually, and thus not controlled or incorporated by the I in the way that objects can. Through the face, the Other speaks (albeit not necessarily in words) expressing a living presence that stands in its own right, and, in this way, urges ethical responsibility. For Levinas, this encounter marks the distinction between the *order of ontology* and the *order of ethics*. (Levinas 1996 [1952], p. 6; 2004 [1969], pp. 197-8). I have operationalised this concept in a way that includes all the dimensions of the human lifeworld listed above. It is used mostly in the verb form (to *face*, *facing*) to underline the presence of active agency in both momentary attitudes and long-term processes where this mode of experience is cultivated. This also means that the division between the two fundamental orders, that of ontology and that of ethics, is not fixed but negotiable, and that this negotiation involves some degree of both personal and collective agency. With this concept as a basis, the thesis understands both health and spirituality as states of (relative) openness toward the world and its human and non-human inhabitants, an openness which appears in contrast to compartmentalisation, especially on emotional and ethical levels.

The field is one that stretches between different cultural trends and spheres of life. For this reason, and because I aim as far as possible to do justice to the complexities of personal experience, I have deemed it necessary to make detours into a range of theoretical and conceptual terrains. This may make the study somewhat straggly and arduous to follow in parts. I have chosen this path to avoid the opposite risks of making the study flat and reductionistic. I am convinced, however, that the approach I have chosen will make for a richer and more useful contribution to the study of these contemporary practices that exist on the fringes of what we would normally cate-

gorise as spirituality. Nevertheless, I also keep to what I call *hermeneutic phenomenology* (elaborated in the next chapter) as my main theoretical and methodological basis.

As I navigate between ideas, practices, and personal experiences, I aim for balance by not giving any one of these levels a primary causal position. It is possible to view these practices as results or manifestations of historical and contemporary ideas; that is, that the practitioners do what they do because they have a certain worldview with a certain ideological lineage. Or we may see the worldview as generated by the practices and the experiences they engender. In all likelihood, it goes both ways, and I will try to approach it both ways as well. Similarly, the experiences reported by practitioners may be seen as a result of the practices and as shaped by certain ideas about nature. But it is just as possible to postulate that practitioners have found their way to these practices and adopted the accompanying ideas because they chime with experiences that they have already had. One of my basic observations is that nature connection practitioners are often people who are already prone to have profound nature experiences and feelings of connection; but that these practices – and even simply participation in the surrounding social milieu – help to maintain, enhance, and transform those experiences through the process I call *cultivation of experience*.

Central Concepts

In the following, I will introduce the three central concepts of the study: *nature*, *cultivation of experience*, and *face*, and then summarise the chapters one by one.

Nature

Nature is not my own analytical concept in the same way as the other two concepts presented below. It is not a concept I apply, but rather one which is central to the context I study, and thus part of my empirical inquiry. In common usage, the word "nature" can refer to everything that is not culture. Lines can be drawn in the landscape between cultivated and natural land, or within a human being between biological functions and culturally acquired (learned) properties. Another common definition of the term is synonymous with essence: the nature of something, the way it really is. For most people, the word "nature" can be used in both senses, depending on context, without any felt contradiction. A conscious engagement with the idea of nature may take us in either a dualistic or a monistic direction: either nature is everything

that has not been altered by humans, or nature is all that exists, including human beings and human culture. Since nature is such a central idea in the movement under study – arguably the most central – an important part of defining this movement is to understand how its practitioners think about and relate to nature, in speech and in action. What is it that nature connection practitioners strive to connect to? This question will be present throughout the thesis, but most explicitly addressed in chapter 5. As we will see, both dualistic and monistic ideas of nature can be discerned among this community, although the latter is dominant in explicit ideological stances. For the most part, humans are seen as part of nature with a legitimate place and role in it (at least potentially). Thus, some people use the term *more-than-human world*, coined by David Abram (1997), to refer to earthly nature in a way that recognises human beings as just one part of the picture.

Cultivation of Experience

As will become clear in part 2, I do not understand experience only as passive perception of an outside reality. Our modes of experience determine, and are determined by, the ways in which we relate to the world and to ourselves. We may even say that experiencing *is* relating and vice versa. Through continuous interaction with the world, we shape ourselves as well as our environment in processes involving bodily, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions. My approach is inspired to a large degree by two anthropologists: James D. Faubion, who speaks of *ethical autopoiesis*, "the production and maintenance of the ethical subject" (2010, p. 85), and Tim Ingold, who sees a human being "[…] not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually evolving field of relationships" (2000, pp. 4-5).

In this study, I will use the term *cultivation of experience* as an overall framework for understanding the personal impacts of participation in the nature connection movement and its practices. By this, I mean collective as well as individual efforts to maintain, enhance, or direct the ways in which the world is experienced. The agricultural metaphor of cultivation suggests a bringing forth of something partially new from pre-existing elements and conditions. For instance, people who are already prone to having profound nature experiences discover a nature connection practice through which this pre-existing tendency is enhanced and articulated in partially new ways. This cultivation is not necessarily conscious in the sense that individual participants are fully aware of the process. In the milieu we are examining here,

however, it is probably more conscious than in many other contexts, seeing as nature connection practices specifically target personal experience and sensory attention. Nevertheless, cultivation of experience is of course nothing unique to the nature connection movement. Culture in general shapes and directs our modes of experience. In part 2 of this thesis, I will discuss in detail what I have found to be characteristic of the specific cultivation that goes on in the nature connection milieu, and what it can mean for a person's view of both world and self.

Face

The *face*, in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, is a phenomenal expression of the encounter between the I and the Other.[6] For Levinas, the encounter with the Other, the face, constitutes the basis of all ethics. It requires us to give up a part of ourselves and leave room for the Other. In contrast to an object, the Other cannot be controlled and incorporated into our own being as exhaustive knowledge. It is, in this way, infinite. Levinas distinguishes between *things*, belonging to the *order of ontology*, and *persons*, belonging to the *order of ethics* (Levinas 1996 [1952], p. 6; 2004 [1969], pp. 197-8). The face is thus a term that applies to the encounter with subjectivity outside of oneself prior to, and beyond, conceptualisation. Since experience, as I understand it, is an active process, I will use the term 'face' mainly as a transitive verb, indicating a certain mode of relating to the world and to entities in it. *Facing*, as I understand it here, does not require any particular beliefs or assumptions regarding the nature of a given entity. Nature connection practitioners rarely make unambiguous categorical statements regarding the possible sentience of, for instance, trees or stones. This connects to a main line in anthropological discussions on animism in recent decades where personhood is understood as relational rather than as a property of specified classes of entities (Bird-David 1999; Ingold 2000, pp. 87-110). Mary Black characterised animism as "fundamentally antitaxonomic" (Black 1977, quoted in Ingold 2000). It does not take the form of propositional statements or beliefs about the nature of things, but rather of personal, relational knowledge based on active participation in the world (Ingold 2000, pp. 98-100).

I will also use the opposite term *de-face/ing* to illustrate that the process can go in two directions. It is not a fixed reality, either within one person or

[6] The upper-case "Other" represents, in Alphonso Lingis' translation of Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, the word *autrui* in the original French, while the lower-case "other" represents *autre*. Levinas himself alternated between upper case and lower case with both terms. (See translation note by Lingis in Levinas 2004 [1969], pp. 24-25.)

in a wider cultural context. When we open ourselves to the possibility that, for instance, a tree is more than what we can grasp conceptually, that it has dimensions to which we may be granted access only by silencing our own possessive intellect, we are facing it. But if we concern ourselves only with determining its species, measuring its height and width, etc., we are de-facing it. (The same applies to how we relate to other human beings.)

I find this concept useful for the study of contemporary Western animism (or animist tendencies) not as a belief system, but as an attitude, a way of relating to the world which manifests on multiple levels. It also makes it clear that personal wellbeing and ethical conduct cannot be separated; facing and de-facing are closely tied to the ways in which we understand and feel about ourselves as well as the ways in which we act towards other beings in the world.

Overview of the Study

Aside from the introductory chapters 1, 2, and 3, and the conclusions in chapter 17, the thesis consists of two core parts, where the empirical matter of the study is presented and discussed. Chapters 4–10 constitute part 1 and chapters 11–16 constitute part 2. The two main sections also include introductions, which are not numbered or given separate headings but follow directly after the main headings for parts 1 and 2.

In chapter 4, I begin to fulfil the first part of the main purpose – to delineate and define the nature connection movement – by describing the ways in which I have approached and framed my field of study. I introduce the reader to the movement's ideas and practices, to be further elaborated in the following chapters, and list what I consider to be its main influences, to be further elaborated in chapter 10 which concludes part 1.

In chapter 5, I discuss the movement's basic ideology, which is certainly not completely unified but which I find to have enough common denominators to justify a common term. Most of this chapter is dedicated to a discussion of how the central idea of nature is understood and expressed by practitioners in interviews, as well as in public talks and literature. I also discuss the extent to which the movement can be considered religious or spiritual, drawing on Bron Taylor's (2010) concept of *dark green religion* and Nancy Ammerman's (2020) definition of religion as a social practice with all the dimensions of any other social practice (embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, moral judgment, and narrative structuring) but with the addition of a connection to something that is "other than" everyday reality.

In chapter 6, I describe and categorise the movement's practices, whose purposes range between personal wellbeing (on all levels) and social transformation. Much of the practice is about attention: sensory attention as well as attention directed towards aesthetic and poetic dimensions of the natural landscape. There are also ritualised elements, both as a framing for the attention exercises and in the form of specific ritualised gatherings addressing aspects of the ecological crisis.

In chapter 7, I describe and discuss the organised actors in the field, from international and national associations to independent sole practitioners offering training and sessions for the general public. This chapter also includes a few "border post actors"; that is, organisations that I have been in contact with in the course of the study and which do not meet all my criteria for inclusion, but are still close enough to help clarify the delimitations I have made.

In chapter 8, I review some key literary works connected to the movement and define what I consider to be a specific genre: *nature connection literature*. Here too, I include "border post literature", which does not meet all the criteria but which is close enough to be an important source of inspiration (and whose inclusion helps to clarify my delimitations).

In chapter 9, I provide an overview of the people involved in movement, firstly by looking at its demographic features such as high average age, high education level, and strong female dominance, and discuss possible reasons for these patterns. Secondly, I introduce the reader to some of my interlocutors through summaries of their self-descriptions and life stories as given in interviews.

In chapter 10, I return to the movement's main influences and adjacent cultural trends, previously listed in chapter 1. Having familiarised the reader with the movement's ideas and practices in previous chapters, these cultural trends, and the ways in which they relate to the nature connection movement, can be discussed at length here. This concludes part 1 by placing the movement within contemporary Western and Nordic culture.

Part 2 of the thesis commences, after a brief introduction, with chapter 11, where I begin exploring the field from the perspective of my interlocutors' personal experiences. This also marks the beginning of my attempt to fulfil the second main purpose: to understand the long-term impacts, on a personal level, of participation in the nature connection movement. In this chapter, I take a look at the role of the personal narrative in self-understanding, which in turn affects the way we feel (inside and about ourselves) and how we relate to the world and other beings in it. This is also the beginning of my discussion of how ethics relate to health and wellbeing,

which will be one of the central themes in the following two chapters and culminate in chapters 14 and 16.

In chapter 12, I explore the idea of body as it appears in conversations with interlocutors and in the practices under study. If chapter 8 explored how the mind unites ideas about the self and its relations and places them in a larger time-frame, chapter 9 looks at the body as something of an opposite. The idea of body implies our sensory and motor faculties, through which we are present in the here and now. Sensory presence and attention are, in most nature connection practices, prioritised over the mind and its abstractions.

In chapter 13, I approach the emotional dimensions of nature connection practice. Drawing on the work of phenomenologist Otto Friedrich Bollnow (2017 [1956]), I distinguish between object-related *emotions* on the one hand, and objectless *moods* (*Stimmungen*) on the other. The former are directed at something specific, while the latter can be felt to reign over a place or situation. Both emotions and moods can be temporary or long-lasting, the latter setting the tone and framework for the former. Using the concept of *emotional regime*, as defined by Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead (2010), I try to understand what my interlocutors describe as increased emotionality as a result of continued practice, and to identify a repertoire of emotions and moods that are typically cultivated within the nature connection milieu.

In chapter 14, I explore the connections between ethics and health in the life story of one of my interlocutors. I observe how people with strong values of respect and love for nature may feel a clash with contemporary culture – although, as far as we can tell from surveys and ethnographic data, these values appear to be widespread. The main difference is perhaps to be found in people's propensity for moral and emotional compartmentalisation. I also observe that an emotional sensitivity to nature (also described in chapter 13) may contribute to personal wellbeing through positive emotions and a feeling of being energised, but that it also leaves a person vulnerable to the pain of witnessing environmental destruction. Adding an existential dimension, however, we may understand health as a state of openness towards the world that can result in pleasure as well as pain. The opposite of health is then not pain but numbness and alienation.

In chapter 15, I address the intellectual dimension of nature connection – although not as a general discussion of ideas characterising the movement, as in chapter 2. Instead, I adopt a person-centred perspective by following the intellectual and experiential development of one of my interlocutors, which resulted in a conviction – as well as perception – of the earth as a living being with whom communication is possible. This sample case illustrates how

intellectual convictions and experiences can develop in parallel, feeding into each other. To understand the connections between thought patterns (ontology) and perception, I am aided by Philippe Descola's (2013) four basic *modes of identification*.

In chapter 16, I dig deeper into the sense of openness towards the world that we have encountered in previous chapters in the forms of emotional sensitivity, ethical concern, and experiences of communication with nature. Revisiting some of the discussions and observations from earlier chapters, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of this openness by applying the concept of *face* (introduced above). I find that a great many of the experiences described by my interlocutors can be understood as part of a multi-levelled attitude towards the world: turning to the world as to a face. In this chapter, the discussion on ethics and health is taken a step further in light of this attitude and how it reflects on self-understanding and personal conduct. This is also the chapter which (apart from the general conclusions) most explicitly addresses the third purpose of the thesis: to identify theoretical approaches to contemporary spirituality where a multi-layered personal experience is at the centre. In earlier chapters, I have relied mainly on those definitions of religion and spirituality where ideas and social practices are in focus. With the concept of face, I turn the spotlight directly on personal attitudes towards and positions in relation to the world – a dimension which is certainly not absent from the above mentioned definitions, but which here takes centre stage.

CHAPTER 2

Previous Research

As noted in the introduction, in studying a field that spans different cultural trends and spheres of life, and attempting to give justice to the complexities of personal experience in such a context, it has been necessary to make detours into a range of theoretical and conceptual terrains. This is also an effect of a spiralling hermeneutic process, described in the next chapter, which, fully developed, results in a form of emergent theory. Moving thus back and forth between the empirical and theoretical levels, I have come into contact with several fields of research where the various dimensions of nature connection have previously been addressed. In accordance with this process, new theoretical avenues and possible interpretations will emerge throughout the thesis. In this introductory section, I cannot specify every one of those avenues. I do, however, provide an overview of the areas of research which I consider most relevant, and clarify my initial positions in the areas where the thesis aims to contribute. Following the threefold purpose of this thesis (to define and describe the nature connection movement, to understand the long-term impacts of participation in that movement and its practices on the lifeworlds of practitioners, and to explore an experience-based approach to contemporary spirituality), we necessarily encounter three central ideas: nature, health,[7] and spirituality, and the intersections between them. I will now discuss these intersections one by one.

Nature and Health

Roughly the last decade has seen a virtual explosion of research interest in the impacts of nature connection on human health, mostly in the fields of psychology and biomedicine. The theoretical basis of this research is usually found in evolutionary psychology, in the basic idea that our responses to

[7] Although health is not explicitly stated in my study purpose, it can, as we will see below, be taken as a multi-dimensional concept that is entangled with many different levels of the lifeworld. Moreover, since many nature connection practices are promoted as health practices, a study that aspires to provide a comprehensive view of this field will hardly be able to avoid the subject.

natural landscapes are conditioned by our long evolution in such environments. The broadest formulation of this idea, of which some of the other theories can be seen as versions or specifications, is the *biophilia hypothesis*.

The Biophilia Hypothesis

The term *biophilia* was first coined by the social psychologist Erich Fromm (1973) and later defined by Edward O. Wilson as an "innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" (Wilson 1986). Together with Stephen Kellert, Wilson developed the Biophilia Hypothesis (Kellert & Wilson 1993) which suggests that this tendency is

> inherent (that is, biologically based), part of our species' evolutionary heritage, associated with human competitive advantage and genetic fitness, likely to increase the possibility for achieving individual meaning and personal fulfilment [and] the self-interested basis for a human ethic of care and conservation of nature, most especially the diversity of life (Kellert 1993, p. 21).

The hypothesis aspires to encompass the whole human being, assuming that biophilia has consequences on all levels of human existence. In the words of Stephen R. Kellert, it

> […] proclaims a human dependence on nature that extends far beyond the simple issues of material and physical sustenance to encompass as well the human craving for aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and even spiritual meaning and satisfaction" (Kellert 1993, p. 20).

More specifically, the biophilia tendency is thought to find expression in the following set of values and ways of seeing and relating to nature:

- Utilitarian (Practical and material exploitation of nature)
- Naturalistic (Satisfaction from direct experience/contact with nature)
- Ecologistic-scientific (Systematic study of structure, function, and relationship in nature)
- Aesthetic (Physical appeal and beauty of nature)
- Symbolic (Use of nature for metaphorical expression, language, expressive thought)
- Humanistic (Strong affection, emotional attachment, "love" for nature)
- Moralistic (Strong affinity, spiritual reverence, ethical concern for nature)
- Dominionistic (Mastery, physical control, dominance of nature)
- Negativistic (Fear, aversion, alienation from nature) (Kellert 1993, p. 59)

The last of these values seems to point in the opposite direction. Could negative feelings really be part of the biophilia tendency? Well, if we assume that it has a genetic basis in our long evolution in natural environments, we certainly cannot expect only positive feelings in connection with nature. The natural environments in which we developed as a species would also have contained danger and unpleasant experiences. This is recognised by the authors of the biophilia hypothesis, and the opposite of biophilia is termed *biophobia*, discussed at some length by Roger S. Ulrich in the anthology in which the hypothesis is laid out. Biophobia, according to Ulrich, is expressed in our (presumably just as inherent) propensity to develop fear of things like snakes, spiders, and confined spaces (Ulrich 1993, pp. 74-86). Biophilia and biophobia are thus thought to be two sides of the same coin: our genetic inheritance from a long evolutionary involvement with nature.

Attention Restoration Theory

ART, Attention Restoration Theory, as formulated by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989), also assumes a bio-genetic basis for our responses to natural landscapes. It might perhaps be categorised as a subdivision of the biophilia hypothesis that attempts to explain and test in detail what really happens in the body (or in the brain) when we spend time in natural environments. The idea is that natural environments tend to keep us in a state of soft fascination, awake and engaged but without any demand for action. In prehistoric times, it is assumed, this gave us relief and restoration between the acute dangers that would occasionally appear and require another mode of attention that prepared us to fight or to flee. These two modes of attention are associated with the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems, respectively, and are often referred to in nature connection literature (e.g., Banyard 2018, p. 100; Clifford 2018, pp. 17, 22-4; Miyazaki 2018, pp. 130-4). According to the theory, modern city environments tend to over-activate the sympathetic nervous system by constantly demanding our urgent attention and active response, without the intermittent restoration provided by natural environments with their irregular forms, soft contrasts, and diversity, which keep us in that state of soft fascination. The authors of the ART theory, and other researchers who have tested and developed it, have found some empirical support in clinical tests where participants performed better on tests evaluating their stress levels and high-order cognitive functions after spending time in natural landscapes – even after just looking at pictures of nature (Kaplan 1995; Basu et al. 2019).

Critique of the Biophilia Hypothesis

The biophilia hypothesis and its derivatives have been criticised for being too broad and vague to be truly useful. The most fundamental problem is that the whole theory relies on a vaguely defined distinction between nature and artefact. Yannick Joye and Andreas de Block (2011) argue that the definition "an innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes" is too vague and open-ended to be properly falsifiable, since the terms *innate, focus,* and *life and life-like processes* are open to so many different interpretations. They argue further that the foundation of the biophilia hypothesis in the general theory of evolution is questionable, in that it seems to sway back and forth between ascribing our positive responses either to certain types of environments to their high survival value for our ancestors, or to the fact that these were simply the environments in which most of our ancestors lived and that this has somehow been imprinted in our genes (Joye & de Block 2011, p. 193).

The biophilia hypothesis and ART are both based on the assumption that our responses to natural environments are genetically determined. The authors of the biophilia hypothesis do recognise that there are also cultural dimensions that may affect our preferences. In fact, to some extent they try to bridge the nature-culture divide by referring to biocultural evolution. Wilson suggests that the interaction between culture (socially learned behaviour) and biological evolution (natural selection) has resulted in a set of *learning rules*; that is, inherent inclinations in the ways we think of, feel about, and direct our attention towards the world around us (Wilson 1993, pp. 31-40).

Other Perspectives on Nature and Health

Some studies in the field of environmental psychology (e.g., Grahn & Stigsdotter 2003) are based on *affordance theory*. *Affordances*, as understood by James Gibson (1979), are the perceivable possibilities present in a landscape in relation to the activity of a perceiving subject. In this perspective, which is also applied in some strands of anthropology, perception is understood as a complex and constantly moving process involving not only the whole organism, but also its environment. It is not a passive reception, but an active engagement with the environment (Gibson 1979 pp. 3-4; Ingold 2000).[8]

Purely ethnographic approaches to questions of nature and health are rare. One notable example is a recent study from Swansea University in which Edward Lord (2020) examines different forms of ecotherapy as inter-

[8] See further discussion of affordance theory in the chapter on Theory and Method under the heading "Experience in Ecological Perspective".

ventions for mental health. Lord suggests a holistic model for evaluation of such practices, which takes into account not only the usual individual well-being measurements but also social and environmental conditions (Lord 2020, pp. 248-51). His ethnographic approach also allows him to understand the effects of interventions in a long-term narrative perspective (Lord 2020, pp. 199-201).

Health and Spirituality

Let us move on to the next intersection: that between health and spirituality. An increased popular interest in health and wellbeing is a notable feature of late modernity. This has led some scholars to conclude that our contemporary culture has abandoned spirituality for more earthly concerns. The historian Christopher Lasch, for instance, argued that "[t]he contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious" (Lasch 1979, p. 7). Frank Furedi speaks of *therapy culture* and argues that this constitutes "[…] a shift away from the more traditional affirmation of communal purpose [and] a shift towards encouraging people to find meaning through their individual selves" (Furedi 2004, p. 14). This results in fragile, isolated selves in need of counselling by professionals in all of life's transitions and difficult situations (Furedi 2004, pp. 106 ff.).

On the other hand, just as nature connection can be seen as either a replacement for spirituality or itself a form of spirituality, so can many health-related practices. Moreover, the individualism reflected in such practices is not necessarily built around the idea of an isolated self. It has been shown, for instance by Christopher Partridge (2005), that the current health trend is to a large extent inspired by a holistic spiritual philosophy, according to which human beings consist of mind, body, and spirit, and are part of a larger whole, a universe of essentially the same substance(s). Health is, from this perspective, a condition of harmony on and between all levels within the individual and between the individual and the universe (Partridge 2005, pp. 4-41).

Regardless of whether we understand the health trend primarily as therapy culture or as holistic spirituality, the wider cultural context can be described in terms of a shift towards what Ronald Inglehart (1990; 2008) has called *post-bourgeois* or *post-materialist values*. Based in part on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Inglehart originally hypothesised that the post-war generations in the West, having been raised in conditions of economic security, would be more likely than previous generations to pursue goals of personal happiness and fulfilment, goals that may be pursued once the more basic needs are met (Inglehart 1971). Moreover, he suggested that a given

generation for the most part will keep their value system throughout their whole life-span. Research over the decades that followed appears to have corroborated the hypothesis to a large degree (Inglehart 2006). These post-materialist values include physical and mental health, social relations, life satisfaction, and self-realisation – all of which may be included in a broader idea of health or wellbeing.

A similar – or at least fully compatible – perspective has been expressed in terms of the *subjective turn*, an increasing orientation in modernity towards evaluation based on subjective experience, rather than social roles and duties (Taylor 1992; Heelas & Woodhead 2004). Wellbeing culture can be thought of as an expression of the subjective turn. However, it is also possible to trace a subjective turn *within* wellbeing culture. Wilhelm Kardemark (2013) has compared the contents of Swedish health journals from 1910-13 and 2009. He observes a shift in perspective between early 20th century and early 21st century journals from what Heelas and Woodhead (2005) call *life-as* to what they call *subjective life*. Kardemark finds the life-as perspective clearly accentuated in the earlier material, where the health of the individual is considered important in terms of their being part of the nation, or their relations to God and to fellow human beings. Individual health, in this perspective, becomes meaningful as a precondition for the individual's productive contribution to the larger whole of which she is part. In the material from 2009, he finds the dominant perspective to be focused more on the experience and emotions of the individual. Wellbeing is desirable for the sake of the experiencing individual.

Spiritual Dimensions of Health

Thus, we may think of the health trend as something people engage with instead of spirituality, or we may think of health practices (at least certain types) as spiritual practices in and of themselves. The latter perspective applies perhaps most readily to practices we might also categorise as alternative or complementary and which are characterised by some version of holistic philosophy. However, regardless of the type of practice concerned, the intersection between health and spirituality is also a matter of how we understand health. The WHO definition of health includes physical, mental, and social dimensions.[9] In some discussions of health, a spiritual or existen-

[9] Preamble to the Constitution of WHO as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19 June–22 July 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of WHO, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948.

tial dimension is also added.[10] We may thus speak of *spiritual* or *existential health*. This may refer to a person's meaning making capacities (DeMarinis 2003; 2008; 2011; Melder 2011), or to the capacity for reflexiveness in relation to one's own illness and health (Sigurdsson 2016). It does not necessarily require a spiritual or religious meaning making system (in any usual sense of these words), just one which provides functioning tools for making sense of the world and one's place and situation in it. Existential or spiritual health can be approached either as a specific dimension of health in addition to the bodily, mental, and social dimensions that are included in the WHO definition, or as a meta-dimension in which all the other dimensions can be contained, put in context, and given meaning.

Spirituality and Nature

Finally, let us begin to explore the intersection between spirituality and nature. As we have seen, nature connection in general, and specific targeted practices in particular, may be studied with regard to their impacts on physical and mental health. With an ethnographic approach, it becomes clear that such practices also have ethical and potentially political dimensions (cf. Lord 2020). And, as I will argue in this thesis, I find it motivated to also speak of these practices as spiritual, or at least as containing spiritual dimensions. Some practitioners would probably not be comfortable with such classifications and would rather characterise their practices as therapeutic and based on medical and psychological science. The way I understand it here, however, spirituality does not necessarily carry all the connotations that we often associate with it, such as belief in supernatural[11] beings or forces, and does not stand in opposition to science.

Religion and Spirituality

To clarify what I mean by spiritual dimensions, we need a quick orientation in the study of religion, as I understand and relate to it. The early scholars of the field approached religion either as a dimension of personal experience pertaining to an elevated, separate, or transcendent dimension of reality (the *numinous*, the *sacred,* etc.), or as a social phenomenon, reflecting and/or determined by social structure. The former approach has sometimes been

[10] For instance, WHO has developed a field test instrument for measuring Spirituality, Religion, and personal beliefs called WHOQOL-SRPB (accessed 17 April 2018: http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/622.pdf).

[11] Distinguishing between "natural" and "supernatural" is especially complicated in a context where nature is the main concept.

associated with phenomenology of religion and has received a bad reputation after being associated with generalising attempts to map the religious human mind by such scholars as Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and Mircea Eliade. Referring to this school of research, Timothy Fitzgerald has argued that "[…] phenomenology is fundamentally a form of liberal ecumenical theology" (Fitzgerald 1997, p. 91). In other contexts, however, phenomenology of religion has referred to a kind of pre- or meta-theoretical taxonomy of elements that may be part of religious practice and thinking, such as rituals, gods, or conceptions of the soul (Fujiwara et al. 2021). This latter type of phenomenology of religion has little to do with philosophical phenomenology. There is, however, an element of philosophical phenomenology which arguably remains to a large extent in the study of religion today – not least in the sociological approaches – in what Peter Berger called *methodological atheism*, and Ninian Smart modified to *methodological agnosticism* (Cox 2003; 2006, pp. 209-248). This bracketing of religious truth-claims and experiences can be seen as a version of the phenomenological *epoché*.[12]

In more recent decades, the concept of religion as a separate sphere of either personal or social life has been criticised and deconstructed in many ways, and its usefulness as a cross-cultural category has been questioned (Fitzgerald 1997). Such criticisms, however, did not put an end to the study of religion but prompted scholars to look at religion as entangled with, and perhaps inseparable from, other spheres of life. The aim was no longer to find and describe coherent systems of thought but rather to study ordinary people in everyday situations – what has become known as the study of *lived religion* (e.g., McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2020). If scholars of earlier eras had a tendency to privilege belief over practice and religious specialists over laypeople, the lived-religion perspective turned this order on its head. Nevertheless, it does not seem possible to completely shake the notion of religion as a special domain or dimension. For instance, Nancy Ammerman, one of the prominent scholars of the lived-religion school, conceives of religion as a social practice which includes a dimension that connects to something other than the everyday:

> All social practice […] is characterized by embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, moral judgment, and narrative structuring. What distinguishes

[12] In the study of religion, it is usually a matter of local *epoché* applied to the beliefs and accounts of experience given in a religious community. Of course, the fact that it is usually applied to the beliefs and accounts of others brings additional methodological difficulties that philosophical phenomenology is not burdened with. See also discussion of *epoché* in the next chapter.

> religious practice, in turn, is a seventh dimension, a spiritual dimension that invokes direct or indirect (institutionalized) connection to something that is "other than" everyday reality. (Ammerman 2020, p. 9)

This extra dimension seems to work as an amplifier for the other dimensions, adding extra weight to moral messages and seriousness to behavioural patterns (Ammerman 2020, p. 27). In a sense, we seem to be coming back to some idea of the numinous or the sacred, only with a better understanding of its entanglement with other spheres of life provided by decades of empirical research of religion as lived and practised. I find Ammerman's definition useful and applicable to the nature connection practices studied in this thesis and will return to it in discussions of my field research.

Dark Green Religion

The American scholar of religion Bron Taylor has studied a wide range of green movements in the US and beyond and identified a set of core ideas which he collects under the term *dark green religion*. This field is much wider than what I call the nature connection movement, but his observations and definitions are highly relevant as background to my own study. Taylor's basic definition of religion is linked to the common derivation of the term from the Latin words *re* (again) and *ligare* (tie/connect). Thus, "[…] religion has to do with that which connects and binds people to that which they most value, depend on, and consider sacred" (Taylor 2010, p. 2). This is reminiscent of Paul Tillich's well-known definition of religion as "[…] the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern […]" (Tillich 1963). It is a type of functional definition of religion where focus lies on what it does and what role it plays in a person's life, rather than on its specific substance. There is, however, a hint of a substantial element in the indication of something sacred. Although the specific notions and entities that people consider sacred varies, the sacredness itself might amount to a kind of substance. In Taylor's understanding, sacredness entails a deep sense of connectedness to, and a reverence for, (in this case) nature. In different terms, we might say that religion is what connects people to their ethical ideals and their deepest ontological assumptions; that is, what they consider as ultimate good and ultimate reality. Sacredness is then perhaps best understood as an attitude towards, or a mood that surrounds, those ultimate notions. Religion, in this definition, does not require belief in supernatural beings. It does, however, add a touch of something out of the ordinary, as an extra dimension on top

of whatever else a given practice or situation might entail. In this way, Taylor's definition is close to Ammerman's.

Taylor distinguishes between *green religion* (religious interpretations that urge moral responsibility for the environment) and *dark green religion* (an eco-centric worldview and value system which entails a deep feeling of connectedness with nature and where nature is considered intrinsically sacred) (Taylor 2010, p. 10). Furthermore, he divides dark green religion into four types (with blurred boundaries between them).

	Animism	Gaian Earth Religion
Supernaturalism	Spiritual Animism	Gaian Spirituality
Naturalism	Naturalistic Animism	Gaian Naturalism

(Taylor 2010, p. 15)

As illustrated in Taylor's table, the types are divided along two axes. The horizontal axis is between *animism* and *Gaian Earth Religion*, where the former refers to the perception of some sort of soul, personhood, or intentionality in natural entities, and the latter refers to a view of the whole planet as a single living being. The vertical axis reaches between *supernaturalism* and *naturalism*, illustrating that both main currents of dark green religion may be expressed either in the language of the natural sciences, such as descriptions of how trees communicate through the mycorrhiza or James Lovelock's Gaia theory, or in more spiritual terms, such as speaking of the spirits of trees, rocks, and rivers, or of Mother Earth as a goddess (Taylor 2010, pp. 14-16). The dashed line between the supernaturalistic and naturalistic types indicates a fluidity between them. This fluidity is apparent in my own field of study as well – often within one and the same person.[13]

Dark green religion has no formal structure, priesthood, or official sacred texts. It does however have a set of shared values and beliefs:

> Dark green religion is generally deep ecological, biocentric, or ecocentric, considering all species to be intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable apart from their usefulness to human beings. This value system is generally (1) based on a felt kinship with the rest of life, often derived from a Darwinian under-

[13] Such internal fluidity in a person does not necessarily signal inconsistency (although complete intellectual and discoursal consistency in a person is probably extremely rare, if it occurs at all), but merely demonstrates a person's participation in many different discourses which can be activated depending on the situation. Moreover, it is not clear to me why the line between animism and Gaian Earth religion is not dashed as well, seeing as they are often combined, with a variation in emphasis.

> standing that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related; (2) accompanied by feelings of humility and a corresponding critique of human moral superiority, often inspired or reinforced by a science-based cosmology that reveals how tiny human beings are in the universe; and (3) reinforced by metaphysics of interconnection and the idea of interdependence (mutual influence and reciprocal dependence) found in the sciences, especially in ecology and physics. (Taylor 2010, p. 13)

And, although it lacks formal structures and institutions, it has equivalents:

> Although unrecognized by the Parliament of World Religions, it is as widespread as most religions, more significant than some, and growing more rapidly than many others. It has neither priesthood nor institutions devoted to its promotion. Nor does it have an officially adopted sacred text. It does have, however, revered elders, creative leadership, and texts its adherents consider sacred. It does generate significant resources and it has institutional manifestations. Most critically, it has a coherent set of beliefs its adherents find compelling. Rather than rescue from this world, it offers an enveloping sense of belonging to the biosphere, which is considered sacred. (Taylor 2010, p. 217)

Dark green religion, according to Taylor, is not a fringe phenomenon. It is still not adhered to by a majority (and it does not exclude other religious affiliations) but it is gaining influence well outside of radical environmentalist circles. In my own study, it has occurred to me that the values and sentiments expressed by my interlocutors in the nature connection movement do not appear to be at odds with those of contemporary mainstream Nordic culture, to the extent that this mainstream is known through surveys and interviews (Uddenberg 1995; Thurfjell 2020; Remmel & Jonuks 2021). The difference lies perhaps more in the degree of commitment to those values and sentiments, and in their impact on a person's lifestyle and choices (see also chapter 14).

What I understand here as the nature connection movement may be seen as a branch of dark green religion, or a fusion (to a greater or lesser degree) of dark green religion and wellbeing culture. However, my definitions and delimitations consider not only ideological commonalities (which may be more or less widespread in diluted forms) but also commonalities in practice. This makes the field narrower, albeit still with fluid boundaries.

Animism

In Taylor's model, animism is only one of the two sides of what he calls dark green religion. In some definitions, however, it could well encompass the

other side as well, what he calls Gaian Earth Religion. The term has a long history in anthropology and the study of religion. It has been defined both widely, for instance by E. B. Tylor (1871), as designating all kinds of belief in spirits – including disembodied humans – and narrowly, for instance by Jean Piaget (2009 [1928]), who applied the term only to the attribution of agency to entities that are not biologically alive. Tylor, who was the first to apply the term scientifically in anthropology, understood it as

> [an] early childlike philosophy in which human life seems the direct key to the understanding of nature at large, [a] savage theory of the universe [which] refers its phenomena in general to the wilful action of pervading personal spirits. (Tylor 1871, p. 99)

In Tylor's understanding, animism represents a primitive stage of thought that attempts to explain natural phenomena by projecting personhood and intentionality on them – an anthropomorphic way of thinking, since personhood, for Tylor, obviously belonged to the human domain. Tylor suggested this as a general theory of religion, according to which the animistic way of explaining the world developed into complex and eventually monotheistic theologies, which finally gave way to scientific explanations (Tylor 1871, p. 99).

This evolutionistic thinking, with its hierarchisation of stages of culture, was for the most part abandoned in the second half of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the concept of animism has seen something of a resurrection in recent decades. One of the scholars responsible for this resurrection is Stewart E. Guthrie, who has presented a general theory of religion based on a definition of animism, which in some ways is close to Tylor's, but formulated in terms of genetically encoded cognitive structures. The basic idea is that people have a genetically encoded cognitive propensity for perceiving agency in events, due to the evolutionary advantage of assuming the more significant option even if this might be wrong. For Guthrie, as for Tylor, animism is a form of anthropomorphism; that is, a projection of human properties onto the non-human world, and he suggests this as the common denominator for everything we might call religion (Guthrie 1980; 1995; 2013).

The explanatory value of the supposed evolutionary advantage of over-interpreting agency, beyond immediate perception, has been questioned. Nurit Bird-David has argued that Guthrie's evolution-based theory does not explain why these "mistakes" of perception – strategically valuable as they may be in the moment – are culturally endorsed and elaborated into complex systems of thought, at least not without seriously downgrading the cognitive

abilities of people in societies where such views are maintained (Bird-David 1999, pp. 70-71; see also Harvey 2006, pp. 15-16; Hornborg 2016). Bird-David represents another contemporary school of thought concerning animism, which understands it as an ontology that emphasises relations rather than objects. Seen in this way, animism is not a naïve proneness to ascribe personhood to objects and a resulting habit of relating to them socially. It is rather the other way around: "[w]e do not first personify other entities and then socialise with them but personify them *as*, *when*, and *because* we socialise with them (Bird-David 1999, p. 78) (italics in original).

Animism can also be understood as an epistemology that prioritises subjectification; that is, that the primary means of knowing something is by approaching its subjectivity, as opposed to the modern Western tendency towards objectification (Bird-David 1993; Viveiros de-Castro 2004; Descola 2013; 2014). According to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004), the ontology of indigenous peoples in the Amazon is the absolute inverse of modern Western objectivism:

> If in the naturalist view a subject is an insufficiently analyzed object, in the Amerindian animist cosmology the converse holds: an object is an incompletely interpreted subject. (Viveiros de Castro 2004, p. 470)

The animal (or biological materiality), in this view, is thus not the common ground from which humans have evolved, and on top of which personhood and culture have been added. Instead, reflective consciousness is the common ground from which a bodily differentiation has evolved, resulting in multiple perspectives. Of course, this does not mean that objectification is absent from Amazonian thinking and perception, only that subjectification is the hegemonic epistemology, the preferred way to knowledge. And neither is subjectification absent from Western thinking.[14]

These relational and situational approaches to animism can be criticised for over-emphasising the differences between Western and non-Western ways of thinking, amounting to a form of exoticisation. Brian Morris argues, on the basis of his research among self-subsistence agriculturalists in Malawi, that while personification can certainly be situational, it is also (at least in the case of animals) based on the (objective) recognition of agency and mental and emotional capacities similar to those of humans; that is, on qualities

[14] In fact, even Western philosophy, particularly in its continental varieties (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2003), and, more recently, in posthumanism (cf. Braidotti 2013; Åsberg & Braidotti 2018) appears to have developed somewhat in parallel to anthropologists' "discoveries" of radically different ontologies, towards collapsing the subject-object dichotomy.

thought of as intrinsic to the entity in question, regardless of its relations (Morris 2000, p. 35). Morris doubts that any people see the whole world as animate, since animism presupposes ontological distinctions (Morris 2000, p. 35). However, animate and inanimate is not always a matter of set classifications. One might recall Hallowell's Ojibwa Ontology, where the researcher asks an old Ojibwa man: "Are all the stones we see about us here alive?" And the man replies, after some consideration: "No! But some are" (Hallowell 1960, p. 24). Mary Black characterised animism as "fundamentally antitaxonomic" (Black 1977, quoted in Ingold 2000). But similar apparent inconsistencies can be observed in Western cultures too. Guthrie takes computers and other technical devices as examples of inanimate objects which we frequently anthropomorphise in the ways we speak and think about them (Guthrie 1993, pp. 91-121). Thus, it seems that if a distinction between animate and inanimate (in some version) is universal, or at least widespread, then so is the breeching and blurring of it. This may be situational, so that we speak and think of the same (type of) thing differently in different situations, depending on how we relate to the object (Bird-David 1999).

In short, there are several lines of division and historical turns in the study and conceptualisation of animism. But the most important division is perhaps between what Graham Harvey calls *old animism* and *new animism*, where the former is a derogatory term used in a colonial context, while the latter recognises animism as a valid way of knowing the world and is sometimes used as a self-designation among indigenous peoples as well as in some forms of contemporary Western spirituality (Harvey 2006, p. 3). In the nature connection context studied here, the term is often used in this positive sense. Harvey's own definition, quoted in the introduction, is simple and fairly value free: "Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (Harvey 2006, p. XI). I will use this definition loosely in this study, in a way that includes tendencies and instances in this direction – as long as they are extended to non-human entities – and not only cases where interpersonal relationships are dominant in worldview and lifestyle.

The Place of this Study

Finally, I will sum up the key points from my review of relevant research and clarify my own positions. We have seen that the main psychological theories of nature and health (Kaplan & Kaplan 1989; Kellert & Wilson 1993), as well as at least one somewhat influential theory of animism and religion (Guthrie 1993), rely on evolution and genetics as their main explanatory framework.

In the present study, I do not set out to prove what is genetic and what is learned. A definitive demarcation between "nature" and "nurture" is probably impossible to achieve. For instance, while both the biophilia hypothesis and ART emphasise a genetic basis for our aesthetic experience of a landscape, it can also be shown that cultural, personal, and circumstantial factors are involved. Historically, different aesthetic ideals have both reflected and shaped our experience of nature (cf. Graber 1976, Löfgren 2000). Apart from – or intermingled with – the long lines of cultural history, we all have our personal histories, our childhood memories of the landscape we grew up in, and developments later in our lives which shape our aesthetic preferences. Many of my interlocutors in this study recall childhood memories of landscapes (especially forests in this Nordic context), memories that trigger deep and often joyful emotions. One's current life situation and emotional condition is also a factor. Swedish research within the field of environmental psychology suggests that people in different stages of crisis respond very differently to the same environment (see for example Ottosson & Grahn 2008; Stigsdotter et al. 2011).

Regardless of where we see this debate ultimately ending up, it is clear to me that a perspective from the cultural sciences can contribute to the understanding of our perception of and response to landscapes and environments. This is the direction from which I approach the subject, which does not mean that I dismiss possible biological factors. As will be elaborated in the next chapter, my aim is to understand the subject matter on its own level and not to try to explain it or reduce it to some underlying order of reality, be it cultural, social, or biological.

Thus, the biophilia hypothesis and related theories do not, to any significant degree, inform my own theoretical stances. They are reviewed here partly as a background because they have informed a lot of previous research on similar subjects, and partly because they are frequently referred to by nature connection practitioners and in this way are part of the empirical foundation for my study.

Regarding health, my focus, as stated in the introduction, is on the deeper long-term impacts of nature connection practice on a person's lifeworld. This means that I will explore the idea of health together with emotional, cognitive, and ethical dimensions. The long-term perspectives can be found in personal narratives, moods, and emotional settings, all of which are part of what I call cultivation of experience. Health, in this approach, cannot be fully separated from other dimensions of life. Thus, it makes sense analytically to speak of *existential health* as a meta-level at which wellbeing on all

levels is interpreted and put in context. Moreover, this concept of health comes very close to the idea of spirituality I am exploring here.

Regarding spirituality, I will use Ammerman's (2020) and Taylor's (2010) definitions, in which religion is understood as a multi-levelled social practice with a connection to something considered sacred or something experienced as other than everyday. Nature connection practice certainly has all the dimensions indicated by Ammerman, and experiences of something beyond everyday reality are clearly discernible in the personal accounts and behaviour of my subjects. As mentioned above, and as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, this experience is also often enhanced by means of ritual-like elements. On an ideological level, the nature connection movement shares the basic elements of dark green religion as defined by Bron Taylor. Although both Ammerman and Taylor speak of *religion*, for the most part I will use the term *spirituality*, based on a distinction between different basic attitudes made by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2004) where *religion* is legitimised primarily by reference to outer roles and obligations, while *spirituality* is legitimised primarily with reference to inner experience and personal sense of authenticity. Nature connection practice, like many forms of contemporary spirituality, is clearly characterised by the latter attitude. However, I find these definitions helpful mainly in relation to the first part of my purpose, that of delineating and defining the nature connection movement, where they can be used to identify practices or elements of practice that can be classified as spiritual. For the second and third parts of my purpose (to understand the long-term impacts of participation in that movement and its practices on the lifeworlds of practitioners, and to explore an experience-based approach to contemporary spirituality), I will need to make some further definitions. As will be elaborated in the next chapter, I stand, in several ways, in a tradition that we may call phenomenology of religion: firstly in my use of methodological agnosticism (or *epoché*), and secondly in my focus on experience. My aim in this regard, which will be expressed chiefly in the second part of the thesis, is to understand spirituality as personal modes of experience and attitudes towards the world. Here the ideas of spirituality and (existential) health merge together. This is where I will apply the *face* concept taken from Levinas (as outlined in the introduction) to understand a mode of being in the world which, as we shall see, might be described in a few words as *being alive in a living world*.

This mode of being in the world, where relationships with other living beings – human and non-human – are fundamental, puts the study within the wider field of contemporary animism studies. Research on animism is

still largely focused on the social and spiritual life of indigenous peoples. In a contemporary Western context, it is often found in neo-pagan or neo-shamanist movements and in some forms of New Age, and is often treated as a foreign element in Western culture, a loan or even a cultural appropriation (cf. Fisk 2017; Rountree 2012). With this study, I hope to contribute to a nuanced and complex picture of the sources and expressions of contemporary Western animism.

CHAPTER 3

Theory and Method

As noted above, nature-related health practices have been studied quite extensively from psychological and biomedical perspectives, mostly with a focus on quantifiable short-term effects. My own aim is to understand the long-term impacts on participants' lifeworlds of a deeper commitment to the practices under study and to the milieu in which they are promoted and developed. For this purpose, I have employed an interpretive qualitative methodology in the tradition of *hermeneutic phenomenology* and conducted an ethnographic study based on interviews and participant observations, augmented by continuous informal contacts with practitioners and the study of websites and literature. In this chapter, I will first elaborate my principal theoretical and methodological stances, and then describe in detail how the study has been conducted.

I see this a phenomenological study for two reasons. The first is that my focus is on experience, and that my aim is to describe and understand experience rather than trying to explain it or reduce it to some underlying order of reality (such as genetics or social structures). I am not dismissing the possible validity of such explanations, but my focus lies on how experience plays out in the lifeworlds of practitioners. I want to explore the impacts of participation on a person's inner moods, sense of wellbeing, understanding of the world, and ethical self-understanding. For this purpose, I find the phenomenological *epoché* to be a productive approach. In Husserl's phenomenology, *epoché* (suspension of judgment or belief) is a method that can be applied universally (on the whole of reality outside of the transcendent self-knowledge of the mind) or locally (on whatever is in focus in the study). In any case, it entails the possibility to study a phenomenon as it is given to consciousness without presupposing its reality (or making assumptions about how it relates to some other order of reality) (Husserl (2016 [1931], pp. 42-4).

The second reason to call this a phenomenological study is that my understanding is informed by theorists in the phenomenological tradition. The foremost of these theorists is Emmanuel Levinas, whose conceptualisation of face is central to my understanding of the experience of subject-subject

encounters and of the process that results in subject-subject relationships. In this, I am also helped by Martin Buber, who wrestled with much the same questions as Levinas. Other phenomenologists who should be mentioned here are Otto Friedrich Bollnow, whose definitions and distinctions concerning emotions and moods I have found useful, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose insight into the two-way nature of sensory experience has informed my work to some extent, and who is also an important intellectual influence in the practices I study.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

When I speak of experience here, I am not trying to reach some sort of prelingual experience or to isolate pure sensory perception. All experience that renders itself to description and interpretation is already conceptualised. This is where the hermeneutic part comes in. I rely, practically and methodologically, on Hans Georg Gadamer's understanding of experience as inseparable from language (Gadamer 2004 [1975], pp. 341-55). Even experience "beyond words" is put into words already in this very description, whatever it may be in the moment of experience. My data consists of practitioners' descriptions of their experience given in interviews and in sharing circles during collective practice, and, to some extent, descriptions of nature experiences in published literature. Trying to understand this data is a hermeneutical process that takes place within language. In Gadamer's terminology, it is a *hermeneutic conversation* whose goal is a *fusion of horizons* (Gadamer 2004 [1975], pp. 305 ff.). Thus, I place my methodology for this study in the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, described by Susann M. Laverty as a process in which "…interpretation arises from pre-understandings and a dialectical movement between the parts and the whole of the texts of those involved" (Laverty 2003, p. 30).

In this reciprocal process, researcher and research subject are understood as co-authors of the text rendered by the interviews (Laverty 2003; Lindseth & Norberg 2004; Paterson & Higgs 2005). The interviewee is perhaps rightly described as the main author who produces most of the text, assisted by the researcher's questions (Lindseth & Norberg 2004). In the next stage, the researcher (now the main author) interprets the interviewee's statements, draws conclusions, and expresses their interpretations and conclusions in the form of an academic text. Thus, whatever experience may be when it first arises in the experiencing subject, it must pass through several stages of interpretation, within and between the experiencing subject and the researcher, before it takes the shape of an academic text, such as the present

one. In my research design, this process is iterative, as will be described below, allowing for interpretations to be corroborated or reformulated within an ongoing hermeneutic conversation.

Understanding Experience

When we study personal experience in a social milieu involving collective practice, and identify common themes, questions arise regarding how personal it really is, and to what extent it is shared and affected by social, cultural, or other contexts. I find it motivated to speak of a *cultivation of experience*; that is, collective as well as individual efforts to maintain, enhance, or direct the ways in which the world is experienced. This cultivation, as such, is of course nothing unique to the nature connection movement – culture in general shapes and directs our modes of experience – but perhaps inwardly oriented practices such as those studied here conduct this cultivation more consciously and actively than other cultural practices. This would then apply to most spiritual practices – all, in fact, if this inward orientation is a defining criterion of spirituality (see discussions in the previous chapter and in chapter 10). My focus here is on the specific directions this cultivation takes in the nature connection movement, and what elements are involved. But first, I must make some general remarks about how I understand and approach experience.

Perception and Imagination

If we accept, as discussed above, that experience, to the extent that it can be described and studied interpretively, is conceptualised, we must also observe that conceptualisation entails more than just putting words to something. Concepts bring associations. We learn, through personal experience, other people, or things we read, to associate certain properties and expected behaviours with a given concept. In this way, perception is effectively inseparable from imagination. When we meet a person, our eyes perceive her physical appearance and our ears perceive her voice. But we also somehow perceive a person in all this, a person with feelings and intentions towards us, whose voice forms words that carry meaning (lexical and personal/situational). This is not something that can be seen or heard in a strict sense. Husserl used the term *appresentation* to refer to the way that our consciousness constitutes another person, a primary centre of experience, separate from our own primary centre of experience, based on associations connected

to a bodily presence similar to the one experienced from within (Husserl (2016 [1931], pp. 137-150).[15]

Moreover, this imaginative element in perception is present not only in encounters with what we perceive as persons or intentional beings. Even if we conceive of, for instance, a stone as inanimate, we still ascribe more to it than what is immediately given by the senses. We have learned to associate properties such as hardness and weight with the visual appearance of a stone. Thus, we always "see" more than what our eyes perceive. This much should be obvious to anyone if we only think about it. And while there may be levels in our associative patterns that are universally human, my interest lies in how they are affected by our specific personal, social, cultural, and ecological circumstances.

Experience in Social and Cultural Context

Most traditional models for understanding experience picture a dualism between the inner and outer world. Emile Durkheim spoke of sensation and representation, observing that the former is momentary, constantly flowing through the stream of consciousness, whereas the latter is lasting and necessary for us to know what we have perceived through our senses (Ingold 2000, pp. 157-60). In the cultural sciences, representations have for the most part been treated as collective, shared phenomena. Although they are internalised by the individual, they (also) exist in a social space between people, where they are constantly reproduced but also reshaped. Some strands of anthropology have tried to reconstruct *cultural models* or *schemata* – patterns of ideas, emotions, attitudes, and habits believed to underlie culturally characteristic behaviour – similar to the types of patterns that cognitive science tries to uncover on a universally human, genetically determined level (Ingold 2000, pp. 160-6). Some of these are specific and associated with a particular skill or knowledge, while others encompass central and characteristic elements of a culture (Ingold 2000, pp. 160-2; Descola 2013, pp. 92-108).

With Gadamer, we may think of language not only as a means through which we communicate our experiences with others, but as an intrinsic part of experience itself. In this way, all the historical, cultural, and social dimensions contained in language become deeply entangled with personal experience (Gadamer 2004 [1975], pp. 341-55).

[15] The idea of personhood will be discussed extensively in part 2 of this thesis.

Experience in Ecological Context

That experience, although subjective and personal, does not develop in isolation from social and cultural context should be clear to anyone with a basic orientation in the humanities. What may be less obvious is the ecological context – although, with a Western standard division of nature and culture, the ecological context could reasonably be considered as primary. Indeed, as discussed in the previous chapter, theories about how our experiential responses to natural environments have developed in an evolutionary process are widespread. What interests me here, however, is not our genetic predispositions, but the development of experience – or modes of experience – within individual human lives.

There is one strand of perceptual psychology that studies the dynamic development of perception in the interaction between individual and environment. One of the pioneers of this approach is James Gibson (1979) with his ecological theory of visual perception. In opposition to the general assumption that the basic element of visual perception is the single snapshot image, which is then combined with other snapshot images to form a complete picture, Gibson suggests that the basis of natural vision lies in a constant movement, which he terms ambient vision (looking around) and ambulatory vision (moving from place to place) whereby the landscape reveals its *affordances*, i.e., its perceivable possibilities in relation to the activity of the perceiving subject. Visual perception, as mentioned above, is thus a complex and constantly moving process involving not only the whole organism, but also its environment. It is not a passive reception, but an active engagement with the environment (Gibson 1979 pp. 3-4). The anthropologist Tim Ingold has continued along these lines to develop a theory of behaviour and perception that escapes the dualisms of nature and culture, organism and environment, mind and body. Ingold thinks of a human being "[…] not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually evolving field of relationships" (Ingold 2000, pp. 4-5).

This is in line with the so-called "embodiment paradigm" in anthropology (and in the humanities in general), although Ingold cautions against trying to dissolve a dichotomy by simply emphasising one term to the exclusion of the other (Ingold 2000, pp. 170-1). We could just as well speak of "enmindment". These are just two ways of describing the same thing or process, "namely the environmentally situated activity of the human organism-

person" (Ingold 2000, p. 171). Donna Haraway (2016, pp. 58-98) has used the term *sympoiesis* to denote this co-arising of organism and environment.

Cultivation of Experience

By now, it should be somewhat clearer what types of elements are involved in what I call cultivation of experience. In agriculture, the farmer has to work with what is already present. Likewise, in the cultivation of experience, the soil, seeds, and climatic conditions are already present in the form of the individual's personal history and inclinations, general history, social and cultural context, language, and the affordances of the landscape. Cultivation does not create something out of nothing but rather tweaks the conditions so as to provide optimal conditions for the favoured plants to grow. It is likely that people who are drawn to nature connection practice already have a propensity for profound nature experiences and feelings of connection. Many of my interlocutors recall such experiences from their childhoods. But then again, their recollections are naturally coloured by their present values and understandings. It is extremely difficult – if not impossible – to retrospectively pinpoint the exact turning points in life, or even the extent to which turns have actually occurred. All that can be observed from the perspective of the present is what is currently being emphasised and worked with. However, this is all we need in order to observe the cultivation taking place in the present, and to reasonably assume that the elements being worked with were to some extent present before a person began to actively engage in nature connection practice, and further that they have to some extent been enhanced or reformulated through this practice.

Some nature connection practitioners might object to the agricultural metaphor, insisting that nature connection is really about letting things grow wild rather than trying to control them. This may be a valid objection. However, I would still contend that there is a cultivation going on even in this embrace of wildness. When we think of agriculture, we need not picture industrial farming which attempts to control every aspect of the landscape and the crops. Instead, we might think of permaculture – another contemporary movement, which shares the nature connection movement's ties to deep ecology. The permaculturalist looks, listens, feels, smells, and tastes to ascertain – and to work actively with – the affordances of the landscape. In the process, both the landscape and the permaculturalist are transformed. If we think of this in terms of sympoiesis or a co-arising between individual and landscape – where the landscape includes elements that would traditionally be identified as both natural and cultural – it becomes clear that experience

is not just representations that we passively make of reality and keep in some isolated region of our minds, but rather a totality of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and activities arising in continuous interaction. A change in experiential patterns affects the ways in which we live in, and interact with, the world and ourselves, and thus has implications for our wellbeing (the way we feel "inside") and our ethics (the way we interact with the world).

Method

My description and analysis are based on four years of fieldwork, from late 2017 to early 2022, involving participatory observations of practice, in-depth interviews with practitioners, and the study of websites and publications. Apart from on-site fieldwork at organised events, which lasted from a few hours up to five days at a time, I have been in continuous contact with practitioners in Sweden, Finland, Belgium, and the United States through social media, email, and informal conversations.

Interviews

In the course of this study, I conducted 34 recorded in-depth interviews with 26 people, i.e., some interlocutors were interviewed more than once. I have endeavoured to uphold continuous contact with my interlocutors over time through email, social media, and casual conversations in person.

The main aim in my selection of interviewees was to find people engaged in the various branches of practice with a serious commitment to it, with varying degrees of experience, a representative variety of ages and genders, and a wide geographical distribution. I have used two main methods to achieve this. The first was fieldwork based. After participation in a practice, I interviewed the person who conducted the session, either directly afterwards or at a later date. During practice sessions, I also made contact with other participants, specifically those who attended regularly and had a long-term commitment to the practice. My second main method of finding interviewees was to contact two of the main organisations[16] that are part of my study and ask them to distribute information about the project and my contact details among current and future participants of their longer training courses. I then interviewed those who made contact and expressed an interest in taking part. The latter method helped me to get in contact with practitioners with less experience but still a serious commitment to the practice (although it is hard to define exactly where experience begins in this kind of practice, since many

[16] SNFTI and Lodyn (see chapter 7).

people already had experience of various forms of nature connection, meditation, and wellbeing practices before they took this particular course).

My interview style has been primarily open, starting out from an open and general question about what brought them to the practice, letting the interlocutor lead the conversation, and then asking follow-up questions about themes they have touched upon. The first step in the analysis was to make a heuristic assessment of what appeared to be important and characteristic in the interlocutors' accounts of nature connection experience, and to try to break it down thematically. I have not done a thematic codification of the interview transcripts. Coding has its pros and cons. The main advantage would be to help me transcend my own pre-understandings. However, there is also a risk of creating the illusion of a neutral gaze while my pre-understandings are in reality still present in the coded categories. That would also entail the risk of forcing things into boxes where they do not really fit. Instead, I have opted for another way to transcend the pre-understandings of my heuristic assessments, one that I find more interactive: continued conversation with my interlocutors. After the first round of interviews and analysis, the next step was to send a draft to the interviewees asking for their comments, which were then taken into consideration before the text was finalised, and new questions were sometimes added. Another important step has been to keep conducting interviews (both follow-up interviews and interviews with new interlocutors) and making participatory observations almost throughout the writing process. This process has made it possible to either validate or invalidate my initial assessments, and opened up new and unexpected avenues of exploration. In this way, my interview style has gradually become more structured towards the latter part of the study. In interviews with new interlocutors during the later stages, I would begin in the same open fashion as in the earlier interviews, and then added my fixed questions (still in a semi-structured fashion that allowed for digressions and follow-up questions).

The research process thus moves in a hermeneutic spiral, circling between heuristic pre-understanding and engagement with interlocutors, moving slightly forward for each round (Paterson & Higgs 2005).

Participant Observations

The main part of my fieldwork has been to take part in organised activities that fit the criteria I have established – criteria which have, in part, arisen from the fieldwork itself, as will be elaborated in chapter 4. I have included activities labelled as forest bathing, forest therapy, ecopsychology, and

natural mindfulness, offered (usually for a small fee) as ways of improving personal wellbeing and relationships with nature. I have also included free-to-attend ritual activities addressing the ecological crisis which, based on both content and context, can also reasonably be counted as part of the nature connection movement. I have included activities offered by both sole practitioners and larger organisations. Fieldwork could last from about three hours up to five days at a time. As with the interviews, I have strived for a good geographical distribution. The fieldwork in Sweden thus represents areas around major cities, mid-size towns, and rural areas. In Finland, I participated in two retreats organised by IFTD (see chapter 7) in different rural areas of the country. I have also aimed to include activities that tend more towards wellbeing and those that tend more towards social activism. In total, this central part of my fieldwork amounts to about 350 hours (not counting interviews).

My analysis of field notes has been conducted in conjunction with my analysis of interview data. My initial heuristic interpretations of the practices and their contexts have formed the basis for further inquiries in the field and in interviews. Although my field time can be measured as above, I have in a sense stayed in the field throughout the project. Rather than having one or more clearly delimited periods of fieldwork and data assembly, followed by a process of analysis, both processes have run in parallel. In some types of study, a separation in time between data collection and analysis may be a practical necessity. However, it is in the process of analysis that it becomes clear what is missing from the empirical material. These gaps may then be remedied through follow-up-interviews, communication with key interlocutors, and continued participation in practice. The practitioners I have been in contact with over this period have been interlocutors in the full sense of the word; that is, discussion partners with whom I have discussed not only their personal experiences or details about their practice, but also my own theoretical perspectives. The situation as a whole over the years I have conducted this study can thus be described as a *hermeneutic conversation* seeking a *fusion of horizons* (Gadamer 2004 [1975], pp. 305 ff.).

Informal Communication and Participation

Formal interviews have the advantage that I can be mindful of my interview technique. When using a semi-structured format, I can make sure that all themes I have deemed relevant are touched upon, and that I can record it and thus have access to the exact words of the whole conversation when I am making my analysis. A disadvantage is that formal interviews take the

conversation out of context and into a constructed, unnatural situation. Of course, interviews can be conducted in settings more or less close to the context under study. Taking someone aside during a gathering of forest therapy practitioners to conduct an interview then and there it is still closer to the context and less artificial than, say, setting an appointment at a city café. (My formal interviews for this study include both of the above-mentioned as well as other settings, which may be placed somewhere in between.)

Informal conversations and encounters, on the other hand, lack the advantages of the formal interviews, but instead they are closer to the context and less artificial. Those who take part in such conversations are not in an interview situation with all that this means in terms of increased self-awareness, possible nervousness, and wanting to "say the right things" that they think the researcher wants to hear (although they might still be affected to some degree by their knowledge of the study I am conducting). For this reason, I consider these informal conversations and encounters as valuable source material, and I have endeavoured to take thorough field notes which hopefully capture the gist of the most relevant conversations.

It can be argued that these exchanges might result in an idealised picture of the interlocutors' experience and conduct. The study of lived religion has shown that both cognitive and practice-related inconsistencies are part of a general pattern of religious behaviour (Cf. McGuire 2008; af Burén 2015). However, this should not prevent the researcher from trying to give as true an account as possible of people's ideals and aspirations, which, while not representing the whole truth about their lives, still constitute a part that is as authentic as other parts we may observe, e.g., in conduct, attitudes, and spontaneous conversations.

Ethical Considerations

Permission for this study was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Board. All my interviews and other contact with people in this field have involved consenting adults. Nevertheless, some of the topics and personal experiences touched upon in interviews may be considered private, especially those connected to health and wellbeing. Potential interviewees were informed about the project and what participation would entail. They had the option to withdraw their participation at any time, and their names were altered to ensure anonymity. No material where interview statements can be connected to real persons will be stored after the conclusion of the project.

Throughout the research process, I have been guided by fundamental principles of transparency and accountability. Although the interlocutors are anonymised, it is still necessary to make efforts not to misrepresent their views, out of respect for the interlocutors as well as for the reliability of the results. My dialogical process has been designed with all this in mind.

Of course, there are also risks involved in getting this close to one's subject matter. Being enmeshed in a social environment in this way entails both influencing and being influenced by it – perhaps even beyond what is unavoidable in any contact between researcher and research subject. I have presented parts of my research at nature connection events, discussed theoretical matters with practitioners, and sent drafts to my participants for comment. Thus, my view on the nature connection movement is not that of an outside observer. Nor, however, is it that of a complete insider. I am not affiliated with any particular organisation within the field, and I do not promote or provide any nature connection services or organise any practice.

PART 1

The Nature Connection Movement

> *I had been in and out of political activism […]. And I felt there was a commitment to the earth, but there was a lack of a deeper spiritual and philosophical perspective. So, after a while it felt flat and superficial and empty. And then maybe I took a break from those groups and devoted myself to what we might place in the personal development field. It could be shamanism and various groups like that. But after a while, I felt something wasn't quite right there either. It could be very introverted and self-centred and focussed just on my own spiritual development, in a way that I thought was disconnected from the work of societal transformation. […] Somehow Lodyn[17] became my way of trying to integrate these different worlds that I felt were separated – which in itself expressed a deep separation. (Per, interviewed 1 Aug 2021)*

As noted in the introduction, what I call the nature connection movement emerges on the junction between some of the most salient trends of contemporary Western culture and stretches between different spheres of life. It encompasses personal wellbeing and social transformation, simple stress relief and deep spirituality. In this first core part of the thesis, I will describe the ideas, practices, organised actors, and literature I deem characteristic and constitutive of the movement, as well as how I have made my definitions and delimitations. I will also give an idea of who the practitioners are by discussing key demographic factors and by providing summaries of the personal stories of some of my interlocutors. Finally, in chapter 10, which concludes part 1, I will attempt to place this movement in relation to other trends in contemporary Western and Nordic culture (which will be indicated initially in chapter 4). In this first part of the thesis, which aims to achieve a comprehensive view of the movement, the primary data consists of websites,

[17] See presentation of organisations in chapter 7.

literature, and public discourse, aided by participant observations, interviews, conversations, and written communication with practitioners.[18]

[18] In the second part, this order will be reversed. There, the aim is to understand the practitioners' experiences, and thus interviews and participant observations will take centre stage, aided by websites, literature, and public discourse.

CHAPTER 4

Identifying a Movement

To get some perspective, it might be helpful to say a few words about how I began to focus in on these practices and eventually find them to have enough in common to merit categorisation under a common term. This study has been part of a larger project[19] conducted in the countries around the Baltic Sea, which aimed to answer the question of whether and to what degree nature had taken the role traditionally held by organised religion in this highly secularised part of the world. This was the initial overall question that guided me as I began to sound the terrain for fieldwork. I was also interested in the idea of health, which seemed so obviously important in many kinds of outdoor practice. What did health mean in this context? Could there be more to it than fresh air and exercise – perhaps something close to the spiritual or existential needs that would traditionally have been the domain of the church or other religious institution? In that case, the health question could be connected with the overall question of the project. Thus, in parallel with the early fieldwork, I also needed to get a grasp of the idea of health, particularly that of *spiritual* or *existential health* (see discussions in chapters 14 and 17).

Approaching the Field

Based on searches on websites and social media, I made the initial observations that, on the one hand, organised outdoor culture in Sweden appeared to increasingly address participants' existential/spiritual needs; and, on the other hand, spiritual practice appeared to become increasingly outdoor oriented. I entered the field, conducting some initial interviews and parti-

[19] The project is called "The relocation of transcendence: Silence and the sacred of the seculars around the Baltic Sea". It involved researchers in Sweden, Denmark, and Estonia and consisted mostly of ethnographic research among ordinary nature walkers as well as environmental activists, birdwatchers, and other specialists. This project has been an important part of the wider circles around my area of focus. The exchange that took place within the project has provided me with valuable vantage points from which to approach my own material, not least the possibility to compare themes between my own interviews and interviews conducted with "ordinary nature walkers", i.e., people outside of organised nature connection contexts (Cf. Thurfjell 2020).

cipatory observations, from two main vantage points: pilgrimage tours organised by the Church of Sweden,[20] and nature walks organised by the Swedish Outdoor Association (Friluftsfrämjandet), an NGO promoting outdoor practice, incorporating elements such as mindfulness, meditation, yoga, and qigong. The former type of activity had a clear spiritual dimension, and nature was involved at least as a setting; however, the health dimension was not as obvious. The latter took place in a secular context where nature was the central focus and where the health dimension was apparent on a general level as an integral part of outdoor culture. But these activities also contained a hint of the spiritual. These particular walks were somewhat on the fringe of the Association's normal activities, involving elements which, at least in some contexts, could be conceived of as spiritual. Gradually, I became more aware of a growing field of practice in which nature is the central focus in an explicitly both health-related and spiritual/existential capacity, a field which I have come to regard as cohesive enough to merit a common term: *nature connection practice*. I began to narrow the circle and engage more deeply with this focus area. Confronted with the close connection in this context between personal wellbeing and concern for ecology and human-nature relations at large, I was prompted to widen the circle again in a new direction: that of deep ecology. This added another axis besides the one between health and spirituality, namely that between personal wellbeing (including on a spiritual level) on the one hand, and ethical and social dimensions on the other.

Framing the Field

What I identify as the nature connection movement is a field with floating boundaries on an intersection of wider ideologies, practices, and cultural trends. My understanding of this movement's main influences and place in contemporary culture is shaped by the spiralling hermeneutic process described in chapter 3, which moves back and forth between the empirical, contextual, and theoretical levels. Starting from concepts and practices that appear to be of central importance, I have moved into wider circles consisting of contemporary (Western and Nordic) culture and its immediate historical background, and then returned to the empirical level with new perspectives. For instance, observing that mindfulness was referred to both in the literature and in interviews with practitioners prompted me to learn more about it. With a better understanding of the mindfulness movement, its influence on

[20] Pilgrimage has been a growing trend within the Church of Sweden in the last couple of decades, and in many cases the route – often through scenic landscapes – is just as important or more important than the destination (Davidsson-Bremborg 2013).

the practices I was studying appeared greater than I had expected. The process has also included posing negative questions to the material: what is *not* there? Or, what *is* there but is either too weak or too generic to add anything relevant to the analysis? One example of an important area of contemporary culture that is not prominent in this material might be sports culture. It is not completely absent, of course, in that there are probably individual nature connection practitioners who are also engaged in sports. However, this does not make sports culture part of what characterises the movement. On the other hand, sports culture is closely related to outdoor culture, of which I do find significant expressions in nature connection practice. Another prominent feature of contemporary culture is of course capitalism, which is nonetheless is too all-encompassing to be discussed here as an influence. Instead, more specific areas of culture, such as wellbeing and the subjective turn in contemporary spirituality, can be discussed against a background of the present stage of capitalism.

In this way, I have moved between wider and narrower circles in the attempt to pinpoint what is both significant enough and specific enough to include in the characterisation and delimitation of the field. During this process, presenting chapter drafts and papers at research seminars and academic conferences has helped to ensure that the end result is not entirely based on my own personal associations. Last but not least, the nature connection practitioners themselves have not only served as "empirical material" but have also been conversation partners well beyond the formal interviews, commenting on my drafts and corroborating or negating my interpretations of concepts and practices, as well as my presentation of facts.[21]

Through this process, I have arrived at a set of defining characteristics, in ideology and in practice, that are shared, with variations in emphasis, across what I count as the nature connection movement. On the ideological level, I have identified a set of core ideas which can be summarised in the following way:

1) Humans are (or at least ought to be) part of nature;
2) The separation from nature (real or illusory) in our present cultural condition is the cause of many of our current mental (and often also physical) afflictions;
3) It is also the cause of the current ecological crisis.

[21] Any remaining factual errors are of course completely my own.

On the level of practice, I have identified the following defining characteristics:

1) Practices designed to deepen practitioners' personal connection with natural environments and entities on sensory and/or emotional levels,
2) For the purpose of personal wellbeing and/or social change in the direction of ecological sustainability.

I have also identified six major influences, each of which contributes with a fundamental part of the movement's ideology or practice – although they each take on a particular colouring in the nature connection context. These are:

1) Deep ecology (particularly the branch called ecopsychology) which provides major tenets of the movement's ideology and worldview;
2) Science, which also contributes to the movement's worldview, for instance with biological and ecological research which suggests some level of sentience in plants, and biomedical and psychological research which provides evidence of the benefits of nature connection;
3) Outdoor culture, which has contributed to a general appreciation for nature and to the idea of nature experience as something out of the ordinary;
4) Wellbeing culture, which rides on a wider cultural tendency towards subjective evaluation and has a high regard for self-care;
5) Mindfulness, which inspires the practice of sensory attention and embodied awareness; and
6) Contemporary spiritualities, with which the movement shares a mixture of individualism and holism, as well as some points of resistance to modernity.

In chapter 10, having become better acquainted with the movement's ideology, practice, organised actors, literature, and practitioners, we will return to these influences and discuss them in more detail, so as to better understand the movement's place in contemporary Western and Nordic culture. For now, we may simply keep them in mind as we get to know the movement.

It would be possible to place different expressions of practice at points on an axis between science and spirituality. However, I want to avoid picturing

them as absolute opposites. Spiritual and scientific terminologies can sometimes convey very similar messages on the level of popular discourse (Taylor 2010, pp. 14-41; see also discussions in chapters 2, 10, and 17).

Another such apparent opposition is that between wellbeing and social activism – between self-care and concern for the world. However, at least from an emic point of view, this opposition is false. Self-care is seen by practitioners as a necessary precondition for being able to properly care for others and for the world at large – or even as essentially and functionally the same thing, given the ideology of non-separation (further discussed in the next chapter). This is fully in accordance with many forms of new spiritualities and self-development movements that have emerged since the 1960s (Puttick 2000, pp. 205-6; Ivakhiv 2003; Partridge 2005, p. 43).

Thus, while contradictions can certainly occur both between and within these areas of ideology and practice, they are opposites mainly in the same sense that buildings and topographic features in a landscape can be placed opposite each other. They frame the area of interest for this study and serve as points of orientation that help us to situate different examples of nature connection ideology and practice in relation to each other.

Terminology

Practices aimed at deepening people's connection with nature are promoted under many different terms and labels. One term that has recently gained global recognition is *forest bathing*, translated from the Japanese *shinrin yoku*, which seems to have been coined by Tomohide Akiyama at the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries in 1982 (Miyazaki 2018, p. 9; Li 2018, p. 58; Plevin 2018).

The term *forest therapy* is also used, sometimes as a synonym for forest bathing, but also to indicate a more focussed medical intervention. The confusion between the two terms has stirred some debate among leading practitioners. Wetterholm, for instance, advocates a sharper distinction:

- Forest bathing is a nature-based, guided or non-guided preventive wellness practice to achieve a sensory connection with the natural environment for relaxation and sustained health.
- Forest therapy is a nature-based, guided and clinically reinforced forest bathing intervention, with additional treatment applications and adapted professional guiding skills to achieve a sensory

> connection with the natural environment and increased health in specific populations.
> (Wetterholm 2020a, p. 108)

The Japanese forest therapy researcher Yoshifumi Miyazaki makes a similar distinction but insists that the practice is purely prophylactic (Miyazaki 2018, p. 12).

Natural mindfulness is another term promoted by the British author and nature connection promotor Ian Banyard, who led activities in which I participated at an IFTD gathering in Finland. Banyard (2018; see review in chapter 8) also uses the more general term *nature connection*.

The Swedish organization Lodyn uses the Swedish term *naturvakenhet*, which, according to Henrik Hallgren, who came up with this term in Swedish, was originally a translation of "wilderness awareness", used in some American nature connection contexts.[22] Lodyn also uses *ecopsychology* as a comprehensive term for much of their practice and ideology (see discussion of ecopsychology in chapter 10).

Many other terms are in use internationally for similar types of activities, such as *nature-based interventions*, *forest-based interventions*, *eco-therapy* and others (Bloomfeld 2017; Lord 2020). In my descriptions of specific occasions during fieldwork, I will use the terms that were used there and then. As general terms in overall discussions, I will use the term *nature connection*, often in compounds such as *nature connection ideology*, *nature connection practice*, *nature connection milieu* and *the nature connection movement*.

[22] Private conversation with Hallgren.

CHAPTER 5

Nature

In the previous chapter, I defined and delimited the nature connection movement in the context of this study and presented a list of defining criteria pertaining to ideology and practice. In this chapter and the next, we will take a deeper look at what those criteria really mean. The ideological criteria were the following:

1) Humans are (or at least ought to be) part of nature;
2) The separation from nature (real or illusory) in our present cultural condition is the cause of many of our current mental (and physical) afflictions; and
3) This separation is also the cause of the current ecological crisis.

How, then, have I arrived at this description? I have placed my general methodology in the tradition called hermeneutic phenomenology. In this chapter, which aims to understand ideas as they are expressed in speech, writing, and behaviour, the methodology is perhaps more purely hermeneutical. The starting points for my analysis have been heuristic assessments – based on literature, lectures, interviews, conversations, and practice – of what appear to me the most fundamental and characteristic ideas of the movement. These assessments constituted my pre-understanding at that point; that is, not my original pre-understanding, prior to engaging with the field, but my pre-understanding in the first round of analysis. That understanding has then been tested and validated in various ways.

Part of this validation has been to return again and again to the written material (published literature, interview transcripts and other unpublished texts), with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding rather than to quantify the occurrence of key terms. To get beyond my own pre-understandings, the most important part of the validation process has been to refer back to the interlocutors by asking new questions in follow-up interviews and by asking them to read and comment on my drafts. Among the fixed questions added in the later-stage interviews (as described in chapter 3) was one where I

specifically asked people to elaborate on their conceptions of nature and human beings, and how they relate to each other. I also asked for descriptions of both positive and negative[23] experiences of nature, which provided some insights into the ways in which nature was conceptualised and framed.

To understand the core ideological points summarised above, we need to take a deeper look at different concepts of nature, which, as noted in the introduction, is one of the major areas of tension I have identified in this movement. What do nature connection practitioners mean when they refer to "nature"? Here it is important to keep in mind that the movement consists of individuals with differences in opinion and expression. My aim is to provide a description of the broad agreements within the movement concerning nature and humanity's relationship with it, while also giving space for variations and points of disagreement.

Concepts of Nature

The philosopher Andrew McLaughlin (1993) has identified two basic concepts of nature, each with its inherent problems. Either nature is everything that has not been altered by humans (i.e., a dualistic concept), or nature is all that exists (a monistic concept which of course includes human beings). The dualistic understanding comes in many versions, where the lines of division are drawn differently, and where the value systems may be diametrically opposed to each other. There are dualistic ideologies (religious, scientific, or political) which assert human dominance over nature. But dualism is also implicit in most environmentalist ideologies, where it is assumed that nature is best left to itself without human interference. A monistic concept of nature can likewise be animated by opposite value systems. It can be used to justify anything humans do in nature as "just natural", or to argue that anything we do to nature we also do to ourselves (McLaughlin1993, pp. 1-16).

Both of these basic concepts bring potential problems for the idea of nature connection. If nature is everything that is untouched by humans, then how is it even possible for us to connect to it without immediately turning it into culture? And, conversely, if humans and all that we are and do are part of nature, then how can we be separated from it? Why is there then a need to *re*connect with it?

[23] The first question was in fact about "strong" (Sw. *stark*) nature experiences, which invariably rendered descriptions of positive experiences. The second was specified as "unpleasant" (Sw. *obehaglig*).

Monistic Concepts of Nature

The monistic concept of nature is dominant in nature connection circles, at least in terms of what is openly declared. The unity of humanity and nature is often expressed in bodily, biological terms. One experienced forest bathing and forest therapy guide, Eleonora, makes the following remarks when asked about the basic human-nature relationship:

> I think we are part of nature in just about every way; we can neither breathe nor dress nor survive... well, what is it? 5 minutes? without nature. And there is nothing inorganic in us either. We are fully degradable, unless we've had a titanium ball or something surgically inserted. We consist of the same substance as nature. (Second interview with Eleonora, 20 Aug. 2020)

Through the substance of the body, we are connected with the rest of nature. And this connection is not just a factual observation; it is related to a deep feeling of belonging. Jakob, who calls himself a Mother Earth activist and participates in some of Lodyn's activities, explains how he came to see the Earth as a living organism:

> [W]hen I began to look at myself that way, that I was made up of billions of different creatures, including all cells, including all that are not me, bacteria and viruses, everything is included. Then with that I thought: "Aha but me, I feel like one. I feel, I know that I am a being with defined limbs and so on". […] So, then I began to feel that maybe this is where the problem lies, that for some reason I am separated from knowing and hearing, from being one with Mother Earth. (Interview with Jakob, 26 Nov. 2019)

While this monism can be classified as a form of materialism, it differs from the mechanistic materialism that underpins classical modernity, which is based on a Cartesian dualism that posits the reasoning subject (or at least reason itself) outside of matter. What my interlocutors express is more in line with the strand of continental philosophy in which matter (or *body*, *flesh,* etc.) is made subject. One of the most influential thinkers in this strand of philosophy, and in what is called the "embodiment paradigm" in the humanities, is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose concept of *flesh* transcends the dichotomy of spirit and matter (at least as this dichotomy is traditionally understood):

> […] the flesh we are speaking of is not matter. It is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing and

> touching the things, such that, simultaneously, *as* tangible it descends among them, *as* touching it dominates them all and draws this relationship and even this double relationship from itself, by dehiscence or fission of its own mass. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 146)

Central in Merleau-Ponty's thinking is the double-sidedness of sensation; the seer can also be seen, the touching hand is also tangible, etc. It is "coiling over", as in the quote above, simultaneously sensing and being sensed. Eleonora expresses something very much in line with this thinking:

> When I touch something, it's a communication. […] In the deeper levels of forest bathing it's also to feel touched by a blueberry leaf or a taste or a tree. (Second Interview with Eleonora, 20 Aug. 2020).

In this perspective, it appears natural that close sensory attention can also lead to emotional connection with the object of that attention. Instead of being simply an object of attention, it is experienced as an attentive subject. Here we are touching on what will be the central themes of my phenomenological explorations in the second part of this thesis.

Dualistic Concepts of Nature

Although a monistic concept of nature is more pronounced within the movement, dualistic tendencies are also clearly noticeable in both practice and verbal expression. The idea that nature would do well without humans, implying that human presence is somehow alien to nature, has long been influential in environmentalism and wilderness conservation movements (cf. Graber 1976). Similar views can certainly be found among nature connection practitioners as well. There is an ambivalence here: we are part of nature but also exceptional in our cruelty and capacity for destruction – and for imagining ourselves as separate from nature.

Other practitioners make a more positive evaluation of humanity as having potential to make positive contributions to the world. Eleonora further elaborates her views on the human-nature relationship:

> People often say like, "Yeah, nature can do without us, but we cannot do without nature". I often think that this is a very sad way of looking at it. I think that humans have cared for nature for a very long time. Indigenous peoples nurture local nature in very specific ways. […] I also sometimes mention during the last ceremony [of a forest bathing session] where you express gratitude for something, that we have our hands, and we have the ability to feel compassion, empathy […] to help other creatures. […] But also that we

> have our intellect, that is, that we can… my teacher often says that we can bless; we can bless others; we can bless the trees, we can wish them well. […] we have an intention which is very important, because intention shapes the world; so that the world would not look the same without it, unless we constantly created – co-created – with... the rest of the world. (Second interview with Eleonora, 20 Aug. 2020)

In this view, some of the properties of human culture that may have caused our separation from nature also carry the potential for a positive – and uniquely human – contribution to the world.

M. Amos Clifford, founder of ANFT (a US-based association for forest therapy which will be described in chapter 7), similarly seems to ponder the possibility of a special role for humans in his recent book:

> The trees have been planting within me this question: what if being in the "image of God" means that we have the ability – and responsibility – to nurture the sentience of other beings, to help them wake up? Perhaps the earth is asking us to be the bringers of reveille, agents of awakening, calling forth the full conscious potential of creation, so it too can do its work. As in the fairy tale of sleeping beauty, there is a kiss that awakens the sleeper. Forest bathers bestow this awakening kiss when we cultivate softhearted, sensual, connective, and communicative relationships with the trees and streams, the stones and sky, and all the many beings. (Clifford 2018, pp. 160-61; see also my review of this book in chapter 8)

Considering these abilities as the exclusive properties of humanity may amount to a kind of dualism where the human side is more positively evaluated. However, it is also possible to see this view of humanity as consistent with a monist view, where the special capacities of humans enable us to fulfil our particular – even exceptional – role within the larger ecosystem.

One salient feature of nature connection practice, which seems to reveal a dualist bent, is the contrast drawn between nature and everyday social reality. This is expressed both in experiential accounts and in certain ritual elements. As we shall see, people's attitudes and emotional patterns change upon entering the forest. This probably happens outside of organised practice as well, but it can also be enhanced in the collective context, sometimes with the help of ritual elements (which will be described in chapter 6 and discussed in many of the subsequent chapters). This indicates a borderline somewhere in the landscape between what is perceived as nature and culture, respectively. Many practitioners also report feeling a strong positive impact from even small patches or elements of nature, like birds, trees, or insects, in otherwise

human-shaped environments. However, there is still a contrast being drawn: these elements of nature constitute a positive break with what is otherwise a grey and dreary environment. The key seems to be the ability to pay attention to these little elements of magic. Perhaps, then, the difference between nature and culture is above all a question of attention and attitude.

Nature as Attitude

Ben Page, former director of training at ANFT and an internationally influential figure in nature connection circles, spoke in a webinar of nature as a kind of fundamental essence shared by everyone and everything (IFTD Webinar, 26 Sept. 2020). Thus, he leans strongly toward the monistic idea of nature, even to the point where our destruction of ecosystems is seen, in a sense, as part of nature. He does not seem to be advocating indifference in the face of this destruction, but rather that instead of trying to protect nature – which entails putting ourselves in a superior position – we should simply love nature.

So, if everything is essentially nature, why is there a need to reconnect with it, which is apparently the main point of his teaching and practice? (See also Page 2021, and my review of said work in chapter 8). Nature and not-nature, in his view, seems to be a question of attitude. Instead of being preoccupied with *who* we are (in terms of jobs, relationships, belief systems), he suggested in the same webinar, we should focus on *what* we are. And *what* we are is nature. When I asked him: "What is nature, and what is not nature?", he clarified: "Nature is everything that is happening right here, right now. Abstractions and generalisations are not nature" (IFTD Webinar, 26 Sept. 2020). In email correspondence, after reading a draft of this chapter, he clarified further that it is more about remembering than reconnection:

> The point of my work is not "reconnect people" but to help them recognize what they are, to properly identify themselves as nature, which then grounds them in a sort of monistic reality. (Ben Page, in email correspondence, 23 Nov. 2021)

Page's thinking appears to be in line with the deep ecologist David Abram (1997), who, in turn, builds to a large extent on Merleau-Ponty and sees language – especially written language with its additional levels of abstraction – as the principal cause of our separation from nature; that is, from the immediate sensory prelingual experience.

Nature as Embodiment and Community

The practice of sensory attention, the attitude of presence in the here and now rather than being caught up in abstractions, and the emphasis on being of the same substance, all amount to what we may call *embodiment*. However, as we have seen, we are not primarily talking about the body as object, as in conventional biology (although biological research is certainly an important source of inspiration, as we have already seen). What does come across from practitioners, in both ideas and practice, is rather the body as subject, which is consistent with the embodiment paradigm in the humanities. It is also in line with animistic thinking as understood by some contemporary anthropologists. Central to this understanding of animism is that commonality with the rest of nature is found primarily on the subjective level rather than in objectively observable outer properties (Ingold 2000, pp. 89-109; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Descola 2013, pp. 116-122; Descola 2014). Although nature connection practitioners often use a biological terminology to express their sense of belonging, this belonging apparently includes – or is even primarily constituted by – what we would normally categorise as inner qualities. It entails a kind of community within which meaningful communication can take place.

This idea of a community, moreover, is not only stated as a general fact based on biological factors. Embodiment is also, as noted above, a matter of attitude. Shifting focus from social roles, generalisations, and identities to embodied presence in the local, specific, and situational appears to enable participation in this community. Sensory experience becomes a mode of communication.

The Absence of Traditional Folklore

While nature connection practitioners often describe nature as a community of beings, there is a curious absence of traditional folkloric entities in the narratives of nature connection practitioners. In a Nordic context, traditional beliefs include beings such as *Näcken*, *Skogsrået*, *vättar*, *vittror*, *de små under jorden* and others, which have often been depicted in a human or partially human form. Due to their unplaceable status somewhere between human and nature, they have often been perceived as potentially dangerous disruptions of the proper order of things (Häll 2013, pp. 23-25, 519-524, 538-541). One of my interlocutors, Jakob, shared with me an experience that is somewhat reminiscent of older accounts of encounters with nature beings. This took place in a forested area near a river in the north of Sweden:

> There were these pits [Jakob uses the word *häxgrop* in Swedish, which can be translated as "witch's pit"] where stones roll around in the rapids. And there I was for a long time just by the rapids, listening. And all of a sudden, like… I had heard about these *Näcken* (water spirits), and that they would talk and all that and… Suddenly I heard a voice: "What are you doing here?" So, I can't say that this that I heard, it was like the words were… like in my head, but it was, it wasn't nice, but it was like, "Go away!" It was such strange and hard, surly, short phrases, just really short. So, I thought, and I kind of looked into the woods like "Is somebody here?" I thought I'd be here by myself.

Perhaps this unfriendliness that Jakob experienced on this occasion points to a key difference between contemporary nature connection experiences and older folklore: contemporary nature connection practitioners, in my experience, tend to interpret the nature beings they encounter – be they animals, trees, rocks, places, landscapes, or Mother Earth – as either benign or as beyond/above such values. In older accounts, nature beings often come across as at least potentially dangerous and potentially acting against human interests. This difference might have to do with the fact that people in a self-sustenance farming economy were more directly dependent on the surrounding landscape in ways that could mean life or death, while for most contemporary Westerners, nature is more of a pleasant contrast to life's hardships.

When I asked my interlocutors about unpleasant experiences in nature, they rarely came up with much more than having felt cold, wet, or hungry, which could usually be remedied by simply going home. Some remembered being afraid of the forest at night as children. But as adults, this fear was mostly gone, dispelled through the feelings of love and comfort they now had in relation to nature. It seems that the dark forest is placed in a master narrative in which its potential danger is discharged and replaced by a feeling of love and support. And if one master narrative can have that effect, then it is not unlikely that another could have the opposite effect. Thus, another reason why nature beings often appear more dangerous in older accounts could be the filtering through post-Reformation Christian values and/or the values of early modernity, a historical period in which the distinction between the human and the natural became particularly sharp.

Other reasons for the apparent absence of traditional folk beliefs in the nature connection milieu might be changes in language, that the "same" experiences are expressed in different words, or that it is simply considered old-fashioned to believe in such things. As we will see in later chapters (most clearly in chapters 10 and 15), nature connection practitioners often take a

keen interest in science and emphasise that their activities have a scientific foundation.

It should be noted that I have not chosen to actively explore folkloric beliefs or experiences in this study. They have rarely been mentioned spontaneously by my interlocutors. However, in the few cases where I did ask specific questions about mythological beings, it appeared that people did have experiences of and ideas about them. This is an avenue that could be explored in further research. It would then be interesting to examine not only the extent to which people believe in and experience such beings, but also how they relate emotionally to them and what they mean in people's lives. This could provide a new perspective on current ideas of, and attitudes toward, nature.

CHAPTER 6

Practice

We shall now look at examples of practice, based on my participant observations. In part 2 of the thesis, I will return to many of these examples and make further interpretations pertaining to the specific themes of each chapter. In the present chapter, I will make some classifications and initial interpretations. Let us first return to the practice-related criteria presented in chapter 4:

1) Practices designed to deepen practitioners' personal connection with natural environments and entities on sensory and/or emotional levels,
2) For the purpose of personal wellbeing and/or social change in the direction of ecological sustainability.

The criteria I have set for ideology and practice (and the list of major influences, which cover both ideology and practice) have emerged through the same process. They are in reality deeply intertwined, although they can be separated analytically. As described in chapter 4, I started my inquiries from the perspective of practice.[24] I then quickly found several similar practices under different labels which also appeared to share certain basic – and specific – ideas. These practices and ideas do not just happen to occur together; they fit together quite naturally and form a coherent whole. Nevertheless, similar ideas and practices do also occur separately (or rather in other constellations). Following sometimes the ideas and sometimes the practices, I have thus encountered organised actors and milieus which are close to my defined field in one aspect but not in the other, which I term "border post actors". In the next chapter, where I will present and discuss key organised actors, I will also include these border post actors as a way to help clarify my delimitations.

[24] I have nevertheless chosen to present my findings in these areas in the reverse order, starting with ideology, because I felt that a discussion of the idea of nature at an early stage would be beneficial for the following exposition.

Nature connection practice is often conducted as organised sessions, either for a fee or free of charge, which may go on for a few hours or sometimes a whole day, and include an array of different exercises. Many of these exercises aim to bring about heightened sensory attention in natural environments. Much like in mindfulness practice (which I consider one of the main influences on the movement and which will be discussed in chapter 10), attention is directed inwards towards one's own thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, and outwards towards scents, sounds, and visual impressions. Organised sessions under different labels[25] often begin with a strong emphasis on being in the here and now, landing in the body and in the place. This sensory attention is not just a means of gathering information; it also brings about an emotional connection and a sense of communication with the landscape. In part 2 of the thesis, I will explore the bodily, emotional, cognitive, and ethical dimensions of this type of practice. Here it is sufficient to note that the practice has an impact on all these dimensions, and that it may therefore be placed somewhere between a wellbeing practice and social activism. As we will see in the next chapter, the organised actors (and individual practitioners) differ in their placement along this spectrum, but in all cases, both aspects are present (except perhaps in the "border post" cases).

Connecting with Nature Beings

In one common type of exercise, participants are sent out to find a tree that feels friendly, and to approach the tree carefully and respectfully, take it in with all their senses, get acquainted with it in every way one can think of, and then to spend some time just sitting with it. This is often experienced by participants as a communication with the tree, sometimes in words and sometimes more in feelings and moods. The communication can also occur in metaphors, but still be experienced as though the tree is speaking through these metaphors, through the way it directs its branches, the way it relates to other trees or animals, or the way it waves in the wind. The content of such conversations may be about the tree or about the human person approaching it, or the tree might divulge some general wisdom about the forest or the world.

Similar exercises may also include other entities besides trees, although trees seem to be easy for many practitioners to relate to. In one exercise I took part in, we were invited to find any being in the forest that caught our interest and give it our full attention for a while. In the circle afterwards, where we

[25] As the reader may recall from chapter 4, this study includes practices under the labels forest bathing, forest therapy, natural mindfulness, and nature awareness.

shared our experiences, some reported having found a spider, and ant, a rock, or, indeed, a tree. This is an example of how sensory attention is used in order to become fully aware of the presence of another being.

There is also a common practice called "sit spot", in which practitioners relate to a place by giving full and open attention to what is going on in the landscape. This exercise can be included in a forest bathing session, often as the final activity before the closing circle and tea ceremony (as described below). But the sit spot is also often used as a regularly recurring personal practice, and part of the training for forest bathing guides. As a long-term practice, the point is to get to know a particular place intimately through the changing seasons, and thus to develop an ongoing communication and relationship with it.

Metaphorical Interaction with Nature

A common experience, among ordinary forest walkers as well as nature connection practitioners, is that certain characteristics or events in the landscape seems to speak to them in metaphors about their own lives (cf. Thurfjell 2020, pp. 31-36). It may be the comforting discovery that decay and new growth are constantly taking place simultaneously, or the feeling of hope inspired by seeing new buds on a tree. As mentioned above, metaphors may be part of what is experienced as communication with a tree or with a place as a whole. Unsurprisingly, this widespread tendency to relate metaphorically to nature is put to use in some nature connection exercises.

In one such exercise, which I have experienced on two occasions in forest sessions led by guides from the Finnish organisation Forest Mind, we were instructed to gather twigs or pine cones, or any loose object we might find in the forest, into piles representing, for instance, things in our lives that we were grateful for or things we wanted to get rid of. On another occasion, we were instructed to find an object that would represent a specific problem in our lives, to think intensely about that problem while holding the object, and finally to put the object down and slowly walk backwards to distance ourselves from it while still watching it. These two exercises are perhaps not the best examples of metaphorical interaction, seeing as the natural objects are used here as abstract representations, while their own characteristics and expressions are less important.

Another example of metaphorical interaction, which I have experienced during a forest bathing session in Sweden (although it was not presented as part of a regular forest bathing curriculum), is an exercise called "the blossoming tree". We were instructed to find a tree, connect with it in any

way that seemed appropriate, and then to sit or stand with our backs to the tree for a while in each of the cardinal directions. Each direction was associated with a different area of life, which we were encouraged to ponder when facing that direction, while also paying attention to what was going on in the landscape. We might say that this was a way to consciously and systematically connect the inner and outer landscapes.

Artistic and Poetic Exercises

Another type of practice in which metaphorical thinking can play a part is what we might call artistic or poetic exercises, which hold a prominent place in many forms of nature connection practice. This might involve arranging leaves in a beautiful mandala pattern or singing to the landscape. Such exercises may be done for the sheer sensory pleasure, and they can be a way of giving something of oneself back to the place. They are also a way to train one's sensitivity to what in ecopsychology is sometimes referred to as the *mythopoetic* dimension of life.

To give an example, I will describe an exercise I participated in during a day of introduction to ecopsychology organised by Lodyn. The participants (six people including myself and the teacher) went in turn to three different trees chosen by the teacher in advance. We were instructed to behold each tree, try to familiarise ourselves with it, and then to write down on a piece of paper our impressions of the tree in one or two sentences. The notes were collected in a plastic pocket at the foot of each tree. Next, we were divided into groups of two and instructed to return to one of the trees and put together a coherent poem out of the written sentences, without changing more than inflections and auxiliaries to make the text coherent. It was surprisingly easy to put together a fairly coherent poem from the scattered sentences. The poems took the form of stories and character descriptions. They were mainly formulated in the second person, addressing the tree. In this way, the trees seemed to become more alive, not only as biological organisms, but as subjects with intentions taking part in a meaningful context.

Ritual Practice

A significant part of organised nature connection practice contains a ritual-like element, or takes place within a ritual or at least ritual-like framework. I use the term ritual here in an inclusive sense, based on Catherine Bell's six criteria of *ritual-like* activities: "[…] *formalism, traditionalism, disciplined*

invariance, rule-governance, sacred symbolism, and *performance*", which, in her definition, can be present to a greater or lesser degree (Bell 1997, p. 138).

A Forest Bathing Session

The following is a description of a typical forest bathing session according to a model first created by ANFT, and then further developed within the related organisations GIFT, FTI, and SNFTI (see next chapter). However, I have found that some of the key elements are also present in practices organised by Lodyn, which is not part of the ANFT "family". It should be noted that this framework allows quite a lot of room for variation based on the individual guide's preferences and skills and the needs of participants.

A typical session lasts 3–4 hours and often begins, after a brief introduction, with participants crossing some kind of threshold – for example, a fallen tree, or two large standing trees that form a gate. Then follows a series of exercises, or "invitations", as they are usually called in order to emphasise that they are absolutely voluntary. Once the participants have thus properly entered the forest, the group is gathered again in a circle, where the guide leads a journey through the senses: What do I hear? What do I see? What scents do I detect? What sensations do I feel on my skin? What does the air taste like? The participants walk very slowly between stops, almost in slow motion, opening their senses to impressions from the surroundings. At certain points along the way, the guide gathers the group again for participants to exchange experiences and receive new instructions/invitations. Most of the exercises are done individually for about 15–20 minutes, after which participants are called back, often by means of a flute or imitated birdsong. Some of the exercises involve tuning in to senses that cannot really be counted among the standard five, such as the feeling of being drawn or invited to move in a certain direction in the forest,[26] perhaps finding a place where one feels at home, or a tree to hang out with for a while. After a series of such invitations, the session usually ends with a tea ceremony where participants are treated to a cup of herbal tea, preferably brewed from herbs that grow in the immediate area, served in beautiful pottery and placed on an ornamented piece of cloth. Often, one extra cup of tea is sent around into which the participants can project their thoughts of gratitude for what they have experienced, after which the tea is poured out as a gift to the place.

[26] This is sometimes called "body radar", for instance by M. Amos Clifford (2018) reviewed below in chapter 8.

All types of exercises described in the above sections may be part of a forest bathing session, and more examples will be discussed in part 2 of this thesis.

Open Ritual Activities

Lodyn (see next chapter) is an organisation with a stronger emphasis on the side of social activism than most forest bathing providers. Some of their practice takes the form of open ritual-like activities designed to direct attention towards, and give recognition to, the needs of non-human species. Such events are usually free of charge and announced through their network. However, they differ in several ways from public protests. They are not (as far as I am aware) held outside corporate or political offices or in city centres with the aim of attracting attention. The ritual framing creates a closed community which exists mainly for the participants and for the purposes of their personal relationships with the natural world. In this way, these events are part of a practice meant to deepen personal connections with nature. And, as we shall see, they may also include exercises of sensory attention in natural environments.

A Council of All Beings

One type of event in this category is called a Council of All Beings. It is based on a concept originally developed by Joanna Macy and John Seed (Seed et al. 2007 [1988]). In November 2019, I attended this ceremony in Uppsala organised by Lodyn in cooperation with Swedish International Centre of Education for Sustainable Development (SWEDESD) at Uppsala University, and Uppsala Art Museum. The main idea of the ceremony is to enact a council where the different species of a local ecosystem are provided equal opportunity to speak for themselves and to be listened to by the others. In this case, the ecosystem was Fyrisån river which flows through Uppsala. After an initial assembly at Uppsala Art Museum, the group of around 40 participants followed the river to the outskirts of town, stopping occasionally for instructions (invitations) to nature connection exercises, very similar to the exercises of sensory attention practised in forest bathing. One of the organisers gathered the group in a circle and guided the participants through the senses, asking us to really feel what it was like to stand on that spot, feeling the cold November wind on our skins and so on. The next step was to carefully approach the river to get acquainted with it and its inhabitants. Before we arrived at our final destination, an old mental institution which now serves as a cultural centre for the local community, everyone was given

the opportunity to choose from photos laid out on the grass a species to represent in the council. The indoor activities began with everybody making artistic expressions of the species they had chosen to represent, which were then placed on a piece of cloth in the centre of the room. Then followed the council – the culmination of the day's activities. When everybody was seated in a circle around the artworks and some lit candles, each species representative (some species were represented by a pair or a group) was invited to stand up and speak from their perspective about the situation in and around the river. All participants were also invited to take turns to represent humans, during which time they were seated outside the main circle, listening but not speaking.

It was clear that some took the performance more seriously than others. Some got into their roles to the point where it seemed that they were trying to channel the authentic voice of the species they represented, while others were simply stating the facts they knew about their species and its situation in the area. Some even performed their roles somewhat humorously, expressing their appreciation for certain effects of human activity (such as food waste that some of the species benefited from). This was not exactly frowned upon; but it seemed clear that one of the main purposes of the council was to raise awareness of the destructive impacts of human activities.

The role of humans in this ceremony was somewhat ambivalent. The structure of the ceremony, on the one hand, removed humans from the central position, but on the other, afforded them a special position by placing them outside of the circle as observers and not participants. A special role for humans also seems implicit in the fact that all the roles were played by humans: the human species is the one that takes it upon itself to perform and represent all other species.

The Life Cairn Ritual

On a grassy mound in a park in Stockholm, a pile of rocks called a life cairn (*livsröse* in Swedish) has taken shape during ceremonies that have been taking place since 2012. The practice originated in England in 2011 and quickly spread across the world (Jørgensen 2018). The occasion I describe here took place on World Environment Day on 5th June, 2019. Ten people had gathered, myself included, starting with a picnic and then moving on to the ceremony. When everybody was standing in a circle around the cairn, a man began by calling on the four elements (fire, air, earth, and water) associated with the cardinal directions (north, east, south, and west, respectively). A woman then read a poem by Joanna Macy expressing grief and guilt

over the extinction of species. This was followed by the reading of a long list of species that had gone extinct or were on the brink of extinction. In this reading, everyone took part, reading one after another going around the circle. After the reading, everyone walked into the middle of the circle individually, one after another, placing the rock(s) they had brought with them onto the cairn. Most of the participants said something about the purpose that they had picked their stone to represent. Some spoke of issues close to their hearts, such as a forest they loved which had been cut down or an animal species that they felt a special kinship with. Others spoke of global issues such as the rainforest, climate change, or the extinction of species in general. This was an emotional part of the ceremony, and some wept as they placed their rocks and stated their purpose. The ceremony was concluded by everyone singing the song "Änglamark", written by the Swedish songwriter Evert Taube for a 1971 movie made to raise awareness of environmental destruction.

As the ceremony was coming to an end, three barn swallows were flying around playfully near the circle, and one of them flew right across the circle, only about a metre above our heads. Everyone acknowledged this and was delighted by the participation of the birds.

Concluding Remarks on the Practices

As one of my interlocutors explained it, the gist of nature connection practice is to go back and forth between inward and outward attention (interview with Linda, 18 Oct. 2020). This leads to a kind of meditative recuperation. It also creates the preconditions for free creative expression which many practitioners remember having had as children, and for an experience of communication with non-human beings which may be direct or metaphorical or something in between. As will be further explored in part 2, sensory attention in all its forms also implies emotional connection. It is not just a means of perceiving information about the surroundings; to give sensory attention to a natural entity is experienced as an act of recognition and communication.

Some nature connection exercises are all about direct sensory attention, touching, smelling, listening, etc., while others utilise metaphorical thinking. The exercises described above that were organised by Forest Mind, in which objects found in the forest were made to represent factors in participants' lives, are perhaps going one step further in abstraction. The fact that the objects come from the forest seems arbitrary. But perhaps the idea is also that the forest environment contributes to making people more at ease in contemplating their lives. In any case, there is a strong current in nature con-

nection practice that flows in the opposite direction, away from abstractions and towards a more direct, prelingual experience.[27]

Having seen some examples of practice, we may now revisit the question of whether, and to what extent, this is a spiritual practice. Ritual elements, like those described above, are certainly part of what we normally associate with religion and spirituality. What those elements do, moreover, is perhaps first and foremost to frame a time and a place, and to lift the whole situation out of the everyday (Bell 1997, 156-7; Hornborg 2010, s. 154–6). This brings us back to Ammerman's definition of religion, in which the other-than-everyday is the central component, the seventh dimension of practice which amplifies the other dimensions (strengthening moral messages, behaviour, sense of community, etc.) (Ammerman 2020, pp. 9, 27).

As noted in the previous chapter, this framing and elevation of nature seems to express and enhance a dualistic concept of nature and culture by creating a dichotomy similar (and sometimes coterminous) to that between the sacred and the profane. This dichotomisation has been – and often still is – a widespread feature in many forms of environmentalism, which the nature connection movement, at least to some extent, is moving away from (Graber 1976; Ohlsson 2020). In this way, the elevation of nature to the level of the extraordinary or even sacred seems to have the paradoxical effect, shared with many forms of religion and spirituality, of increasing the distance from something while also making it more attractive – and more important to integrate in one's everyday life. At the same time, at least a regular nature connection practice also leads to a trained eye for spotting the natural (and, as we will see in part 2, the magic and wonder) in the everyday. It has become clear to me in the course of this study that any particular practice, when turned over and looked at from different angles, often displays apparent contradictions. My view, however, is that these apparently opposite qualities are rarely mutually exclusive in reality.

While none of Bell's criteria of ritual-like activities are completely absent from these practices, they fulfil the first four only to a limited degree. They are not highly formalistic or founded in long historical traditions. They do not require disciplined adherence to invariant patterns and are not controlled by strict rules. The last two of her criteria, however, are met to a much higher

[27] As will be discussed in the next chapter, Forest Mind falls somewhat outside or on the fringe of what I define as the nature connection movement on the ideological level, in that they do not explicitly present their practice as part of a solution to the ecological crisis. In this way, some of their practice is also on the fringe. They do, however, practise other exercises that are more clearly intended to enhance sensory attention to, and connection with, the landscape.

degree. The sacralisation of a time and place (what Bell calls *sacred symbolism*) is at the centre of these activities – as, arguably, in most ritual and ritual-like activities – and the last criterion, *performance*, contributes to this sacralisation by creating a multi-faceted experience of scents, flavours, tactile, aural, and visual impressions that enhance the effects of the practice on many levels simultaneously. This is a salient trait of nature connection practice, displayed, for instance, in the serving of fragrant herbal tea in beautiful cups, or in the calling back to the circle by the sound of a flute or an imitated bird call.

All the activities I have described fit with what Bell observes as a paradigm shift in the ritual culture of the West, which has made rituals and ritual-like activities more inward oriented (Bell 1997, pp. 240-2). In this new paradigm, rituals and ritual-like activities aim to bring about an inner change in the participating individuals, while external social contexts and functions are less important. The primary measurement of the legitimacy of such activities is their direct impact on the participants, rather than their basis in tradition or the authority of the leading performer. (This general orientation around personal experience also applies, of course, to activities that are not in themselves clearly ritual-like.) Some of the ritual activities I describe in this study do address social issues, and in that sense can be said to transcend personal inner experience. However, even those activities do not fully take the form of public protests. They are conducted for the participants, in the interest of their personal relationships with and feelings towards nature.

CHAPTER 7

Organised Actors

Organised nature connection practice may be conducted by independent providers or under the aegis of larger national, regional, or international organisations. When the larger organisations are involved, it is mostly as providers of training and certification for guides who then, as independent providers, offer their services to the general public or within the framework of employment or collaborative projects with, for instance, a local municipality or a healthcare provider. All of the organisations described below have emerged within the last 10 years, some of them during the period of this study, which has given me the opportunity to follow their development in real time through continuous contact with key figures.

In this chapter, I will provide a brief description of the organised actors I have been in contact with during fieldwork, and the nature of my contact with each organisation. I will also include what I call "border post actors"; that is, organisations that are close to the nature connection milieu in theory or practice, but which do not meet all the criteria established in chapter 4.

Nature Connection Actors

The following organisations and independent actors fall within the field I have defined in this study, that is, they meet the criteria in both ideology and practice. Nevertheless, there are notable differences between them, not least in how far they lean towards wellbeing or social activism.

ANFT

The Association of Forest and Nature Therapy Guides and Programs (ANFT) was founded in the United States in 2013. It has branches around the world and has developed a model of forest bathing (described below) whose basic tenets are recognisable in the practices of some of the other organisations listed here. These were founded by people who received their original training within the ANFT and have been part of its network. (https://www.natureandforesttherapy.org/, accessed 29 May, 2020). My contact with ANFT has consisted of attending forest bathing sessions led by

ANFT guides, interviewing ANFT-trained guides, and corresponding with one of its leading members.

GIFT

Global Institute of Forest Therapy (GIFT) was founded in 2018. Some of the founding members had previously been part of the core of ANFT. GIFT has branches in Ireland, Canada, and the United States (https://www.giftofthe forest.com/, accessed 29 May, 2020). My connections with the organisation have consisted of attending one forest bathing session led by a GIFT guide and interviewing one of its founding members.

FTI

Forest Therapy Institute (FTI), originally European Forest Therapy Institute (EFTI), was founded in 2019 by practitioners trained within the ANFT. The organisation has branches in Ireland, Spain, Portugal, and Argentina. (https://foresttherapyinstitute.com/, accessed 29 May, 2020). My contact with FTI has consisted of attending forest bathing sessions led by FTI guides, interviewing FTI-trained guides, and corresponding with one of its founding members. The organisation has since split into two new organisations: Nádúr, based in Ireland (https://nadurforesttherapy.com/, accessed 4 March 2022) and Forest Therapy Hub (FTH) with branches in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland, Chile, and Argentina (https://foresttherapyhub.com/, accessed 4 March 2022).

SNFTI

Scandinavian Nature and Forest Therapy Institute (SNFTI) was founded in Sweden in 2019 by Petra Ellora Cau Wetterholm, who had been trained within the ANFT and also participated in the founding of FTI/EFTI before branching off to found an independent Scandinavian institute. SNFTI provides training and certifications for forest bathing and forest therapy guides.[28] (https://www.scandinaviannatureandforesttherapyinstitute.com/, accessed 29 May, 2020). My contact with SNFTI has consisted of attending forest bathing sessions led by SNFTI guides, interviewing SNFTI-trained guides, attending (part of) one SNFTI guide training event, and extensive correspondence and informal conversations with its founder.

[28] Wetterholm develops a clear distinction between forest bathing and forest therapy on the institute's website and in her article (Wetterholm 2020a).

IFTD

International Forest Therapy Days (IFTD) is a conference association bringing together a broad range of nature connection practitioners, researchers, and others who take an interest the field. It has so far arranged conferences and retreats in Finland in 2018 and 2019, an online conference in September 2020, and several shorter webinars. (https://www.foresttherapydays.com/, accessed 29 May 2020). My contact with IFTD has included attending two on-site conferences and retreats, three online events, and extensive correspondence and informal communication with several members of the organising committee.

Lodyn

Lodyn is a Swedish organisation founded in 2015. It uses the term "nature awareness" (Swedish: naturvakenhet) rather than forest bathing or forest therapy. Apart from nature awareness training, Lodyn takes a more openly political stance, advocating for the rights of nature and presenting itself as a Swedish branch of the global movement for that cause. On their website, they place themselves within the ecopsychological current more explicitly than the other organisations I have been in contact with. Neopagan influences are also discernible, for instance the name is taken from a Norse goddess of the Earth. (http://www.lodyn.se/, accessed 29 May, 2020). My connections with Lodyn have consisted of attending a one day-course in ecopsychology, two open ritual-like events, one webinar on animism and the rights of nature, and interviews and correspondence with members and people who have taken their one-year course "Jorden är själens hem" ("Earth is Home to the Soul").

Sole Proprietors

Sole proprietors constitute the majority of organising practitioners in this field. These may or may not be affiliated with one of the above organisations. Some of those who are affiliated also hold longer training courses to certify new practitioners as, for instance, forest bathing guides. Many have received training under the aegis of one of the above organisations, but some have developed their practices independently (of course with influence and inspiration from other practices) and prefer to remain unaffiliated. Few (if any) can make a full living out of this practice, and most either have other employment or, as sole proprietors, offer other services that provide a more steady and substantial revenue. Some are owners of small farmsteads and countryside properties, where some form of nature connection practice can be part of a wider offering of nature- and farm-related services.

Border Post Actors

The following organisations do not fully fit into my definition of the nature connection movement. They have been included to help clarify the boundaries of the field. They constitute a kind of roadmap that shows the routes I have taken in and out of the field, as described in chapter 4.

Church of Sweden
The Church of Sweden is an Evangelical Lutheran former state church, separated from the state in the year 2000. In the last couple of decades, the practice of pilgrimage has increased rapidly. New pilgrimage routes and pilgrimage centres have been established around the country with the main centre being in Vadstena. My contact with this practice, in the early stages of this study, consisted of participation in one pilgrimage walk, conversations with organisers and participants, and one formal interview with a participant.

Swedish Outdoor Association (Friluftsfrämjandet)
Swedish Outdoor Association is an NGO promoting outdoor practice, founded in 1892. The types of activities that attracted my attention in the early stages of the study, where elements like yoga, qigong, and meditation were involved, appear to be a relatively recent development, and are still a minor part of the association's activities. My contact with them consisted of interviews with one organiser and one participant.

A School Called Home
A School Called Home began its course activities in 2018. It is run by the activist intellectuals Anna Björkman and Dougald Hine, who live together in Sweden as a couple. They communicate mostly in English and have a global outreach. The school, as they say, "grows out of the conversations we bring together around our kitchen table" and is about "rebuilding a living culture" that can cope with the current ecological crisis. (https://aschoolcalledhome.org/, accessed 11 Nov. 2020). My contact with A School Called Home has consisted of attending a series of online seminars in the autumn of 2020 under the headline "Homeward Bound: The Climate Sessions". These were structured as dialogues between Hine and invited guest speakers. A School Called Home is built on a form of deep ecology that resonates with the basic ideas of the nature connection movement, as summarised and discussed in previous chapters. However, it stays mostly within the field of ideology production and social activism.

Forest Mind

Forest Mind (Finnish: Metsämieli) was founded in 2014 and is based in Finland. They describe their practice as a "system of mental skills exercises designed to utilise and intensify the natural healing effects of forests". The method is said to be built on psychology, therapy, coaching, and mindfulness. Forest Mind offer methods to connect with nature for personal wellbeing but do not make any explicit statements on their website about the larger ecological context (http://metsamieli.fi/Forestmind-fi/, accessed 11 Nov. 2020). In this way, as organisation they fall somewhat outside my definition of nature connection practice, although some of their practices are very close to those of some organisations that I do include in the field. My contact with Forest Mind has included attending two nature walks led by Forest Mind guides and informal conversations and correspondence with several people trained in the Forest Mind system.

Concluding Remarks on the Organised Actors

As we have seen, many of the organisations in this field are interconnected in various ways. Some of the most widespread forms of nature connection practice in Europe and North America are based on a forest bathing model developed by the ANFT, founded in the United States in 2013. Three international institutes, GIFT, SNFTI, and FTI (which, as noted above, has branched off again) have or have had direct connections with the ANFT, where the founders received their training and, in some cases, took part in the development of that training. This branch-off situation has caused some strain and competition within and between the organisations, but it also makes for continued personal relationships and cooperation. This strain and competition can be seen in light of a tension between adjustment to a capitalist business model and resistance to that same social system. On the one hand, many of the most committed practitioners aim to make a living out of this practice, which means that they need to treat ideas and models for practice as intellectual property. On the other hand, they share the conviction that this practice is an important driver of social change, and that it should therefore be spread and shared as widely as possible. In online fora, and in the conference forum IFTD, there is an atmosphere of sharing. But competition can also come to the surface.

Of the organisations included here, which are fully included in the category of nature connection actors, it is only Lodyn that is not at all associated with the ANFT. The conference association IFTD is also not an ANFT branch. It is a forum where practitioners and organisers, either independent

or representing various organisations, including ANFT, meet and exchange experiences together with researchers and others who take an interest in the field. IFTD does not provide certifications and has not developed a specific practice of its own.

As noted above, there is a general agreement among the organisations I have included in this study that a deepened connection with nature contributes to personal wellbeing and to the repair of humanity's troubled relationship with the Earth. They differ in their areas of emphasis, and in the extent to which they take an open political stance. Lodyn tends towards the political side with a kind of social, cultural, and spiritual activism. A lot of their practice consists of making personal connections with nature. But they also organise semi-open ritual activities, and conferences on the rights of nature. The ANFT-related organisations put more emphasis on the personal wellbeing side, but also clearly express on their websites and in other publications the wider perspective of healing humanity's relationship with the Earth. As noted in previous chapters, and as will be discussed further in chapter 10, there is, in the emic perspective, no opposition between personal wellbeing and a balanced relationship with nature. Building a personal connection with nature can thus be viewed as a form of activism in and of itself, an act of breaking the paradigm of distance from and domination over nature.

CHAPTER 8

Literature

The last decade has seen a veritable flood of literature on nature, health, and personal connection to nature, some of it with an emphasis on personal wellbeing and some with a more ecological perspective. As we shall discuss more thoroughly in chapter 10, the nature connection movement is influenced by many kinds of literature, not least scientific and popular scientific writing in the fields of psychology, medicine, biology, and ecology. There is, however, one category of literature that is so close to the movement, ideologically and practically, that I find it motivated to treat it as a separate genre: *nature connection literature*. Among this literature, I count publications that share the defining ideological tenets of the movement, and which also promote a practice clearly intended to inspire the reader to develop a deeper personal connection with nature, consistent with my practice-based criteria. I will review a selection of these works here to give an idea of the kind of literature I place in this genre. Two of the American titles reviewed here – Wall Kimmerer 2013 (which I still consider as border post literature, as will be explained below) and Clifford 2018 – are the top two on a list of ten nature connection books published on the American website natureconnectionguide.com, based on a survey of ANFT-certified forest therapy guides (natureconnectionguide.com, accessed 13 April 2021). Another American title (Page 2021) was published after said list was compiled. Regarding the Swedish literature, I have not found any equivalent list.

In familiarising ourselves with this selection of literature, we can get a more detailed picture of the movement's ideology and practice.

Nature Connection Literature

Let us first review a selection of books that fully meet the criteria I have established for the genre nature connection literature.

M. Amos Clifford (2018), *Your Guide to Forest Bathing: Experience the Healing Power of Nature*

M. Amos Clifford is the founder of ANFT and a long-time nature guide and environmental activist. This book is an attempt to summarise experiences from his own life as well as from his work with forest bathing and forest therapy as it has developed in the ANFT's training programmes since its founding in 2013. He also provides an overview of research on the mental and physical health benefits of being in nature. He moves swiftly between different conceptual frameworks and epistemologies. A lot of the book strays outside of a strict scientific framework into more poetic territory where hard evidence is less important, where the trees are singing and the forest invites you to discover its secrets.

The book is intended as a practical guide to forest bathing, providing an outline of how to structure and conduct a session and what types of exercises can be included, to be tried by the reader at home. It also includes a detailed discussion of bodily and sensory presence and different modes of perception. In addition to the traditionally recognised five senses, Clifford describes nine more, some of which are scientifically recognised and some of which are not, as he readily admits. His descriptions are based on personal experience, Clifford's own and that of his fellow forest therapy guides and participants. In ANFT-related practice, some of the most important additional senses are known as "body radar", "imaginal sensing", and "heart sense" (Clifford 2018, pp. 51-54). Moreover, the connection achieved through the senses is not only sensory, but also sensual (Clifford 2018, pp. 54-55).

This emphasis on bodily and sensory presence is of course inspired by the mindfulness movement, which in turn is inspired by Zen meditation, which Clifford has practised for many years. However, he distances himself and forest bathing somewhat from the ideal of complete equanimity of mind cultivated in Zen meditation. In forest bathing, while unpleasant experiences are certainly not shunned or ignored, the pleasurable ones are invited and given slight priority (Clifford 2018, pp. 34-38).

In a larger perspective, Clifford sees this practice as part of the healing of the human relationship with the Earth. He even seems to imply that the role of humans might not be just to discover nature as sentient and communicative, and to live in consideration of that insight, but also to actively contribute to the world's awakening (Clifford 2018, pp. 160-61).

Ian Banyard (2018), *Natural Mindfulness: Your personal guide to the healing power of Nature Connection*

Ian Banyard is a prolific promotor of nature connection in Britain and internationally. He mostly refers to the practice as *natural mindfulness*, but also uses the more general term *nature connection*. Banyard has a background in the world of corporate business. In the book, he tells the story of how a decade of working too hard, meeting professional and social expectations, eventually took its toll. Nature had been important in his childhood but became less so in adult life due to a lack of time. However, walking mindfully in nature, he gradually brought himself back into balance:

> […] I began to reconnect with my love of Nature, walking on the fells, around the lakes, in the forests and along the shoreline, exploring the landscape around me. I also explored my inner landscape; the one full of memories, thoughts, feelings, experiences and insights. At times during these years of reclusion, I experienced anger, bitterness, guilt, shame, deep sadness and depression. I also experienced moments of a profound sense of inner balance, healing and intimate connection with the plants, animals and landscapes around me. The beauty and tranquillity of the natural world stimulated my senses and expanded my awareness (Banyard 2018, p. 14).

The central content of the book consists of seven exercises meant for the reader to practice over the course of one week. Each chapter ends with a few lined pages for the reader's own journal notes. The exercises include breathing, listening, and other sensory exercises. The most important thing is to do everything mindfully. Banyard is inspired by the prominent mindfulness teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, whose key teaching he summarises thus: "Through mindfulness, we can learn to live happily in the present moment – the only way to truly develop peace, both in one's self and in the world" (Banyard 2018, p. 52). In the sixth and seventh exercises, the programme is completed through discovering the feeling of aliveness in one's own body, which is then brought into communication with the aliveness in the surrounding nature.

As is common in this type of literature, the book also aims to speak to the reader's sense of beauty. In this case, Banyard has cooperated with the photo-artist Miyuki Miura, whose photos of leaves and waterdrops embellish the pages.

The main focus of the book is on personal wellbeing; but the wider social perspective is present throughout and sometimes becomes more explicit.

Banyard clearly connects inner changes to changes in the world. By the end of the seventh exercise chapter, he reflects:

> [In the forest] I hear walkers moaning about their work colleagues, their boss, their spouse, the news, the government, the state of the country and what's wrong with the world. All of them infecting the beauty of Nature with the *Manufactured Mindlessness* they create inside their heads. What if, in the same way as people can infect a Natural space with all the problems in the world, people could also infect all the problems in the world with Nature?" (Banyard 2018, p. 89).

Eva Sanner (2018), *Naturens hemlighet: Återfinn din plats i det stora sammanhanget [The Secret of Nature: Rediscover Your Place in the Greater Context]*

Eva Sanner is the author of a long list of books, mostly on lifestyle-related subjects. More recently, her writing has been focused on human-nature relations. She has undergone Lodyn's one-year training programme in eco-psychology (mentioned in the previous chapter).

Naturens hemlighet is written as a series of personal stories and essays built around the author's memories involving nature connection, the history of humanity's relationship with nature, and references to psychological and medical research. The book is full of photos by Lena Granefelt and designs by Fredrika Siwe, aiding the communication of natural beauty and wonder.

Much of the text revolves around the author's personal experiences of nature connection, such as spending a day and night in the forest, gardening, or just walking. Events in the landscape correspond to inner experience, to her thoughts and feelings – sometimes in apparently magical ways, like when a swarm of golden dragonflies suddenly appears on a nature walk during a stressful time, which instantly changes her mood and, in retrospect, also seems to signal the beginning of a new era in her life. She refers to Jung and his concept of synchronicities. Another story involves moving to a new place and getting to know it through connecting with the old trees growing there (pp. 65-66).

She laments the loss of the "animistic world" that we used to inhabit before Descartes and the Enlightenment. At the same time, she argues, animistic ways of seeing are really not that far from what some climatologists and ecologists are saying. She mentions Lovelock's Gaia theory (p. 191-92). In this way, the text undulates between different epistemologies and perspectives in a manner typical of the genre.

To find our way back to balance – inwardly as well as between humanity and nature – we need to re-enchant the world, give it back the magic that was lost with the Enlightenment and industrialisation. The last chapter is titled "Magic and Presence". Like the other chapters, it is concluded by some practical advice and instructions, in this case on how to awaken this animistic awareness. The first instruction is to find a beautiful and secluded place in nature; to stay there for a while and to take it in as one would the face of a friend, and then just stay with this attention. The second instruction is to note special events in nature, like meeting an animal, and to think about how one would interpret such an event if it took place in a dream (p. 197).

Ben Page (2021), *Healing Trees: A Pocket Guide to Forest Bathing*

Ben Page is an acclaimed lecturer and trainer in the world of forest bathing and forest therapy. Between 2017 and 2020, he served as director of training for the ANFT, and he runs the two labels Shinrin-Yoku L.A. and Integral Forest Bathing.

In his book, Page connects to an American tradition of nature writing through his personal memories from the area around Walden Pond, which is near where he grew up. The spontaneous sensory connection and enjoyment he had experienced in nature as a child, which was pushed into the background as he approached adulthood, was rekindled when a high-school teacher introduced the class to Thoreau's well-known opus, and had them read the last chapter at sunrise near the pond, and then to take a walk to experience the area for themselves.

As discussed in chapter 5, Page is a strong proponent of a monist view where humanity is part of nature and where the key to an authentic relationship with (the rest of) nature is to be less caught up in abstractions and more present in the here and now:

> Real relationships are not characterized by what we know intellectually about another being, but by our immediate embodied sensation of knowing and being known, a reciprocity in perception. (Page 2021, p. 35)

Such relationships affect the ways in which we relate to ourselves as well:

> When we cultivate real relationships, recognizing the intelligence, autonomy, and dignity of other beings, we begin to weave a new story of ourselves. (Page 2021, p. 35)

Most of the book consists of practical advice to the reader on how to cultivate such relationships, intermingled with philosophical reflections on nature and health. He touches on the biophilia hypothesis and related theories on nature and health, but lands in what he calls "relational health":

> We receive our health from nature because we are nature. In reciprocity, we can offer health back to nature. This is called *relational health*: the strength of relationship between people and the environment they live in. (Page 2021, p. 52) (Italics in original)

Border Post Literature

As in my description of organised actors, I include here works of literature that may be considered somewhat on the margins of the field, for the purposes of clarifying my definitions and delimitations. All of the works reviewed below are very close to what I define as the nature connection movement. Robin Wall Kimmerer's book is included in the online list of nature connection books mentioned above and is widely read in nature connection circles. Henrik Hallgren is the founder of Lodyn, an organisation that fulfils all my criteria. Thus, I do not consider these works as being completely outside of the genre, but they are only just inside it. Both have a strong emphasis on mythology combined with personal stories – which can be interpreted as concrete advice for the reader's own connection to nature. However, this is not as explicit as in the works discussed above.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a professor in environmental biology, with a basis in botany. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she draws on both her scientific training and her Native American heritage from the Potawatomi Nation. The chapters are a mixture of personal memories and Native American legends, much of it centred around plants, which she describes from a scientific perspective as well as in terms of her personal relationships with them. The scientific view of plants, which she learned at university, was useful in a certain way and provided new insights but seemed to conflict with the other kinds of knowledge that she had been brought up with, and with the love of plants that had brought her to this line of study in the first place. Eventually, however, she learned to move more easily between the two languages:

> It was the bees that showed me how to move between different flowers – to drink the nectar and gather pollen from both. It is this dance of cross-

> pollination that can produce a new species of knowledge, a new way of being in the world. (Wall Kimmerer 2013, p. 47)

The scientific language is a language of distance, but to really understand something we must approach it with our whole being. The language of distance is, according to Kimmerer, a product of modern Western culture, possibly with roots going all the way back to our Abrahamitic mythology, where Eve is "[…] an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road to her real home in Heaven". An expanded way of knowing and of being in the world is needed to bring balance to our relationship with the Earth.

Many of her personal stories are about connection, to plants or places – or to places through plants, for instance when she moves to a new part of the country and finds an old sitka spruce to sit with and introduce herself to – much like Eva Sanner's description above.

Wall Kimmerer's central message, as I understand it, is that we all – indigenous or not – should cultivate a connection with places and with other species, with an attitude of reciprocity and gratitude.

Henrik Hallgren (2017), *Jordens ande: Om nordisk naturreligion [The Spirit of the Earth: On Norse Nature Religion]*

Henrik Hallgren, founder of Lodyn, gives an ecopsychological/deep ecological perspective on nature connection. He appears to be less interested in medical and (mainstream) psychological research than some of the authors reviewed above, although he touches upon that too. A major source of inspiration is Norse Paganism.

Hallgren discusses the concept of nature religion against the background of Nordic cultural history. Like the other authors referenced here, he advocates a greater humility in human relations with other species. Like Clifford, he sees a role for humans in the "singing" of the world:

> For me, living a spiritual life is about this. Taking part – together with the rustle of the ash tree, the waves against the rock and the echoing cry of the raven – in the singing of a holy world. (Hallgren 2017, p. 43 [my translation])

He characterises his view of nature as a form of animism; that is, a mode of relating to nature and its creatures as to persons. He speculates – drawing, it seems, on something like the biophilia hypothesis – that we likely developed to live in an animistic universe (p. 44-47). Much of the mental illness people suffer from today may then be due to the fact that we cannot cope with living in a soulless world. Like Sanner, Hallgren uses Jung's concept of synchron-

icity when he talks about strange coincidences, for instance between ritual acts and events in the landscape (p. 53).

Ecopsychology, as Hallgren explains it, is about approaching the subjectivity of the world at large, rather than viewing the world from the outside (pp. 79-81). This is in line with how some contemporary anthropologists understand animism, which Hallgren is probably familiar with (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2004; Descola 2013; 2014).

Much of the book consists of stories from Hallgren's own life, interwoven with Norse mythology and ritual practice. This is probably intended as inspiration to readers to develop similar practices of their own, but the advice is not as concrete and explicit as in some of the titles reviewed above. He comes close to giving explicit practical advice in some parts, like when he describes the practice of "thin hearing" (Sw. "tunn hörsel"). The idea is to fade into the background, to sit calmly, silence the inner noise, listen, and observe everything that goes on without letting thoughts, evaluations, and opinions get in the way (Hallgren 2017, pp. 127-9). His description is close to what forest bathers call the "sit spot" (see description in chapter 6).

Qing Li (2018), *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness*

Qing Li is a medical doctor and associate professor at Nippon Medical School in Tokyo. He also holds leading positions in the Forest Therapy Society in Japan and the International Society of Nature and Forest Medicine.

In the book, he tells the story of how forest bathing developed in Japan from the 1980s onwards, from a general sense that being in the forest is good for us, to an area of scientific study which has now gathered a large body of evidence for its efficacy. Li himself has been very much involved in this research. In the book, he describes some of the studies that have been conducted. Much of this research has focused on the effects of forest bathing on stress levels and immune system function.

Another large part of the book consists of advice for how to practice forest bathing, mostly centred on sensory attention and mindfulness. The practical advice also includes instructions for making an essential oil diffuser to bring forest scents indoors, and a list of medicinal properties of essential oils derived from different tree species.

Although his emphasis is on medical science, there are also poetic and aesthetic elements and references to traditional Japanese spirituality. An ecological perspective is not explicit in the book, apart from in the last chapter, where Li reflects on the importance of forest preservation and

observes: "When we love nature, we are likely to look after it. The more we connect with the natural world, the more likely we are to preserve it for the future" (Li 2018, p. 279).

Yoshifumi Miyazaki (2018), *Shinrin Yoku: The Japanese Art of Forest Bathing*

Yoshifumi Miyazaki has a background in agricultural and forestry studies and is currently a professor at the Center for Environment, Health, and Field Sciences at Chiba University.

The structure and content of his book is very similar to that of Qing Li's book on the same topic published in the same year. (I have not sought to ascertain which of the two books came first or the extent to which the two researchers may have cooperated professionally.)

Miyazaki's book is somewhat shorter than Li's, although both books have an easy-to-read layout with short passages of text interspersed with lots of pictures and illustrations (a style that is common to the genre). Miyazaki takes the reader through the main theories underpinning much of the research on nature and health, and presents the results of his own and others' research.

The book also contains practical advice for forest bathing based on sensory attention and mindfulness, and how to make essential oils from trees. There is also a chapter on the history of Japan with regards to nature and forests. This is where we see the most glimpses of spirituality and some intimation of a deep ecological perspective in the idea that humans, in Japanese culture, are considered part of nature, which is contrasted with the Western/Christian placement of man above nature (Miyazaki 2018, pp. 44-6).

Concluding Remarks on the Literature

All the works reviewed here – border posts as well as those placed fully in the category of nature connection literature – more or less fit the criteria I have established for the nature connection movement on both ideology and practice. Its expressions range between the poetic/mystical/enchanted and the scientific. Most of these books (all of those included in the nature connection category) also include photos and/or illustrations that add to the aesthetic quality of the works. The core of this genre, as I understand it here, consists of personal stories and reflections, expressions of poetic beauty, and practical advice for nature connection, mixed in most cases with popular science.

As in the case of organised actors, some of these works share the ideology of the nature connection movement but not so much the practice, while some

share the practice but not so much the ideology. On this basis, I have designated some of these works of literature as border posts, outside or on the outskirts of the field. Hallgren and Wall Kimmerer, in the works reviewed above, elaborate an ecocentric ideology that fits my criteria for nature connection literature. However, I have placed them in the border post category because the books contain very little concrete instructions to the reader on how to achieve a deeper connection with nature. Li and Miyazaki display far less of an explicit ideological perspective. This may be due to the fact that they are both academically based in the natural sciences, or it may be that ecocentric perspectives are more prevalent in the European and North American contexts.

In all these cases, what appears to be lacking may of course be present in implicit and unarticulated forms. To what extent is a matter of interpretation. Some of Hallgren's and Wall Kimmerer's accounts of personal experience can be taken as concrete advice to the reader. Li and Miyazaki do seem to hint at some ecocentric perspectives. It may be that such perspectives are taken for granted in the Japanese context, which is alluded to in the statements about humans being considered part of nature in Japanese culture. However, since my field research does not include Japan, I do not want to speculate too much on possible cultural differences.[29] Thus, the divisions I have made here are approximate. They serve to explain the boundaries I have drawn, but also to illustrate that these boundaries are, in reality, fluid.

[29] I have not conducted field research on site in North America either. However, I have had extensive contact with practitioners who are active in, or trained by, the U.S.-based ANFT, and I have on multiple occasions experienced their model of forest bathing (and related models).

CHAPTER 9

Practitioners

Who, then, are the people that constitute the movement's core of active organiser-practitioners? After years of contact with practitioners – through participation in practice, social media communities, interviews, and informal conversations and correspondence – I have acquired a pretty good idea of the kinds of people who are drawn to this milieu (in terms of gender, age, educational background, profession, etc.). As in many forms of spirituality – and, in fact, many other forms of cultural activities – there is a female dominance. Very few are under the age of 30. The level of education is mixed, but overall rather high. And, as is the situation in many new spiritualities as well as nature-related activities, only a small minority have an immigrant background. In terms of profession, the caring sector seems to dominate. Some are also wilderness guides who want to add a new dimension to their clients' experiences of nature. Many have practised some form of meditation before, often mindfulness and related Buddhist practices, and some are trained as instructors in that practice as well. Many have personal experience of stress-related illness in some form. This has often been a major part of what led them to the practice.

In part 2, we will become further acquainted with several practitioners. This chapter will provide a general overview and discussion of certain demographic patterns, followed by summaries of the life stories of a selection of interviewees.

A Glance at the Demographics

Out of 54 applicants to SNFTI training programmes in 2020, 49 were women, and four men; the ages ranged from 35 to 67 with an average of 51.4. Forty-three had higher education (33 on undergraduate and 11 on graduate level); 14 were living in big city municipalities, 27 in dense municipalities, and nine in rural municipalities; and only one had a foreign-sounding (non-European) name. By comparing this group with statistics for the general population in Sweden on the one hand, and with qualitative data from my

interviews with nature connection practitioners on the other, we may obtain a good picture of the kinds of people who are drawn to this practice.

With only one person whose name indicates a foreign origin or family background, the group does not reflect the total population in a country where about 26% are either themselves born in a foreign country or have two foreign-born parents (SCB 2021). A similar lack of people with foreign backgrounds has been observed in other non-traditional spiritual practices (Frisk 2000, p. 59). In this particular context, however, it should also be noted that Sweden has a strong tradition of outdoor culture (discussed in the next chapter) and that people who have grown up in Sweden with Swedish parents are more likely to have a strong connection with the country's natural landscapes (the types of landscape as well as specific places). My interlocutors frequently mention childhood experiences as a basis for their love of nature. Cultural differences in attitudes to nature have been noted in connection with efforts to improve immigrant integration through interaction with nature (Moshtat 2007; Lisberg Jensen, Ouis 2014). The environmental psychologist and nature connection practitioner Josefin Wilkins, who worked with newly arrived immigrants on commission from a municipality in Sweden, quickly discovered that many of her participants were uncomfortable with going into the forest right away. Her solution was to start indoors, introducing the participants to the taste of blueberries and other sensory experiences that might evoke childhood memories from their countries of origin, and thus approach the Swedish landscape step by step (conference presentation by Josefin Wilkins at IFTD 2019 in Finland).

Regarding place of residence, the group of 54 applicants reflects the general population quite well. Many different definitions of rural and city areas are in use, resulting in varying measures of rural and city populations. The Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis (Growth Analysis) has categorised municipalities based on population density and travelling distance to population centres of more than 50,000 inhabitants (Growth Analysis 2014). They use two levels of precision with six and three categories respectively. Using the simpler level with three categories, the proportion of the group living in rural municipalities (nine out of 54, equivalent to 18%) corresponds quite well to the proportion of the general population living in such areas, which in 2012 was 17%. Twenty-seven of the applicants were living in dense communities (mostly small and mid-size towns and their vicinities) which equals 54%, compared to 51% in the general population. Finally, the proportion living in big city areas (14 people, or 28%) is comparable to the 33% in the general population (Growth Analysis 2014, p. 61).

Thus, the applicant group appears to reflect the geographical distribution of the general population. My interlocutors in the movement are similarly distributed as this group of applicants. Some of them grew up in urban environments and are either still living in a big city area or have moved closer to nature. Others grew up in rural areas and are still living in such areas or have moved back after some years of study and urban life.

The level of education in this group of applicants differs more clearly from the general population. Forty-three people with some form of higher (tertiary) education equals 81%, which can be compared to 44% (in 2019) of the general population between the ages 25–64 (SCB 2020a). The higher age range of the group make this contrast even starker, given that the intake to higher education has increased in recent decades. On the other hand, the female dominance makes it somewhat less stark, since the rate of higher education is higher among women (50%, compared to 38% among men in 2019) (SCB 2020a). It seems natural that people who have already taken a longer study path are generally more prone to engage in further studies and training of any kind, especially that which has a fairly high theoretical content. Regarding the specific orientation of studies, many of my interlocutors were trained in caring professions and behavioural sciences. For them, training and certification in some form of nature-related therapeutic method was often seen as a natural addition to their basic education – one that addressed a need that they had perceived in themselves as well as in their patients or clients.

The age range, which is somewhat on the mature side, appears to reflect the fact that people statistically spend significantly more time in nature the older they get, and is perhaps also indicative of a period of transition and re-evaluation which, for many, occurs when children grow up and leave home, and when one's professional career and family situation may both have reached a point where some reassessment is needed. The bulk of divorces in Sweden – almost 50% in 2019 – occur between the ages of 35 and 49 (SCB 2020b). Some of my interlocutors had indeed gone through a divorce, and some had also gone through stress-related illness, which had prompted a re-evaluation of their work situation. In other cases, there may not have been a crisis in a negative sense, but nonetheless points of re-evaluation.

In summary, compared to the general population, the group is by and large ethnically Swedish, evenly distributed across the country, markedly more educated, on the mature side of the age range, and has a strong female dominance. The latter fact is what stands out most clearly and thus requires some discussion.

Why Such Strong Female Dominance?

Looking at love of nature and outdoor activities in general, the statistically observable gender difference is not dramatic (Fredman et al. 2019). Women appear to spend slightly more time in nature than men. But the difference is nowhere near the magnitude of the 49-to-four gender ratio in the applicant group. This gap likely has more to do with the types of practice involved. In psychometric evaluations of personality traits and interests, one of the clearest and most cross-culturally consistent differences between women and men is that women more often tend to be person-oriented rather than thing-oriented (Lippa 2010). Against this background, some degree of female dominance can be expected in most contexts where relationships (in this case those with non-human beings) are in focus. This may perhaps be partially explained by biological factors, as Richard A. Lippa (2010) suggests. But there are of course also social factors at play.

To understand the specific social patterns relevant to the case at hand, we may consider two fields of practice where female dominance exists and has been thoroughly researched, and which are both related to nature connection practice. One is healthcare, where, as mentioned above, many nature connection practitioners are professionally active. The other is the multifaceted field of holistic wellbeing, self-development, and spiritualities, sometimes assembled under the label New Age. In both fields, the female dominance can be traced back to the sometimes-paradoxical effects of strict divisions in modernity, between gender roles and between professional and private life. In the early industrial period, women were assigned the role of homemaker and caretaker while men brought home an income through increasingly specialised professions. Women then gradually entered the labour market, often in caring professions which were seen as a natural extension of their caretaker roles in private life and thus were not fully recognised as professions without considerable struggle (Abbott & Meerabeau 1998).

Linda Woodhead (2007) finds in this role confusion at least a partial explanation for the female dominance in contemporary spiritualities and holistic wellbeing practice. While both men and women are conditioned by modernity to pursue exploration of a post-traditional identity in some form, men are more likely to find what they seek in an increased engagement with family, or in a culturally valued (and male-dominated) sport or leisure activity, since their professional role is unambiguously the primary one. Women are more torn between the roles of caretaker/homemaker and professional and are thus more likely to embark on a deeper quest of self-discovery. Moreover, the caretaker role often causes women to neglect their

own needs. In the holistic milieu, people learn to pay attention to their own needs, and in this way also to be able to care for others without depleting their own energy.

Another trait that nature connection practice shares with many forms of contemporary spiritualities and holistic wellbeing practice is a resistance to modernity's tendency towards moral and emotional compartmentalisation. The quest for self-discovery is perhaps to a large degree a quest for inner consistency, an escape from the modern condition of fragmentation. This perspective will be further discussed in chapter 14. Here it is enough to note the possibility of a gender pattern connected to the role confusion and quest for self-discovery observed by Woodhead (2007).

Interlocutors

Here, I will summarise the life stories of 11 of my interlocutors, as told to me in interviews. The accounts provided here have been selected with the aim of providing an even distribution with regard to demographics and types of practice. Some of these people, alongside others who are not represented here, will reappear in later chapters, in some cases with further details of their life stories in relation to the themes of those chapters.

The summaries presented here are based on interviews and were sent to the interlocutors to be corroborated and, in some cases, modified. In my hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology, researcher and interlocutor are considered co-authors of the text that results from the interview process (cf. Lindseth & Norberg 2004, pp. 148-9).[30]

Eleonora (interviews conducted 18 April 2018 and 20 August 2020)

Eleonora, a clinical psychologist by profession, is also an experienced provider of forest bathing and forest therapy. The forest was her playground as a child, where she would spend days alone, building little huts and feeling the thrilling presence of animals. She describes a state of bliss, peace, creativity, connection, and a sense of belonging.

As an adult, Eleonora took up Zen meditation and practised it full-time and in remote temples for many years. Eventually, she found herself in a situation as a single mother with a full-time job. The stress of making ends meet led to a period of burnout fatigue. She found the remedy by combining the connection with nature she had enjoyed as a child with her long experien-

[30] As explained in chapter 3, this interview process, including follow-up interviews and feedback from interlocutors on draft texts, is a hermeneutic conversation aiming to reach a fusion of horizons (Gadamer 2004 [1975], pp. 305 ff.).

ce of meditation. Lying down or walking slowly in the forest, she felt her balance and energy coming back. Now in her early fifties, she is one of the leading practitioners and developers of forest bathing and forest therapy in Scandinavia and beyond, with her schedule full of training and lectures. She is still prone to taking on lots of activities and responsibilities, but she is now better able to sense her own needs, so as to avoid becoming overburdened again.

In some ways, her nature connection practice is a journey back to that childhood experience of peace, creativity, belonging, and a sense of mystery. But it has also taken these experiences to new levels. She describes her current life as a state of constant communication with the natural world, even when she is not in the forest. The trees on the way to the bus stop are communicating with her. A little ladybird can change her mood instantly simply by being there and being noticed through her trained sense of connection with all the life that surrounds her and for the awe-inspiring beauty of small things.

Tina (interviews conducted 10 November 2019 and 10 October 2021)

By the time of our first interview, in November 2019, Tina had just started offering forest bathing sessions to small groups. She has a background in management and as an occupational therapist in both the private and public sector. Her basic training is in a therapeutic profession.

In Tina's childhood, nature was a constant source of support and energy. She has moved around quite a lot in her life. But in all the places she has lived, she has always found some large rock in a forest or on a cliff by the sea where she would go for some quiet contemplation. As a child, she found comfort in such places at times of trouble, like after an argument with her parents.

As an adult, she remained an avid nature walker. At a certain point, however, when she was around 50, her busy work life took its toll, and it was no longer enough to visit nature only on weekends. Tina was struck by burnout fatigue and decided to reorient her life and let nature take centre stage. She moved to a different city, trained as a forest bathing guide – a practice that seemed to her to be in line with her own experience of coming back from burnout – and started her own small business.

Like most others in this line of work, she cannot support herself fully through her own company. She has managed to find supplementary employment in projects involving nature-based methods within municipal healthcare systems. This has included treating patients with stress-related illness, post-Covid fatigue, and various psychiatric diagnoses. At the time of our second interview, in October 2021, Tina had moved to a different part of the

country for one such project and is now in transition to another, more long-term project in a neighbouring municipality. This position is full-time, which means that her own company will largely be inactive for the next couple of years. But she is happy to be able to offer and develop her nature-based methods in a clinical setting.

Linda (interviews conducted 18 October 2020 and 11 October 2021)

Linda is in her mid-thirties and self-employed. She lives in a small village community on a countryside property where she and her husband occupy the main building. She grew up on a farm and has always had a close relationship with nature. She tells an almost identical story to that of Tina about a rock in the forest that she would go to in order to find emotional balance when she had had a disagreement with her parents. She called it her "grieving stone".

As a young adult, she moved abroad and lived in England and Nepal. Now in her thirties, she has come back to Sweden and settled with her husband in a rural area. During her time in England, living in a coastal city, she felt drawn to the beaches, the parks, and any patch of nature she could find. Having always been a keen observer of her own thoughts and feelings, she noticed how much place mattered to her overall wellbeing. This aptitude for self-observation was strengthened during her time in Nepal as well, where she learned Vipassana meditation.

Back in Sweden, Linda took a degree in environmental psychology[31] and started working in rehabilitation, both as a sole practitioner and as an employee of the local municipality. In this work, she involves a lot of nature connection, combined with psychological and meditative techniques. Just like in most other types of nature connection practice, her exercises are mostly about directing sensory attention, simultaneously – or alternately – towards the body and towards the surroundings. However, she does not use any particular term like forest bathing or forest therapy to describe what she does, since she has no specific certification in this area – aside from her academic degree in environmental psychology.

Linda does not mention any major crisis that led her to turn her life around. The need for connection with nature seems to have been present to varying degrees throughout her life. The life choices she has made, at least

[31] Environmental psychology should not be confused with ecopsychology. The latter, which will be discussed in the next chapter, may be characterised as a philosophical current and a branch of deep ecology, while environmental psychology is a branch of mainstream psychology studying the impacts of different types of environments on our wellbeing and mental faculties.

since she returned to Sweden – moving (back) to the countryside, studying environmental psychology, and taking up a career in nature-related rehabilitation – all seem to lead towards a life lived closer to nature. Through her techniques for directing attention, and taking part in her clients' experiences as she works with them in nature, her own feeling of connection to nature has grown. She tells me that strong emotional experiences and a heightened sense of being alive come very easily to her now. When I ask her to recall and describe a specific profound nature experience, she has a hard time finding one, simply because she has them all the time. She is out walking almost every day.

Jakob (interview conducted 26 November 2019)

During a life-cairn ceremony[32] organised by Lodyn, I met Jakob, a man in his sixties who has devoted his life to the protection of Mother Earth. He told me his story in an interview conducted on a separate occasion some months later.

Like most of my interlocutors, Jakob developed a love for nature in childhood. But it is roughly in the last decade that his life has been completely oriented around loving and protecting Mother Earth. Jakob worked for many years as a psychiatric nurse, and after that as a salesman at a tech company. About ten years ago, he left everything behind and devoted himself entirely to the defence of Mother Earth. He quit his job and gave up his apartment and just "walked out on the streets", as he describes it.

Thus, there is a specific moment of reorientation that he can point to, but it is not described as a crisis or illness, as is the case for some of the others I met. Nor did the decision come out of the blue (which is probably true for those who had gone through a crisis as well). For some time before his "walk-out", Jakob had been contemplating environmental and philosophical issues and writing a blog on those themes. He describes a long process of parallel – or perhaps reciprocal – intellectual and experiential development, involving, for instance, a keen interest in biology, through which he gradually came to perceive the natural world as alive, sentient, and communicative, and Mother Earth as a single being in the same way as he himself is a single person although his body consists of billions of single-cell organisms.

Ylva (interview conducted 10 December 2019)

Ylva, a woman in her forties who is active in the partially ritualised activism in and around Lodyn, has always felt a strong bond with nature, a bond which

[32] A semi-open ritual-like practice designed to express grief and to protest against the loss of species, as described in chapter 6 (also discussed in chapters 13 and 14).

affects both her wellbeing and her sense of morality. She has had periods of depression, and has gradually come to realise how strong her need is to connect with nature. This connection, especially with birds and mammals, has been the main thing that kept her going through the darker times.

Ylva grew up in an urban area in Stockholm but spent her childhood summers on the archipelago with access to both sea and forest, where her parents and grandparents taught her to respect living beings and stimulated her fascination with nature. There were forest mice living in the house and her parents let them stay there. Instead of killing flies and wasps, her father would capture them and release them outside. He even showed her how to very carefully caress bumblebees.

As she grew up and moved out of her parental home, it felt important to Ylva to live closer to nature. She got an apartment in a semi-rural area on the outskirts of one of Sweden's major cities. Later, she also acquired a cottage in a rural area about a 3–4-hour drive from Stockholm. In urban areas, she feels drained of energy, but regains it when she is closer to nature. The beauty of the landscape and the presence of animals can instantly change her mood for the better.

Ylva has a degree in geography and has worked with environmental issues in different capacities. She has kept her childhood interests and values, and has increasingly found them to be in conflict with the general direction and values of modern Western society. Instead, she has found inspiration in the spiritual traditions of Native Americans. As she witnesses the devastation of nature in the areas she frequents, she finds it hard to grasp how this can be culturally sanctioned. To cope with this, and to try to do something about it, Ylva became active in Lodyn's work, which addresses the ongoing mass extinction of species.

Karin (interview conducted 21 July 2021)

Karin is in her fifties. She is a psychologist and artist living in the countryside. She grew up on a farm with parents who were academics but had chosen a rural life. The passion for farming went further back in the family too: her grandmother was a keen grower of both vegetables and decorative plants. Karin can trace her own deep and intimate relationship with nature back to her mother and grandmother. It was a feeling that they manifested in their lives and passed on to her. She remembers, for instance, how her mother used go out early some mornings to cover all the birds' nests in the orchard with cardboard to protect them from the aerial spraying of pesticides.

A couple of years ago, Karin went through Lodyn's one-year training programme, *Jorden är själens hem* ("Earth is Home to the Soul"). One of the benefits of the programme for Karin was that her "animistic perspective" became communicable. She discovered that other people shared experiences that she had previously been reluctant to talk about. She was also stimulated to develop sides of herself which, although they had been present before, had not been clearly expressed. She rekindled an older practice as an artist, inspired by her growing relationship with nature. She "came out" as an activist, as she puts it, participating in civil disobedience for the environment – a tough process for a middle-aged person who is well established in society.

Her main driving force is the deep love she feels for all kinds of living creatures, and her deep grief over the loss of species and ecosystems.

Katarina (interview conducted 12 August 2021)

Katarina is around 60 years old and lives in one of Sweden's major cities. She has an administrative position on a municipal school board. She has always felt a special connection with animals, especially birds and horses. As a child, she had vivid recurring dreams about birds. Her father seems to have shared her affinity with birds, and with nature as a whole. He was also an avid fisherman. Katarina remembers that whenever he lost one of his lures, he would dive into the lake to retrieve it.

Katarina has often felt lonely and like some kind of freak for having this deep feeling for animals, which did not seem to chime with the attitudes of mainstream society. But in the writings of Joanna Macy, she discovered the she was not alone. And a couple of years ago, when she took Lodyn's one-year programme, she was delighted to meet other people who shared her attitude towards nature.

Although her connection to nature had always been there, it deepened in certain ways during the programme. Before, she had mainly felt connected to animals, but now she learned to connect more deeply with plants as well. She keeps up a regular practice of visiting nearby forest areas and has certain places that she has become friendly with. She also takes part in some of Lodyn's environmental advocacy and tries to maintain a low-impact lifestyle.

Lotta (interviews conducted 12 May 2021 and 24 September 2021)

Lotta is in her late forties and lives in a rural area in the north of Sweden, near her parents' organic farm where she grew up. Since her childhood, she has spent a lot of time in nature, bringing home berries or pieces of wood, and taking part in different sports.

Lotta works as a police officer and used to be part of an elite task force, but suffered a work-related injury some years ago which made her unable to perform physically on that level. She has now transferred to more investigative work and works reduced hours due to the long-term effects of her injury, and to an episode of burnout, which she attributes to the mental strain of working with cases of human trafficking and domestic violence.

In our second interview, after she had completed the SNFTI certification course for forest bathing guides, she reflected on what she brings with her. What struck her the most during the course was the degree to which the participants opened up, not just to nature but also to each other.

Lotta divides her life into before and after the injury and is now in a process of reorientation. One step in that process has been to take the certification course. Nature has always been important for her recuperation. Her certification as a forest bathing guide may open up the possibility to build a professional life around this and to help others to connect with nature. Her professional experience has given her the ability to stay calm and to handle people in all kinds of crises.

John (interview conducted 18 May 2021)

John is in his early sixties and lives in a rural community in the south of Sweden. He grew up near the forest, with parents who loved berry picking and grandparents who were forest owners. As a child, he was a scout.

In adult life, he has suffered from burnout which he attributes to a very high workload some years ago when he was employed in public administration. Today, he is a part-time pensioner due to the aftermath of the burnout and works the rest of the time as a deacon within the Church of Sweden.

John has some prior experience with nature-related forms of therapy. For instance, he participated in the creation of a therapeutic garden in cooperation with researchers from the Swedish agricultural university, SLU. When I met him, he was just about to start a course to become a certified forest bathing guide. His aim is to integrate the practice into a rehabilitation project he is working on, which is a cooperation between the Church and regional authorities.

Charlotte (interviews made 19 May 2021 and 9 September 2021)

Charlotte is in her late twenties, and lives in a mid-size town in the south of Sweden. She works as a swimming instructor for children but is currently looking for a reorientation in her professional life, in part due to a medical condition which makes a physically demanding job difficult.

Charlotte is quite young in this context but has already been through some major life crises. She has suffered periods of depression, starting in her early teens, which have become milder over time. In her late teens, one of her parents passed away. She has always felt at home in nature and being in nature was the one thing that helped the most during her periods of depression. Having practised mindfulness and other forms of meditation, she is interested in a career in wellness and rehabilitation. She has taken the SNFTI certification course for forest bathing guides as part of building her competence in this area.

When I met Charlotte the second time, after she had completed the course, she was feeling pleased to have experienced a boost in creativity, and to have met so many people who shared her interest in spiritual and existential matters. She has always felt a strong connection with nature, but the certification course has enabled her to benefit from that connection more often and more easily.

Sten (interviews conducted 3 October 2020 and 12 October 2021)

Sten is around 60 years old and self-employed as a management consultant. He grew up in the countryside and has always been keen on outdoor life. Some eight years ago, Sten was certified as a mindfulness instructor, a practice he has integrated to some degree in the services he offers. He also felt right away that he wanted to practice and teach mindfulness in nature. This led him to take the SNFTI certification course for forest bathing guides.

When Sten and I met for our first interview, he had recently started offering forest bathing walks for small groups in nature reserves near one of Sweden's major cities. Although he has always spent a lot of time in nature, running, kayaking, and hiking, the forest bathing practice has changed the way he relates to the landscape. It has become a more emotional experience, and he appreciates being in nature without any specific goal, just following his impulses in the moment. He has also become more aware of the difference between a tree plantation and a real forest.

At the time of our second interview, in October 2021, Sten had moved out of the big city and settled with his wife in a rural home. He still visits the city regularly for work but feels that he is done living there.

Concluding Remarks on the Practitioners

The demographic data I have presented in the first part of this chapter are of course not meant as a real statistical analysis of the nature connection milieu. They do, however, confirm my own general impressions after four years of

fieldwork. SNFTI founder Petra Ellora Cau Wetterholm also confirms this picture, based on years of experience as a nature connection teacher (in email communication after reading a first draft of this chapter). The above summarised stories of 11 interlocutors both confirm and elaborate this picture.

The gender and age patterns are more or less what can be expected in many forms of self-development practice, although the degree of female dominance is perhaps unusually strong. That, and the high average level of education, may have to do with the strong association of the field with healthcare. This association is a common one among self-development practices. In this case, however, many practitioners are professionally active within healthcare and make efforts to integrate nature connection into their normal practice.

The fact that many practitioners are healthcare professionals, and that many – often the same people – are also experienced practitioners of meditation and mindfulness, is indicative of a field on the junction between conventional medicine and psychology on the one hand, and alternative holistic treatments and spirituality on the other. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on this and other junctions in contemporary culture on which nature connection practice balances.

Looking at the life stories of practitioners, there seems to be a common narrative among many of those deeply engaged in nature connection practice, in which nature acts as a source of constant support in any kind of crisis, great or small, from childhood and continuously throughout life. There may have been periods of a weaker connection to nature, periods characterised by unbalance. Sometimes people have gone through a major crisis, such as a period of burnout fatigue. In other cases, interlocutors do not identify any particular crisis, and instead describe their lives as a continuous quest to be closer to nature. Whether the pursuit for closeness and connection to nature is prompted by some sort of crisis, or simply takes the shape of a more or less continuous process, nature provides both comfort and a heightened sense of being alive.

For many of my interlocutors, one of the most important gains from engaging in collective practice, for instance by committing to an organised training programme, has been the acquisition of a language to describe certain types of experiences. This new language provides words and concepts with which to make sense of one's own experiences, and at the same time a community where those experiences can be communicated and validated through the discovery that they are shared by others. Putting clear words to experiences makes them, in a sense, more real, and also part of a shared reality. Viewing nature connection practice from a life-story perspective can

help us understand its long-term impacts on practitioners' ethical and salutary autopoiesis; that is, on the ways in which they think and feel about themselves and the world. These impacts are therefore the results not only of practice, but also of participation in a movement or milieu.

CHAPTER 10

Influences

Now that we have become acquainted with the nature connection movement, its ideology, practice, organised actors, and practitioners, we now turn to a more thorough discussion of its influences and its place in contemporary Western and Nordic culture. In this chapter, I will discuss the six main influences I have identified for this movement (as described in chapter 4) and the ways in which they appear in its ideology and practice.

Deep Ecology

As we have seen, a central tenet of nature connection ideology is that humans are part of nature and that the healing of our relationships with nature (or of the multitude of relationships of which we are a part in nature) are central to both personal wellbeing and ecological balance. This view is compatible with, and inspired by, the current(s) of thought termed *ecopsychology*, which in turn may be seen as a part of the wider field of *deep ecology*.

The philosopher Arne Naess has defined a number of features that separate deep and shallow ecology. One of the key points is that while shallow ecology is exclusively concerned with pollution and resource depletion, based on the image of *man-in-environment*, deep ecology rejects this image in favour of a relational, *total-field image*, where organisms are seen as parts of a whole and tied together in intrinsic relationships so that the one would not be the same without the other (Naess 1972, p. 95). This is very much in line with views commonly expressed within the nature connection movement. As we have seen, nature connection practice can be understood as a form of activism striving towards a more balanced ecological way of life. Forging emotional bonds with nature might make people more inclined to protect nature. However, what is emphasised in this line of thinking is the relationship itself. We may remember from chapter 5 Ben Page's insistence that we should love nature rather than trying to protect it (and thus putting ourselves above and outside of nature).

Ecopsychology

Ecopsychology is in many ways a branch of deep ecology, focusing on the psychological implications of this total-field image that Naess speaks of. Theodore Roszak has defined ecopsychology in the following four points:

> 1) The emerging synthesis of ecology and psychology.
> 2) The skilful application of ecological insights to the practice of psychotherapy.
> 3) The discovery of our emotional bond with the planet.
> 4) Defining "sanity" as if the whole world mattered.
> (Roszak, 1994)

Modern psychology arose at a time when subjectivity could only be imagined as confined within the (human) individual, a view from an utterly separated inside looking out on the exterior world. This atomistic understanding of the individual was fully in accordance with the dominant scientific paradigm of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Later in the 20th century, however, new branches of science would emerge which began to look beyond the atomistic focus on discrete entities. One important such branch was ecology, which looked at whole biospheric systems where different organisms could only be understood in relation to their environment and vice versa. Some of the groundwork for this was laid by Jakob Johann von Uexküll, whose concept of *umwelt* (i.e., an environment which is both experienced and shaped by the organism) inspired the development of ecological thinking, and the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who, as noted in chapter 5, has had some influence on deep ecology and nature connection ideology (2003, p. 172).

Thus, ecology adopted a holistic perspective in contrast to the hitherto dominant atomistic perspective. However, ecology was still looking at biospheric systems from the outside, using the same standards and methods of measurement as atomistic science. But what happens, then, when this new holistic branch of science meets psychology, the study of the subjective world? There have been many suggested terms for the hybrid(s) between ecology and psychology, such as *psychoecology*, *green therapy*, and *eco-therapy*, but the most prevalent today is *ecopsychology*. In a foreword to an anthology on ecopsychology, James Hillman (1995) identifies as the major flaw of psychology its exclusive attention to, and boosting of, the narrow self, limited to the individual human body:

> The subjectivist exaggeration that psychology has fostered is coming home to roost, because the symptoms that are coming back to the consulting room are precisely those its theory engenders: borderline disorders in which the personality does not conform to the limits set by psychology; preoccupation with subjective moods called "addictions" and "recovery"; inability to let the world into one's perceptional field, called "attention deficit disorders" or "narcissism"; and a vague depressed exhaustion from trying so hard to cope with the enlarged expectations of private self-actualization apart from the actual world (Hillman 1995, p. XX).

Hillman uses "subjective" here in a sense that refers exclusively to the narrow human self. However, he argues against this traditional limitation of the self in modern Western thought and for a concept of self that includes the natural environment in which we live. This is the *ecological self* of Arne Naess (1995), and what Joanna Macy speaks of as *the greening of the self* (Macy 2013). It is a self that takes shape in relation to other beings, human and non-human. Laura Sewell speaks of the ecological self as an open self, as opposed to the strictly delimited self of modernity. This open ecological self, of course, comes with ethical corollaries:

> In contradiction to an identity in which the mature self is defined as fully individuated and possessing intact, absolute, decisive, and divisive boundaries, the ecological self experiences a permeability and fluidity of boundaries. This manifests as an empathy and identity with family, friend, lover, community, humanity, and similarly, with the whole of the nonhuman world. An empathy and identity with all that is ideally translates into a radical awareness of interdependence – a recognition that to tread heavily on the Earth is to tread heavily on one's self. (Sewell 1995, p. 203)

The key issue is where, if at all, to draw the line between the self and the world. Being able to clearly make this distinction has, in traditional psychology, been a fundamental part of the idea of sanity, but is here called into question:

> [l]ike all forms of psychology, [ecopsychology] concerns itself with the foundations of human nature and behavior. Unlike other mainstream schools of psychology that limit themselves to the intrapsychic mechanisms or to a narrow social range that may not look beyond the family, ecopsychology proceeds from the assumption that at its deepest level the psyche remains sympathetically bonded to the Earth that mothered us into existence. (Roszak 1995, p. 5)

One major implication of this interconnectedness is that we as human individuals are deeply affected by the trauma of the current ecological crisis. The scholar and activist Joanna Macy, often referred to by nature connection practitioners, has devoted some of her writing to dealing with the grief and despair felt by people who are faced with the immensity of this crisis:

> No one is exempt from that pain, any more than one could exist alone and self-existent in empty space. It is inseparable from the currents of matter, energy, and information that flow through us and sustain us as interconnected open systems. We are not closed off from the world, but rather are integral components of it, like cells in a larger body. When part of that body is traumatized – in the sufferings of fellow beings, in the pillage of our planet, and even in the violation of future generations – we sense that trauma too. When the larger system sickens, as is happening in our present age of exploitation and nuclear technology, the disturbance we feel at a semiconscious level is acute. Like the impulses of pain in any ailing organism, they serve a positive purpose; these impulses of pain are warning signals. (Macy 1995, pp. 241-2)

It is against this background that we can understand how nature connection practice is promoted as a treatment for personal imbalances and health conditions, and at the same time as an essential part of the solution to the planet's trauma.

Henrik Hallgren, founder of Lodyn (see chapters 7 and 8), has developed a model of ecopsychology illustrated by a flower with four petals: 1) deep reflection – the existential dimension; 2) ecology – the pedagogical dimension; 3) involvement/commitment (Sw. "engagemang") – the activist dimension; and 4) health – the therapeutic dimension (http://www.lodyn.se/ekopsykologins-fyra-kronblad/, accessed 24 Nov. 2021).

Science

Science and technology have always had a role in societal developments, a role that became increasingly central with what we call the scientific revolution. But it is only after the two world wars in the 20th century that a scientific discourse has saturated the popular culture of industrialised nations to a point where it shapes our views on matters far beyond what is actually covered by scientific inquiry (Tietge 2008). David J. Tietge argues that the Cold War situation in the United States, characterised by military and technological competition between the superpowers and increased consumerism to keep the capitalist economy growing, created a "[…]'trickle-down' ideology that favored science" (Tietge 2008, p. 20). As a result, Tietge argues,

> […] science and technology has [sic] penetrated our lives—not as a body of knowledge that all educated people possess, but as a language system that dominates our world view and is frequently appropriated by non-scientists for a-scientific ends. (Tietge 2008, p. 34).

"Science" has become almost synonymous with "knowledge" both in popular culture and in policy and governance. This language implies a hierarchy where the top position is occupied by the kind of knowledge that can be expressed in "hard numbers" unequivocally describing a physical reality – even in realms where such knowledge is not practical, such as social relations (Tietge 2008, pp. 34-74; Bornemark 2018, pp. 132-158).

There are other sides to the coin, of course. Tietge observes how a high appraisal of science is often paired with suspicion towards its sometimes-destructive applications, and also (somewhat paradoxically) towards its attitude of scepticism and caution. We want science to provide us with assertive, unequivocal answers, and are disappointed when it fails to do so (Tietge 2008, pp. 24, 73).

There are of course significant variations between subcultures in attitudes towards science. Some subcultures – not least those that can be counted to the holistic current – harbour a deep scepticism towards science (or what is seen as mainstream science). In the nature connection movement, attitudes towards science are generally positive.

When scientific concepts and narratives are popularised to such a high degree, the line between a scientific rhetoric/discourse and actual science is often blurred. In this situation, it can be difficult to distinguish between science, popular science, and a popular discourse where scientific terms are employed but where the links to actual scientific studies are weak. As Bron Taylor has observed, the general theory of evolution can constitute a basis for a felt kinship with other living creatures – a kinship which includes emotional bonds and ethical obligations, and which can be combined with, for instance, mythological narratives (Taylor 2010, p. 14). When nature connection practitioners refer to the biophilia hypothesis as a framework for understanding our need for nature connection, it can be classified as popular science, that is, communication of a scientific theory. On the other hand, this theory has itself been criticised for being vague, open-ended, and not properly falsifiable (Joye & de Block 2011; see also discussion in chapter 2). Thus, although the biophilia hypothesis is still referred to in psychological studies, it represents in itself perhaps a somewhat loose application of the general theory of evolution.

An episode from my fieldwork may help to illustrate the feeling towards science among nature connection practitioners. During a forest therapy

conference in Finland in 2019, professor Bum Jin Park from Changnam National University presented a paper on phytoncides. Phytoncides are substances emitted by trees as protection against attacks from bacteria, insects, and fungi. Clinical studies have suggested that these substances can have positive effects on the human immune system. Many of the participants in the conference were nature connection practitioners who shared a common knowledge of the scientific basis for their practice, which includes the positive effects of phytoncides. As Park was closing in on his main point, I could feel some tension in the room. He had described how his team had indeed observed improved immune system activity in test animals that had been exposed to the substances. However, for humans to be exposed to amounts of phytoncides equivalent to those that had been required for results on the animals, they would have to spend approximately 50 years in a forest. On the other hand, the team had also been able to measure effects on the immune systems of human test subjects who had spent only 15 minutes in a forest. How did this add up? Park's explanation was that if the phytoncides reach a person via the psychological level, for instance in the form of positive childhood memories of forest scents, then the same effect could be achieved with a much smaller dosage. "So", someone in the audience asked, "are you saying that it's only psychosomatic?". This idea appeared to stir disappointment among some of the participants.

This episode illustrates the importance that many nature connection practitioners ascribe to the scientific basis of their practice – and also the widespread preference for hard physical evidence even in a milieu that embraces the more poetic sides of life. The apparent disappointment among some people in the audience may be attributed to an underlying conception of psychosomatic effects as less real and less of a scientific fact than effects that can be attributed solely to biochemical processes independent of the mind.[33] Many practitioners take a keen interest in current research – and some even conduct or take part in research (e.g., Wetterholm 2020a). The level of scientific training and orientation varies between practitioners. Some are trained in a medical profession and may utilise their educational backgrounds and other experiences to varying degrees in their nature connection practice. Forest bathing and forest therapy guides who are trained and certified by one of the major organisations receive an orientation in the psychological and biomedical theories and evidence that support the benefits

[33] The episode described here may perhaps also be noted as an indication of a lingering body-soul dualism in an environment that consciously strives towards non-dualism.

of nature connection (https://www.natureandforesttherapy.earth/training-curriculum-overview; Wetterholm 2020b).

In conclusion: science is generally highly valued and embraced within the movement, albeit, of course, with a bias towards studies that confirm the benefits of the practice. We might compare this to a political party which takes input from science in shaping its policies but which also has values and opinions that are not themselves based on science.

There are two main branches of science that have a direct influence on nature connection practice: psychology/biomedicine, which provides an evidence base for the efficacy of the practice, and ecology/(new)[34] biology, which contributes to a worldview in which nature is alive, sentient, and interconnected. We will now take a look at these two branches.

Psychology and Biomedicine

I am lumping psychology and biomedicine together as they fulfil pretty much the same role in this context: the role of a scientific, empirically-tested basis for the practice. As biomedical and psychological research, I count studies of phytoncides emitted from trees, which seem to stimulate our immune systems, blood pressure, biomarkers in saliva (Tsunetsugu et. al. 2009; Park et. al. 2009); cognitive studies (e.g., performance on memory tests); and psychological evaluations (often in the form of self-evaluation questionnaires) measuring mental and emotional well-being (Fuller et. al. 2007; Ottosson & Grahn 2008; Stigsdotter et al. 2011).

The practically-oriented literature on nature connection, that which I would place in the nature connection genre, often provides an overview of the science with varying depth and weight in relation to other parts (see chapter 8). Most of these authors make quite brief mentions of research mixed with personal reflections in an essayistic style. They rarely provide a thorough explanation of the theories and findings, let alone a critical discussion of them. Nor can this be expected. This is not academic literature, although some of these works may, at least in part, be classified as popular science. As described above, the core of this genre consists of personal stories and reflections, expressions of poetic beauty, and practical advice for nature connection. More typical popular science works also have an impact on the movement, such as Florence Williams' *The Nature Fix* (Williams 2017), which is often referred to by nature connection practitioners.

[34] I will explain below what I mean by new biology.

Nature connection practice, such as a forest bathing session, is often structured in a way similar to nature connection literature: first, the guide gives a brief overview of some of the research on nature connection and wellbeing, and then follow practical exercises based on sensory attention, sharing of personal experience, and the celebration of beauty and wonder. Of course, some of these exercises, and indeed the whole idea of spending time in natural environments to increase wellbeing, can also be said to be science based, considering the large body of research on nature's effects on wellbeing. Again, the distinction is difficult to make. Sensory attention exercises can be designed to achieve the stress-reducing and cognition-enhancing effects of activating the parasympathetic nervous system, as suggested by studies based on ART.[35] They are also clearly inspired by mindfulness – an area in which research is conducted, but which I have chosen to treat separately, as a practice with its own values and ideas (see section on mindfulness below). I have done the same with ecopsychology, which can be an academic discipline, one that leans more towards the humanities than does conventional psychology. But ecopsychology is also an ideology and practice outside of academia in a similar way as some other basic theoretical positions in academia, such as Marxism, economic liberalism, and feminism.

Ecology and (New) Biology

Biological and ecological research about the intricate functions and interactions of natural ecosystems also inform the worldview of the nature connection movement. Of particular interest is research that supports the view of nature as sentient and communicative, such as recent findings about how trees and plants respond to stimuli in a way that suggests something like senses, and how they cooperate and communicate with each other and with other organisms in forest ecosystems via fungal mycorrhiza. This research has been popularised by Peter Wohlleben in his bestselling book *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Wohlleben 2016), and later books on similar themes. The complex web beneath the forest floor, involving trees, fungi, and other organisms has been popularised under the term "wood wide web", an internet of the woods – a concept that has been well received in nature connection circles.

During a forest bathing session in Finland in 2018, we were invited to find a tree, plant, or other entity that would function as a "phone" or "router" through which we could connect to this wood wide web. We were to tune into this connection for a while and listen to whatever was communicated to

[35] Attention Restoration Theory; see discussion in chapter 2.

us. This was probably not meant to suggest that we would be connected to the metabolic and communicative exchange within the mycorrhiza as described by botanists and mycologists. The idea of the wood wide web served as a mental image to focus on during the exercise, and at the same time it supported the legitimacy of the exercise and of participants' personal experiences of communication. (If science confirms that trees are communicative and sentient on some level, then it is not all that odd that we should communicate with them.) In a sense, this was an application of science in practice, although in a mainly symbolic way, and not as an attempt to achieve an effect indicated in research findings, as in the case of medical and psychological research. The role of ecology and biology (excluding medical biology) in the nature connection movement is chiefly as a source of inspiration, contributing to the movement's worldview.

There is a current of thought in contemporary biology sometimes referred to as "new biology", which might be characterised as holistic, and which emphasises the self-creating capacity of organisms, ecosystems, and the Earth as a whole (Maturana & Varela 1998; Harding 2009). Some of its pioneers, who first began to transcend what was known as the "modern synthesis"[36] in biology, are Lynn Margulis, who brought attention to the role of symbiosis in evolution (Lazcano & Peretó 2017), and James Lovelock, who, along with Margulis, developed what has become known as Gaia theory.[37] A contemporary proponent of Gaia theory, Stephan Harding, takes a few additional steps out of the current scientific paradigm, advocating a science that includes not only knowledge gained through the exact measurements and calculations of the rational mind, but also that which is gained through emotions, direct sensory impressions, and intuition. He draws on a model originally created by C. G. Jung where four basic faculties of the mind are arranged in two pairs of opposites: thinking/feeling and intuition/sensing (Harding 2009, p. 36). He is also inspired by pan-psychism, suggesting that not only biological organisms, but matter itself, is conscious to some extent (Harding 2009, p. 93). Another biologist who has had a clear impact on the nature connection movement is Robin Wall Kimmerer, who combines her training as a research botanist with the knowledge traditions of her own Native American heritage. Her books, especially *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Wall

[36] The synthesis between Darwin's theory of natural selection and 20th-century genetics.
[37] Gaia theory is based on the idea that the Earth functions as a single organism where biological life contributes to regulate the climate and the chemical composition of the atmosphere, thus creating the conditions necessary for its own continuation (Harding 2009, pp. 68-91).

Kimmerer 2013; see review in chapter 8), are widely read in nature connection circles.

Wellbeing Culture

The health trend in Western modernity, which I will refer to here as wellbeing culture, has been discussed previously in my review of existing research in chapter 2. I noted there that certain currents within this wellbeing culture flow in opposite directions. On the one hand, what Frank Furedi (2004) has called *therapy culture* is creating a society of fragile, atomic egos in constant need of professional counselling. On the other, a movement towards holism and connectedness makes that ego an integral part of society, nature, or the cosmos (Partridge 2005, pp. 4-41). Nature connection practice reflects both these ideas. It is often promoted as a form of therapy, with importance given to the sharing of thoughts and emotions and the validation of individual experience. At the same time, individual wellbeing is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of the planet (or at least to the individual's relationship with the planet).

I also noted in chapter 2 that wellbeing culture may be seen as an expression of post-materialist values (Inglehart 1990) and of the subjective turn (Heelas & Woodhead 2004). In this way, and through the presence of holistic philosophies in many wellbeing practices, the current wellbeing trend has important overlaps with contemporary spiritualities, discussed later in this chapter. In fact, outdoor culture, mindfulness, and contemporary spiritualities could thus be placed under this umbrella – just as all of them, including wellbeing culture, could be placed under the umbrella of contemporary spiritualities. However, I treat each of these terms separately here because I consider all of them important influences in their own right in relation to the nature connection movement. In the case of wellbeing culture, its specific contribution lies precisely in the attention given to personal wellbeing, and also, of course, in the fact that many nature connection practices are promoted as health and wellbeing practices. Wellbeing culture covers a wide range of activities, from sports to spirituality. How, then, can we locate nature connection practice in relation to this wider context? Its holistic ideology and elements of spirituality seem to suggest a categorisation of the practice as alternative healthcare. However, efforts are also made to integrate these methods in the conventional healthcare system. Some practitioners participate actively in clinical psychological studies, or even design and conduct such studies (cf. Wetterholm 2020a). Perhaps it is better to use the term "complementary" rather than "alternative". However, the two terms are often used more or less as synonyms, and the line between complementary/alter-

native and conventional medicine differs between countries and cultural contexts (Eklöf 2004, p. 20). Midwifery, for instance, has long been part of conventional medicine in Sweden but was considered alternative treatment in Canada as late as the 1990s, and Chinese traditional medicine, which is part of conventional medical practice in China, is usually considered alternative or complementary in the West (Eklöf 2004, pp 19-20). More recently, the term "integrative medicine" has increasingly been used in order to reflect a complex whole of which different types of practice can be part (Eklöf 2004, p. 20). This term is perhaps the one that best reflects the general status of nature connection practices in relation to conventional healthcare in the Nordic countries today, considering the participation of some practitioners in psychological research projects, and the fact that some practitioners integrate nature connection methods into their employed work or commissioned work for municipalities and conventional healthcare providers.

Shinrin Yoku

One form of wellbeing practice that is particularly relevant in the nature connection context is of course the Japanese practice of forest bathing, *shinrin yoku*, which originated in the 1980s. The term seems to have been coined by Tomohide Akiyama at the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries in 1982 (Miyazaki 2018, p. 9; Li 2018, p. 58; Plevin 2018). It was originally promoted as a treatment for city dwellers suffering from high stress levels.

In Japan, and also in South Korea, forest bathing practice is fully integrated with the health-care system, as well as with forestry research institutions. At the same time, scientists have undertaken research into participants' physical reactions to natural environments, measuring blood pressure and levels of stress biomarkers in saliva (cf. Tsunetsugu et. al. 2009; Park et. al. 2009, Miyazaki 2018; Li 2018). The non-profit organisation Forest Therapy Society has developed a system of certification of forests and trails for therapeutic use (Forest Therapy Society: https://www.fo-society.jp/society/cn48/pg938.html, accessed 18 April 2021). Some practitioners have endeavoured to take such certification practices in the Nordic countries.

My field research has not included Japanese or Korean forest bathing (apart from a session in the forest in Finland in 2018 led by Prof. Iwao Uehara from Tokyo University of Agriculture). I am interested in Western nature connection practice in a (mostly) Nordic regional context. While the Japanese

shinrin yoku concept is often referred to in this milieu, it is far from the only major influence. I address it here as part of a larger wellbeing culture.[38]

Outdoor Culture

Through the process of industrialisation and urbanisation, the vast majority of the population in the Nordic countries have lost their everyday practical connection with the land. Instead, new forms of interaction with nature have emerged as leisure activities, which have become an important part of modern culture and civil society. In the 19th century, this burgeoning outdoor culture was inspired by a critique of civilisation found in Romanticism and American transcendentalism, but also by the American "frontier spirit" and the achievements of scientific expeditions (Sandell & Sörlin 2008, pp. 258-59; Graber 1976). In the beginning, this new outdoor culture was mostly for the elite, but gradually, opportunities to participate in outdoor activities became more evenly distributed through regulation of labour and leisure time. Nature became something outside of the everyday, a realm of leisure, recuperation, and experiences out of the ordinary (Graber 1976; Uddenberg 1995; Thurfjell et al. 2019; Thurfjell 2020; Ohlsson 2020; Remmel & Jonuks 2021; Rubow 2022).

Outdoor culture can include many different types of activities. It might be sports and physical achievement, birdwatching or pursuing an interest in plants, or bushcraft and survival skills in the wilderness. It may not even necessarily revolve around specific activities, but may instead have some kind of aesthetic or existential experience as its primary objective.[39]

Outdoor culture has helped to build environmental awareness through conveying biological and ecological knowledge, but also by fostering aesthetic and ethical ideals (Graber 1976; Klöfver 2008, pp. 156-66). The geographer Linda H. Graber (1976) has described what she calls a *wilderness ethic*, an undercurrent in American culture with roots going back to the 18th century, which she understands as something tantamount to a religious belief

[38] In the Japanese cultural context, it may also have some connections to Shinto practices, but this is outside of the scope of this study.

[39] In a national survey conducted in Sweden in 2018, 60.2 % of respondents stated that they had been in nature "to get a nature experience" at least six times in the last 12 months; 17.8 % had done this more than 60 times in the last 12 months. Among 48 different activities and objectives for going into nature, this was topped only by walks for pleasure or exercise (for which the corresponding figures were 72.5 and 27.2) (Fredman et al. 2019, Bilaga 1, pp. 2-3; see also Sandell & Sörlin 2008, pp. 206-07).

system.[40] The wilderness ethic that Graber describes is based on the axiom of wilderness as *Wholly Other*, as opposed to profane human existence. From this follow a couple of corollaries. The first is that wilderness becomes a stage for transcendence, for transcending the human condition and connecting to sacred power. The experience of one's own smallness before the vastness of nature is central in this regard. The second corollary is that wilderness is perceived as a manifestation of order and perfection, which influences the sense of morality and beauty (Graber 1976, pp. 10-15). Beauty is thought to suggest a moral order in nature. She refers to John Muir, who considered beauty and morality as one, and to Henry David Thoreau, who saw the ability to perceive beauty as a hallmark of moral eminence (Graber 1976, p. 14). Nature writing and nature photography in the 19th and 20th centuries contributed to the cultivation of very specific ways of perceiving wilderness (Graber 1976, pp. 31-74), and organisations such as the Sierra Club shaped wilderness behaviour through examples, publications, and political action (Graber 1976, pp. 76-110). Graber distinguishes between what she calls "wilderness purists" and "outsiders" (e.g., ordinary visitors to national parks). The purists are those who uphold the wilderness ethic in full. Purists respond primarily to the idea of wilderness, and they strive to make no noise and to leave no trace. This is as much a matter of aesthetics as of ecological awareness. According to Graber, aesthetics and ecology tend to be interchangeable in purist rhetoric (Graber 1976, pp. 80, 113). Outsiders, on the other hand, respond primarily to other people. Their activities in the wilderness are more social and their aesthetic criteria more shaped by the clichés of landscape painting, whereas the purist aesthetic is more austere and minimalistic. Purists are sometimes seen as elitists who consider their own perception as superior to that of outsiders in much the same way as a religious community entrusted with a higher truth:

> Purists resent the outsider's presence in sacred space because his "inferior" mode of perception allows him to enjoy and inadvertently to desecrate wilderness. The Moslem removes his shoes at the door of the mosque, the purist parks his car at the trailhead, but the blundering tourist snaps flashbulbs in the cathedral and rides trailbikes in the woods (Graber 1976, p. 81).

Nevertheless, this ethics, cultivated most devotedly by the purists, has had a wide impact on public opinion and policy making (Graber 1976, pp. x-xi, 8-11). And although Graber's focus is on the American context, it is certainly

[40] Her definition of religion relies on Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade (Graber 1976, pp. x-xi, 2-7).

possible to see the influence of the purist perspective in conservationist movements and outdoor culture on a global scale. As I have argued elsewhere (Ohlsson 2020), it can be found among contemporary nature connection practitioners in the Nordic countries, but appears to be partially giving way to an ethics of participation where humans are given a legitimate role and place in the interactions of nature.

Apart from its ethical and intellectual influence, other elements of outdoor culture can also be found in nature connection contexts. For instance, the IFTD gatherings in Finland have included workshops on bushcraft and medicinal plants, although this has not been the central focus. Some practitioners are professionally active as wilderness guides and bushcraft instructtors and have found nature connection practice to be a natural extension or deepening of their previous training, similarly to those in health-care professions. Even for people with long experience of outdoor life, nature connection practice often seems to bring new perspectives. We might say it is a new style or mode of being in nature, as described by my interlocutor Sten, now around 60 and active as a forest bathing guide. He has been an avid hiker since his youth. But in the last few years, with his new nature connection practice, he has discovered a new way of being in nature without having a clear route set out from the beginning. He just takes his tent and walks about until he feels like stopping somewhere, and makes camp. In a way, he feels that this has been a rediscovery of the freedom and creativity he experienced playing in nature as a child.

Seen in this context, nature connection practice is a burgeoning trend which maintains, but also renegotiates, some of the central themes and attitudes of a wider outdoor culture. The idea of nature experience as out-of-the-everyday – and thus an existential event – which has been cultivated in outdoor culture, here takes centre stage and is refined as a method of improving wellbeing, in some cases even targeting specific medical conditions (cf. Wetterholm 2020a).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness practices are now widespread and integrated into mainstream culture in many parts of the world. Jon Kabat-Zinn, sometimes referred to as the father of contemporary Western mindfulness, has coined the terms Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Intervention (MBI). The origins of mindfulness practice have been subject to some debate, where the balance has shifted mostly between Zen and Theravada Buddhism, while some see it as a Western phenomenon with little

connection to Buddhist practice and teachings (Husgafvel 2016). Mindfulness frequently appears in more or less decontextualised forms without explicit religious connotations. Kabat-Zinn himself has a background in Zen practice, and recognises a continuity in values between mindfulness and Buddhist traditions (Kabat-Zinn 2011; 2015). On the other hand, he has argued that "to insist mindfulness meditation is Buddhist is like saying gravity is English because it was identified by Sir Isaac Newton" (Booth 2017).

Some of the key developers of nature connection practices have comprehensive backgrounds in meditation and mindfulness, which they are now applying in natural settings. The term "mindfulness", and related terminology, can be used more or less explicitly in nature connection practice (e.g., Banyard 2018.) As noted in chapter 8, M. Amos Clifford (Clifford 2018, pp. 34-38), founder of ANFT, distances himself and his model of forest bathing somewhat from the ideal of complete equanimity of mind emphasised in Zen meditation and mindfulness (cf. Kabat-Zinn 2013, pp. 21-31). In any case, sensory attention in some form is at the heart of all practices I have come across that are intended to deepen connection with nature.

Moreover, mindfulness and nature connection practice are related not only by the practice of sensory attention; they also share a connection to deep ecology. One of the luminaries of the mindfulness movement is the Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who is also a key figure in deep ecology:

> *The bells of mindfulness are calling out to us, trying to wake us up, reminding us to look deeply at our impact on the planet.* (Nhat Hanh 2013, p. 25) (Italics in original)

Another central figure in deep ecology is the poet and scholar Joanna Macy, who also builds to a large extent on Buddhist traditions and advocates growing awareness of, and intimacy with, the natural world (cf. Macy 2013).

Proponents of mindfulness sometimes promote it as a revolutionary practice which constitutes a radical break with contemporary lifestyle and society (Nhat Hanh 2013a; b; Booth [Kabat-Zinn] 2017). Critics of the movement, however, consider it a capitalist or neoliberal form of spirituality that lays all responsibility for wellbeing and maintained efficiency on the individual (Hyland 2017; Purser 2019). Mindfulness (and many contemporary forms of spirituality) both reflects and holds a critique of the current social and cultural conditions. The same can be said of nature connection practice.

Contemporary Spiritualities

New Age, holistic spiritualities, and new spiritualities are some of the common terms for an array of ideas and practices that have emerged in the West, in their current forms mostly since the 1960s, but with roots in late 19th century and early 20th century theosophy and anthroposophy. I prefer to use the term *contemporary spiritualities*, which is not burdened by the specific connotations that come with most other terms. Contemporary spiritualities draw inspiration from many different traditions, both historical and current, and have been described as eclectic, syncretistic, "pick-and-mix religion" (Hamilton 2000), or a "bricolage" (Luckman 1979; Altglas 2014). It is of course problematic to use such terms to contrast contemporary spiritualities with older religious and spiritual traditions – as if other "genuine" traditions were all derived solely from single original sources. Moreover, to do so may divert attention from commonalities beyond the eclecticism itself. Some scholars have instead identified a common core underneath the superficial plurality: a perennialist philosophy, according to which all religious and spiritual traditions express a common truth ultimately to be found within the self (Heelas 1993; 1996; Puttick 2000; Possamaï 2001; Aupers & Houtman 2006).

Arriving at the venue of the first IFTD[41] gathering in Finland in July 2018, I remember being struck by a familiar scent which I associated with places of spiritual practice and alternative living – something like a mixture of incense, vegetarian cooking, and lavender soap. As it turned out, the place was run by an Osho community and was often used for tantric practice. The IFTD crew, however, had only rented the place as a venue, suitable for its isolated location in natural surroundings. They did not seem to have any other ties to the Osho community or their practice. Over the course of the five-day IFTD gathering, I noticed an almost complete absence of the kind of themes one might expect in a New Age setting, such as chakras, subtle energies, or gods and goddesses (apart from Nature, which was often spoken of using a more or less personifying language). Nevertheless, I contend that there are commonalities, not so much in the specific metaphysical content but in a general attitude of resistance to certain aspects of Western modernity.

The central role of the self in contemporary spiritualities, as the main point of reference for truth and authenticity, has led to characterisations such as "self-religiosity" or "self-spirituality" (Heelas 1993; 1996). It has been pointed out that the "self" can mean many different things in contemporary spiritual and self-development environments and most often it is not an

[41] International Forest Therapy Days. See chapter 7.

atomic, separate self, but one that is an integral part of a greater whole (Ivakhiv 2003; Partridge 2004; 2005). These practices are self-oriented and holistic at the same time. The self is a source of truth by merit of its connection to the greater whole.

This idea of the connected self is also the basis of an ideology of individualism and resistance to authorities. This does not mean that such movements lack authorities; but their role is usually understood as that of a guide helping individuals to get in touch with the truth within themselves, of which the individual's own experience and intuition is the ultimate judge (Hammer 2010).

A similar attitude is often demonstrated in the nature connection movement. The guide in a forest bathing session (who represents something of an authority) gives "invitations" to exercises and activities rather than instructions. It is often underlined that there are no demands and that everyone should follow their own heart. There are also more central authorities, such as those who occupy key roles in national and international networks, or who have published widely-read works on nature connection practice. One such authority figure is the British writer and nature connection trainer Ian Banyard, who says, regarding the seven-day programme for nature connection that he promotes:

> To get the most benefit from this book It [sic] is important for you to complete the full seven days. You are in complete control of the journey. You choose when, where and for how long you walk mindfully in Nature. This is your *unique* programme, your *unique* experience and will ultimately be your *unique* success. (Banyard 2018, p. 21) (Italics in original)

(See also my review of this book in chapter 8.) Thus, although experienced guides and teachers provide models and advice, they are careful not to step on anybody's autonomy.

Both in their bricolage formation and in their individualist attitude and ideology, contemporary spiritualities reflect and reproduce the modern Zeitgeist (Luckman 1979; Hammer 2010). However, in the holistic ideology and the idea of connectedness between the individual self and the cosmos lies a resistance to the modern tendency towards atomism and separation of different spheres. In fact, even the bricolage creativity may be seen as a form of resistance insofar as it serves as a method for creating coherence where this is perceived to be lacking (Altglas 2014).

Much of the above can also be said of the nature connection movement: it is both shaped by modernity and a protest against it (or against certain

aspects of it). The whole, in this case, is nature rather than the cosmos (although the two concepts are sometimes synonymous).

Another expression of individualism in contemporary spiritualities is the encouragement of self-care, which, as discussed above, is not considered to conflict with caring for others and for the whole (Puttick 2000; Ivakhiv 2003; Partridge 2005). Elisabeth Puttick traces this ethics to what she terms the human potential movement, a simultaneous psychologisation of spirituality and spiritualisation of psychology, and argues that its reception in the public mind has been marked by confusion due to a perceived opposition between self-care and the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice (Puttick 2000, pp. 205-6).

This turning of attention towards one's own needs, bodily, emotional, and spiritual, is clearly discernible in the life stories of nature connection practitioners, and has been discussed above in relation to gender roles and the modern tendency towards emotional and moral compartmentalisation. The non-conflict between self-care and care for the whole is here expressed in deep ecological/ecopsychological terms: since the individual is part of nature, care for the part benefits the whole and care for the whole benefits the part.

Many contemporary forms of spirituality can be classified as inwardly oriented, focused on the senses, the body, and the here and now. Some scholars point to a turn towards immanence or a "(re)turn to immanence" (Hobgood & Bauman 2018, pp. 2-4). The opposition between spirit and matter seems to be fading. One part of this is probably secularisation in the sense of a decreasing concern for the spiritual or otherworldly. However, it also seems to involve a spiritualisation (or re-enchantment) of matter. The material world is no longer dead, but imbued with all the life, sentience, and meaning previously assigned to the spiritual realm. These new currents of thought are sometimes referred to as "new materialisms" (Hobgood & Bauman, pp 4-5, etc.).

Nature connection practices are good examples of this type of orientation. References to transcendental higher powers are rare (although "Nature" or "Mother Earth" may sometimes be spoken of in terms reminiscent of those used in religious contexts about transcendental powers), and the practices are to a large extent aimed at enhancing the practitioner's bodily presence and sensory attention to the natural surroundings here and now.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, contemporary spiritualities offer resistance to the disenchantment of life that goes along with modernity. Atomisation, rationalisation, and bureaucratisation are countered by organic

coherence, magic, and beauty.[42] Enchantment and sacralisation specifically of nature is widespread in contemporary spiritualities, not least in its Neopagan varieties (von Stuckrad 2002; 2022, pp. 173-80; Rountree 2012; Fisk 2017). Of the organised actors included in this study, the Pagan influence is most clearly discernible in Lodyn (see chapter 7). Here we may speak of shared content, and not just a similarity in attitude, between the nature connection movement and many forms of contemporary spirituality. At the same time, the sacralisation of nature has arguably occurred also in contexts that are not as overtly spiritual, such as among advocates of wilderness protection (Graber 1976); and, conversely, some forms of New Age can be quite anthropocentric and tech-positive (Ivakhiv 2003).

Concluding Remarks on the Influences

In chapter 4, I explained the undulating process, going back and forth between the field and adjacent areas of culture and discourse, by which I arrived at the list of influences discussed in this chapter. Speaking of these areas of culture as *influences* carries the risk of seeing it as a solely one-way process of cause and effect: from a widespread set of ideas to specific manifestations. In this way, the nature connection movement would be reduced to the sum of these influences. It is also possible, however, to look at it from the other direction, starting from the nature connection movement as a movement with its own identity, actively seeking and inviting other cultural influences which it considers compatible and valuable in relation to its own core ideas and practices. The same can be noted on the level of individual practitioners, who seek intellectual and practical inspiration from sources that resonate with their own experiences and convictions, but perhaps also bring these experiences and convictions into a new light.

All of the trends discussed above as important influences for the nature connection movement reflect a wider cultural development in modernity, sometimes called the *subjective turn*: an increasing orientation in modernity towards subjective experience, rather than social roles and duties, as arbiter of value and authenticity (Taylor 1992; Heelas & Woodhead 2004). This turn affects how people evaluate their participation in traditional religion as well (Thurfjell 2015; 2020). Nature connection practice, being completely centred around personal experience, epitomises this attitude. (See also my discussion on ritual practices in chapter 6.)

[42] This is an undercurrent as old as modernity itself, clearly expressed in romanticism and in transcendentalist and idealist philosophy in the 18th and 19th centuries (Cf. Jenkins 2000; von Stuckrad 2002; Partridge 2004; 2005; Stone 2006).

The nature connection movement shares important traits with many forms of contemporary spirituality: both are shaped by modernity, and both resist it in similar ways. I spoke in the introduction about an area of tension between integration and resistance. The practices spread to a large extent within capitalist business models, and there are clear ambitions to integrate them into conventional healthcare. On the other hand, there is a resistance to the way nature and human beings are treated in the capitalist social system, and to the narrowness of conventional medicine.

Concerning the relationship with science, there may be a difference between the nature connection movement and some other forms of contemporary spirituality. This movement is not as unambiguously metaphysical as, for instance, some forms of New Age. Nature connection practitioners, whom I have met during fieldwork, or whose works I have read, rarely make metaphysical claims. Their core statements about the essential unity between humanity and nature, or about the sentience of non-human beings, are in most cases open to interpretation; the reader or listener may choose to understand them within either a scientific-naturalistic or a spiritual-supernaturalistic framework. Bron Taylor's (2010) observation of how what he calls dark green religion can move back and forth between spiritual and naturalistic interpretations holds true in this context. In a recent doctoral thesis, Ive Brissman has observed an ambivalence towards science among environmental activists in the UK who are leaning towards dark green spirituality. On the one hand, they rely on scientific reports regarding the reality of climate change. But on the other, they often find scientific interpretations unsatisfactory in their inaccessibility to laypersons, their lack of meaningful stories, and their tendency towards disenchantment (Brissman 2022, pp. 163-66). In my own study, I observe some of this ambivalence too. As we saw above, biomedical and psychological studies serve as evidence for the health benefits of nature connection practice, while biology and ecology contribute to the movement's worldview. This latter part makes the relationship even more complicated. In this case, science does seem to offer meaningful stories (or stories that can be filled with meaning and fruitfully joined with more mythological elements). The ideas of the wood-wide-web, evolution, and biophilia can all become parts of meaningful stories. Moreover, a tension between disenchantment and re-enchantment is apparent within some branches of science as well, not least in the emergence of new biology, as discussed above, where some scholars are seeking ways out of the old disenchanting paradigm and are instead employing a more mythological, personifying language (cf. Harding 2009).

Among nature connection practitioners, personifying language about nature and natural elements may in some cases be poetic expressions not meant to be taken literally. Or, at least, it is open to metaphorical interpretation, which perhaps make it easier to digest for participants who are this way inclined. It is an expression of personal experience and not (necessarily) much more than that. We may perhaps think of this as a phenomenological attitude to metaphysics: a reluctance to make knowledge claims beyond the truth of experience itself.

PART 2

Cultivating Nature Experience

> *When I've been in Nature long enough, the trees somehow become more alive to me, than when I'm in this everyday busy mind, more preoccupied with my thoughts than with my sensory impressions. Then I can hardly see. But when I really get to the point where I see, I often perceive incredible beauty, which leads to gratitude. Wonder is a good word, the feeling that everything is so magical, crisp, and magically alive! (Interview with Annika, 13 February 2018)*

From part 1, we should now have a good overview of the of ideas, practices, organised actors, and practitioners that constitute the nature connection movement, and also its main influences and place in contemporary (Western and Nordic) culture. Some of the themes that will be developed here in part 2 have been broached already, but here they will be deepened and elaborated. It is here that the truly phenomenological part of my hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology comes to the fore. In the following chapters, the personal experiences and life stories of my interlocutors in the movement will be at the centre, as I seek to address the second and third parts of my aim: to understand the long-term impacts of participation in the nature connection movement and its practices on the lifeworlds of practitioners, and to explore an experience-based approach to contemporary spirituality.

In part 1, I treated the central concept of "nature" in this way, to better understand what it is that all of these practices seem to revolve around. Here in part 2, I begin my exploration of personal experience with two chapters that explore the concepts of mind and body. In chapter 11, I explore mind[43]

[43] The term "mind" has no exact equivalent in modern Swedish. A common translation is "sinne", which also means "sense". Other possibilities are "medvetande" ("consciousness") and "hjärna" ("brain"). Thus, when I speak of mind here, it is not taken verbatim from my interlocutors' statements (although some of them in fact occasionally used the

as an arena that narratively unites all the other dimensions to shape a person's lifeworld, connecting past, present, and future. In chapter 12, I explore body in the form of an immediate, timeless, sensory presence, which nonetheless also connects to all the other dimensions of the lifeworld. Although the chapters are thematically divided, it is important to keep in mind that the dimensions of experience studied here are all intertwined in various ways. I have come to understand the emotional dimension as something of a key that opens and connects the other dimensions. As I will explain in chapter 13, there are passive and active sides of the emotional life which makes it a bridge between personal wellbeing and ethical conduct. For this reason, and because I find emotions to be too often neglected in contemporary studies of spirituality – not least in many cognitively heavy interpretations of animism – I have sought to give emotions a particularly thorough treatment.

English word "mind", and many of them mention "mindfulness"). I use the term "mind" also in relation to "body" (Sw. "Kropp"), which is very often referred to by my interlocutors, as are the sensory and motor faculties that underpin my initial definition.

CHAPTER 11

The Narrative Mind

Eleonora appears to have found her place and her mission in life. Everything about her seems consistent with this mission, even the clothes she wears to the forest – not the usual functional wilderness gear but an aesthetically coherent attire in natural materials and colours. In the temporal dimension too, it is easy to see the main lines in her life leading up to what she is today – a leading developer of forest bathing and forest therapy both inside and outside of the conventional health system. Like everybody else, Eleonora probably has inner inconsistencies and parts of herself that she struggles to understand. But the overall impression she gives is that everything makes sense in a coherent whole which includes historical, aesthetic, emotional, cognitive, and ethical[44] dimensions. After reading a first draft of this chapter, Eleonora indeed points out that she does not always feel this consistency inside, that she is a sensitive and emotional person who constantly struggles with life's twists and turns. But perhaps this is precisely where the narrative connection to a larger context becomes especially important. In Eleonora's words:

> Perhaps it is precisely because of this continuous vulnerability and the balancing between depression and the joy of life that nature plays a constant role, much like finding refuge in a higher power or belief system. Where nature, in several essential ways, reflects and deepens a more "true" self-image than what I am able to evoke and "retain" over time, both biologically and existentially. (Email correspondence with Eleonora, 11 January 2022)

It seems that in the face of inner instability and fluctuations, nature offers a larger context, stability over time, and a field of resonance that facilitates self-reflection and identity formation. All of this takes place within a personal narrative, a kind of mind map of oneself and one's relations. This mind that

[44] By ethics, I am not referring to a set of clearly formulated principles but a dimension present in all aspects of life, not least in aesthetic judgments or in the will and effort to lead a life in accordance with one's passions and sense of meaning. There is a clear ethical dimension in the very act of making sense of a situation. My approach to ethics will be further developed in chapters 14 and 16.

connects past, present, and future, and is prone to generalisations and abstractions is, in the nature connection milieu, often negatively contrasted with the immediate sensory presence – the here and now – of the body. On the other hand, "mind" can also imply a conscious presence and sensory awareness, as in "mindfulness".[45] Nevertheless, abstractions and larger time frames are also an important part of how we experience ourselves and the world.

Narration as Autopoiesis

In my efforts to understand long-term developments in personal wellbeing and ethical self-understanding, narration is a key element. This perspective is inspired by what Cheryl Mattingly has called the *narrative self,*[46] a self which "[…] in response to ethical demands, engages in narrative experiments with her own becoming" (Mattingly 2017, p. 41). In this perspective, the ethical self is not just a passive derivative of social circumstances and cultural norms, but an active part who creatively interprets and responds. The narrative self creates – and is shaped by – what Mattingly calls *small-scale history*, a level between *large-scale history* and *micro-level interactions*, where long-term intentions are at work in, for instance, commitments to a project or a significant other (Mattingly 2017, p. 44). Narration is an important part of how we make sense of ourselves and our lives; not an act of passive understanding, but an active, creative process. By telling our own story, we create ourselves. We are thus approaching what James D. Faubion calls *ethical autopoiesis*, "the production and maintenance of the ethical subject"; that is, the process through which the ethical subject maintains itself but also adjusts and recreates itself to meet changing circumstances (Faubion 2010, p. 85). Since my interest here is on both ethics and wellbeing, I will speak of both *ethical* and *salutary autopoiesis*.

Connecting to the Roots

Like almost all of my interlocutors, Eleonora has positive childhood memories of nature. Asked to elaborate on what the forest meant to her in her childhood, she reflects:

[45] As Tim Ingold has pointed out, we could speak of "enmindment" just as well as "embodiment", since the purpose of the latter term is usually to transcend mind-body dualism (Ingold 2000, pp. 170-1).
[46] Self and mind should not be confused, although mind, defined here as reflective consciousness, is a precondition for the kind of self-formation discussed here.

> Well, these are things you discover and put words to as you get older, of course. It wasn't something I thought about so much back then. But what I did in the forest, again in retrospect, I activated parts of myself which surprised me, like how in some spontaneous way I knew how to build huts. I wasn't old, I might have been 10, and I thought out special ways to do this. I would spend whole days in the forest. I had gotten into my head that I wanted to live in the forest. And how I connected to the forest, in a special way to the animals and to some kind of memory in myself.

There were also influences from popular culture:

> I remember (laughs) it was so silly that I had the Junior Woodchuck's Guidebook from Donald Duck, and there were totems and tracking, how to track animals and there was even a language that you could learn... That's what I got into then, as I remember it, and I felt incredibly alive when I sat there in my self-made hut of moss and braided branches.

The general feeling she describes is one of pure bliss, a desirable condition which in many ways is also what her forest bathing practice aims to achieve:

> I would walk around and just have these strange experiences, deep experiences of unity and belonging and that time just stopped. I was completely happy, in some peculiar way. Well, when you are so young, it's that you're not lacking anything. Everything is just the way it is. A powerful presence and inner peace and this creativity that... and belonging, a really strong sense of belonging, and a touch of mysticism too.

As is clear from the quotes above, Eleonora is well aware that these memories are being seen through her adult eyes, coloured by her later experiences and her current knowledge, views, and convictions. This (re)interpretation of childhood experiences through the adult mind might have posed a methodological problem for my interpretation, had I set out to examine a possible causal link between childhood experiences of nature and the pursuit of nature connection in adult life. My focus here, however, is on the narration itself as part of an ethical and salutary autopoiesis. The accounts given of childhood experiences – and of experiences later in life – are not mere representations (which can be more or less accurate) of past events, but part of a process of constant interpretation and expression of past, present, and future through which the self creates and maintains itself. The research interview, in this perspective, is not just a documentation of that process but also a part of it.

Crisis and Homecoming

The condition that Eleonora associates with her childhood frolicking in nature – a condition of joy, spontaneity, creativity, belonging, and a touch of mystery – is a desired state which can be contrasted with the onerous demands of adult life, which, for Eleonora, eventually led to a state of burnout. The way back to full function was, in many ways, a return to this childhood condition (as recalled) by spending time in the forest, walking slowly, lying down, and simply being there without any specific goal or plan. At that point in her life, however, she also had other tools to work with. She could build on her long experience of Zen meditation and on her training as a clinical psychologist. In this way, several different tracks in her life came together in a practice that first addressed her own situation, but soon also became something that she wanted to share with others by integrating it into her clinical practice.

Many of the practitioners I have spoken to share this experience of getting through a crisis by reawakening the spontaneous connection with nature they remember from childhood, and then wanting to share their discoveries with others. I find this to be a recurring pattern: a childhood connection to nature which is difficult to retain in the face of the demands of adulthood. Eventually, the need for nature connection re-emerges, either through a major crisis or just increasingly over time. Nature acts as a source of constant support in any kind of crisis, great or small, from childhood and continuously throughout life. There may have been periods of a weaker connection to nature, periods characterised by unbalance. Whether the pursuit for closeness and connection to nature is prompted by some sort of crisis, or simply takes the shape of a more or less continuous process, nature provides, for these practitioners, both comfort and a heightened sense of being alive.

Concluding Remarks on the Narrative Mind

Despite the apparent significance of a state remembered from childhood, nature connection practice also appears to be a very conscious development of a new relationship with nature, which, in turn, puts the childhood experiences in a new light. Narration is a way to make sense of oneself, to connect the dots and achieve coherence; and with a new practice comes a new language through which to express and understand both past and present experiences. For many of my interlocutors, one of the most important gains from engaging in collective practice, for instance by committing to an organised training programme, has been the acquisition of a language for

certain types of experience. This new language provides words and concepts that help to make sense of one's own experiences, and at the same time a community within which those experiences can be communicated and validated through the discovery that they are shared by others. Putting clear words to experiences makes them, in a sense, more real, and part of a shared reality. In this perspective, changes that occur in practitioners' sense of wellbeing and ethical self-understanding are not just the results of practice, but also of participation in a movement or milieu.

To tell one's own story is a way of connecting the dots in one's life, like how Eleonora can see in retrospect how her previous experiences of nature connection and meditation came together in her adult life, and in her role as a clinical psychologist, due to a major crisis. But it is not just the dots within oneself that are connected; we can also place ourselves within larger narratives. As noted in chapter 10, and as we will return to in chapter 15, in the nature connection context these larger narratives are often taken from evolution and biology. Eleonora, too, often speaks in such terms: "There are tens of billions upon millions of organisms in the soil on which I stand with my bare foot. It's an interaction. [W]hen you become aware of it… it is a very tangible communication" (second interview with Eleonora, 20 August 2020).

Understanding one's place in a larger whole and within a longer timeframe is an important part of self-understanding, and also provides a key for the interpretation of momentary experiences. In the following chapters, I will examine personal experience on the emotional, ethical, cognitive, and perceptual levels, before bringing all these levels together again through the concept of *face* in chapter 16. The experiences described in this exploration can be seen in both a long-term and a momentary perspective; that is, both *small-scale history* and *momentary experience* (Mattingly 2017). We will also see examples of how these different timeframes connect to each other. For instance, our long-term attitudes to life impact the ways in which we manage ourselves in momentary situations. And, conversely, momentary experiences can sometimes be profound enough to affect our long-term attitudes and self-understanding. I will thus return to the long-term narrative perspective in my discussion of the different dimensions of momentary experience.

CHAPTER 12

The Connected Body

Linda is a person who practically radiates wellbeing. She is young (in her mid-thirties, which is relatively young in this context), slim, and gives the impression of being awake and attentive. She lives in a rural area and takes daily walks in the forest. During these walks, she often stops to look at something, or to sit or lie down on the ground. When I ask her about positive nature experiences, she struggles to find any specific occasion simply because she has such experiences on a daily basis. Eventually, she recalls her sojourn in the forest that same morning:

> I'm lying on the moss and just taking in everything that's there with my senses, with the feeling of my body against the moss, and just sink into the experience of being human in this amazing complex and... simply being allowed to be there and... there's something about love too that I can't really put into words. But there's something about being allowed to love something and to be loved back. It's not an ecstatic feeling, but it's just... a soft and somewhat easy feeling, that I am somehow simply there, and that every part of me is in touch with every part of what is outside of me. (Interview with Linda, 18 Oct. 2020)

In the introduction to part 2, I made an initial definition of body which I judge to be close to a common everyday understanding of the word: "body" refers to our sensory and motor faculties. These faculties are certainly involved here,[47] but there are also many other dimensions in play. It is not just that the softness of the moss is providing bodily comfort, which could just as well have been provided by a soft mat or mattress. It is the feeling of touching and being touched, of loving and being loved.

A Space Where Anything Can Happen

Linda describes what she calls a "space" (Sw. "*utrymme*") that she inhabits which seems to open up somewhere between the inner world of the body and

[47] At least the sensory faculties are referred to in this quote. However, as we shall see below, bodily movement can also play a part in this feeling of connectedness.

the outer world of the surrounding landscape when she gives the right kind of attention. This can happen spontaneously, for instance when she is watching a spectacular sunset, or deliberately, through the use of techniques for meditation and nature connection. The key seems to be to shift sensory attention back and forth between the body and the surroundings.

> Either I start in the external world and direct my consciousness towards it, or inwards, and then I swing back and forth. And by (laughter) – this may sound rather fuzzy – but by moving my body too, and getting the body in movement, eventually it's like – this is sounding really fuzzy, and I'm not saying this to everyone – but this… sometimes it's like I'm not moving myself. It's not me who's moving, it's something else that's making me move. And this space there [that I get into], it's so magical, because it feels like, as I said before, that life is so close to me when I'm there, and... Yeah, so, answering your question, it's both body, inner environment, outer environment and this swinging back and forth. That's what gets me there... wherever "there" is. A feeling of love. I don't know why, but love came up. (Interview with Linda, 18 Oct. 2020)

Here, bodily movement is added to sensory attention as another way to connect to the surroundings. In this case, it is not clear where the movements come from. In many nature connection exercises, one of the objectives is to get into the same pace and rhythm as the surrounding landscape (cf. Clifford 2018, pp. 74-76). Linda mentions love in this context too – a love for which she does not specify subject and object (or subject and subject). As in her description of lying in the moss, the sensory and emotional dimensions are clearly entangled. The experience is not easy for Linda to grasp cognitively, even in retrospect.

> What I can say is that it's not cognitive. It's not something I can use and put into words. It's more a like a knowledge from my body and the experience of being in this both-sides-world (laughter) in a movement back and forth between my inner and outer worlds. It… so, I don't want to put it into words really. But if I have to… it's about some kind of wholeness, about feeling that you're coming back both to yourself and to everything else, to the outside, feeling integrated with myself in my whole body, but also integrated in the exterior. (Interview with Linda, Oct. 18, 2020)

Positive emotions are certainly part of the impact on wellbeing that can be achieved by getting into this space, emotions that seem to emerge through integration with the surroundings. It is also a space where transformation can take place.

> I would say that I try to be open to the idea that in this space, anything can happen. I remember how I used to try to put it into words and would say like, yeah it is recovery that's going on, or it's, it's vitality that's going on, or that you get an energy boost. But eventually, I was like: no! That's not how I want to teach it and that's not how I want my participants and myself to see this space. Because the space can also make me cry, make me feel a deep connection with what's going on, both in my inner environment, but also in the outside… environment. Like, if there's a lot going on with the coronavirus and everything, you can kind of feel that too clearly in this space. So, for me it is more like a space that's just transformative, that can cause change. (Interview with Linda, Oct. 18, 2020)

This transitive and transformative space where anything can happen sounds very much like the liminal condition that Victor Turner (1969) saw as a central element in the ritual process, through which a person may transition from one social role to another. In the nature connection context, it is perhaps more often a matter of recuperation and a return to the same social role as before. More dramatic life changes are also attested to by nature connection practitioners, but not resulting from (or facilitated by) a single occasion of practice. Ritual elements such as those described in chapter 6 can, through the framing and lifting of a place and a time out of the everyday, contribute to opening up something like the space that Linda describes here. Perhaps the same liminal condition can be achieved through a deep embodiment which temporarily dissolves the mind's abstractions – and thus the normal social conditions – just as in the ritual processes described by Turner.

More recent perspectives on this experience of boundlessness and transformation can be found in post-humanist theory, for instance in Rosi Braidotti's (2013) *zoe-centered egalitarianism*. At the centre of this philosophy is the body, which takes the role of subject and not object. It is, however, not a discrete, atomic subject, but a relational one. In its embodied presence, this subject relates to other embodied subjects physically, affectionately, and empathically. *Zoe* (Greek for *life*), in Braidotti's terminology, refers to the life force that flows through all these relations, dissolving the boundaries between subjects – even between living and dying – within a constantly self-organising matter (Braidotti 2013, pp. 27, 60, 115).

Concluding Remarks on the Connected Body

Embodiment entails situatedness in a specific time and place. In Linda's descriptions above, everything seems to be present at once: bodily sensations, emotions, the coronavirus crisis, and ideas about humanity and nature. As

we saw in the previous chapter, however, the impact of nature on practitioners' wellbeing can also involve abstractions and larger timeframes. The narrative self-formation discussed in chapter 11 is also a kind of situatedness, but between different times and places, and in relation to important ideas such as nature, humanity, etc. – a situatedness of the mind, one that relates the self to abstractions. Embodiment may then be understood as the opposite kind of situatedness: a situatedness in the concrete, in the here and now, as perceived by the senses and participated in through bodily movement.

Nevertheless, it difficult to make an absolute distinction between these two types of situatedness. They are entangled with each other in various ways, at least when viewed in retrospect. The feeling of love that Linda refers to appears to involve bodily sensations, such as the soft feel of the moss; but there is also a mental element, i.e., ideas about being human within the complexity of nature. Are the bodily sensations the cause of this feeling of love? Or is it the ideas about humanity and nature that give meaning to the sensations of touch? Perhaps we can settle for noting that different levels of experience are involved in some kind of interplay, without trying to determine which one is primary. The point seems to be to achieve a balance between the levels. The emphasis on embodiment and sensory presence is perhaps an attempt to remedy an imbalance, in Western modernity, towards the other side. The ability to move effortlessly between these different levels of experience may also be desirable, to quickly focus and redirect attention like a trained meditator – as Linda does with her experience of Vipassana meditation. She certainly has an agile intellect that moves quickly between what is immediately present, on the one hand, and abstract ideas about biology, mythology, spirituality, and the role of humanity in nature, on the other. Linda's words about love and the place of humans in nature, in the linguistic form presented to us here, is of course a retrospective sense-making. As discussed in the previous chapter, this sense-making is itself part of a salutary and ethical self-formation. This is, however, a methodological obstacle – perhaps an insurmountable one – in any endeavour to understand immediate bodily-sensory experience. In the nature connection milieu, embodiment and sensory presence in the here and now are usually prioritised over the mind's abstractions. But the ideas of mind and body are not easily separated in reality – at least not when our inquiry is dependent on language. At times, the two terms can even become almost synonymous,[48] as noted in the previous chapter.

[48] As in "mindfulness", which implies a conscious presence and sensory awareness, which makes it almost synonymous with "embodiment".

Experiences of connecting simultaneously to one's own body and to the natural environment are commonly related by my interlocutors. Many sensory attention-based exercises nature connection practice seem to be designed to achieve precisely this – to feel one's own body and how it connects to the surroundings, to passively sense the connection but also to participate through movement and rhythm.

In chapter 5, I observed that the connection with nature is often expressed by practitioners in biological-physical terms, but that it is also apparent that other levels are involved, such as emotion and meaning. I also noted that the difference between "nature" and "not-nature" may be a matter of attitudes and priorities, rather than just a statement of facts. I referred to a webinar with the American forest bathing guide, trainer, and author Ben Page, who insisted that instead of being preoccupied with *who* we are (in terms of job, relationships, belief systems) we should focus on *what* we are. Nature and not-nature seems to be a matter of attitude and priorities: "Nature is everything that is happening right here, right now. Abstractions and generalisations are not nature" (Ben Page, IFTD Webinar, 26 Sept. 2020). This idea of nature seems to be analogous with body or embodiment.

CHAPTER 13

Emotional Dimensions of Nature Connection

Sten notes that he has become more emotional over the past year. He can see no other explanation for this than his many long sojourns in the forest in connection with his training as a forest bathing guide, which he has quite recently completed. Sten is around 60 years old and self-employed as a management consultant. He gives the impression of calm and stability. What does he mean, then, by "emotional" (Sw. "*känslosam*")? The word "emotional" (and its Swedish equivalent) can sometimes have negative connotations, such as lack of self-control and irrationality. But Sten speaks of it as a good thing. When I ask him to elaborate, he explains that he is more easily and more deeply affected by his (natural) surroundings. He can be humbled and moved to tears in sheer gratitude over some small thing or event he notices. This change in his experience of nature seems to have already begun to some extent during his training as a mindfulness instructor some eight years ago, and then reinforced through forest bathing.[49]

Similar accounts of a heightened emotional sensitivity to the landscape are given by many of my interlocutors. A bad mood can instantly be changed for the better simply by noticing some detail or event in the surrounding landscape. Birds and animals often seem to have this effect when they appear.

It is likely that people who are drawn to nature connection practice are prone to be emotionally affected by natural landscapes to begin with. But it also seems that this tendency is somehow enhanced through the practice, or simply by being part of the nature connection milieu, seeing as practitioners report being more easily affected than they used to. To explore this further, we need to clarify the concept of emotion somewhat, and then take a look at how emotions may relate to group settings and collective practices.

[49] During mindfulness training, Sten immediately felt that he wanted to practice and teach it in natural environments. The forest bathing training was a natural next step. As we have seen in Part 1, mindfulness is an important influence in nature connection practice, and Sten is far from alone in having found his way to this practice through mindfulness.

What are Emotions?

Since the 20th century, two competing views of emotions have dominated. One line of thought (for which Sigmund Freud and later Freudian theorists have provided an important part of the basis) regards emotions as intentional states, part of the realm of metacognition and close to both thought and will. The other (of which William James was a pioneering proponent) regards them as affects in the body whose appearance as conscious experience is merely an epiphenomenon (Deigh 2010). Viewed as intentional states, emotions have objects; we feel in a certain way about something or someone. This makes it easy to see them as motivators and causes of behaviour. As affects, they also relate to objects in the sense that they are bodily reactions to something and, secondarily, appear as mental states, which means that they cannot be considered as causes *of*, but rather as caused *by*, bodily reactions and behaviours (Deigh 2010, pp. 20-1). In the last decades of the 20th century, the view of emotions as intentional states dominated in psychology and in the branch of philosophy that concerned itself with emotions. With the rise of cognitive studies, however, versions of the Jamesian position regained popularity, often leading eventually to hybrid forms between the two principal positions (Deigh 2010, pp. 32-7)

My purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive theory of emotion. It suffices to note that what we refer to in everyday speech as "emotion" includes (what can reasonably be defined as) bodily affects *as well as* mental evaluative states directed towards something or someone, and that the two levels are connected either as cause and effect (in either direction) or simply as different dimensions of a complex experience. Different types of what we call emotions have their apparent origins the body, in words or thoughts, or somewhere in between.[50] If we hear or read about something that upsets us and this, in turn, is felt in the body as a racing heart or a churning stomach, is seems obvious that the emotion goes through the mind to affect the body. But it is also obvious that bodily pain or pleasure can affect our conscious emotional state. Many types of emotion can be placed somewhere between these two poles. Aesthetic experience involves sensory perception. But what is perceived is not just physical information about, for instance, a piece of music, a building, or a landscape. It evokes evaluation, and sometimes an experience of beauty that can lift us out of the everyday. Erotic experience is similar in this way. It is not just the physical touch that creates the experience

[50] As explained in the introduction to part 2, *mind* refers to our reflective consciousness and *body* refers to our sensory and motoric faculties.

but the way it is "charged": it matters in what situation, by whom, and with what intention we are touched. These complex entanglements between different levels of the lifeworld are important to note when studying experiences of nature connection which, as described by my interlocutors, often display the same complexities as aesthetic and erotic experience. Aesthetics, at least, is also clearly an important part of nature connection experiences as described to me in interviews. The beauty of a landscape – or of the smallest of its creatures – evokes further feelings of love, wonder, reverence, and gratitude. There is also a sense of being touched, which is perhaps not exactly erotic, but at least bordering on the sensual. It is a touch (or indeed an impression through any of the senses) which holds an emotional charge – as in Linda's description of lying on the moss, where physical sensations mingled with feelings of love and ideas about humanity and nature.

Emotions and Moods

By viewing emotions either as intentional states oriented towards specific objects, or as affects with specific causes, we are still missing at least one dimension of what I believe most of us would count as part of emotional life: moods. We can be in a good mood or a bad mood, sometimes for no apparent reason. A mood can also be felt to reign over a place or a situation. We enter a church and immediately enter into a solemn mood – or a forest, which some of my interlocutors compare to a church precisely in order to explain the kind of mood they assume upon entering it. Or we get into a "party mood" by sensing the mood of others around us and of the situation as a whole. We can passively sense and adjust to the mood of a place or situation, or we can make active efforts to get into it. We can also resist a mood that we feel does not concern us or that we are somehow motivated to break or change.

The phenomenologist Otto Friedrich Bollnow (2017 [1956]) has made some useful definitions and distinctions. Moods (*Stimmungen*) are total conditions of the mind which, unlike emotions, have no specific object. For instance, fear is an emotion because it is directed at something specific, but anxiety is a mood (*Stimmung*) because it has no specific object (Bollnow 2017 [1956], p. 1400).

However, instead of using different terms for object-related emotions and moods, I will use "emotion" as a comprehensive term that includes both, and only speak of mood when there is a need for specification. Likewise, when naming specific emotional states, I will use the same term to refer to an object-related emotion and a mood. For instance, "wonder" may be either an emotion directed at something specific which is felt to be wonderful,

beautiful, or exceptional in some way (close to amazement), or a more general mindset of wonder which brings with it a tendency to experience things as wondrous or wonderful. This, I believe, is consistent with Bollnow's view of the *Stimmung* as the foundation which determines the range, style, and orientation of possible object-related emotions (Bollnow 2017 [1956], p. 1402). Obviously, a mood can be affected by specific events. But a mood is also a general disposition that sets the tone for how we receive the world and respond emotionally to events. The literal meaning of the German word *Stimmung* is "tuning". By being in a certain mood, we are tuned to the world in specific ways. Different *Stimmungen* are thus like different harmonies within a person and between a person and the world (Bollnow 2017 [1956], pp. 1403-05). In Bollnow's understanding, a *Stimmung* is

> […] (1) the harmony between the inner and outer world; (2) the harmony between the states of the body and the soul; and, finally, (3) the harmony of all the individual faculties of the soul that are all tuned to a uniform base tone. (Bollnow 2017 [1956], p. 1404)

I believe that most of us would agree, based on personal experience, with these basic propositions, although some might prefer a different terminology. If we take "soul", for instance, to mean mind (i.e., reflective consciousness, as established above), we know that a mood is expressed on that level as well as in bodily gestures and behaviours, and that it has an impact on the ways in which we perceive and interact with the world. If we are in a gloomy mood, our bodily movements become slow and laboured, and we are likely to react negatively to things we encounter, whereas in a cheerful mood, we move with ease and see everything in a positive light.

Bollnow distinguishes, moreover, between temporary moods (*Launen*) and long-term *life moods* (*Lebensstimmungen*) (Bollnow 2017 [1956], pp. 1414-16). While temporary moods set the tone for our emotional responses in a given moment, life moods are our basic emotional dispositions. Life moods are deeper and more fundamental but can also change over time.

Emotions and Moods as Relational and Orientational Stances

Emotions have been characterised not only as intentional or evaluative states, but also as relational stances (Riis & Woodhead, pp. 21, 72, 88). Whether emotions as conscious states are secondary to bodily reactions or vice versa, they are part of how we understand and relate to the world, to objects and persons in it, and to ourselves. According to Bollnow's distinction, emotions

inform, or are part of, our behaviour towards specific objects or persons (including specific parts of ourselves), while moods inform, or are part of, our conduct in a place or situation (including towards ourselves as whole beings). With emotions as compass, we orient ourselves in the world (albeit with some help also from rational thought).

Sten has always loved being in nature, often in connection with activities like hiking and running. With his current practice, however, he has found a new way of being in and with nature:

> [I]t becomes something completely different, just going into the forest and… Where will I end up today? I bring my tent and walk somewhere and then I set it up when I feel it's time, instead of having decided on a goal beforehand. That's two completely different experiences. (Interview with Sten, 3 Oct. 2020)

This new way of relating to and – in this case literally – orienting oneself in natural environments is perhaps not entirely based on emotion. But emotions do appear to play a part. Sten goes wherever he feels like. Feelings pull him in certain directions and make him want to stay in certain places. Through these feelings, he sees the landscape differently than he did before. Our first interview takes place in a forest area on the outskirts of one of Sweden's major cities, where Sten has just led a forest bathing session. He used to live nearby and would often go running in this area. But now he sees it in a new light. It is like a whole new place, he says.

This way of moving about, of feeling one's way in the forest, is in fact often part of organised nature connection practice. In one of the most important practically-oriented books on forest bathing (reviewed in chapter 8), M. Amos Clifford describes what he calls "body radar", a kind of sense that we can tune in to which feels like being pulled in a certain direction in the forest, and "heart sense", through which we sense the specific quality of a place or moment (Clifford 2018, pp. 54-55). I understand this as a way of consciously utilising emotion as a kind of sense organ, to "see", in this case, a place or a landscape in a different light. In fact, it is not essentially different from the way that we use emotion to orient ourselves in everyday social contexts. For instance, if our feelings towards a person change, we "see" him or her in a different light.

Emotional Management

If emotion is related to intention, it seems to me that mood is similarly related to attitude. I understand emotion and mood as passive and active sides of our emotional life, respectively, where the latter enters into what we call the sphere of ethics. This connection between emotion and ethics will be addressed in the next chapter. But the idea of an active side to our emotional life might also lead us to ask to what extent emotions are voluntary and controllable. We know that it is possible to conceal and to fake emotions. But is it also possible to make oneself really feel in a certain way – "fake it till you make it", as the expression goes? Arlie Russell Hochschild, who has studied emotions and emotional management in corporate settings, has distinguished between *surface acting* (hiding one's true emotions or faking emotional expressions without feeling them inside), and *deep acting* (mustering up emotion inside through active imagination or exhortation (Russell Hochschild 2012, pp. 33-55)). Her focus is on corporate settings where deep acting is regulated as part of the requirements for fulfilling a professional role. (A service worker should ideally meet customers with a sincere smile, not just a superficial one, and a salesperson who really believes in the product is more successful than one who just pretends.) However, deep acting is also very much in use in our private lives. We often put a lot of effort into trying to feel what we think we should be feeling and to supress feelings that we find inappropriate or unwanted (Russell Hochschild 2012, pp. 35-55). We can be more or less successful in this. But the observation that deep acting is an integral part of our emotional lives means that it may not always be possible to tell the difference between emotions that are "authentic" or "put on". A further implication is that emotions, at least to some extent, are susceptible to management – either by the self or by external structures. This is important to bear in mind when studying collective practices in which emotions and emotional expressions play a central part.

In nature connection practice, active measures are taken in order to help participants get into the proper mood: the ritual framing and severance from the everyday, the slow walking pace, the ceremonial tea-drinking from aesthetically appealing cups during forest bathing sessions, and many other elements contribute to setting a mood which is conducive to the type of experience being sought – and which is in and of itself an important part of the experience.

As discussed above, we may think of bodily expressions and behaviours as manifestations of inner settings. But the causality can also conceivably be reversed. Without reducing emotion to a mere epiphenomenon of bodily

reactions, we can gain some insights from the Jamesian assertion that bodily reactions and behaviours – what we normally understand as expressions of emotion – may in fact, at least in some cases, be the cause of inner emotional experience (Deigh 2010, pp. 20-1). We may smile because we are happy, but we may also begin to feel happier because we are smiling. During a forest bathing session, walking slowly and attentively may be a spontaneous expression of an inner mood of reverence. But a participant may also walk slowly and attentively because of the guide's instructions to do so and, as a result, enter into a reverent mood (and thus a different way of relating to the landscape). In this, we see the close relationship between the active and the passive side of emotion, between getting into a mood and taking on an attitude.

Social and Cultural Perspectives on Emotion

Emotions can be approached psychologically, with focus on the individual psyche, or sociologically, in a social context. When studying collective practices which appear to somehow stimulate an enhanced emotional sensitivity, there is good reason to look at the sociological angle as well, even if our primary interest lies in personal experience. Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead (2010) take a balanced approach that steers clear of both psychological and sociological reductionism. They insist that emotions are *both* social *and* private. Our emotional lives are shaped by our social context, but there is also room for individual agency within given circumstances (Riis & Woodhead 2010, pp. 5-6). Thus, we may speak of emotional autopoiesis, or of the emotional as one dimension of the ethical and salutary autopoiesis, which are my principal synoptic terms. Additionally, apart from the private and the social, Riis and Woodhead include a third side to the dynamics surrounding emotion: a cultural level which they call *symbolic*. Symbols here include any kind of object or entity, real or imagined, that can be charged with emotional meaning (Riis & Woodhead 2010, pp. 5-7). This means that emotions are not just inner states but relational stances towards the world (Riis & Woodhead 2010, pp. 21, 72, 88).

What, then, can we make of the initial observation that nature connection practitioners report an increased emotional sensitivity towards nature? As mentioned, there are elements of the collective practice that clearly contribute to setting the proper moods. But perhaps there is also something in the social milieu itself that influences the emotional lives of participants. Within this milieu, emotional experience is expressed and shared. This is done in an organised form during collective practice, which almost always includes circles for experience sharing. But such exchange also takes place in

less organised social forms outside of active practice. People discuss their experiences over coffee and share them on social media. Shared values with regard to the importance of emotional awareness, emotional expressiveness, and readiness to be emotionally affected by the landscape, also contribute.

An Emotional Repertoire

It is not just a general emotional sensitivity that is being cultivated here, but also a specific repertoire of emotions. When Sten says he has become more emotional, he does not mean, for instance, that he has become more easily angered. He repeatedly mentions *reverence*[51] and *gratitude*, which are among a repertoire of emotions that I have found characteristic of the nature connection milieu, along with *mystery*, *wonder*, *beauty*, *love*, *comfort*, *peace*, *thrill*, and *grief* (the latter evoked by the loss of species and degradation of ecosystems).

I have arrived at this list of emotions in the spiralling hermeneutic fashion broadly described in the chapter 3. In this case, I started out with a heuristic assessment of which emotional states and expressions appeared to be prevalent and characteristic of the milieu, drawing on participant observations, interviews, and literature studies. As part of the verification process, I then went back to the interview transcripts and searched for the terms used (or Swedish equivalents). In a qualitative analysis, the relative frequency of certain words can of course only give hints as to their importance and meaning in the context. However, these searches also provided opportunities to re-read relevant parts and gain a better understanding. I then modified the list in accordance with the new findings. Another important step in the verification process (as in other parts of the thesis) was to refer back to the interlocutors quoted in the text by sending them a draft and asking for their comments. This part of the process also led me to develop new questions for follow-up interviews with some of the interlocutors and for upcoming interviews with new interlocutors.

Regarding the terms used, there are some basic methodological problems that need to be addressed. One is, of course, that I have had to translate the terms, since most of the interviews were conducted in Swedish. Even in the

[51] He uses the Swedish word *ödmjukhet*, which is usually translated as "humility". However, as a general term in this context I have decided to use the related term *reverence*, which has more emotional connotations, while humility is more often spoken of as a moral quality. The most obvious Swedish equivalent of "reverence" is "*vördnad*", which is in fact a word frequently used by practitioners in interviews. Of course, one of my main points here is that emotion and morality are deeply entangled. The distinction is made for analytical clarity.

same language, however, people may use different words when speaking about what is arguably the same thing, or at least things that are similar enough to be classified together. Or, conversely, they may use the same word but with different meanings. Interpretation is therefore central at every stage of the process. The final repertoire of emotional states presented here consists of terms used by practitioners in interviews and published texts (or their most obvious English equivalents), but with the addition of some less frequently used terms which I have employed to highlight nuances and variations in the meanings of other terms, or to capture a class of similar emotional states expressed in interviews in different ways. For instance, the word "magic" (and its adjective and adverbial forms) is frequently used by practitioners to express a wide spectrum of emotional states. At one end of this spectrum is what I call "mystery", a term which is much less frequently used by practitioners. On another side of this spectrum, "magic" is almost synonymous with "wonder" (Sw. *förundran*), which occurs quite frequently in interviews. I have included all three terms – magic, mystery, and wonder – in order to do justice as far as possible to these nuances. The term "thrill", whose closest Swedish equivalent would be *spänning*, is not based on any specific term used by practitioners. It is a term I have employed to classify feelings of excitement and fascination, often evoked by the presence of animals. In interviews, this class of emotions may be expressed in words like "it was a powerful feeling" or "I was completely fascinated". My classification of such expressions under the term "thrill" is dependent on context.

Here, I will elaborate on the meaning of the terms included in the repertoire and on the ways in which they are linked to each other. Annika, a practitioner of several different kinds of nature connection for therapeutic purposes, provides a good description, previously quoted in the opening of part 2, which demonstrates several of the central parts of this repertoire:

> When I've been in Nature long enough, the trees somehow become more alive to me, than when I'm in this everyday busy mind, more preoccupied with my thoughts than with my sensory impressions. Then I can hardly see. But when I really get to the point where I see, I often perceive incredible beauty, which leads to gratitude. Wonder is a good word, the feeling that everything is so magical, crisp, and magically alive! (Interview with Annika, 13 February, 2018)

Words such as "magic" (Sw. *magi*) and "mystery" (Sw. *mystik*), as nouns, adjectives and adverbs, are frequently used by practitioners to describe their experiences. These terms can refer to a sense of mystery, of secrets, and of something unexplained. It is sometimes mentioned in passing as something

that just adds an extra note to the quality of a situation, as when Eleonora describes her childhood experience of nature:

> I was completely happy in some odd way, happy[52] in the way that, when you're that young you don't feel that you're in lack of anything. Things just were the way they were. Such a powerful presence and inner peace, and that creativity which… belonging, a strong sense of belonging, and a touch of mystery too. (Interview with Eleonora, 18 April 2018).

When I ask her to elaborate on what she means by "mystery",[53] she goes on:

> As I remember it, the way I thought about it when I was young, very young, was that I was a bit elevated, thrilled and delighted about being in a kind of connection, to be able to look around and feel that I could communicate with the animals – "What if I could really do that?"… well, something like that, the thrill and the delight of not being stuck in this dualistic thinking that I'm here as a human being and over there are the animals, but instead in some spontaneous way to be part of something, of a whole, which now you might call a spiritual or religious kind of feeling. And also this idea, which was then completely spontaneous, it wasn't something that I had picked up somewhere, that the animals might be looking at me and that there may be more to the animals than what was usually attributed to them. (Interview with Eleonora, 18 April 2018)

Mystery can also be sensed as a mood reigning over a place, as described here by Tina, recalling a situation where she felt a strange pull from a place in the forest, as if it might have been some sort of ceremonial site:

> As I was walking on the path, I saw two big rocks […]. And, at first, I passed by. But then I felt that I had to go back to this place. So I turned and went back to this place, to the rocks, and so when I got there on top of the rocks it was like... it was a moss-covered rock, and on one of them there was a [smaller] rock like this and a small piece of bone and then there was something more which I now don't remember. But it felt so strange, because those things, they hadn't been there… well, they hadn't been there for hundreds of years… but

[52] I have excluded from this account emotions such as happiness and unhappiness, joy and sadness, which are of course present and spoken of in interviews, but which I find too generic to add anything to the understanding of what is characteristic of the emotional repertoire explored here.
[53] She uses the word "mysticism" (the same in Swedish). In this context, however, I take it to mean the same as "mystery".

> still, it was such a great feeling, like I mentioned before, ceremonies, rites, rituals… (Interview with Tina, 10 November 2019)

As mentioned above, it is common in nature connection practice for people to feel drawn in a certain direction or to a certain place. The pull of a place may feel inviting, homely, and comforting, or, as in this case, the place may be felt to hold secrets. Tina does not, however, appear to be driven by a curiosity to uncover any specific knowledge. The items lying in the moss on top of one of the rocks give a hint of ancient ceremonies and rituals, but she does not seem to believe that they have really been used in such a context. Rather, they have these associations and thus contribute to the general sense of mystery in that place. Or perhaps it is this general mysterious mood that colours the items so that they take on such associations. In any case, the point is not to uncover anything specific, but rather just to exist in this atmosphere of magic and mystery.

"Magical" is also used in ways that would perhaps better translate as "amazing", "awe-inspiring", or "wondrous"/"wonderful". Nevertheless, I have included the term "wonder" (Sw. *förundran*) in its own right. This term is in fact also frequently used by participants. Wonder can be evoked by a sense of nature's unfathomable complexity, immensity, and beauty, as expressed by Ylva:

> [There are moments] when you just stop and… well, it's a feeling of wonder. You just stop and stand still and just... Yeah, it is a feeling of being one with everything and nothing at the same time […] I feel, well, on the one hand you can feel a very strong, almost euphoric joy, but sometimes it's just that you feel a calmness, which is... and then you marvel at how beautiful and how divine – a word I have begun to use [laughter] but it's a good description – [it all is]. (Interview with Ylva, 10 December 2019)

The feeling of gratitude that can move Sten to tears can be a response to being allowed to be part of this vastness and complexity and to experience its beauty. In this way, it is closely linked to reverence. Both gratitude and reverence are conditions that can be understood as intentions or attitudes just as well as passively experienced emotions. In this way, their ethical importance becomes apparent.

It would seem natural to connect love to wonder and beauty in the same way as to reverence and gratitude, at least if we are thinking of a fiery, passionate kind of love. But love can also be a soft feeling of safety, of caring

and being cared for, or simply being in touch with something or someone,[54] as expressed by Linda in one of the quotes we saw above:

> [T]here's something about being allowed to love something and to be loved back. It's not an ecstatic feeling, but it's just... a soft and somewhat easy feeling, that I am somehow simply there, and that every part of me is in touch with every part of what is outside of me. (Interview with Linda, 18 October 2020)

This kind of love is closely related to comfort, which I have also included in the repertoire. The word "comfort" is used here with all of its usual connotations. It can be a feeling of home – a very common theme in interviews – of being comfortable and feeling safe, or of being comforted in times of crisis. Eva recalls a situation where she was sitting in the forest struck by grief over the death of a close relative

> [...] as I was sitting there weeping, they began to approach. It's like several roe deer and two beavers all of a sudden, instead of the one I used to see. They all gathered around me. So, I couldn't interpret it in any other way than that they had come to comfort me. (Interview with Eva, 9 May 2018)

Peace (Sw. *frid*), too, is related to comfort but also, it seems, to meditation and some types of religious experience. Practitioners speak of inner peace as well as a sense of peace present in the landscape, as in Ylva's description of a moment she had in nature on a winter's day near her cabin in the woods:

> [It was] beautiful and sunny and there were like these hanging… yeah like hanging crystals from the trees, and there were colours. The sun made those crystals sparkle in all the colours of the rainbow. And there was no wind. It was all quiet and it was like "ah", such beauty and peace. (Interview with Ylva, 10 December 2019)

Thrill is perhaps something of an opposite to peace, but not in a negative sense. It is not a stressful disturbance but rather an input of positive energy. Here, I use it specifically to denote the vibrating excitement of being close to something that is alive and fascinating, something like what a birdwatcher might feel in the presence of a rare species. In the nature connection context

[54] Love in the noun form (Sw. *kärlek*) is not in fact a frequently occurring word in my interviews. It is more common in nature connection literature, however. Further, feelings of caring reciprocity and of meaningful touch constitute a central theme in my interviews which may reasonably be classified under the term "love". In the verb form (Sw. *älska*), it occurs very frequently in the interviews, but mostly in a rather trivial sense such as "I love walking in nature" or "my parents loved picking berries".

too, this feeling is often evoked by the appearance of birds or other animals. We saw an example of this in one of the quotes from Eleonora, above:

> […] I was a bit elevated, thrilled and delighted about being in a kind of contact, to be able to look around and feel that I could communicate with the animals – "What if I could really do that?" (Interview with Eleonora, 18 April 2018)

Tina describes something similar during an encounter with a raptor during a sit spot[55] session:

> At first it was all quiet, but then this thing happened that tends to happen when you have your place where you sit: you begin to see things. There were some birds and a squirrel that came up close. But the most awesome thing that was so powerful, because I love raptors and, and, well, for me it's a powerful experience just to be driving and seeing them in the air. I'm just as fascinated every time… But anyway, on this occasion, not far from me, I don't know exactly what species it was, but a raptor, lifted. It was a big heavy raptor that just "poof!", lifted off and flew away maybe 50 metres in front of me or so. It was powerful. (Interview with Tina, 10 November 2019)

Thrill makes us present in the moment and sharpens our attention. As seen in these examples, it is often evoked by the presence of living beings, beings whose aliveness and vibrancy demand our attention.

Most of the emotional states I describe here are ones that we would usually count as positive. Grief stands out somewhat in this company. A recurring theme in interviews, practice, and literature is the grief felt over the devastation of ecosystems and the loss of species. In this way, grief can be understood as yet another side of love – the feeling of being separated from the beloved. This combination of love and grief can become a driving force urging people both to connect more deeply to nature on a personal level and to engage in efforts to protect the environment:

> What it all comes down to… I feel like I'm almost ready to cry now… is that I love all these life forms so much and… I feel such a deep love for these different creatures and this fantastic interaction and all that. And well, that's my driving force, that this should be preserved. So, there's also a deep feeling of grief. (Interview with Karin, 2 August 2021)

[55] See description of sit spot in chapter 6.

This side of the emotional repertoire may be more accentuated in those branches of the nature connection movement which lean more towards social activism. But neither is it absent from the ANFT-related contexts which lean more towards personal wellbeing. M. Amos Clifford, founder of ANFT, writes in his book *Your Guide to Forest Bathing* (reviewed in chapter 8) of a "river of grief", which may be encountered on the path towards a deeper connection with nature, and which should be recognised as part of an increased awareness (Clifford 2018, pp. 36-37). This form of grief is also specifically evoked and addressed in some ritual practices, which will be discussed below.

Other negative emotions, such as stress and anxiety, are also frequently mentioned in the interviews, but then mostly in contrast to the experience of nature and nature connection practice by which such negative states can be relieved. Fear is sometimes mentioned in connection with childhood memories, for instance of being afraid of the forest at night. But for most participants, this fear has now been largely dispelled through the feelings of love and comfort.

As stated above, all of the specific emotional states discussed here (reverence, gratitude, magic, mystery, wonder, beauty, love, comfort, peace, thrill, and grief) can be understood both as object-related emotions and as moods, although some may be easier to imagine as object related or vice versa. Grief, for instance, is perhaps hard to imagine without an object. In a wider use of the term, however, we may also include nostalgia, which is somewhat less specific regarding what it relates to than, say, grief over the loss of a loved one. Even the latter form of grief, although its cause is specific, can also be a mood insofar as it is a total condition that permeates a person's whole being – or a ritual setting, such as a funeral – even in moments of temporary joy. Wonder and peace, on the contrary, are harder, but not impossible, to imagine with specific objects.

Moreover, as discussed above, emotions and moods can have active sides. Object-related emotions can be intentions and moods can be attitudes. Reverence and gratitude often tend towards the active side. Peace can be passively perceived, but it can also be a state which we make efforts to achieve. Here we are reminded of the close relationship between nature connection practice and different kinds of meditative practice, not least mindfulness. Again, we are reminded of the close connection between emotions and ethics.

Of course, the types of emotion discussed in this chapter, and even the complete repertoire, are not exclusive to this milieu. Earlier ethnographic studies suggest that at least some important elements of this repertoire are

also common in nature experiences among people not involved in the kinds of practice discussed here (Uddenberg 1995; Thurfjell 2020). What I do maintain is that this repertoire is characteristic of, and cultivated within, the nature connection milieu.

Emotional Regimes

Thus, we find in the nature connection milieu a general emotional sensitivity towards natural landscapes, shared values concerning emotions and emotional expression, and a characteristic repertoire of emotions. All this amounts to what Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead (2010) have called an *emotional regime*. The term *emotional regime* was originally coined by William Reddy (2001), who used it specifically to mean emotional structuring imposed by the state. Riis and Woodhead expand it to include any social context which "[…] holds together a repertoire of different emotions, and specifies their rhythm, significance, mode of expression, and combination" (Riis & Woodhead 2010, p. 10). An emotional regime offers "[…] a structured emotional repertoire that guides how adherents feel about themselves, one another, and their wider circumstances" (Riis & Woodhead 2010, p. 11). This does not mean that the regime is uncritically internalised by all individuals in a given context. There are, however, rewards and sanctions involved. Riis and Woodhead cite the example of getting into the "Christmas spirit", which may be rejected by some individuals, but only at the risk of being labelled as grumpy, anti-social, or a "Scrooge" (Riis & Woodhead 2010, pp. 11-12).

Entering into a new emotional regime also means relating in new ways to situations in one's own life. In a certain sense, nature constitutes an emotional regime which is separate from, and contrasted with, everyday life in modern society. This emotional regime of nature is not cultivated solely within specific sub-sections of culture, such as the nature connection movement, but appears to enjoy a general validity in (at least) contemporary Nordic culture. Being in nature brings the comforting sense of being part of something greater than oneself, which makes one's own troubles seem less significant (cf. Thurfjell 2020, pp. 30-57). This is likely a part of why nature often becomes important to people in a deep life crisis (cf. Ahmadi 2006). Nature connection practice builds on, enhances, and develops this mainstream emotional regime of nature, creating what might be described as a higher emotional order through which everyday troubles can be transcended, temporarily or permanently. This brings us to what Riis and Woodhead define as a *religious emotional regime*.

Religious Emotional Regimes

Riis and Woodhead make their definition of "religious", in a *religious emotional regime*, partially on a social constructionist basis; that is, on the condition that the context in which the regime is upheld is socially constructed as religious (by insiders, outsiders, or both). Another part of their definition is that it relates to "[…] an 'alternate ordering' that goes beyond the orderings of everyday life" (Riis & Woodhead 2010, p. 70).[56] They list three key characteristics of such a regime: *emotional ordering*, *emotional transcendence-transitioning*, and *inspiration-orientation*. The first characteristic, *emotional ordering*, is really a characteristic of any emotional regime. What is specific to a religious regime is that it orders emotions according to an *alternate ordering*, an ordering which is considered to be in some way higher or better than the everyday. The second characteristic, *emotional transcendence-transitioning*, refers to the possibilities within such an alternate order to either transcend one's own troubles, without necessarily making them go away, or to transition from them – temporarily or permanently – into a new emotional setting. It may even allow a person, under special circumstances, such as a ritual setting, to feel and express emotions which would otherwise not be socially acceptable. The third characteristic, *inspiration-orientation*, is the ability of a religious emotional regime to inspire and guide a person's behaviour, deeply and consistently over time (Riis & Woodhead 2010, pp. 70-76). Riis and Woodhead are inspired in part by Geertz's well-known definition, where religion has the ability to "establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations […]" (Geertz 1993 [1966], p. 90). We may also recall Bollnow's definition of life moods (*Lebensstimmungen*). This inspiration and orientation are achieved, not by specific deep emotions that are inherently religious, but by an arrangement that specifies a repertoire of emotions, and their levels of intensity and modes of expression, resulting in an alternate order which is perceived as in some way higher or better than the everyday (Riis & Woodhead 2010, pp. 57, 70). It is important to note, however, that this alternate order is not necessarily otherworldly. It may simply be a different arrangement of emotions (and thus relations) within the same basic order of reality (Riis & Woodhead 2010, p. 70).

The alternate order cultivated in nature connection practice is one in which humans relate emotionally (and thus, in a sense, socially) to non-human beings. It is, moreover, an order in which the dominant notes are

[56] Here they are clearly in the same line of thought as Ammerman (2020), whose definition of religion includes an element that is "other than everyday" (see chapters 2 and 6).

reverence, gratitude, magic, mystery, wonder, beauty, peace, love, comfort, and thrill, sometimes tempered by grief over the loss and degradation of species and ecosystems. As an alternate order, it is separated from the everyday emotional order of modern Western society and thus provides the opportunity to transcend or transition from that order. It may offer a temporary relief and recuperation that serves to improve or maintain wellbeing, but also, since it is considered as a better order, as the way things ought to be, it also provides a pervasive long-term motivational structure. The ethical relevance of emotions has already been discussed. The structuring of a complex of emotions into an alternate order adds a new dimension to bear in mind as we initiate a more detailed discussion on ethics in the next chapter.

Of course, a person is not a blank slate upon which an emotional regime can simply be imposed. A new regime builds on pre-existing personal, social, and cultural layers. In some cases, it can lead to radical change in a person's outlook and behaviour. (One needs only to consider how religious and political radicalisation can sometimes make people turn to violence or cut ties with friends and family.) In most cases, however, it merely tweaks and shifts the emphasis in a person's emotional constitution.

Ritual Settings and Temporary Emotional Regimes

An emotional regime is never constant or ubiquitous. There are times and places where the regime is more intense, or where particular aspects of it are accentuated. Natural environments (i.e., environments perceived as natural) activate a regime that differs from that of everyday life. In a forest bathing session or other practice where participants strive to deepen their connection with nature through sensory attention and experience sharing, the contrast to the everyday is often enhanced through ritual-like activities such as passing through a portal or a threshold, a tea ceremony, or aesthetic or performative elements (see description in chapter 6). Nature connection practitioners do make efforts to integrate this regime into their everyday lives, for instance by paying attention to elements of nature that are present in urban environments. But there is still a difference between that and being completely immersed in a forest. A regular nature connection practice may perhaps be compared to going to church every Sunday, entering the intensified emotional regime of that time and place, and being reminded of one's deepest values – values which ought then to be integrated as far as possible in everyday life.

If a forest bathing session is an example of a densification of a general emotional regime (like Sunday service or Friday prayer), other ritual-like

settings, with which we were also acquainted in part 1, accentuate particular aspects of the regime (like Good Friday or Ashora in their respective traditions). The life-cairn ceremony, for instance, is a ritual space in which to feel and express grief over the loss of species. The occasion described in chapter 6 was indeed tinged with a mournful and solemn mood. Some participants were weeping as they placed their stones on the cairn. The Council of All Beings is also to some extent about grief, but more about grievances, performatively stated by representatives of non-human beings, and, most of all, a lesson in humility for the human participants. On the occasion in Uppsala described in chapter 6, the mood was somewhat less uniform than during the life-cairn ceremony. The crowd was larger (around 30, compared to around ten in the life-cairn ceremony), and the ceremony was held in cooperation between Lodyn and two other organisations, and thus probably attracted participants with different approaches to what was going on. This was evident in the different attitudes of the performers, where some appeared almost to be channelling the spirit of the organism they were to represent while others stated their case in a more prosaic – or even facetious – manner. This suggests that the mood during a session of collective practice is dependent not only on the practice itself, but also on the social milieu and the overall emotional regime that comes with it.

This sort of discord can in fact make emotional regimes appear in a clearer light. During a forest walk during one of the IFTD gatherings in Finland, with participants from around the world (but with a dominance of northern Europeans), I recall a man from a non-European country, who was new to the nature connection milieu and perhaps also unfamiliar with the wider emotional regime of Nordic mainstream culture, answering his mobile phone and starting a conversion with what appeared to be a business partner. He quickly ended the conversation as soon as he picked up on the signals from those around him. It was not entirely obvious at this point in the journey whether or not the walk was part of the session or just a transit from where the guide had given initial instructions to where the exercises were to take place. But we had entered the forest, and this apparently meant, for most participants, that talking on a cell phone was not part of the expected behaviour. This clearly shows the contrast that exists, for most participants, between nature and everyday social and professional life. Talking on the phone belongs in the latter context and thus disrupts the forest mood.

Concluding Remarks on Emotion

From the above, it should be clear that what we call emotion involves both body and mind (with the definitions outlined above), and that emotions are part of our orientation; that is, the ways in which we see and relate to things and persons in the world. Bollnow's distinction between object-related emotions and objectless moods provides further clarification, although I have decided to include under the term "emotion". In the concepts of *deep acting*, *emotional labour* (Russell Hochschild 2012), and *emotional regime* (Riis & Woodhead 2010), I have found some entry points into an understanding of how emotions relate to social structures and situations. Neither of the works cited understands emotions as completely determined by social context. Emotions are influenced by social context, and they are susceptible to personal management conducted in order to conform to social expectations or meet professional requirements. But there is also room for individual agency.

As seen in the examples above, nature connection practice includes means and methods for evoking specific emotions. A practice that inspires temporary moods (*Launen* in Bollnow's terminology), if conducted regularly, can reasonably be assumed to also affect our long-term life moods (*Lebensstimmungen*) and thus our basic orientation in life – our wellbeing and our ethical attitudes and conduct. Moreover, since an emotional regime is upheld by the social milieu itself through social interaction and shared values, it is apparent that not only the practice but also simply being part of the nature connection milieu can contribute to the aforementioned effects.

Let us now take a look at the emotional regime described above in its contemporary context, bearing in mind the review of cultural influences in part 1. Riis and Woodhead discuss two contradictory historical developments affecting emotion in modernity. On the one hand, centralised power, urbanisation, and mass culture have led to increased emotional control. A modern individual is (ideally) characterised by a high degree of both bodily and emotional restraint – a necessity in order to navigate effectively in modern life. On the other hand, modernity has also seen an "expressive revolution", a "turn towards the self", etc. (see discussion in chapter 10 in the sections on wellbeing culture and contemporary spiritualities). This apparent contradiction may be reconciled by the assumption that one development has provoked the other as a reaction (Riis & Woodhead 2010, pp. 34-8).

Such a reconciliation is offered by Arlie Russell Hochschild (2012). Modern life, she observes, involves a great deal of exchange between total strangers. To run smoothly, this requires large-scale emotional engineering (Russell Hochshild 2012, p. 22-3, 190-8). She uses the term *emotional labour*

to describe the management of emotional responses that has become part of the requirements for many types of work, especially in the service sector. She argues that emotional labour is managed just like any other labour in a commercial capitalist enterprise. As workers, we learn to be genuinely nice and accommodating towards customers and to really believe in the products we are selling. We succeed to a certain extent, but are left with inner tension and an identity struggle. As customers, on the other hand, we are aware that the emotional display with which we are met is largely part of a professional role, and we are thus constantly trying to subtract the professional layer to find the real person underneath it (Russell Hochshild 2012 p. 34). This high level of emotional management has prompted a cultural response in the form of a deep appreciation of natural, unmanaged emotion (Russell Hochshild 2012, pp. 22-3, 190-8). This is another angle on the modern and postmodern search for the authentic self (also discussed in chapter 9, in the section on female dominance, and in chapter 10, in the section on contemporary spiritualities). There is a clear parallel here with the enthusiasm for "wild" nature that seems to have arisen in tandem with our increased distance from, and loss of, natural environments (discussed in chapter 7 in the section on outdoor culture). The concepts of childhood and nature are related in that they are both associated with wildness (as in unmanaged emotion) and authenticity.

Sten's new way of walking in the forest without a set goal, just going wherever he feels like in the moment, is a way of embracing unmanaged emotion and unmanaged behaviour. It feels like coming home, home to the free creativity he used to enjoy while playing in the forest as a child. In fact, he recalls engaging in similar behaviour as a child, taking long, unplanned nature walks together with a friend. This is a recurring theme in my interviews with nature connection practitioners: coming home and finding the way back to the uninhibited creativity of childhood. The emotional regime maintained in many kinds of nature connection practice could, in a sense, be characterised as child-like: high emotional sensibility and a tendency to feel thrill and wonder, a strong presence in the moment, and the open-mindedness of not knowing what comes next, without the need or even ability to grasp everything conceptually. Love (in some senses of the word) and especially grief add some more serious notes that we might not associate with the ideal carefree childhood. The aim is not to escape all notions of adulthood, but to recover some of the unmanaged, natural, authentic way of being that many practitioners remember having had in childhood. The artistic and poetic exercises described in chapter 6 are ways of waking this free creativity,

and they are carried out within a ritual-like framework which allows participants to leave behind the burdens of everyday (modern and adult) life. In this way, nature connection practice can be placed within an undercurrent in contemporary culture – together with many forms of contemporary spirituality – of resistance to the modern tendency towards emotional management, distancing, and compartmentalisation.[57]

[57] The notion of moral compartmentalisation will be discussed in the next chapter. It should be noted here, however, that moral and emotional compartmentalisation are closely related.

CHAPTER 14

Ethics and Personal Wellbeing

In recent decades, ethics has increasingly been approached by anthropologists as lived reality; that is, not a set of clearly formulated ideas that can be more or less strictly adhered to, but rather a dimension present in all aspects of life (Faubion 2001; 2010; Lambek 2010a; 2010b; 2015; Mattingly 2017). In this view, all levels of culture – verbal and non-verbal alike – appear as processes of communication and maintenance of (ethical) meaning, processes through which the participating subjects are shaped and shape themselves. I have already touched upon the idea of *ethical autopoiesis*, "the production and maintenance of the ethical subject", (Faubion 2010, p. 85), which I have paired here with *salutary autopoiesis*, indicating that our attitudes towards ourselves – the way we think and feel about and inside of ourselves – take shape together with our attitudes towards others. This is not to say that we are in control of our own health or wellbeing; there are of course factors, both bodily and socio-cultural, which we do not control. Even practices and ideological discourses in which we freely choose to engage are not completely within our control. They are part of the complex web of circumstances to which we respond both consciously and unconsciously.[58]

A Clash of Culture(s)

Ylva recalls her childhood summers on the archipelago, when her parents and grandparents taught her to love and respect the living world. They did this mostly by example, through their own attitudes and behaviours, like allowing mice to cohabit with them in the cottage or taking Ylva on excursions to show her all the different life forms inhabiting the surroundings. She fondly remembers her father teaching her how to gently caress bumblebees. In adult life, this fundamental ethics of love and respect for living beings often seems to be at odds with contemporary social realities. She sees the violence

[58] In posthumanist theory, the term *autopoiesis* has now begun to partially give way to *sympoiesis* = "creation together" (Haraway 2016; Schuller 2018). This term could also be applicable to the kind of collective and individual processes I am trying to understand here.

being committed against nature in the form of clear-cut forests and the building of new residential areas.

> It is frightening and deeply upsetting for me to see how the violence against nature is escalating. It is like the forests are being destroyed in [the rural county where Ylva's cottage is located], there's clear-cuts – and this is in recent years that it's become like this. And I felt like, it's like if you were to blow up a church, it's a desecration. I am deeply affected by this. It's terrible. And here in [the municipality in the outskirts of a major urban centre where Ylva lives], they have also devastated areas and built a big new residential area. And because of that you see fewer and fewer wild animals and, well, they've been scared away and… It feels so strange that this is the way we behave, that it's so... that the normal thing in our culture is to lay waste and to kill, and to desecrate nature. (Interview with Ylva, December 10, 2019)

These sentiments have brought Ylva to the organisation Lodyn, which combines environmental activism with training people to deepen their personal connections with nature. It is not just about ideological conviction; it is important that the personal emotional connection with nature forms a basis for the group's activities. At times, Ylva has struggled with depression: "The deeper the crises I have gone through, the more I have understood that to survive I need to be in nature – both need to and want to" (Interview with Ylva, December 10, 2019). In urban environments, she is drained of energy, but in nature, she feels energised and alive. Part of that energy seems to result from an openness to emotional impressions. She mentions an occasion when the appearance of a flock of starlings instantly changed her mood for the better, and other similar moments in nature when she has just stopped and let herself be filled with beauty and wonder.

In this way, the clash she feels with contemporary social realities affects her wellbeing; her whole being is involved. It appears almost as a clash of cultures, although she is still in her native country. Ylva is probably not alone in feeling like an alien in her own culture. Like many others with similar inclinations, she turns to indigenous cultures for inspiration. For Ylva, it is specifically Native American cultures that have been a source of inspiration since her teen years.

Love and Grief as Driving Forces

As noted in chapter 13, grief over the devastation of ecosystems and the loss of species is a recurring theme in both interviews and published literature relating to nature connection practice, and it is sometimes manifested in

ritual practice. One such ritual (described in chapter 6 and further discussed in chapter 13), originating in England and practised in Sweden by Lodyn, consists of building and gathering around a "life cairn", a pile of rocks symbolising the species lost in what is known as the sixth mass extinction.

Grief is closely related to love: "Grief is the price we pay for love", as Queen Elizabeth II said in a message of support to the 9/11 victims (probably inspired by a longer statement along the same lines by the psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes). Far from being debilitating, however, grief – because of its relationship to love – can become an important driving force for action. This appears to be the case for some of my interlocutors. It is a strong force that can drive people out of their comfort zone. Karin, a psychologist in her fifties (see summary in chapter 9), specifically mentions love and grief as a background to her "coming out" as an activist, as she puts it, and began participating in civil disobedience for the environment.

Being filled with grief, or even despair, over the condition of the world might not seem like a good basis for personal wellbeing. However, perhaps what is important is how we face and channel such emotions, which brings us to the idea of existential health. An important part of good health, as I understand it in this context, is an emotional openness towards the world – as opposed to numbness and indifference. Such openness of course entails exposure to pain just as well as pleasure.

Existential Health

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "health" shares its etymological roots with "wholeness" and "holiness", suggesting a long history of association between these concepts. In contemporary discussions on health in general and *existential health* in particular, it is generally recognised that health is more than simply the absence of disease. This is clearly stated in the WHO definition of health: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO 1948). My interlocutors seem to agree with this multidimensional understanding of health. When asked to define health, most speak of balance, integration between different areas in life, tools for coping, and, of course, connection with nature.

As discussed in the review of previous research in chapter 2, *spiritual* and *existential health* can refer to a person's meaning-making capacities (or to a totality in which this dimension plays an important part) (DeMarinis 2003; 2008; 2011; Melder 2011). It can also refer to a meta-level, a reflexiveness in relation to one's own illness and health (Sigurdsson 2016). We may remem-

ber what Riis and Woodhead termed *emotional transcendence-transitioning* (discussed in chapter 13); that is, the possibility to either transcend one's own troubles, without necessarily making them go away, or to transition from them – temporarily or permanently – within the alternate order of a religious emotional regime (Riis & Woodhead 2010, pp- 70-6).

Inner Consistency and Openness to the World

There are at least two salient traits in my interlocutors' narratives that appear to have an impact on both personal wellbeing and ethics: 1) a desire for moral and emotional consistency, what I will call de-compartmentalisation (to be explained shortly); and 2) an openness towards the (natural) world. The two are connected in that the former, the desire for consistency, implies an inner openness between different spheres within a person's life. The latter, openness towards the world, we have already seen in the form of a personal narrative that places the individual in a greater context, in bodily connectedness and communication with the surroundings, and in a propensity to be emotionally affected by natural environments and entities. It also entails an expansion of the sphere of ethical relevance, as we will return to in chapter 16.

Compartmentalisation and De-Compartmentalisation

Ylva clearly cannot reconcile her own values with the de facto conduct of Western modernity. As noted above, it is almost as if she finds herself in an alien culture with vastly different values to her own. Nevertheless, judging from available survey statistics and ethnography, her values of respect for life forms and recognition of the intrinsic value of non-human organisms appear, in fact, to be widely shared among contemporary Swedes (Uddenberg 1995, pp. 169-80; Thurfjell 2020, pp. 242-68). It may be that Ylva adheres to these values more strongly than most people, but they do not seem to be at odds with the mainstream. Most of all, I believe, it is a matter of moral consistency. It has been observed that modern societies are characterised by a high degree of moral compartmentalisation (MacIntyre 1999; Rozuel 2011; Hornborg 2013). Professional specialisation and bureaucratic rationalisation require of us to take on different roles – and different sets of values – in different contexts. Each specialisation has its own mode of objectification and detachment, which, as Alf Hornborg has observed, allows most people to maintain a moral identity – even if the overall result becomes amoral (Hornborg 2013, p. 247). A certain set of values can be strongly adhered to in one context and completely abandoned in another. Not everyone, however, is willing or able

to compartmentalise in this way. Against this background, we may understand the struggles of Ylva and others like her as a quest for moral consistency, for *de-compartmentalisation*.[59]

Moreover, the modern tendency towards compartmentalisation is not limited to morality. The strict separation between private and public life also entails a differentiation between the types of emotions and attitudes that are appropriate in each setting. Resistance to this separation – what we might describe as the urge to decompartmentalise – can be identified in many forms of holistic spirituality and wellbeing practice, often expressed as a quest for one's true self and its authentic expression (Aupers & Houtmann 2006, pp. 211-18; Russell Hochshild 2012, pp. 22-3, 190-8).

It is noteworthy that many of my interlocutors associate nature connection with "coming home". This may refer to a return to (some aspects of) childhood, or it may reflect an ideal of a humanity that returns to nature. In relation to compartmentalisation, however, it is also worth noting that home is a place where the professional and public roles of modern society are cast off, and where one can thus be both internally consistent and externally in touch with the surrounding world without masks and barriers. In short, home – and nature – are places where people de-compartmentalise. This resistance to compartmentalisation is thus related to the search for the authentic self, which is a central theme in many contemporary forms of spirituality and self-development practice. The *turn towards the self* can be understood as a search for coherence on every level, not least the moral and the emotional. One way of achieving such coherence is to tell one's own story, and to relate that story to a larger one told in a cultural or subcultural context, such as the nature connection movement. (See also my discussion of the narrative self in chapter 11.)

Emotional Closedness and Openness

Ylva's story is illustrative of an emotional openness to nature which, as elaborated in chapter 13, is cultivated in the nature connection milieu (although, as in Ylva's case, it can often be traced back to childhood). We may also recall Sten, who reported having become more emotional through his forest bathing training. In that chapter, I initiated a discussion of the close relationship between the emotional and the ethical dimensions of life, both in the evaluative aspect of emotions and in the kinship between emotion and

[59] While the term "compartmentalisation" is a common term in psychology, the opposite term appears to be used mostly in biology, where it refers to a dissolution of functional boundaries within or between cells.

attitude, where the latter may be seen as an active side of the former and thus akin to conduct and behaviour.

Of course, the emotional openness cultivated in nature connection practice comes with a price, namely that of increased sensitivity to the degradation of ecosystems. Thus, if emotional openness is part of what it means to be (existentially) healthy, then health does not mean always feeling good. The unhealthy counterpart of this aspect of health is numbness, alienation, and indifference, which may entail less pain, but also a generally lower quality of life. Nature connection practitioners seek to live a life in full colour, taking in every sensuous and emotional nuance in full awareness. Many of their practices appear to be designed to increase this openness towards the world.

The opposite state may be caused by stress, for instance. One of my interlocutors, Maria, recalls how her connection with nature went numb and silent during an existential crisis some years back. Before this crisis, she had always been able to find comfort in nature. But all of a sudden, there was no connection. Eventually, it did come back – and with it, out of Maria's crisis, came also a sense of urgency in relation to the ecological crisis. There were personal reasons for the crisis, and it struck her on a deep personal level. But there were also social and ecological dimensions, which ultimately led her to get involved in organised environmental action (interview with Maria, 20 May 2021).

If emotional openness is an important part of our idea of health, we may be approaching something like what Hartmut Rosa (2019) calls *resonance*, which he sets in opposition to *alienation*. It should be noted that resonance, in Rosa's definition, is not an emotional state, but a "mode of relation", which includes emotional, cognitive and social levels (Rosa 2019, p. 174).

Finally, I want to underline that the emotional openness pursued by nature connection practitioners is not just a matter of degree. As will be elaborated in chapter 16, opening up in this way also involves a qualitative shift in a person's relationship to the world.

CHAPTER 15

Cognitive and Perceptual Dimensions of Nature Connection

In chapters 4 and 5, I described and discussed the ideology of what I have defined as the nature connection movement (an ideology which is certainly not without its variations). Here, I will explore some of these ideas as they develop at certain points in a person's life – in this case Jakob, who left everything behind and devoted himself entirely to the defence of Mother Earth (see my summary of Jakob's story in chapter 9). How, then, did he reach this rather drastic decision? In this chapter, I will attempt to follow his line of thought, the parallel intellectual and experiential development that led him to re-evaluate and reshape his life in this way.

Ideas are in some ways easier to grasp than emotions, at least when the goal is to put them into words in an academic text. Ideas are more easily verbalised and more explicitly communicated. Of course, not all ideas fit this description. Our most basic ideas about reality are often not verbalised (at least not openly or consciously) even to ourselves. They are so taken for granted that there is no need to pronounce them. Without serious introspection, we are often not even aware of them. Other ideas may be concealed more or less consciously because they are deemed not to be socially acceptable. Such concealed, unspoken, or unconscious ideas can sometimes be discerned through an analysis of behaviour. For instance, as discussed in chapter 13, a shift in attitude and behaviour upon entering a forest, such as heightened attention and lowered voice, may indicate entry into a new emotional regime. It can also be taken to reveal ideas about the contrast between nature and culture, and about precisely where in the landscape the line between them is drawn. In the Council of All Beings, described in chapter 6, participants could take turns representing humans, during which time they had to stay outside of the circle as silent observers. This could be taken to reveal lingering ideas about human exceptionality in apparent conflict with the explicitly professed ecocentrism. However, as we saw in chapter 5, even explicitly stated ideas regarding the role of humans in relation to (the rest of) nature are not uniform within the nature connection milieu. Another aspect,

which is probably more obvious regarding ideas, as compared to emotions, is that they are shared socially and culturally.[60]

Perception is here, as in many contemporary approaches to animism, treated together with cognitive patterns and ontological assumptions. This approach is rooted in the observation that perception (at least to the extent that it can be understood from verbal accounts) is always already conceptualised, and thus a matter of interpretation. This is in line with Gadamer's insight that experience is inseparable from language (Gadamer 2004 [1975], pp. 341-55). As stated in the chapter on theory and method, concepts bring associations, which makes perception practically inseparable from imagination. We always "see" more than what immediately meets the eye.

Encountering Mother Earth

> I have stopped calling Mother Earth "nature"; I have stopped calling her "the environment"; I definitely don't call her "climate"; nor do I call her "planet". She is a living being, a living organism that I, all of us, are part of. (Interview with Jakob, 26 Nov. 2019)

Jakob had felt a strong connection to nature since his childhood on the Finnish archipelago. For some time before his "walk-out", he had been writing a blog on environmental and philosophical issues. He describes a long process of parallel – or perhaps reciprocal – intellectual and experiential development through which he gradually came to perceive Earth as alive, sentient, and communicative. His own account of how he came to this conviction is illustrative of the mixture of influences that feed into the cognitive dimension of nature connection. Some of these influences may be categorised as spiritual. He quotes the dictum "As above so below; as within so without; as your soul so the Earth" (apparently a variation of a verse from the Hermetic text Tabula Smaragdina). This, in combination with the biology-based realisation that he consists of a multitude of cells but still experiences himself as a single person, led him to deduct that the Earth must similarly be a single living sentient being (a version of Gaia theory, discussed in chapter 10).

[60] I am still using Riis & Woodhead's distinction between the social and the cultural level, where "social" refers to our direct relational contexts and "cultural" refers to more widely shared symbols and basic ideas independent of direct relations (Riis & Woodhead 2010, pp.5-7; See also the section on social and perspectives on emotion in chapter 13).

Communicating with Mother Earth

This intellectual conviction of the oneness of life, as it grew stronger, made Jakob, as he describes it, more open to the idea that direct communication was possible not only with Mother Earth, but also with all kinds of non-human beings, such as animals and trees. He gives a detailed account of how he began to perceive a message from nature. He begins by recalling an incident involving a specific tree, one of many old oak trees in a park around a rural castle in Sweden. This was the first time he had experienced that a tree was speaking to him:

> I thought I heard it saying something to me, but there were no words. And it was like… I got goosebumps, like when you feel the power of something. And the fact that I came to this point at all was also because I had opened up to, well, to even believe that [the trees] were something other than planks that are still growing, that is, that it was actually a living being with the ability to communicate.

Jakob makes some general observations concerning trees and fungi and how they communicate with each other, inspired by recent scientific findings, and how reading about this led him to ask the question, "If you can communicate with each other, why shouldn't I be able to hear it too?"

> I think it was questions about such things, and that I opened up to, that I was approaching nature all the time with an attitude of expecting to actually understand, expecting to get… to get messages. So, the message to me then became this calling, as I'm referring to it, a call to evangelise basically, not in the way you would think about missionaries, but simply go out and exist and speak for Mother Earth. So, I guess I'm a Mother Earth activist, that's the closest I can get to a self-characterisation.

It does not seem that Jakob actually heard words being spoken by the tree; it was more that he sensed that the tree wanted something, that he became aware of the tree as an intentional being that related to him as one being to another. This, in combination with other similar experiences and his own thought processes, formed the message or calling.

> The problem is that when you try to define something, if you imagine a dry panorama view where the knowledge is constantly in a flow […] and that is the message that is there; the only thing you can do is to get into that message, to become one with that message. […] As soon as you take something out of that message, a small part of it forms a letter, and then another part brings

> another letter, and then we can try to create some model to explain it, […] So it's not a message in that way, rather that these experiences in me, over time, gave me the assurance that I have a mission.

It seems that a number of different experiences of communication with natural beings, together with his own thinking and writing processes, formed an overall message about – or perhaps *from* – Mother Earth and about Jakob's relationship with this being who, just like the message, emerges as a super-being composed of, but not reducible to, a multitude of smaller entities. The boundaries between self and world are floating, in his description, and we are reminded of the idea of the ecological self. In the words of the Australian deep ecologist John Seed: "I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking" (as opposed to being a separate entity, an activist thinking about, and trying to protect, the rainforest) (Seed 2007 [1988], p. 36).

Many nature connection practitioners share similar experiences of deep and meaningful communication with nature as a whole (Mother Earth, or whichever name they use) as well as with many specific kinds of non-human beings. This reflects core ideas of the nature connection movement (as presented in chapters 4 and 5) of nature as a living being and at the same time a community of which we humans are part (or at least ought to be part), together with and on equal terms with all other species, a view consistent with the deep ecological principle of *biospherical egalitarianism* (Naess 1973).

Modes of Identification

These ideas and experiences have obvious ethical implications, which have been discussed in the previous chapter and to which we will return in the next. The focus here, however, is on possible correlations between what we might (with some reservations) call cognition and perception. In the popular Western mind, the connection between rational thought and behaviour is often overestimated. As children of the Enlightenment, we want to see a direct causal relationship between our thoughts and convictions, on the one hand, and our momentary actions as well as our major life choices, on the other. At the same time, we probably tend to underestimate the connection between thought and perception. We think of sensory impressions as neutral data, which are then subjected to interpretation and speculation.[61] As stated

[61] It is of course well known by now that, for instance, racial prejudice may affect the way a witness of a crime perceives the perpetrator's physical appearance. However, this effect can be accounted for as a misapprehension of data in a stressful situation or a distortion of a blurry memory. It does not necessarily challenge the basic view that perceptions are neutral data.

in chapter 3, I do not seek to study pure isolated perception. All experience that renders itself to description and interpretation is already conceptualised. We may think of perception and conceptualisation as two different terms in a dialectical relationship, or as the same process viewed from different perspectives. In any case, I think it makes sense to separate them analytically. What we have seen in Jakob's story appears as a parallel progression of conceptualisation and perception – of thinking and experiencing – into something we might classify as a type of animism.

Some strands of anthropology have been concerned with developing cultural models based on cognitive schemata; that is, patterns of identification and classification considered characteristic of a given culture (or type of culture) (Ingold 2000, pp. 160-2; Descola 2013, pp. 92-125). While all kinds of schemata always come with a risk of oversimplification and, in the case of cognitive schemata, over-mentalisation, it might be worthwhile to examine to what degree such cognitive schemata of animism are at all applicable in the Western nature connection context studied here. Philippe Descola (2013; 2014) identifies four basic *modes of identification* as he calls them, which, he argues, are widespread in human cultures with variations as to which one is dominant. The essential difference between the modes lies in how we perceive *interiority* and *physicality* in other beings.

> […] "interiority" refers to a range of properties recognized by all human beings and partially covers what we generally call the mind, the soul, or consciousness: intentionality, subjectivity, reflexivity, feelings, and the ability to express oneself and to dream. […] Physicality, in contrast, concerns external form, substance, the physiological, perceptive and sensorimotor processes, even a being's constitution and way of acting in the world, insofar as these reflect the influence brought to bear on behavior patterns and a habitus by corporeal humors, diets, anatomical characteristics, and particular modes of reproduction. (Descola 2013, p. 116)

The four modes are: *animism*, *totemism*, *analogism*, and *naturalism*. Animism he defines as "[…] a continuity of souls and a discontinuity of bodies […]", i.e., that non-human beings are assumed to have essentially the same type of interior as humans, but that the different types of exteriors (bodies) in which we find ourselves provide different perspectives on the world. In the next mode of identification, totemism, "[…] some beings in the world share sets of physical and moral attributes that cut across the boundaries of species". The third mode, analogism, is described as "the idea that all the entities in the world are fragmented into a multiplicity of essences,

forms, and substances separated by minute intervals, often ordered along a graded scale, such as in the Great Chain of Being, which served as the main cosmological model during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance". Naturalism, finally, is a complete inversion of animism: "[…] a discontinuity of interiorities and a material continuity" (Descola 2014, pp. 275-7; see also Descola 2013, pp. 112-125; Viveiros de Castro, 2004).

Where, then, can we place Jakob's thinking in this model? Jakob identifies himself with the non-human in biological terms, which suggests a naturalistic view that sees similarities in external qualities. However, it is also clear that the observation of such similarities leads him to infer similarities also in what Descola would define as interior qualities. The kinship with the more-than-human world, even if inferred from biology, opens the possibility for an exchange not only of cells and molecules but also of meaning. In light of the monistic philosophy that dominates the nature connection movement, it is perhaps futile to try to separate interiority and physicality in this way. From the monistic perspective, they are simply two sides of the same (biological) matter.

Concluding Remarks on Cognition and Perception

I have spoken in previous chapters about the acquisition of a new terminology that makes certain experiences more real and part of a shared reality. I have also observed that people who are drawn to nature connection practice are likely prone to have strong nature experiences to begin with, which is a large part of what brought them to the practice. What seems to happen when people engage in organised collective practice is that certain things are elucidated as they are named and shared with others. Experiences of certain types, which practitioners may also have had in the past, appear in a different light and become more readily available; the susceptibility for them seems to increase. While some types of experience may be genuinely new, it is more often a matter of reformulations and shifts in emphasis in emotional patterns, which can occur as a result of the collective context (as discussed in chapter 13). The same must be assumed regarding perception, conceptualisation, and patterns of association. In chapter 3, I noted that concepts carry associations, that we learn to associate certain properties and expected behaviours with a given concept; and that perception, in this way, is effectively inseparable from imagination. A new shared terminology and way of speaking about certain experiences can be seen in this light.

Even if experiences that can be communicated are already verbalised, we need not think of verbal communication between people (written or spoken)

as the primary cause or origin of certain types of experiences. As stated above, we can think of perception and conceptualisation as two different terms in a dialectical relationship, or as the same process viewed from different perspectives. This means that we can also see causality in different directions. For instance, as noted in chapter 5, there are similarities between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and experiences described by nature connection practitioners. Does this mean that we should regard Merleau-Ponty as an intellectual influence in nature connection practice? Well, this is certainly one way of seeing it, and one which has some merit. Merleau-Ponty is a household name in some nature connection circles. Among the books that are recommended on nature connection websites is David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997), which advocates a form of animism, a revival of the world of the senses, built in large part on the works of Merleau-Ponty. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty's work may also be considered as an articulate and intellectually thorough expression of certain types of human experience. And if nature connection practitioners read his work, or the works of other authors who rely on it, it is perhaps because it resonates with their own experience and practice (just like they are drawn to nature connection practice because that too resonates with their own past experiences). Thus, instead of looking for causality in only one direction, I find it more accurate to see it as a reciprocal relationship where both sides feed each other. In the previous chapter, I postulated that bodily behaviour can evoke emotions just as well as it can express them. Returning to the ecological theories of perception and cognition, as formulated by Gibson (1979) and Ingold (2000), we may also think of this reciprocity in terms of affordances arising in a relationship between environment – here including a cultural, linguistic, and intellectual environment – and acting subject; nature connection practitioners find literature that resonates with their practice and make use of it in relation to that practice. Or they find a new social context with a language that resonates with their past experiences and puts those experiences in a new light.

CHAPTER 16

Facing Nature

> *Find a place in nature that you perceive as beautiful, safe and secluded. Sit for a long time with this place, maybe a whole day, around the clock, or just for an hour. Imagine that you are looking at nature as the face of someone very dear to you. Imagine that nature looks back at you. Do not look away; stay focused on your senses and what they register. Thoughts are not interesting right now. Observe your emotional reactions and bodily sensations. (*Eva Sanner*, Naturens hemlighet: Återfinn din plats i det stora sammanhanget,* 2018, p. 197) (My translation)

As we have seen in earlier chapters, nature connection practitioners describe a constant communication going on with all kinds of beings. Animals, trees, rocks, and even places seem to respond to the practitioner's presence and reveal some kind of intentionality. This communication, understood as conveyance of meaning, takes place on all levels of being thematically treated here: in mind and body and through emotions, cognitions, and perceptions. Practitioners report having experienced communication with nature earlier in life. But on entering the nature connection milieu, these experiences are confirmed through contact with others who share similar experiences, they are verbalised in a partially new terminology, and they are actively practised. Eleonora, whom we have met in previous chapters, experiences her current default condition, after years of forest bathing practice, as a state of constant communication with all the natural elements around her, even in urban environments. In a series of interviews with new forest bathing guides (some of which are summarised in chapter 9), this communicative element was more clearly pronounced in the follow-up interviews after they had completed their training. Although it was not entirely unexpected to them, some were amazed at the extent to which nature seemed to respond and take active part in the process as they developed their skills in forest bathing and guiding.

Levinas' Concept of Face

An important precondition for this reciprocity as described by my interlocutors seems to be an emotional openness towards nature (discussed in chapters 13 and 14), but also the (re)conceptualisation of nature and non-human beings as sentient and communicative (discussed in chapter 15). What is cultivated in the nature connection milieu, through exercises and participation in a discursive community, is perhaps first and foremost a communicative state of openness towards the (natural) world. Nature is met face-to-face and appears to be looking back, as Eva Sanner describes it in the quote at the beginning of this chapter.

In the attempt to understand such experiences, I will introduce a specific and perhaps somewhat peculiar sense of the word "face", based on a central concept in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1996 [1952]; 2004 [1969]). The *face* is here a phenomenal expression of the encounter between the subject and the Other[62] – or between *I* and *Thou*, in the terminology of Martin Buber (1937), who concerned himself with similar matters, and whose thinking has also informed my conceptualisation. For Levinas, the encounter with the Other, the face, constitutes the basis of all ethics. It prompts us to give up a part of ourselves and leave room for the Other, an Other whom we cannot control or incorporate into our own being as exhaustive knowledge. Levinas distinguishes between simple and radical alterity, where the former can be known exhaustively and objectively, while the second is beyond conceptual grasp, i.e., it cannot be incorporated fully into one's sphere of knowledge. It is, in this way, infinite. This, according to Levinas, is the difference between things, belonging to the *order of ontology*, and persons, belonging to the *order of ethics* (Levinas 1996 [1952], p. 6; 2004 [1969], pp. 197-8).

The face is thus a term that applies to the encounter with subjecthood outside of oneself prior to, and beyond, conceptualisation. As we saw in chapter 15, conceptualisation can also contribute to the experience of subjecthood in nature. However, it cannot fully constitute that experience. Once the intellect has conceptualised something as a subject, it renounces its capacity to fully grasp it, its claim to ownership, as it were. Instead, we use emotions as a means to know the unknowable, and we relate ethically, which, in Levinas' thinking, is not primarily a matter of following cognitively under-

[62] The upper-case "Other" represents, in Alphonso Lingis' translation of Levinas' Totality and Infinity, the word *autrui* in the French original, while the lower-case "other" represents *autre*. Levinas himself altered between upper case and lower case with both terms. (See translation note by Lingis in Levinas 2004 [1969], pp. 24-25.)

stood principles, but a direct response to the experience of encountering the Other. As stated in chapter 3, I do not understand experience as a mere passive reception of the world, but rather as an active engagement with it. For this reason, I will use the term "face" mostly in the form of a transitive verb, indicating a certain mode of relating to the world and to entities in it.

Persons and Things

In modern humanist thinking, the ethical division between persons and things has generally been coterminous with that between humans and non-humans.[63] Immanuel Kant distinguished between persons, belonging to the "Kingdom of Ends" – that is, endowed with an absolute, intrinsic value, *dignity*; and things, which possess only a relative, instrumental value, *price* (von der Pfordten 2009). This is true also in the case of Levinas, although, in his essay *Is Ontology Fundamental?*, he does, in passing, open the question of whether things can take on a face (Levinas 1996 [1952], p. 10).[64] Nevertheless, Levinas' thorough analysis of what it means to be confronted with another person can be and has been applied to ethical situations involving non-humans as well, especially animals (Davy 2003; Atterton 2004; Ezzy 2013).

This division between persons and things can be treated as an ontological question, a question of objectively placing entities in one category or the other based on intrinsic qualities. Such approaches can be found in discussions within bioethics seeking to define personhood based on psychological criteria intrinsic to the entity in question, although there is disagreement regarding whether such definitions should be absolute or gradual (Farah & Heberlein 2007; Perring 1997; 2007). For Levinas, as we have seen, the question is meta- or pre-ontological.

In my phenomenological approach, I am not examining any (objectively observable) intrinsic qualities of non-human entities – only attitudes towards, and impressions of, such entities among nature connection practitioners. *Facing*, as I understand it here, does not require any particular beliefs or assumptions regarding the nature of a given entity. As discussed in earlier chapters, nature connection practitioners rarely make unambiguous categorical statements regarding the possible sentience of, for instance, trees or stones. This connects to a main line in anthropological discussions on

[63] Personhood has been granted to non-human beings as well, most frequently to animals, within what is still arguably a humanist tradition, advocating an extension of the Kantian person-category to animals (cf. Korsgaard 2004; Braidotti 2013, p. 77, 87).
[64] Buber seems to have been more open to the idea of addressing the non-human as Thou (Buber 1937, pp. 7-8, 15; Atterton 2004).

animism in recent decades in which personhood is understood as relational rather than being the property of specified classes of entities (Bird-David 1999; Ingold 2000, pp. 87-110). Mary Black characterised animism as "fundamentally antitaxonomic" (Black 1977, quoted in Ingold 2000). It does not take the form of propositional statements or beliefs about the nature of things, but rather as personal, relational knowledge based on active participation in the world (Ingold 2000, pp. 98-100).

Facing and De-Facing

As we have seen, the division between persons and things (or subjects and objects) results in two spheres to which different ethical principles apply. Persons are endowed with intrinsic value, i.e., they are ends in themselves, while things are granted only instrumental value, i.e., their value lies in their usefulness towards an end beyond themselves (von der Pfordten 2009; Levinas 1996 [1952], p. 6; 2004 [1969], pp. 197-8). What is important from my point of view is that the two spheres are not fixed, but constantly either expanding or contracting, both historically and in individual life; and that this expansion or contraction relies on our active engagement with the world, individually and collectively, on a smaller and a larger scale. It is also important to note that this is not primarily a matter of intellectual reflection. Such reflections can certainly play a part, as we saw in the previous chapter. But since we are moving beyond conceptualisation, the emotional life is more primary.

Through this expansion and contraction, entities or groups and classes of entities can move gradually between the order of ontology and the order of ethics. These opposite processes may occur within as well as outside of humanity. When humans fall outside of the order of ethics, it is usually referred to as dehumanisation, a process that tends to precede violent and degrading actions against certain groups or categories of people. I have not found any equivalent term applicable to the non-human in common use.[65] Neither does there seem to be an obvious term for a development in the positive direction, when the sphere of ethics is expanded. I have thus found the verbs *face* and *de-face* suitable in that they are applicable both within and outside of the human species, and that they allude here to Levinas' phenomenological understanding of a meeting between subjects, and thus include

[65] One possibility would be adiaphorisation (from the Greek: adiaphoron, "indifferent matter", originally a theological term for matters which are ethically indifferent) which is sometimes used in sociology and criminology to connote a process by which people, things, or social actions become ethically indifferent (cf. Bauman 1991).

not only ethical, but also emotional, cognitive, and perceptual dimensions. Simply put: *to face something is to open oneself to its infinity, to let it speak*[66] *for itself. To de-face something is to quantify and define it conceptually*. For instance, if I open myself to, say, a tree as being something more than what I can grasp conceptually, with dimensions to which I may be granted access only by silencing my own possessive intellect and making room in myself to receive it on its own terms, I am facing it. But if I concern myself only with determining its objective properties, its species, height, and width, etc., I am de-facing it.

Facing in Nature Connection Practice

It should be clear by now that the close sensory attention which is a central part of nature connection practice is not simply a gathering of sensory data, nor is it a hedonistic indulgence in sensory pleasure (although pleasure is certainly embraced).

> When I touch something, it's a communication. […] In the deeper levels of forest bathing it's also to feel touched by a blueberry leaf or a taste or a tree. It's a relational communication which can be very important and create context, a sense of context and existential meaning – belonging: "I am seen", when one realises that all living things have senses. So, everything can relate to me in its own way; the fly can do it, the tree can do it, the land, the earth itself is alive. (Second interview with Eleonora, 20 Aug. 2020)

In chapter 5, I discussed the first part of this statement in relation to Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the reciprocity of sensory experience. With Levinas, we can add new dimensions of understanding. For Levinas, sensory experience can either be what he terms *enjoyment* – that is, sensory experience which is self-contained – or it may establish a relation between the self and objects in the world (Levinas 2004 [1969], p. 189). The experience of the face is a third level that transcends both sensory experience itself and the world of objects. It is an existential horizon confronting the perceiving self with something or someone that cannot be contained in any concept.

[66] Speech, in Levinas' philosophy, is the means through which the Other is revealed to us, and for which we must willfully give up space within ourselves in order to achieve a face-to-face relationship. That is, we allow something to speak for itself and thus to overflow our conceptualisation (Levinas 2004 [1969] pp. 195-202; 217). Here, we do not need to understand "speech" in a literal sense, as the uttering of audible words, but instead as including any expression that appears to reveal a subjectivity beyond our own.

In nature connection practice, it is clear that sensory experience is more than just enjoyment or gathering of data. There is an experience of responsiveness. We may remember Linda's account (in chapter 12) of lying down in the moss, every part of her body connected to everything else around her. Far from simply being comfortable in the soft moss, as on a mattress, she felt something that she could only describe as love. The readiness to be emotionally affected by nature that is cultivated in the nature connection milieu, especially by emotions like love and a sense of wonder and mystery, make sensory impressions into something more than just that. The landscape seems to open up, in a sense; something or someone is speaking through – or in – these sensory impressions.

Feeling the Other

If emotions are indeed relational stances, ways of understanding and relating to things in the world, then increased emotional sensitivity towards something brings us closer to it. Even negative emotions arguably bring us, in a sense, closer to the object of those emotions – and make that object more alive – than would emotional indifference. Practitioners are connecting with nature through close sensory attention, but also through emotional attention which fills bodily and sensory impressions with meaning and with a different kind of presence. There is a feeling of reciprocity, a feeling of touching and being touched, loving and being loved. In this way, a surface – such as the moss on which Linda lies down (see chapter 12) – becomes an interface, or, simply, a face.

Aside from the general emotional sensibility that is cultivated in the nature connection milieu, a specific emotional repertoire also contributes to this facing process. Although subject and object are not always specified – there may simply be a feeling "in the air" of love, mystery, thrill, etc. – all the emotional states described in chapter 13 bring a sense of life to a situation. Any encounter coloured by such emotions becomes an encounter not only with measurable properties (the surface) but also with something beyond or within, something which is not necessarily fully a person but at least approaching personhood or subjecthood in some sense. The surface becomes transparent; something or someone, which cannot be exhaustively described or conceptually grasped, shines through. Perhaps more than anything else, the feelings of mystery and wonder contribute to taking us beyond a totalising conceptual grasp. Eleonora's feeling that there may be something more to animals than what we usually attribute to them hints at something beyond a conceptual (biological) understanding of them, something that can

be felt and surmised but not fully understood. The same applies to Tina's experience of a mysterious mood in a place whose secrets will not – perhaps cannot – be revealed (both accounts in chapter 13.)

Thus, a general emotional sensitivity towards nature as well as certain specific emotional conditions contribute to the facing process. However, as with so many other factors that we are looking at here, it can also be turned around, so that emotion, as a way of seeing and navigating in the world, is what remains as a means of knowing something when our conceptual grasp fails or is insufficient.

Cultivating Uniqueness

One central property of a face, in the usual sense of the word, is that its features are unique and recognisable. To see a face is not just to perceive its general properties – a nose, a mouth, a pair of eyes, etc. – but even more, to perceive its specificity, its unique traits. Sensory attention and embodied awareness, as practiced in nature connection circles, is likewise not just a way to take in general information about the landscape and its inhabitants, but also to relate to the specificities of entities, places, and situations, which creates emotional bonds with the landscape. Apart from the distinction between persons and things, a further distinction can be made between general and particular personhood. The latter refers to the uniqueness of a specific person, the personality with which we forge strong emotional connections. We can recognise on an intellectual level a general personhood in humans, for instance. But a particular personhood can only be recognised in the encounter with that person.

Some scholars underline the importance of a deep long-standing relation to specific places or entities as a basis for the animism of indigenous peoples. Alf Hornborg, for instance, observes that a deep immersion in place, where relations are formed with specific "irreplaceable persons, localities and things", are the most conducive for animist relatedness (Hornborg 2013, p. 250). Amy Whitehead defines animism as "[…] a practice, a co-inspired form of active, mutual relating that emerges from the unique, personal, even intimate relationships that take place between persons (human and other-than-human) rather than a religious label, an ethic, or a worldview" (Whitehead 2013, p. 260).

How, then, can anything resembling animism be cultivated in a milieu where ideas and practices are exchanged internationally and where people often take part in practice far away from home? I will discuss a few examples of how an eye for personality and uniqueness is trained within this milieu

also on the national or international level, which can then be brought home and used to build relations with one's own local natural environments.

The first example is an exercise that took place during a forest therapy gathering in Finland in the summer of 2019. The participants were mostly nature connection practitioners from different European countries. As in many other similar exercises, we were instructed to start walking in the forest in any direction in which we felt pulled or called, and to find a place that felt like a home. The group scattered, and we had about 20 minutes to spend alone in our "homes" before we were called back. In the next phase, we were put together in groups of three and instructed to go back to our respective "homes" and invite the other two to come inside and have a look. We each explained to the others what we liked about the place, its specific details, the trees and other organisms that were present there. None of the participants had any prior acquaintance with this area; many of us were visitors from other countries, and few, if any, were likely to ever come back there specifically. There were thus no prospects of us building a deep, long-term relationship with the place. Nevertheless, this can be understood as an exercise in perceiving the unique qualities of a place, an ability that participants can bring back with them to their home environments where it might help them forge real long-term connections, as when, for instance, the sit spot exercise described in chapter 6 is made into a regular practice.

A second example of training to perceive uniqueness and personality is the collective tree poetry exercise described in chapter 6, where we were instructed to write one or two lines for each of three selected trees, after which we gathered in groups to combine the lines to poems. As I observed in my earlier discussion of this exercise, the poems were mostly written in the second person, addressing the tree, and attributed personal qualities and history to it. This exercise was obviously meant to enhance the participants' ability to perceive poetic qualities in the landscape, but also, I would argue, to perceive the unique qualities of individual trees, the qualities that make them into personalities. That particular tree was no longer a *what* but a *who*.

Concluding Remarks on Facing

It may seem odd to put such emphasis on otherness in a context which so obviously strives for unity. A few remarks on Levinas' view on simple and radical alterity may be helpful. Simple alterity, in Levinas' view, characterises the relationship between the I and the world of things, where everything is in a sense a possession of the I in that it can be grasped by the senses and contained in concepts. In this way, the I and the world (and its objects) are

parts of the same totality. This totality, however, is breached by what he calls radical exteriority or radical alterity, which characterises the relationship between the I and the Other (Levinas 2004 [1969], pp. 35-41). This is not a correlation between objects or concepts which can be numbered or ordered under some general term. It is two realities separated by an absolute distance but still connected through the unfathomable encounter that is realised in the face. Radical alterity thus appears, somewhat paradoxically, as a precondition for the intimacy of love and community.

CHAPTER 17

Conclusions

To conclude the thesis, I will return to my threefold main purpose: to define and describe the nature connection movement; to understand the long-term impacts of participation in that movement and its practices on the lifeworlds of practitioners; and to explore an experience-based approach to contemporary spirituality.

Part 1 aims to fulfil the first part of the purpose by examining the movement's ideas, literature, practices, practitioners, and influences. This part can be read as a case study of dark green religion, as defined by Bron Taylor (see chapter 2). I have described common features regarding ideas and practice, and have also discussed tensions, chiefly those between personal wellbeing and social activism and between dualist and monist ideas of nature.

Many of the movement's ideas and practices may also be classified as animistic, which brings the study into contact with several discussions around that concept. One of those discussions concerns whether animism in a Western cultural context should be understood as a foreign influence, cultural appropriation, or a recreation of a distant past. My discussion of the movement's influences places it in relation to some of the major cultural trends in Western (and in this case also Nordic) culture. Although there are important elements that can be classified as foreign, and some influences from paganism, I argue that the movement also has roots in Western and Nordic recent history that are just as important (see chapter 10). This line of discussion continues in part 2, where I examine animistic tendencies in the personal experience and attitudes of practitioners and find them to be often rooted in childhood (or at least connected in retrospect to childhood experiences). I argue that those who do seek inspiration from, for instance, indigenous cultures, likely do so because of a resonance with experiences, attitudes, and values that they already have.

To fulfil the second part of my purpose, I have studied the cultivation, on a personal level but also in a collective context, of modes of experience, attitudes, and values associated with the movement. I have been cautious not to describe it as a one-way process, i.e., where ideological influences and

convictions are manifested in practices which then produce certain results. What I have called *cultivation of experience* is a process where personal history and inclinations interact with ideas, practices, and social milieus in multidirectional ways. Practices can be expressions of inner moods and emotions, but they can also produce them. Intellectual influences can inspire and introduce new ideas and values, but they are also actively sought out because they seem to reflect already established ideas and values and to be useful in relation to ongoing practices. Past experiences and established values are confirmed in the new context, but also influenced and tweaked, just like in agriculture where the farmer works with the existing soil and climate in order to make things grow.

What, then, are the crops I have found to be cultivated within the nature connection movement? There are of course the ideas and values I have sought to summarise in chapter 4. There are ways of perceiving nature and relating to it emotionally, ethically, cognitively, and perceptually, expressed in mind and body, which I have described in part 2. One of my central observations concerns what I understand as an idea of health, a desired condition which the cultivation process seeks to achieve. I have described it as a state of openness towards the world and within oneself. In relation to the world, it entails an openness to both pleasure and pain, to being emotionally affected and ethically concerned. In relation to oneself, it entails an openness between different spheres of life, what I call *de-compartmentalisation*, driven by an urge for moral and emotional consistency.

This idea of health brings together ethical conduct with emotional and existential wellbeing. It can also be a bridge between health and spirituality. What it all comes down to are the ways in which we face the world and ourselves. Moreover, I have spoken of *facing* not just in a general sense (as in the previous sentence). My specific use of the term, based on Levinas, has helped me describe modes of experiencing and relating to nature and non-human beings not as objects, but as Others, which defy conceptual grasp, stir emotions, and require recognition as being intrinsically valuable.

In the following, I will discuss what I perceive to be the main contributions of this thesis to the areas of research summarised in chapter 2.

A Case of Dark Green Religion

In my efforts to define and delimit what I call the nature connection movement, I have identified some common ideological denominators which I will revisit here:

> 1) Humans are (or at least ought to be) part of nature;
> 2) The separation from nature (real or illusory) in our present cultural condition is the cause of many of our current mental (and physical) afflictions; and
> 3) This separation is also the cause of the current ecological crisis.

These points are fully consistent with the ecocentric ideology that Taylor defines as *dark green religion* (see chapter 2). This thesis can therefore be read as a study of a particular case within that field. Apart from ideological features, my definition includes commonalities in practice:

1) Practices designed to deepen practitioners' personal connection with natural environments and entities on sensory and/or emotional levels,
2) For the purpose of personal wellbeing and/or social change in the direction of ecological sustainability.

Thus, my specific case of dark green religion – if we choose to see it in this context – is characterised by a clear health dimension, often formulated in ecopsychological terms, and by commonalities in practice, which Taylor's definition does not cover.

I have also identified three major areas of tension which concern both practice and ideas. The first area stretches between personal wellbeing and social activism. Taylor's description of dark green religion is mainly concerned with social activism. In my own field, both personal wellbeing and social activism are present at least to some extent in the express aims of all organised actors I include in the nature connection movement, although they are not necessarily explicit in every type of practice. As we saw in chapter 10, this tension is to some extent resolved by the holistic ideology, according to which self-care and care for the world are one and the same thing. However, some tension remains, for instance in the ambivalence between charging for the practices and treating them as a public good that should be spread as widely as possible. Lodyn, an organisation which leans more towards social activism, does charge a fee for trainings in nature awareness and ecopsychology, but not for open ritual activities that directly address the ecological crisis, such as the Life Cairn Ritual and the Council of All Beings.

The second area of tension, which in many ways is related to the first, is that between integration and resistance. This is a tension shared with many

forms of spirituality and alternative medicine. To (at least partially) make a living out of these practices, practitioners need to adjust to capitalist business models as sole proprietors, or strive to integrate the practices into conventional healthcare, where many practitioners have employment. On the other hand, there is a resistance to the way nature and human beings are treated in the capitalist social system, and to the narrowness of conventional medicine. Of course, endeavours to integrate the practices into conventional healthcare also entails a hope of changing the latter from within. This can also be observed in the movement's relationship to science, which I have included in the same area of tension, and which is mostly positive but has some complications. As noted in chapter 10, environmental activists can have an ambivalent relationship with science, which provides evidence of climate change and ecosystem collapse but which can also be inaccessible and disenchanting (Brissman 2022, pp. 163-66). From what I have observed among nature connection practitioners, however, some areas of science can in fact be integrated into an enchanted narrative. This is true not least of the currents in biology and ecology which are sometimes called new biology, which contributes to the idea of non-human nature as sentient and communicative, and which sometimes employs a personifying, mytho-poetic language. Thus, there is no clear-cut distinction between integration and resistance.

The third area of tension was that between different concepts of nature (as seen in several chapters but most thoroughly elaborated in chapter 5) where practitioners balance between dualism and monism, While monism dominates in explicit ideological discourse, dualistic ideas are still apparent in many practices, often in the form of nature providing a positive contrast with everyday life which contributes to feelings of aliveness, relief from social pressures, and recuperation. This brings about a somewhat paradoxical situation, common to many forms of religion and spirituality, where practitioners frame, elevate, and separate from the everyday that which they consider sacred, and at the same time strive to integrate it into their daily lives.

Indigenous or Endogenous Animism in the West

As we may remember from chapter 2, Taylor's dark green religion includes what he calls *animism* as one of its two sides (the other being *Gaian Earth Religion*). However, other definitions of the term "animism" may well include Gaian Earth Religion too. I have used Graham Harvey's definition: "Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (Harvey 2006, p. XI). I have used it in a way that includes tendencies in this direction

– as long as they are extended to non-human entities[67] – and not only cases where interpersonal relationships constitute the dominant mode of relating to the world. In this way, many of the experiences, attitudes, and behaviours described in this thesis can be classified as animistic, regardless of a person's overall views and their behaviours in other contexts.

Animism is usually associated with indigenous cultures, and some scholars have argued that modern Western animism can be a form of cultural appropriation, or a romanticising reimagination of elements of indigenous peoples' cultures by the descendants of European colonisers (Rountree 2012; Fisk 2017). I prefer to speak of cultural inspiration or cultural influence, to the extent that it is, in some way, transferred between the cultures of different nations or parts of the world. This is not to ignore historical and current power relations or remaining attitudes and ideas among Europeans and European descendants that are shaped by colonialism. However, I will argue that the scholarly treatment of animism as exclusively an element of indigenous cultures, which can be borrowed – regardless of whether this borrowing is characterised as appropriation, inspiration, or influence – risks both over-generalising indigenous cultures and ignoring other important roots of animism in Western cultural history (including, but not limited to, re-imaginings of pre-Christian Europe).

Western animism has been characterised as "elective", a matter of personal choice and belief, as opposed to indigenous animism which is inherited and derived from a livelihood in close contact with nature, such as hunter-gathering, pastoralism, or subsistence farming. Religious scholars Cathryn Rountree and Anna Fisk have both argued that this is the case even for indigenous people who are currently leading urban lifestyles in modern societies, but still retain animist worldviews and attitudes inherited within their cultures (Rountree 2012, pp. 313, 316-17; Fisk 2017, p. 24). Rountree recognises that a nature-oriented worldview can also be a matter of choice for a person of indigenous descent after several generations of urban living, but maintains that "indigenous people who have experienced dislocation and 'alienation from nature' relatively recently have readier access to an inherited tradition which values kinship with nature" (Rountree 2012, p. 317). While there is probably some truth in this, much the same could be said about

[67] The condition that it extends to non-human entities puts my use of the term in line with a more common understanding of it. However, as I will argue toward the end of this chapter, the expressions of interpersonal relationships in experience, attitudes, and behaviour, and the processes that shape these expressions, described in this thesis, are essentially the same whether we stay within or go beyond the human sphere.

contemporary Swedish culture, where a majority of people are descended from subsistence farmers and peasants only a few generations back (Morell 2011, p. 172).

Modern Western animism is perceived by scholars as elective, imported, or recreated, in contrast to its indigenous counterpart, which is considered as traditional and integrated with a total way of life. This picture is not untrue, but it is an oversimplification relying on the assumption that the subject-object mode of relation prevails in every aspect and every area of modern Western thinking, while the subject-subject mode is equally dominant in indigenous cultures. However, contemporary scholars also tend to recognise that these modes are highly situational in all cultures (cf. Bird-David 1999; Viveiros de-Castro 2004; Hornborg 2013; Descola 2013; pp. 102-8). It can therefore be argued that the differences between cultures are relative and floating rather than absolute.

Most of my interlocutors trace their own current attitudes towards nature back to childhood experiences. Often (in the recollections of my adult interlocutors), these experiences appear to have been spontaneous, emerging through playing in the forest or seeking refuge there during difficult times. The freedom and creative imagination associated with the forest can then become almost like a space of resistance to the adult world and its social demands, cold rationalism, and lack of imagination. But adults can also (possibly more often than is generally recognised in retrospect) play a role in conveying love and respect for nature. Several of my interlocutors recall how parents and grandparents imparted values of respect for nature and living creatures. As discussed in chapter 14, such values are by no means alien to contemporary Nordic culture (Uddenberg 1995; Thurfjell 2020).

Nevertheless, inspiration from indigenous cultures is also evident among nature connection practitioners. My interlocutor Ylva, for instance, whom we met in chapters 9 and 14, has, from an early age, taken a deep interest in Native American cultures. We may ask, however, whether this interest was prompted by her past experiences of nature connection or the other way around.

There is also an element of escapism in nature connection practice, apparent in a narrative that appears in different versions in the stories of practitioners – a narrative of discomfort with modern Western culture, leading to a search for something different. The search for inspiration in indigenous and even more so in Asian cultures is a well-described cultural factor in Western modernity. Its manifestations in recent decades constitute an important part of what Christopher Partridge (2004) terms occulture, a rapidly growing popularisation, since the 1960s, whose roots can be traced

further back to, for instance, turn-of-the-century theosophy. The interest in the spiritual traditions of non-Western cultures, and in pre-Christian Europe, seems to express a built-in escapism in Western modernity, part of the ongoing re-enchantment which, according to most current assessments, is as old as its opposite tendency, disenchantment, and thus just as much a part of modernity as the latter (Jenkins 2000; von Stuckrad 2002; Partridge 2004; 2005; Stone 2006).

Another source of influence, especially on children and youth, is of course popular culture. Douglas Ezzy has suggested that particularly the science fiction and fantasy genres in Western culture can play a role similar to that of indigenous peoples' mythologies, although without the same close ties to communities and rituals (Ezzy 2013, p. 188-90). During interviews, my interlocutors in general make very few spontaneous references to popular culture. In all the time I have spent with nature connection practitioners, I do not recall hearing even a single reference to the film *Avatar* (2009), which one could perhaps have expected in this context. Eleonora mentioned the "Book of the Junior Woodchucks" (*Gröngölingsboken* in Swedish) from Donald Duck, a kind of fictional handbook for the scouting organisation of which Huey, Dewey, and Louie are members (see chapters 9 and 11). Popular culture such as fantasy (and the Book of the Junior Woodchucks) can of course be inspired by, or contain direct references to, indigenous cultures, and could thus be seen as a part of the process of appropriation of elements from those cultures.

Being Alive in a Living World

In this phenomenological study, I am interested not only in the possible influences and origins of the ideas and practices that constitute the movement, but even more in what takes place in the lifeworlds of practitioners. I have examined how emotions, ethical convictions, thoughts, and perceptions are expressed in mind and body,[68] in order to identify the specific and characteristic modes of experience that are cultivated in the nature connection milieu.

One of my key observations is that much of this cultivation points towards a desired condition which can be described as a state of openness, a sensitivity in relation to the world (the more-than-human world, that is) on the sensory, emotional, and ethical levels. I understand this as an idea of existential health,

[68] "Mind" was initially defined as reflective consciousness, and "body" as our sensory and motor faculties. The two concepts were then elaborated in chapters 11 and 12.

which entails an openness and sensitivity to both pleasure and pain. While sensory pleasure and positive emotions are certainly sought-after and embraced, the opposite of health is not pain, but numbness and alienation. One example discussed in chapters 13 and 14 is the role of grief in the otherwise mostly-positive repertoire of emotions cultivated in this milieu, how it accompanies love (or simply is another side of love), and how it can in some cases even be a driving force for social action.

This openness may be described as being alive in a living world; that is, to be fully present through the senses and emotions, to feel pleasure and pain in relation to other beings and to the world at large. It is, simply, being alive, and being alive in a world that is full of other living beings, which reflects back as a feeling of being more fully alive. We may remember from the literature review in chapter 8 how Ian Banyard (2018) spoke about the feeling of aliveness in one's own body which is brought into communication with the aliveness in the surrounding nature, or the term "relational health" used by Ben Page (2021).

It also implies an inner openness, a relaxation of the boundaries between different spheres of life, which I have termed de-compartmentalisation (see chapter 14). I understand this de-compartmentalisation as a response to the modern tendency towards compartmentalisation, especially on the moral and emotional levels.

In chapter 12, we heard Linda's description of a condition of bodily-sensory awareness and participation in the surrounding environment, a space where anything can happen, negative as well as positive emotions, immediate connections with physical elements as well as a sense of what is going on in the world, because all boundaries are dissolved. I interpreted this as a liminal condition which can be both recuperative and transformative. Linda herself characterises it in terms of integration (inner and outer), wholeness, and a closeness to life.

However, the openness towards the world that I have sought to describe here does not occur exclusively in immediate, bodily-sensory intimacy with the world. As demonstrated in chapter 11, openings and connections can also take place within a narrative process, where self-understanding develops within a longer timeframe and with nature as a stable field of resonance. To include the self in a larger story that also includes nature and non-human beings – the more-than-human world – is also a way to achieve connection and integration.

It should be noted as well that this openness and dissolution of boundaries can hardly be absolute, other than, perhaps, in momentary experiences of

oneness. In biology, de-compartmentalisation implies a cessation of the cell's basic functions. In a seminar preceding the Council of All Beings, described in chapter 6, Lodyn representative Henrik Hallgren remarked that life requires a semi-openness, like the selective permeability of the cell. Thus, as noted above, the urge towards a greater degree of openness should be seen in relation to the closedness and alienation experienced in the modern condition, rather than as a quest for absolute oneness with the world. Although nature connection practitioners have temporary experiences of oneness and express desires in that direction, they more often relate to nature as to a community of beings. The attitude of semi-openness facilitates connection with other semi-open life processes, a condition where life flows more easily. In this, I find an understanding of health that is both simple and comprehensive. It seems reasonable and intuitive to equate health and aliveness – more alive = better health, simply put – and the idea of openness or semi-openness can be applied on all levels of the lifeworld: mind, body, emotion, cognition, perception, and ethical stance.

Being alive in a living world, moreover, means that we become alive in relation to others, which touches on a central point in phenomenological and also certain strands of ecological and post-humanist thinking: that of the co-arising (or *sympoiesis*) of organism/person and environment (Merleau-Ponty 2003, pp.172-197; Haraway 2016, pp. 58-98). The lifeworld is what goes on between self and environment. This means that what or whom we relate to, and also how we do it, reflects back on our inner lives, our self-understanding. Relating to objects or to subjects makes a difference in the way we feel and the way we understand ourselves. As Buber puts it: "[…] I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being. […] I-It can never be spoken with the whole being" (Buber 1937, p. 3). To relate to objects is to encounter closed areas of reality, which closes the self as well. But to relate to subjects is to encounter semi-open areas of reality, which also opens the self.

To develop my phenomenological understanding of relationships to subjects, I have sought a concept that focuses on experience and attitudes rather than beliefs or assertions regarding the (objective) properties of the entities in question. I have found this in the concept *face*, as it is described by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1996 [1951]; 2004 [1969]).

Old and New Animism

The theories of animism discussed in chapter 2, some of which are intended as theories of religion in general, in most cases put a strong emphasis on cognitive and perceptual patterns. They may be divided, as Graham Harvey

has done, into *old animism* and *new animism* (which thus does not refer to different types of animism but to different scholarly views and uses of the term) (Harvey 2006, p. 3). They differ in their assessments of the validity of animist views and in assigning primacy to either cognitive and perceptual patterns or relations. Old animism implies that animist views are primitive and mistaken attempts at explaining occurrences in nature, while the newer use implies that animist ontologies are legitimate ways of understanding the world, only different from those of Western modernity. Old animism asserts that animists form interpersonal relations with non-human entities because of their assumptions or beliefs about the nature of those entities, while new animism asserts that cognitive patterns arise in relations.

Both schools, however, are quite heavily focused on cognition and perception. Ethical dimensions often get a fairly substantial treatment in the new animism school, but emotional dimensions usually receive less attention. Applying Levinas means stepping away somewhat from ontology and cognitive models and instead emphasising the direct experience of the encounter with the Other, in which emotions and ethics are more central – and tightly interwoven (or rather sprung from the same source). In the words of Douglas Ezzy: "For Levinas […] ethics is not a product of cognitively framed understandings of right and wrong. Rather, a person's ethical nature is a product of how they respond to the encounter with the 'other'" Ezzy 2013, p. 182).

This does not mean that such a view is incompatible with more widely used contemporary approaches to animism. Harvey's definition of animism,[69] quoted above, which has informed my own classifications in this thesis, is open for a multidimensional approach. Harvey himself mentions "[…] actions, relationships, understandings, rhetorics, narratives, performances, constructions, worldviews and lifeways" (Harvey 2006, p. 28). Although the list does not explicitly include sensory perceptions, emotions, or ethics, these could well be seen as implicit in several of the dimensions that he does mention.

Faces in Clouds and Crowds

It seems that there is at least a superficial likeness between the concept of face I have developed here and the "faces in the clouds" of Stewart Guthrie's theory of animism (and religion in general) as a genetically-based predisposition towards anthropomorphism. Guthrie ends his main work on the subject with the following statement:

[69] Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (Harvey 2006, p. XI)

> Choosing among interpretations of the world, we remain condemned to meaning, and the greatest meaning has a human face. Occasionally our interpretations assign too little meaning and we fail to see some real face confronting us. More often our interpretations assign too much and we see a face where none is. Pursuing an uncertain course between too little meaning and too much, we chronically veer, mistaken but safe, toward too much. (Guthrie 1993, p. 204)

From the context, we can understand "meaning" here as equivalent to "significance for survival". Assigning too much meaning means either to attribute life to the non-living (*animating*) or human likeness to the non-human (*anthropomorphising*) (Guthrie 1993, p. 62). Human likeness is understood as complexity of organisation and symbolic behaviour/communication (Guthrie 1993, p. 25). As noted in chapter 2, Guthrie has been criticised for taking categories such as "human"-"non-human" and "animate"-"inanimate" for granted, and for making too much of a momentary error in perception when he takes it as explanation for complex and consciously maintained systems of thought (Bird-David 1999, pp. 70-71; Harvey 2006, pp. 15-16). It seems to me that my own observations in this study, and my operationalisation of Levinas' *face* concept, can contribute to this discussion.

First of all, my aim is not to explain religious thinking or behaviour (or any type of thinking or behaviour regardless of how we define it), but to describe and understand it. My interest lies not in how the attitude and process I call facing may affect our chances of survival, but in its impacts on a person's lifeworld. Moreover, I do not make any assumptions regarding where to correctly draw the line between persons and things or between living and non-living. Instead, adopting the *epoché* attitude of withholding judgment, I seek to observe the processes that move the line back and forth (in this case mostly in the positive direction).

Another important difference is the emphasis on the cognitive and perceptual which Guthrie shares with many other approaches to animism. The anthropomorphic tendencies that Guthrie takes to be the basis of animism (and religion) are described purely in terms of perception and interpretation. To encounter a face, however, in Levinas' phenomenological understanding, is not merely a cognitive apprehension of the existence of life and mental capacities in the Other. It is an opening towards something beyond cognitive grasp, an infinity, which induces a sense of wonder and reverence, and a recognition of the Other's intrinsic (rather than instrumental) value. With this multidimensional view, it becomes clear that distinctions between human and non-human and animate and inanimate are dependent

on a plethora of factors operative within different timeframes. In this thesis, we have seen how personal narratives constitute a framework for interpretation and self-understanding on the ethical and salutary levels, and how a ritual setting can affect temporary moods, emotional settings, and perceptions. In other words, emotional and ethical – and also perceptual and cognitive – dimensions are interwoven with long-term processes, both personal and collective, which are at least partially conscious. This gives room for some amount of agency, both individual and collective. Seen in the long term and with a wider range of other dimensions taken into account, it becomes apparent that the ways in which we encounter other entities are not just automatic reactions. Guthrie takes a momentary and involuntary perceptual-cognitive reaction as his starting point and extrapolates the pattern to complex intellectual constructs such as theologies. It seems, however, that it is also possible to look at it from the opposite direction; that is, starting from complex intellectual processes and observing how they affect momentary perception and interpretation. In chapter 15, we heard my interlocutor Jakob recall how a tree suddenly addressed him, and his understanding of this in the context of his own ongoing intellectual and perceptual development.

Thus, I agree with the criticism that Guthrie draws too far-reaching conclusions from his observations of perceptual patterns. A simple perceptual mistake which is quickly forgotten does not seem likely to leave a lasting mark on a person's inner life and modes of relating to the world.[70] The types of experience I have studied here, however, even if momentary, do in some cases seem to have long-term impacts. At least, unlike a simple perceptual mistake, such experiences carry emotional and moral significance and can much later be recalled and understood within an existentially meaningful framework. On the other hand, such experiences, momentary as they may be, are perhaps already connected with long-term convictions, attitudes, and emotional stances towards the world. Thus, we find ourselves in something of a chicken-and-egg situation where momentary perception and long-term patterns seem to beget each other.

This multidimensional view also helps us see that the distinctions we are interested in here are relative and constantly moving within the human sphere as well. Even if we refuse to accept the possibility of what Guthrie

[70] To be fair, this is not really how Guthrie formulates his thesis. What he does suggest is rather that our tendencies to animate and anthropomorphise are a cognitive pattern which also gives rise to more advanced religious thinking. However, since his argument rests on the evolutionary advantage of this pattern in immediate perception, it amounts to saying that that these momentary mistakes are the underlying cause of religious thinking.

defines as human likeness outside of the human, it is obvious that there are great variations already in how we relate to other humans and that our perception of them can change, over time, in both directions. Human faces that pass by on a busy city street may be recognised as faces on a general level. Already this general recognition of faces as faces or humans as humans, although anonymous, probably instils at least a modicum of respect towards them (which, in turn, may be based on genetic coding, cultural upbringing and socialisation, or a combination). However, there is a vast difference between the level of meaning in these generally recognised faces compared to the face of a friend – a face that was at some point just one in the crowd but now stands out from it. We also know from numerous historical examples how dehumanising propaganda can move this line in the other direction.[71]

Similarly, a tree or a place in nature can stand out from a general idea of "tree" or "forest" when we cultivate a sense for the specific and unique in them, as we have seen examples of in chapter 16 under the heading "Cultivating Uniqueness". In this study, I have not examined the opposite process, the de-facing of nature (in the specific sense of the word used here). This would be an interesting topic for further research, and could perhaps be studied, for instance, in educational settings oriented towards extractive industry, or in the personal lives of those whose professional responsibilities require an objectifying mode of relating to non-human entities. The Danish anthropologist Sofie Isager Ahl provides an interesting example in her description of a home slaughter of sheep in a small-scale agricultural setting in Norway, where the tension in the room does not lighten immediately upon the death of the animals, but only after their skins have been removed and their bodies have thus been transformed into meat (Isager Ahl 2021, p. 68).

In short, if we withhold judgment regarding the existence of an objectively correct line between human and non-human and between animate and inanimate, and pay attention not only to the perceptual and cognitive, but also to emotional and ethical dimensions of experience and behaviour, we can observe, in many types of situations, the processes through which this line moves in both directions, both within and outside of humanity.

Facing as Spirituality

As noted above, the concept of face/facing that I have sought to develop in this thesis is not part of an attempt to explain religion. It may, however, serve as a tool to describe and understand it. *Religion* (or *spirituality,* if we

[71] See discussion in chapter 16.

reserve the term "religion" for organised and/or dogmatised enterprises) can then be defined as a propensity to see and approach the world as a face or a multitude of faces (with all the connotations this concept has here), and as processes through which the world and/or entities in it are rendered and maintained as faces.

This definition entails that most interpersonal relationships can be classified as spiritual. And indeed, why not? It is not entirely without precedent. The sphere of inviolability around the human body, marked by behavioural and linguistic protocols, has been understood by the sociologist Mark A. Schneider (1996) as a form of sacredness. Levinas and Buber both see the relationship between self and Other, or I-Thou, as the basis of religion (Levinas 2004 [1969], pp. 40, 78; Buber 1937, pp. 18-34; Kaufmann pp. 201-33). They understand such relationships as deeply spiritual already on the interhuman level. For Levinas, "the dimension of the divine shines forth from the human face" (Levinas 2004 [1969], p.78). Something like this seems to be present in experiences of nature connection too, only the face is not exclusively human. Buber sees a movement, in personal as well as historical development, through which the world of It expands at the expense of the world of Thou – a version of the disenchantment thesis (Buber 1937, pp. 37 ff.).

It seems, however, that through a cultivation of experience, such as that practiced in the nature connection movement, there are also ways back to an expansion of the world of Thou – a world with a face or with many faces – although I am reluctant to say which way is back and which is forward.

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Through field research in Sweden and Finland between 2017 and 2022, the volume follows a burgeoning social movement in which connection with nature is seen as a means of both personal wellbeing and ecological sustainability at the societal level. It describes and analyses ideas, practices, organisations, and literature in a contemporary cultural context in the borderland between health practice, environmental activism, and spirituality. Futhermore, it examines participants' personal experiences and understands both the practice and its social milieu as a *cultivation of experience*, whereby experiences of nature as alive and communicative are maintained and enhanced. This leads into a discussion of animism in a contemporary Western context, where the study aims to develop a multidimensional understanding that takes into account not only ontology and cognitive–perceptual patterns, but also lays emphasis on emotional and ethical dimensions.

The thesis employs the concept *face*, which, in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, signifies the encounter with subjectivity outside of oneself. In contrast to objects, which can be grasped intellectually and thus controlled and incorporated, the face reveals a reality beyond conceptualisation to which one must relate ethically. The thesis arrives at an understanding of both health and spirituality as states of (relative) openness toward the world and its human and non-human inhabitants.

Henrik Ohlsson, b. 1977, has completed this thesis as part of a research project "The relocation of transcendence: Silence and the sacred of the seculars around the Baltic Sea", funded by the Baltic Sea Foundation, in which scholars in Sweden, Denmark and Estonia have studied nature relations, spirituality, and secularity.

Study of Religions, Historical Studies, School of Historical and Contemporary Studies, Södertörn University.

ISBN 78-91-89504-05-9 (print) / 978-91-89504-06-6 (digital) | Södertörns högskola | publications@sh.se

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