

Mutual Blessings:
Towards a community centered on the sacredness of creation

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	vi
Abstract.....	vii
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Thesis in context	6
2.1 Congregational context: a congregation in redevelopment	7
2.2 Leadership context: the Church’s environmental calling	10
2.2.1 Science seeks partnership	10
2.2.2 Creation care as model for relationship with God	12
2.2.3 Summary: the Church’s environmental calling	15
2.3 Opportunity context: partnership possibility with local activists	15
2.4 The Act of Ministry and Study	18
2.5 Conclusion	19
3. Encountering sacred creation: conceptual frameworks	21
3.1 Developing a sense of nature as sacred – a psychospiritual process	22
3.2 Choosing a side in the conflict over models of creation theology	25
3.2.1 Developing the foundational elements of an ecological theology	26
3.2.2 Conflict with non-ecological theologies	31
3.2.3 Conclusion - choosing to reject anthropocentrism.....	34
3.3 Bridges toward evangelistic community.....	36
3.3.1 Post-Christendom evangelism	37
3.3.2 Bioecological model of human development	39

3.4	Conclusion: pilgrimage.....	41
4.	Methodology.....	43
4.1	Act of Ministry.....	43
4.1.1	Initial conversations and planning	44
4.1.2	The three meetings.....	46
4.1.3	Act of Ministry concluding thoughts	51
4.2	Research design	51
4.2.1	Data collection	53
4.2.2	Participant descriptions.....	55
4.2.3	Setting	55
4.2.4	Data analysis	56
4.2.5	Trustworthiness of research methodology	57
4.2.6	Personal experiences with the phenomenon	58
4.3	Conclusion	59
5.	Findings.....	61
5.1	Initial fears and surprises	61
5.2	Validation of self.....	65
5.3	Valuable and common purpose.....	67
5.4	Desire for personal growth.....	69
5.5	Desire for greater community change.....	72
5.6	Not the belief system I was taught	76
5.7	Location of God	79
5.8	Conclusion	81

6.	Discussion.....	83
6.1	Objection to the thesis.....	83
6.2	Interpretation of the findings	84
6.1.1	Belonging.....	85
6.1.2	Behaving.....	88
6.1.3	Believing.....	90
6.1.4	Thesis and findings	93
6.3	Limitations and potential improvements to the Act of Ministry and Study	94
6.4	Recommendations for further research.....	96
6.5	Summary and concluding personal thoughts	99
7.	Afterword.....	101
8.	Appendices.....	103
A.	Invitation Letter	103
B.	Pre-Experience Survey.....	105
C.	Session Outlines and Homework handouts.....	106
D.	Focus Group Questions.....	108
E.	Focus Group Community Action worksheet	110
F.	Transcript of Focus Group Interviews	113
	Focus Group 1: Un-churched Environmental Activists.....	113
	Focus Group 2: Environmentally oriented church members	141
	Focus Group 3: One on One with Karen	174
	Bibliography	197

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Abstract

An opportunity for dialog between church members and unchurched local environmental activists offers an evangelistic opportunity for a rural Episcopal congregation. The paper argues that by sharing reflections in a small group setting about the experience of the sacredness of nature, churched and unchurched persons will build bridges toward mutual evangelistic community. Evidence in favor of the argument comes from an interpretive phenomenological study of participant's experience. Important to this research is how an individual's experiences in nature may offer a unique avenue for evangelism efforts. Themes addressed include ecological theology, post-Christendom evangelism, and the impact of interpersonal relationships on human development.

1. Introduction

For some, experiences in wild spaces become moments of sacred encounter. This is definitely true for me. Since young adulthood, encounters with the sacred mediated through outdoor experiences have profoundly impacted my faith journey. Questions of faith and life continue to lead me back out to a trail or river somewhere, in hopes that God will speak a word there like before.

In his dissertation, Paul J. Deal grounds his study of the spiritual experience of environmental activists by asking: "...how does seeking and recovering the sacred in nature act as a wise source of restraint, orient one's freedom, and help negotiate problems of meaning and living well...?"¹ In reading his dissertation as I began researching this project, I knew I had found someone who was seeking the answers that have become part of a driving desire in my life and ministry. I know intuitively nature's sacredness and that my congregation's present approach toward its life did not fully take advantage of the rest of nature as part of our sacred journey together. Yes, nature is sacred, but it is out there and our current work in following Jesus happens primarily in the liturgical spaces and spiritual practices grounded in the physical interior of the congregation's buildings. This project is a first step in this work toward personal and communal integration.

The roots of this project run deeper than just my role as a clergy leader. Nature's value to me as a place for discovering the sacred has been a part of my spiritual journey since long before I understood and claimed a relationship with Jesus. Experiences in

¹ Paul J. Deal, "Sanctification Within the Middle Ground: A Narrative Phenomenology of Nature as Sacred" (Loyola University in Maryland, 2014).7.

nature make up the bulk of the pivotal moments that led to my entering the church and in becoming a priest.

I first spoke to God in humility, seeking his mercy, and understood something of a reply in 1998. That summer two friends and I set out to hike the Appalachian Trail, the 2,180-mile footpath along the mountains of eastern side of North America. On May 7th I encountered Jane's Bald, one of the innumerable summits that one crosses along the AT. We had been on the trail for over 2 months by that point, and we had grown accustomed to traveling apart much of the day and meeting up each evening. So it was that I was alone that early afternoon when an unexpected and particularly violent thunderstorm struck. I could find no cover as Jane's Bald lived up to its name as a summit with no trees. I picked up my pace, hoping to get over the hill and to safety on the other side. Quickly, hope of escape vanished. Hail pelted me, the darkness grew deeper, and the lighting and thunder drew close enough that there was no longer any gap between the flash of light and the crash of sound. I crouched down, hoisted my pack over my head to block the punishing hail, and understood at the age of 22 the fear of impending mortality.

While I was spiritually inclined before this, having practiced Zen meditation for a few years, I was not raised in the church and had rarely visited a worshipping congregation. Prayer up until that point was only basely transactional, a sort of bland deal-making with what I supposed was God, made in the hopes of a beneficial influence on trivial events in my life. In this not so trivial moment, in the dark and cold of the storm on the mountain, I understood that there were no deals to be made, that there is nothing I can offer that God does not already have. The only authentic approach to God is an

appeal that your creator might love you enough to let you live, even if you have nothing to offer in return. Such was the cry of my heart as the maelstrom swirled around me.

The storm continued its raging. I witnessed the inside of a cumulonimbus cloud, where sunlight pours down in eerie green hues as the cloud drains its energy in fierce rain, wind, and lightning. But then, imperceptibly at first, the storm began to pass by. Surprisingly, within an hour the sun even came out. I did not hear a booming voice from the sky as a response to my prayer, but I did, in some place so deep that I still cannot fully describe it, understand an answer from God that continues to unfold in me. I understood that I am loved, even if there are many days since when I have wondered why.

That day and its message finished with a flourish. I reached a large shelter a few miles further along the trail as evening drew on. Many other backpackers were already there in the abandoned barn left to the use of hikers along the trail. Soon after setting up my things upstairs, one of my friends came and invited me to see something amazing. As I walked toward the open barn door that faced east across a beautiful valley, I could see the storm continuing to rage upon the ridges of mountains across the way. The setting sun was behind us, its warmth drying waterlogged belongings and tired backs. And there, decorating the sky above the now peaceful valley, was a gorgeous rainbow. We sat, so many bedraggled hikers after a soggy day of hiking, absorbing the gorgeous band of light that hung in the sky.

A few months later, after returning home with over 1000 miles hiked and wanting to complete my undergraduate work in education, I decided to take my spiritual life far more seriously than before. I took the advice offered in a meditation book and set out to

understand the religious teachings of the culture from which I come. Christmas and Easter are still celebrated in my family, even if only for their cultural value and not their religious connotations, and so I took up what many say is the best way to get to know Christianity: I started on page 1 of the Bible. And there, just 9 chapters in, I would again find myself drawn into the midst of a storm, and then see so clearly the rainbow that God offered as a sign of his love to all creation. In an instant, I knew that my life was forever changed. The lightning finally struck me. It continues to electrify me to this day.

My journey into the Episcopal Church and then the priesthood is a story for another time. I introduce my paper with this story for many reasons. First, it demonstrates much of what Deal's work describes in terms of a process in which one develops an understanding of nature's sacredness. I will explore his paradigm more thoroughly in Chapter 2 and draw on it for the design of an Act of Ministry and the phenomenological study that forms the backbone of this paper. I also offer the story in order to admit that I am biased toward such experiences. It is one of the energy sources that has driven this project and my life.

I hope to inspire others, just as nature has inspired me and those you will meet in the following document, to pursue Christian ministry in such a way that the environment around us can be more deeply woven into the work and life of the community. To accomplish this goal, I organized the paper into the following sections:

- 1) Thesis in context. I examine the central argument of the paper and ground it in three contexts: my congregation, the Church's calling to respond to environmental issues, and an opportunity for ministry engagement that arose in the community. I offer an overview

of the Act of Ministry undertaken in response to the opportunity and the phenomenological study of the participant's experience that provides evidence toward the thesis.

2) Encountering sacred creation: conceptual frameworks. Three areas of conceptual framework are described that orient the project, guide the Act of Ministry's structure and content, and are used to evaluate the results of the phenomenological study.

3) Methodology. The Act of Ministry's structure, process of development, and a description of how it actually occurred is described here. Then, the methodology used to draw a phenomenological description of the experience of the Act of Ministry for the participants is explained.

4) Findings. I explore the phenomenological study's findings by describing seven themes that emerge in the data.

5) Discussion. The findings are drawn into conversation with the conceptual frameworks, with the goal of supporting the thesis. Following this, the study's limitations, improvements to its design, and future research opportunities are explored.

2. Thesis in context

This paper argues that by sharing reflections in a small group setting about the experience of the sacredness of nature, churched and unchurched persons will build relational bridges toward mutual evangelistic community. This argument focuses on an Act of Ministry in which a small group of participants came together to discuss their personal experiences in nature. Participants came from two different pools: church members who identify experiences in nature as having spiritual significance and a group of environmentally-conscious members of the local community who are not currently participating in a religious congregation. I argue that the participants experienced evangelistic relationships through this encounter, relationships in which participants found “kindred souls and searchers for God” in their fellow participants.² These relationships offer the possibility of building lasting community, even a Christian community, centered on the sacredness of Creation.

Before offering an overview of the Act of Ministry and the phenomenological study, I want to ground this project in several ministry contexts. First, I serve a congregation that seeks partnership with members of the local community as part of a redevelopment strategy. Second, I hear the greater church’s call to respond to the environmental crises of our time and seek ways to lead that effort locally. Third, an opportunity presented itself that had the potential for exploring partnership centered on the environment. What follows here is a deeper description of these three contexts, followed by a brief overview of the Act of Ministry and the Study.

² David Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc, 2018), 2.

2.1 Congregational context: a congregation in redevelopment

The congregation in which I served as the clergy leader at the time of this project was Trinity Memorial Church in Warren County, Pennsylvania. In 2015 Trinity celebrated its 150th anniversary, having proudly served all that time from its location in the county seat of the city of Warren. The congregation's building, enclosed on a city block toward the west end of the small city's business core, features 120-year old stone walls and beautiful stained glass that invites local residents to step out of their surroundings and into a holy space.

Nestled in the northwestern corner of the Allegheny National Forest, Warren County and the surrounding region is rooted to the land through hunting, a small but growing outdoor industry, and family-sized farming. Manufacturing and resource extraction of lumber, oil, and natural gas are the mainstay industries of the region. Warren is situated on the western edge of the booming Marcellus Shale oil field, a resource whose extraction is supported by the overwhelmingly conservative local political climate. Along with petroleum extraction, the forest is also heavily harvested for timber and open to the large hunting community in the area. The recreation industry has only a small voice in the region, focusing on the Allegheny River and some smaller projects in the forest.

The closing of many manufacturing plants since the 1980's and the ensuing population loss greatly depressed the local economy and community. These declines in the region were mirrored in the congregation. One metric that highlights this decline is

average Sunday attendance (ASA).³ Trinity welcomed over 200 people on an average Sunday in 1980. By 2010, the year I began my call as Priest-in-Charge there, we reported just 72.⁴

A little more than a year into my work with them, the congregation and I entered into a relationship with a set of diocesan-sponsored consultants.⁵ The diocese offered this opportunity to congregations that, like Trinity, had the potential to make major strides in turning around the decline evident in many of the region's Episcopal outposts. Following Arlen Routhage's concepts of congregational redevelopment, we identified many things that needed to change in order to see renewed vitality.⁶ For instance, the surveys revealed a deep level of discontent with the status of the congregation's worship life.⁷ Through discernment and a willingness to experiment we made changes to the congregation's identity, vision, and strategy. We restructured the budget, cutting over 20% of expenses as we recognized the need to better protect our endowment. We removed extraneous programs and took advantage of retiring staff to adjust how much we funded key positions. We reoriented our music program through new staff and adopted an eclectic

³ Average Sunday Attendance, or ASA, is an imperfect tool for measuring membership involvement, especially over the long term. In the short term, though, it can point toward the growth or decline.

⁴ In the canons of the Episcopal Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania, a Priest-in-Charge referred to a priest who functioned in the lead clergy position of a congregation. The title is typically applied to one who does not have tenure but instead a limited term contract. My initial contract was for four years. In 2014, the congregation applied for and was granted mission status, a status which offered us greater flexibility in terms of organization and leadership. At that time, I was named Vicar of the congregation, a title which denotes that I served as leader so long as the Bishop of the diocese chooses to keep me there.

⁵ Episcopal Moment Consulting. The Rev. Dr. Al Johnson and the Rev. Jeune Godsey served as lead consultants with our congregation.

⁶ Arlin Routhage, *The Life Cycle of Congregations* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 1996), 205.

⁷ Holy Cow Consulting, "Vital Signs: Trinity Memorial Church 2011" Copy kept in Trinity Memorial Church files.

approach that incorporated both contemporary and traditional styles, changes that led to a dramatic increase in satisfaction as revealed in a survey taken in 2016. The leadership believed this turn-around confirmed that the hard and sometimes painful work was worthwhile.⁸ However, attendance as measured by ASA continued to decline, falling to only 43 in attendance on an average Sunday in 2014.

Along with these structural and stylistic changes, Trinity engaged in workshops on evangelism and hospitality which trained us to be more effective in bringing new people into membership in the church. One key aspect of these trainings focused on establishing relationships with those in the greater community. The leaders of the congregation were made aware of how the church could no longer rely on social pressure to lead people to visit the church on Sunday. Bringing people to church first meant connecting with them outside of church, where we could build relationships strong enough to become bridges for entering the worship community. Evangelism calls us to

“...spread the good news, to find kindred souls and searchers for God wherever [we] go, to share [our] stories of encounter with Jesus, and to bring people the promise of new life and enduring love of God.”⁹

Leaders and other key members began experimenting with how to do such relationship building by moving ministries outside the physical church walls and expanding our internet presence.

By 2017 Trinity began to see the beginnings of what was hoped to be a durable return to vitality. We celebrated an average Sunday attendance of 54, recognizing this slight increase as part of a two-year trend of modest growth. A stronger financial

⁸ Holy Cow Consulting, “Vital Signs: Trinity Memorial Church 2016,” Copy kept in Trinity Memorial Church files.

⁹ David Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc, 2018), 2.

position, a more exciting and appreciated worship service, and first experiments in community relationship building had brought a few new people into the Sunday morning worship. Yet we were still far from the numerical goals that we set as benchmarks of vibrancy and strength. Our re-envisioned understanding of evangelism and hospitality led us to seek any opportunity to engage in more community relationship building.

2.2 Leadership context: the Church's environmental calling

Scientific and political voices have made much of debating the ecological crises that an overwhelming majority of the scientific community recognizes as threatening life as we know it. The church has a role to play in the societal conversations concerning the environment. The call for partnership with science and an emerging theology of creation care encourage the church to respond to the environmental crises.

2.2.1 Science seeks partnership

The present-day environmental crises documented by science prompts action from all corners of society. Much of the response focuses on increasing awareness and motivating action. Yet while many denominations and religious institutions promote environmental awareness and activism, and that work is appreciated by its members, recent polling indicates that religion only plays a small part in forming public opinion on environmental protection.¹⁰

¹⁰ Cary Funk and Becka A. Alper, "Religion and Views on Climate and Energy Issues," Pew Research Center: Internet and Technology, October 22, 2015, accessed November 6, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/22/religion-and-views-on-climate-and-energy-issues/>.

Voices from the scientific and philosophical community increasingly point to the need to work with religious communities in forming a response to the environmental crisis. Arne Naess, a prominent voice in the Deep Ecology movement, thinks such partnership is critical for the continued dissemination of information which in turn nurtures groups, inside the church and elsewhere, that advocate for action.¹¹ Recognizing that “religion and science are the two most powerful forces in the world today,” Harvard biology professor E.O.Wilson implores religious leaders to act on the “moral precept...that we owe ourselves and future generations a beautiful, rich, and healthful environment.”¹² Even though Wilson views religion with deep skepticism, his addressing the book as a letter to a clergy acquaintance makes personal the realization of the science community as to the value of the religious world to the fight over environmental issues.

This call to partnership between science and religion is an invitation to move beyond much of the current divisions between the two. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann sees the pressure of the environmental crisis as an opening to a new stage in in the relationship between science and religion, two pathways for the pursuit of knowledge that have been perceived as enemies in recent history. He sees that religion grounds the scientific endeavor while science healthily broadens the religious context of humanity’s relationship with God.¹³ In this way the environmental crisis presents an opportunity for

¹¹ Arne Naess, as quoted by Stephan Bodian, “Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: An Interview with Arne Naess,” in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995), 34.

¹² Edward O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 5.

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985), 34-8.

these long estranged siblings in the quest to understand existence to find one another again.

The environmental crises then are an open invitation to the greater church to use its influence on behalf of nature as a partner with other actors. Action can even be a step toward healing philosophical divisions that have bedeviled the church in its societal role. More important for the church though than just taking advantage of these invitations and possibilities is for the church to ground any action on behalf of the environment in a renewed appreciation of humanity's calling as stewards and servants of creation.

2.2.2 Creation care as model for relationship with God

Some do ground the church's call to respond upon the ethical duties implied by the current environmental crises. They find reason enough in the ethical duty to alleviate suffering to focus the church's response on adaptively designed environmental projects.¹⁴ But to base our efforts on the pressing circumstances of present day avoids the deeper imperative that stems from appreciating nature's sacred position theologically. Orthodox theologian John Chryssavgis notes that "the way we treat the world around us reflects our relationship with the God we worship."¹⁵ Humanity's relationship to creation itself is at question. In this light, the ecological crises of our present day can be seen as a symptom of a far deeper brokenness the church is called to work against.

¹⁴ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 5.

¹⁵ John Chryssavgis, "The Earth as Sacrament: Insights from Orthodox Christian Theology and Spirituality" in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 100.

We are called into communal relationship with nature by our creator, a relationship whose elements are described in the Genesis account and the covenant between God and the Hebrew people.¹⁶ Efforts to align the congregation's and the surrounding community's life with nature are properly based on such a foundational position. It is important then to ground the motivations of the church's actions toward creation in its call to promote right relationship with nature and not the temporal reality of the current ecological crises.

Part of this work involves the Christian church atoning for its past. Lynn White's 1967 lecture given to the American Association for the Advancement of Science served as a watershed moment in understanding the historical roots of the church's aiding and abetting western society's anthropocentric and destructive approach toward nature.¹⁷ He describes how throughout history the church has favored a view that relegates creation to little more than a resource for human prosperity. While I do not hear his analysis as condemnatory of Christianity, and many strands of his arguments have faced attenuating scrutiny since it was presented, his lecture at least raised the awareness of our complicity if we fail to respond.

Church leaders and prominent theologians since have echoed the broad conclusion that the church has been complicit in environmental exploitation. The Episcopal Bishops of New England in 2003 called their dioceses to a new commitment to environmental awareness and action in part by saying "We confess our past

¹⁶ Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), cf. 28-29.

¹⁷ Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, No. 3767 (March 10, 1967), 1203-1207.

complacency, ignorance and neglect. We regret Christian teachings that claim or imply that human beings have divine sanction to destroy God's creation."¹⁸ Pope Francis wrote in 2015 that "although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures."¹⁹ Both then detail a wide range of strategies through which the church could be a force for promoting greater harmony between humanity and creation.

It perhaps is a gift then that the tragedies evident in our present situation have led to a renewed awareness of God's expectations in how we treat the earth. The present situation bears witness to the truth that "The radical dedivinization of the world, wrought by our inability to desire or maintain a relationship with God, may be the cause of our lack of caring responsibility toward both heaven and earth."²⁰ To not base the church's actions on an understanding of humanity's intended relationship with creation would leave us open to continuing to violate the scriptural covenant's intent. Any technological success could actually become more reason to continue living out a philosophically anthropocentric distortion of our theological location as creatures of our loving God. The environmental crisis of today then is a potent opportunity for the church to direct its efforts toward promoting a healthier relationship between humanity and creation..

¹⁸ The Episcopal Bishops of New England "To Serve Christ in All Creation: A Pastoral Letter from the Episcopal Bishops of New England, Feast of the Presentation of Christ, 2003" accessed September 24, 2018. https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/To_Serve_Christ_in_All_Creation_Prov_1.pdf

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), 48.

²⁰ Chryssavgis, 105.

2.2.3 Summary: the Church's environmental calling

Invitations from the realm of science and a renewed theological understanding of our proper relationship to the environment provide motivation to the greater church to participate more fully in society's conversations concerning the environment. As a congregational leader I am deeply troubled both by what science is uncovering and the theological implications. The greater church's motivations resonate in me as I seek ways to respond. An opportunity was not hard to find.

2.3 Opportunity context: partnership possibility with local activists

In October of 2016, I was approached by my parishioner Petra²¹ whose niece Alice is a local business owner. Alice owns an outdoor recreation retail business and is known as a prominent voice in local environmental issues. Alice, her staff, and many of her friends had been paying close attention to the protests in North Dakota over the Dakota Access oil pipeline. Throughout that summer, social media served to keep them closely tied to the events there, and to contemplate how they could be involved.²² Eventually Alice and her staff felt compelled to go there to bring supplies and to offer

²¹ All names other than my own have been changed to protect their identity.

²² While major news organizations covered the protests as they grew to national prominence (see Jack Healey, "Tribes Protest Oil Pipeline in North Dakota." *The New York Times*. October 10, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/us/tribes-protest-oil-pipeline-north-dakota.html> and others), many including Alice and her colleagues followed on social media, especially Facebook and its live video feature. Facebook offered observers opportunities to show support from afar as well. See Merrit Kennedy, "More than a Million Check in on Facebook to Support the Standing Rock Sioux." NPR. November 1, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/11/01/500268879/more-than-a-million-check-in-on-facebook-to-support-the-standing-rock-sioux>.

support to the protesters. They were beginning to ask those around them for support. Petra felt the church could help them gather supplies for delivering, and I readily agreed.

Within a week we had gathered enough food staples to fill Alice's car. She, her partner Liv, and a friend Karen headed out to Oceti Sakowin, the Native American camp that had been set up over the summer as a center for the protests going on near the pipeline site. We followed along with them through Facebook and other communications channels as they reported in periodically, and we prayed for them each day. Their communications were rather simple, and more than once they expressed how the totality of what they were seeing was hard to describe.

Upon their return, Alice agreed to share their experience during a weeknight forum at Trinity. Beyond being a chance to thank the church community for its support, the forum was a first attempt to debrief their experience and introduce others to the protests. I planned on the forum lasting an hour to 90 minutes, with Alice and Karen present leading the conversation. What unfolded over the next 2 hours was as confessional as it was informative. Multiple times Alice and Karen admitted to being deeply troubled and anxious during their experience, especially during the one day actually spent at the camp itself. After dropping off the supplies near the camp kitchen that morning, they found that no one needed their help. Everyone they met was incredibly gracious and welcoming, yet when they offered to help cook or clean, they were politely turned away by folks explaining that they had things running well and no assistance was needed.

With great anxiety and confusion, they piled back into their car and drove away, only to pull off the road in dismay shortly after leaving the reservation. They could not

leave, yet they did not know what to do to make staying worthwhile. After a time of feverish conversation interspersed with long silences, they reported that somehow they felt compelled to return, even if there was nothing for them to do there. We would realize after the forum that at that same time a group of us were praying for them at Trinity.

They again asked to assist in camp duties yet were turned away as before. However, several folks invited them to a thanksgiving service that was about to begin. The camp was preparing to celebrate the donation and construction of several yurts that would provide more permanent shelter for many protest participants. Alice described how it was held in the face of aggressive anti-protest activities that were attempting to disturb and disrupt the protests themselves. They had little context for understanding the Native American tradition of the worship service itself, but the three-hour long celebration revolutionized their understanding of what thanksgiving truly is. Alice related to us that it helped crystalize for her how thanksgiving is the root of how we approach our relationship with the land.

The church forum continued with Alice sharing reflections about the complexity of our local relationship with the environment. Especially poignant was her noting that petroleum products were a major part of her business and obviously a major part of our local economy, too; just standing up and protesting them seemed naive and foolish. Yet sitting idly by and doing nothing was unacceptable. Amongst many other powerful and heartfelt statements that resonated with me was Alice attempting to conclude the meeting

by offering that “we went not knowing why we were going, and we come back without any good answers. What we do have is a better sense of the questions.”²³

We stumbled together grasping for some way of ending the meeting. We had no clear thing to celebrate, no action step to focus the incredible energy felt by those in attendance. All we knew was that we could not remain as we were, motionless and bewildered. Action had to be taken. Those questions needed to be answered.

2.4 The Act of Ministry and Study

From these contexts emerged the central argument of this paper, the Act of Ministry used to explore it, and the Study. My congregation’s eagerness to grow encouraged me to seek out opportunities for evangelistic engagement in the community. I deeply felt the motivation of the greater church to participate in promoting a healthier relationship between humanity and creation, celebrating its theological reformation and desiring to participate with science in addressing the crises of our day. Potential partners blessed us with their stories and courage as they sought answers and found some hope in the church’s presence.

The Act of Ministry was humble in size and exploratory in design. Initial planning meetings held during the fall of 2017 led to a three-session program where a small group engaged in conversations about our experiences of nature as places of sacred encounter. The small group consisted of four people who, including Alice, had little or no current connection to a religious community or faith practice along with four members of the

²³ Alice, church presentation on visit to Oceti Sakowin, December 7, 2016.

Trinity congregation, all of whom viewed nature as a place for encountering God. These meetings, titled “Nature and Spirituality: Reflection for Action,” occurred in January and early February of 2018.

The study drew data from the ministry participants in order to create a phenomenological understanding of their experience in the small group. Data for the study came from three post-experience focus group interviews that I led in the weeks following the conclusion of the Act of Ministry. The first focus group gathered Alice and the other unchurched environmental activist participants, the second contained the Trinity participants, and the third was a one-on-one interview with an unchurched participant who could not attend her assigned focus group due to a family emergency. The Methodology section of this paper contains a more thorough description of The Act of Ministry and the Study.

2.5 Conclusion

This paper argues that by sharing reflections in a small group setting about the experience of the sacredness of nature, church and unchurched persons will build relational bridges toward mutual evangelistic community. Three ministry contexts ground the Act of Ministry and the Study whose themes will be used to support the argument. The congregation I serve is in the midst of a redevelopment process and seeks partnerships with people currently outside the congregation. The greater church seeks ways to participate in shaping society’s relationship with the environment. Trinity has an opportunity to explore a deeper partnership with local environmental activists. From this

ground emerged the Act of Ministry and the phenomenological study of the participant's experience.

Before more deeply exploring the Act of Ministry and the results of the study, I turn first to describe the theological and psychological frameworks that inform the design of the Act of Ministry and the study. First, I look at sacred encounters in nature as psycho-spiritual phenomena following distinct pathways of development for the individual. Second, I explore the theological ramifications of such psycho-spiritual experiences for the individuals and for the Church. Finally, I detail a conceptual framework for understanding how the Act of Ministry offers an evangelistic opportunity to the participants and the church that sponsored it.

3. Encountering sacred creation: conceptual frameworks

The opportunity to explore more deeply the common questions held by these local environmental activists and members of the congregation through a small group reflection exercise finds support in the work of many writers and researchers. This chapter explores several conceptual frameworks offered in the literature. Their work highlights key elements active at the heart of this paper. These frameworks ground the Act of Ministry and frame the phenomenological study of the participant's experience. This chapter arranges these frameworks into three areas.

First, a framework that sees transcendent spiritual experiences in nature as elements of a *psychospiritual process* provides a launching point for understanding an individual's experiences in realizing and growing a sense of nature's sacredness. This psychospiritual process, described by Dr. Paul Deal, involves categorizing various experiential pathways through which one's sense of nature's sacredness develops.²⁴ Deal's conceptual framework describes an individual's process in developing a sense of nature's sacredness. This framework also forms a foundation for understanding the project participants' motivations.

Second, frameworks that explore the *theological convictions* that arise for those engaged in this psychospiritual process are examined. These theological frameworks will point toward how individuals engaged in this development of a sense of nature's sacredness encounter conflict between their emerging theological understandings and what they perceive to be creation theologies at work in the church and in greater society.

²⁴ Deal, iv.

Those developing a sense of nature as sacred develop foundational elements of ecologically-oriented creation theologies, which they often discover are at odds with prominent theological voices in culture and in what many understand to be church teachings. This paper explores these initial theological convictions, incorporating key biblical sources and theological concepts.

The third grouping of frameworks highlights the *evangelism opportunity* at stake in this dialog between church members and individuals in the greater community. Work by Diana Butler Bass offers a conceptual framework for post-Christendom evangelism. Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development explains the dynamics at work in a small group ministry that would promote community development that align with Bass's framework. These frameworks, interpreted with an eye toward evangelism, point toward how the opportunity here is not to offer an encounter between groups that hold mutually exclusive belief systems but to build upon their common growing convictions for the purpose of journeying toward a common future.

3.1 Developing a sense of nature as sacred – a psychospiritual process

For some, growth in the perception of nature's intrinsic sacredness can be understood as a psychospiritual development process. There are many disparate perspectives on what the experience of such growth of perception entails. Theologically the experience of nature taking on sacred meaning for the individual has been referred to as a hierophany, a breaking in of the knowledge of the holy into the ordinary.²⁵ Using

²⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask, A Harvest Book (San Diego: Harcourt, 1987), 21.

spiritually centered language, other perspectives speak of openness as a key virtue, in that sacred nature becomes “visible to those who use their physical and spiritual eyes to see beyond the immediately apparent.”²⁶ And still other perspectives adopt psychological language by describing the experience of nature taking on sacred significance as involving transcendence, applying the term both in the experience of nature taking on deeper meaning for the individual and through a sense of the individual transcending one’s self in a spiritual experience in nature.²⁷

Paul J. Deal’s work offered a phenomenological description of this transcendent breaking in as it occurs in one developing a sense of nature’s sacredness that accepts both spiritual and psychological perspectives. In gathering and analyzing the reflections of environmental activists, he classified three principle groupings of pathways through which an enriched sense of nature’s sacredness develops in the individual. These groups he termed doorways, dynamics, and reverberations.

Doorways are “the initial gateway experiences that, when cultivated and pursued, start participants on a quest to discover nature as sacred.”²⁸ Such experiences can present themselves as surprises or through carefully pursued engagements. He presents an expansive categorization of different pathways, which often overlap and coexist in one’s memory. They include early childhood experiences, experiences encountered in nature as one seeks meaning or wisdom, and moments of awareness that nature is in crisis as

²⁶ John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics*, Kindle Edition. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), location 127.

²⁷ L. Allison Stringer and Leo H. McAvoy, “The Need for Something Different: Spirituality and Wilderness Adventure,” *The Journal of Experiential Education* 15, no.1 (1992): 59.

²⁸ Deal, 137.

humanity relates improperly to it.²⁹ My personal story of surviving a thunderstorm and then witnessing a rainbow is an example of a doorway experience.

Dynamics pathways, the second grouping in Deal's phenomenology, are integrative pathways. The sense of nature as sacred develops and grows as one integrates various strands of experience and knowledge into a greater wholeness. The dynamic pathways are where individuals build layers of meaning, constructing a body of interconnected knowledge and experience that reinforces and magnifies each separate piece.³⁰ Such interconnectedness and depth help the individual to deepen their sense of nature as sacred. From my experience, the connection to the biblical story of the Flood connecting to my experience on the Appalachian Trail is an example of this dynamic pathway activating, leading to a deepening sense of nature's sacredness.

Reverberations are a group of pathways that are similar to dynamic pathways in that they involve integrating experiences into a larger body of deepening wholeness in one's relationship with nature. The essential difference is that reverberations begin through the encounters one has as they grapple with how to live in relationship to the environment.³¹ Said in another way, the way one thinks and acts in light of their relationship to the environment cause reverberations that in turn affect their experience of nature as sacred. The reverberation pathway activation that comes from such reevaluation includes re-evaluating one's relationship with oneself and with nature, recasting one's desired vision for how society and nature relate to one another, challenging oneself to act

²⁹ Deal, 135.

³⁰ Ibid, 179.

³¹ Ibid, 187.

on behalf of a changed vision, and grappling with the complexity of living in a culture that is in many ways abusive of nature.³² An example from my experience is the undertaking of this project and then how what I have learned has impacted my reflections and convictions. These are reverberation pathways active in me that have led to a profoundly deeper sense of nature's sacredness than what I understood before undertaking this project.

Deal's framework of doorways, dynamics, and reverberations provides a pattern for recognizing and understanding how the sense of the sacredness of nature develops in an individual. The framework also invites one to consider ways of promoting further development. This paper contends that organizing ways of activating these pathways in individuals would be a worthy project for the church. To better understand the theological scope of this opportunity, a collection of theological frameworks will now be explored that inform the individual's understanding and provide a rationale for seeing the Act of Ministry as an evangelistic opportunity.

3.2 Choosing a side in the conflict over models of creation theology

Those who make progress in a process of developing a sense of nature's sacredness through Deal's psychospiritual process reveal a growing awareness of a conflict over creation theology. Creation theologies that can emerge from this developmental process challenge one's understanding of their relationship to the rest of

³² Ibid, 236.

the world and the values of other voices they encounter. This section explores the shape of these developing theologies of creation and the conflicts encountered.

3.2.1 Developing the foundational elements of an ecological theology

I contend that individuals engaged in the psychospiritual process in which nature takes on sacred significance are developing elements of an ecological theology. The experiences and further processes of psychospiritual development lead toward questions and concerns of theological weight. Researchers describe terms of ‘theological intimacy’ in the description of the encounters and understandings of people experiencing such impacts.³³ Such experiences may not require prior religious experience or current practice to reveal in those experiencing them such intimations of theological value.³⁴ It is clear that the experience of nature taking on sacred significance has an impact on one’s theological understandings.

The ecologically-oriented convictions and the theological connections developed in those engaged in the psychospiritual process align with emerging voices in the Christian community that are exploring ecologically consistent theologies. Christian ecological theology, or ecotheology, is a broad area with many applications that are still under debate. To some, the work of Christianity to express a robust and theologically valid theology of creation that aligns with ecological principles of conservation has only

³³ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World, A Spiritual Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2015), 9-13.

³⁴ L. Allison Stringer and Leo H. McAvoy, 64.

begun.³⁵ If only in process, the outlines of what a Christian ecotheology must contain are clear to those who see the scope of change the church will need to accept in order to adopt one. In the words of Santmire, “What does a theologically sound and accessible[revisionist] theology of nature look like? It must be biblical, Christological, ecological, and ecclesiological.”³⁶ The relative newness of the field and the many challenges ecotheology presents to the body of Christian theology leave us now more with proposals of what an ecotheology must do in order to be acceptable than with any concise definition or formula.

Defining a comprehensive Christian ecotheology is beyond the scope of this thesis. What is important within this study is that for those developing a sense of nature as intrinsically sacred the developing theological convictions point toward defensible Christian theological positions. Further, these emerging theological positions conflict with the theologies evident in their everyday actions and their assumptions of widely held church doctrine and programs. Before examining key elements in this conflict over creation theology, this paper offers two foundational theological elements emerging in those developing an ecological theology.

³⁵ Peet Van Dyk, “Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology,” *Old Testament Essays* 22, no. 1 (2009): 186–204.

³⁶ H. Paul Santmire, “In God’s Ecology: A Revisionist Theology of Nature,” *The Christian Century* 117 (December 13, 2000): 1302.

3.2.1.1 Intrinsic sacredness

A primary theological development along a course of discovered ecological theology is the conviction that creation is intrinsically sacred. To say that nature as intrinsically sacred means that one holds that nature has always been and is intended to always carry sacred significance. For the one developing an ecological theology, dynamic and reverberation pathways lead one to apply sacredness beyond the initial doorway experiences, both in space and time. Initial doorway experiences may be transcendent encounters from which one returns to the mundane experience for a time, but progress in the psychospiritual process stretches the application of this realized sense of the sacredness of nature. As dynamics pathways connect the experiences to other experiences and knowledge, they also stimulate growth in the individual's sense of what is nature itself.³⁷ Dynamics pathways push the physical boundaries of what is nature even as it deepens the acceptance and understanding of the intrinsic sacred value of all nature.

The use of intrinsic sacredness does not imply that nature is the source of its own sacredness. The doorway encounters and further pathway development through which creation takes on sacred significance point beyond the reality of one's surroundings toward a source of the sacred. Deal's research was ambivalent concerning this point, but for the sake of this project it can be understood that the hierophanies experienced, the

³⁷ Deal, 177-178.

spiritual eyes opened, can lead one to consider the source of creation's sacredness as beyond nature and the physical world.³⁸

The developing theological understandings of one's experiences then become powerful symbolic possessions of the individual, possessions that bring meaning, orientation, and appreciation to their lives.³⁹ Progress in realizing the intrinsic sacredness of creation carries enormous power for orienting the value system of the one engaged in it. The process can drive individuals to consider questions of ultimate beginnings and intentions. These are questions of how and why concerning life and creation itself, of wondering about the "ground of all being."⁴⁰

For many, then, the transcendent spiritual experience carries with it the incredible knowledge of the immanence of God.⁴¹ In this way the initial doorways can be seen as sacramental encounters, where the land carries with it the intimate knowledge of God and his intentions.⁴² The dynamic and reverberation pathways then stretch that realization to encompass all of creation as sacramental. The whole creation becomes a doorway into participating in the sacredness of all things.⁴³

³⁸ Deal, 32, 50-51. The intended application of his research was to inform the practice of psychological counseling. Ambivalence toward doctrines of faith offers counselors wider latitude in offering counsel.

³⁹ Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994), 14.

⁴⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume I: Reason and Revelation, Being and God* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 45.

⁴¹ Deal, 50.

⁴² F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1445.

⁴³ John Chryssavgis, "The Earth as Sacrament: Insights from Orthodox Christian Theology and Spirituality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Spirituality*, ed. Gottlieb, Roger S. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 93.

3.2.1.2 Mutuality and interdependence

A second key theological principle encountered in one developing an ecological theology is that of one's mutuality and interdependence with nature. At issue is the notion of correct relationship, a justified living between nature and the individual which are mutually humbled before their creator. In developing ecotheological convictions one comes to understand that humanity's proper approach toward creation is "to perceive in order to participate, and to enter into mutual relationships of the living things."⁴⁴

Ecotheology seeks to view all of Creation by, "...stressing the importance of the relations and links between all living things rather than interpreting them...in isolation from one another."⁴⁵ Theological models in this view stress the inseparability of creation, that there is something inherently wrong with dividing creation into discrete parts. This is especially important as such divisions lead toward a tendency to create hierarchies, to separate and often elevate humanity away from the rest of creation. Ecotheology stresses that Creation is an essential wholeness, with humanity a fellow participant in a system of seemingly infinite relationships. We are in a mutual and complexly linked system, a creation tied together, and thus we stand as brothers and sisters with all the cosmos before the source of creation.

⁴⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *God and Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 3.

⁴⁵ Lisa H. Sideris, "Religion, Environmentalism, and the Meaning of Ecology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Spirituality*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 450.

3.2.2 Conflict with non-ecological theologies

Individuals developing an ecological theology grow these convictions amid conflicting, non-ecological theologies that are expressed widely in society. The theological understandings of non-ecological creation theologies are not uniform, but they share some key aspects in which to understand the conflict encountered by those developing ecotheological convictions. At their core, non-ecological theologies hold that the relationship between humanity and creation is unequal and that humanity holds a privileged position before God. Many consider this tendency of such non-ecological theologies as evidence of anthropocentrism, a sociological term for how humanity holds itself as the central concern while all other elements of creation are of some lesser value or worse under the control of humanity.⁴⁶ This paper offers two examples of this conflict between ecotheology and the anthropocentric theologies found in the church and society.

3.2.2.1 Conflict in biblical interpretation

One source in which we can see this conflict between anthropocentric and ecotheological theologies is in biblical interpretation. An example of this can be found in interpretations of key passages in Genesis. Anthropocentric interpretations view the gift of “dominion over” the rest of creation as spelled out in Gen 1:26, along with the charge to “subdue” it in Gen 1:28, as a clear sign of God’s intention for humanity to view the

⁴⁶ George Sessions, ed., *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, 1st ed. (Boston: Shambhala; Random House, 1995). x.

rest of creation as a resource that we control.⁴⁷ The rest of creation is ours to do with as we please.

By contrast, a view of nature that incorporates its intrinsic sacredness and our interdependence with it leads to strong disagreement with this interpretation. Several writers offer other ways to understand the text that are more in harmony with these ecotheological values. One such path chooses to focus on the role humanity is intended to play. That role may be unique due to the gifts we are given in our creation, but it comes with an equal sense of unique responsibility. In such an interpretation we are to be sensitive to how we treat the rest of God's creation, seeing our unique gifts and strengths as a benefit for all things, which are all called good by the creator.⁴⁸ From this position "dominion over" from Gen 1:26 could be better translated as "mastery among," a phrase far more indicative of a shepherding, caretaker, or stewardship role.⁴⁹

Likewise, the portion of Gen 1:28 translated as "fill the earth and subdue it" is understood by ecotheologists through examining the phrase in terms of the context of the original community in which the Genesis story was shared. In this ecotheological perspective the power to subdue is not aimed at a childish victory to be enjoyed once it is accomplished but at the difficult work of managing our power in light of God's overarching love for creation. Any power we perceive that we have over the land is to be held in check by our understanding of its sacredness in God's eyes. Our hand always

⁴⁷ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989.

⁴⁸ Davis, 42-47.

⁴⁹ Davis, 58. Biblical translations cited here that differ from the NRSV are her own.

seeks to work in tune with the blessed status of the land, for in such ways we honor our mutuality and interdependence with it.

3.2.2.2 Conflict in eschatology

Another way of seeing how anthropocentric theologies conflict with ecological theologies is found in examining eschatological expectations. Anthropocentric theologies tend to point toward an eschatology of spiritual ascent.⁵⁰ The ultimate end of humanity is an ascendancy away from the rest of creation. Such theologies can even interpret transcendent experiences in nature as pointing toward this eventual elevation of humanity away from the rest of the land.⁵¹

These anthropocentric eschatologies may also incorporate a three-tiered model of creation, with a distant God of judgement who will, at the end of time, sort out the good of humanity toward this heaven while condemning the rest to an underworld or hell.⁵² The rest of creation gets left behind as no longer bearing worth without humanity in it. In this paradigm, creation's ultimate future is relegation to meaninglessness. Those holding an anthropocentric theology may honor the rest of creation as the stage setting for the drama of God and humanity working out this anthropocentric story of salvation and damnation, but the resulting subjugation of the rest of creation is the same. Creation could be an honored, even significant domain for the time being, but not a mutual partner worthy of a mutual future.

⁵⁰ H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*, Kindle Edition. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), location 452.

⁵¹ Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, location 206.

⁵² Bass, *Grounded*, 3.

For those developing an ecological theology, creation's mutual value and our interdependence with it requires that the rest of creation have a mutual hope for eschatological salvation. The experiences of transcendence by those on this path lead not to a hope of spiritual ascent away from the land but to a humble return to it, land that is restored to its intended blessedness.⁵³ This is an eschatology of the promised land, where the scars upon creation due to humanity's inability to successfully fulfill its role are healed in the fullness of time, the time when humanity will finally be free of its brokenness and thus live in full harmony with all.⁵⁴ While many congregations and denominations focus on the individual human story of salvation, and thus continue to reduce the rest of creation to mere backdrop, those developing the foundations of an ecological theology hunger for a community that supports their vision of a mutual future for all creation.

3.2.3 Conclusion - choosing to reject anthropocentrism

Ecotheological interpretations of scripture and eschatology, as well as theological work in other areas, offers hope to those developing the sense of nature's intrinsic sacredness and our mutual interrelationship with it. The possibility of building a community of faith that is more fully grounded in these principles attracts those for whom these theological convictions are arising. At best, though, religious communities approach ecological theology with ambiguity. Evidence of non-ecological theologies

⁵³ Matthew Jayanth, "Ecologization of Eschatology: An Ecotheological Understanding of Human Longing and Fulfillment," *Disputatio philosophica* 3, no. 1 (2001).

⁵⁴ Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, location 3328.

found in prominent church statements and even the prayers used at worship services become glaring offenses to those for whom these theological convictions are developing. While Episcopalians might pray for God to “give us a reverence for the earth as your own creation,” to follow that by seeking to “use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory” seems to place humanity’s needs as the principle object.⁵⁵ Likewise, to pray, “for the just and proper use of your creation,” and respond immediately with, “for the victims of hunger, fear, injustice, and oppression,” strongly suggests creation is a resource for human security and freedom alone.⁵⁶ Creation’s value often seems judged solely by its value to humanity and not by its wholeness as the beloved creation of God, rich with an eschatological hope beyond the limits of human definition.

The relegation of Creation to that of a resource for humanity becomes repugnant to those in whom a sense of its intrinsic sacredness and our mutual interrelationship with it are developing. In their understanding of religious practice, the apparent lack of focus on an egalitarian ecological relationship in prominent voices of Christian teaching, liturgy, and action leaves those undergoing the process of the sanctification of nature with deep concerns. The importance of religious practice and of the value of relationship with a local congregation for spiritual support are challenged when a person experiences the sacredness of creation diminished or ignored. Thus, for those both in the church and those outside who are developing a sense of nature’s sacredness, the only choice is to reject non-ecological, anthropocentric theologies.

⁵⁵ *Book of Common Prayer, 1979*, 388.

⁵⁶ *Book of Common Prayer, 1979*, 392.

Since the theological convictions of those developing a sense of nature as sacred can find support from Christian theological reasoning, the church can and should provide opportunities for supporting such a notion. While theological debates inside the church may not be resolved, the church can still act in faith. Relationship building across perspectives serves to further the psychospiritual development process for all who engage in it. Such relationship building also benefits the church's work of discerning the will of God by furthering the exploration of ecotheology. Deepening relationships with people outside the church who are developing theological convictions can then aid in drawing their voices into the work of theological exploration and ecclesiological expression. These voices currently outside the church's life may bring just the gifts necessary for the reforming of the church toward sound ecotheology.

3.3 Bridges toward evangelistic community

The conceptual frameworks drawn into this work so far point to a psychospiritual process at work in individuals and an understanding of the theological conflict encountered by those developing an ecological theology. A key element of the thesis that grounds the study is that a small group exploring environmental themes offers an opportunity for relationship building that has evangelistic elements. The psychospiritual process may only raise foundational elements of an ecological theology, and much work remains to build on those foundations to form Christian faith in community. However, bridges can be built toward a community that includes such a possibility. Two complementary frameworks help to construct the bridge: a model of post-Christendom evangelism and a bioecological model of human development.

3.3.1 Post-Christendom evangelism

Many have pointed to our present time as the beginning of a “Post-Christian Age”, where Christianity in many ways no longer defines western culture like it has for centuries.⁵⁷ The transition is observed as a process of secularization, where the voices of religious institutions wane and non-religious forces play an increased role in guiding social norms.⁵⁸ A prominent social norm during the Age of Christendom was to participate in a church congregation. Membership was assumed due to one being a part of the culture.⁵⁹ That age is no more. Measurable and often massive declines in church attendance have led to a profusion of efforts to revision the work of attracting new members to churches. Having so long enjoyed the benefit of defining culture and thus church membership, the church now struggles to grasp the contours of the work of evangelism in the now post-Christendom world.

Explaining why the Age of Christendom is ending is not as important here as drawing on a framework towards which the church can adapt its evangelical work considering the loss of the cultural power it once enjoyed. Diana Butler Bass, in her work *Christianity after Religion*, offers such a framework for this adaptation. She points to how, during the Age of Christendom, member acquisition and support followed a three-stage model of believing, behaving, and then belonging. A prospective new member first

⁵⁷ Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley, *Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 24-25.

⁵⁸ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Kindle Edition. (New York, NY: Open Road Integrated Media, 2011), 107.

⁵⁹ Payne and Beazley, 23.

chose a religious community with which to affiliate based on how its beliefs aligned with their own. Then the developing new member learned how to behave in that community. Finally, they earned the sense of belonging by living out the first two steps in their new community.⁶⁰

Noting that the post-Christendom era has brought a renewed emphasis on the spiritual journey of the individual, Bass observes that the model flips. People find that they belong together because of shared experiences and outlooks. Individuals learn how to behave as a group as they grow closer together. Finally, such gathered communities establish an expression of belief based on their lives together.⁶¹ This framework offers a description of how a small group experience reflecting on environmental experiences can have evangelistic elements. Individuals experiencing this common psychospiritual processes discover one another as partners through sharing their reflections. This new partnership motivates them to change their behaviors in line with their growing sense of common beliefs. In this new flipped paradigm, belonging leads to behaviors and then to beliefs.

This model of viewing a small group encounter between those currently participating in congregational life and those outside it contrasts with other models that would view bringing together two groups from different religious perspectives as a comparative encounter. The assumption of a comparative encounter is that mutual respect for the differences between the two groups is important so that their unique theological

⁶⁰ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 201.

⁶¹ Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 204-209.

stances and practices can benefit from comparison.⁶² Each group benefits by growing a greater appreciation for their unique character and aims. This paper argues that, unlike such an encounter between groups that hold different beliefs, the common ecotheological beliefs under development at the core of both groups is a starting point for a common journey who's end very well could be Christian community.

At least here then the social process of the small group intervention aligns with a post-Christendom understanding of evangelism. Again, though, it is acknowledged that only some fundamental elements of a Christian theology are shared here, and so the community that could form only exemplifies a starting point. Key here is that the experiences that create the context for discovering belonging point toward beliefs that are finding increasing support inside the Christian Church, and thus constitute a possible future for all.

3.3.2 Bioecological model of human development

Reinforcing this post-Christian framework for evangelism is a model of human development that highlights how a small group encounter would help further the psychospiritual process of developing a sense of nature as sacred and help the individuals find common links experientially and theologically. Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development understands that relationships with others, if those relationships possess certain qualities, promote development in the person. Further, this

⁶² Edward Foley, *Theological Reflection across Religious Traditions: The Turn to Reflective Believing*. (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2015), 92.

development then impacts those with whom they are in relationship. The individual “is viewed not merely as a tabula rasa on which the (social) environment makes its impact, but as a growing, dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the milieu in which it resides.”⁶³ We are not only built for relationship as social beings, but we have the agency to impact others and are impacted by them in such ways that we all, through relationships, experience substantive changes to our behaviors, beliefs, and emotional well-being.

This mutual impact is called reciprocity. The force of reciprocity can be enhanced by the social context.⁶⁴ A small group sharing common experiences is an especially effective setting for promoting such development since the positively received presence of fellow small group members leads to stronger forces of development.⁶⁵ Depending on the amount of time spent together, the presence of positive feelings towards one another, and the personal willingness to allow others to impact oneself, mutual development can be understood as a result of these potent social forces affecting the individual.⁶⁶ Bronfenbrenner’s later research also pointed toward how personal characteristics, the type of social process they are engaged in, and factors of time all play key roles in understanding how a small group, or any social interaction, impacts the reciprocal development.⁶⁷

⁶³ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development*. Kindle Edition. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), location 373.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, location 813-816.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, location 1091.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, location 803-858.

⁶⁷ Jonathan R.H. Tudge et al., “Uses and Misuses of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory of Human Development,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 1, no. December 2009 (n.d.): 199–202.

This bioecological model invites us to see a small group as a powerful opportunity for furthering the development of the individual's sense of nature's sacredness. The impactful relationships that can form amongst a group sharing common experiences both demonstrate these strong reciprocal forces of personal development and can be the very enrichment and connections of the dynamic pathways of Deal's framework. This bioecological model of human development also opens the door for us to see the evangelistic opportunity. The growth of common identity, of discovering a group with which to belong, builds the bridge upon which the community can venture together. The model also connects to the post-Christendom evangelism process in that reciprocity leads toward the development of behaviors and beliefs.

3.4 Conclusion: pilgrimage

These three sets of frameworks highlight how the literature informs the opportunity at the heart of this study. First, a psychospiritual process at work in individuals explains a dynamic and compelling system in which people can develop and grow a sense of nature's sacredness. Second, individuals experiencing this process encounter conflict as their lived theological convictions surrounding the environment clash with voices in the church and the greater community. Their growing sense of nature as intrinsically sacred and their intended mutual and interdependent relationship with creation drives them to choose the side of ecological theologies still under development in the church. Third, there is an opportunity for individuals to explore their experiences in

these areas that constitutes an evangelical opportunity when considering our post-Christendom setting.

A metaphor that these frameworks point toward is one of pilgrimage. Individual pilgrims, inspired to move forward on an ethical or spiritual journey by their own initial experiences, can discover the strength of a common community of similar travelers who in turn shape and encourage one another on their journey. This discovery of fellow pilgrims opens avenues for holy listening, the enrichment of the sense of holiness in one's life, and a group of companions with which to journey.⁶⁸ The metaphor of pilgrimage also helps one to accept that supporting such a community of pilgrims may be a potential bridge toward Christian community. The hope of journeying together into that potential future makes it worthy of the investment in time and resources for a congregation to support. The specifics of that investment in the form of an Act of Ministry and how a phenomenological understanding of their experience was developed is explored next.

⁶⁸ Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism*, 35-38.

4. Methodology

This chapter describes the qualitative methodology used in this thesis to gain a phenomenological understanding of the experience of participants in an Act of Ministry. The Act of Ministry came about in response to the opportunity to explore the mutually held concerns over the environment by members of a church community and a group of local leaders in environmental activism who did not have a church affiliation. That opportunity led to a series of midwinter meetings between eight selected participants where they discussed their experiences of nature as a sacred resource in their lives.

The qualitative study of the Act of Ministry seeks to answer one question:

1. What is the experience of the Act of Ministry for the participants?

This chapter has two parts. The first section of the chapter describes the Act of Ministry. It includes descriptions of the initial meetings with leaders, the process of selecting and soliciting participants, and a narrative description of the Act of Ministry itself. The second section of this chapter describes the research design. It includes a review of the research questions that guided the study, descriptions of the participants, the setting for focus groups that served as the primary source of data collection, the question protocol used for focus group interviews, and the coding process used for drawing phenomenological themes from the data.

4.1 Act of Ministry

The Act of Ministry consisted of three weekday evening meetings of where the group of eight participants discussed their experiences of nature as a spiritual resource. Participants were drawn from two circles of people involved in environmental activism:

those currently outside the practice of a religious community and those participating in Trinity's congregation. Titled "Nature and Spirituality: Reflection for Action," these meetings offered the eight participants an opportunity to talk about their experiences and perspectives with the goal of offering "support for your life as it relates to our environment."⁶⁹ The meetings were held late January to mid-February 2018 at the local outdoor retail store owned by Alice and Liv.

4.1.1 Initial conversations and planning

Alice and Liv met with me multiple times in the fall of 2017 to begin planning for the Act of Ministry. These initial planning meetings varied in terms of timing and length, depending on when our busy schedules allowed and what issues were being reviewed. The meetings always took place at their place of business, as this was most convenient for them.

To help Alice act as a co-leader of the Act of Ministry, I introduced both Alice and Liv to some of the conceptual frameworks at the heart of my research during one of the first meetings. Our discussion of Deal's doorways, dynamics, and reverberations deeply impacted Alice and Liv. They expressed that this discussion helped to explain the connection between what they had experienced and how religion and spirituality resources could name those experiences. Both reflected how enriching just having that conversation was and how much they hoped it would be as meaningful for the rest of the group when we met.

⁶⁹ See Appendix A for Invitation Letter to participants.

We settled on hosting three meetings and set the dates for late January and early February 2018 after Alice, Liv, and I realized that our families' holiday schedules made Christmas break not convenient. I had originally hoped to hold the experience during the Christmas season, keying into a perhaps romantic notion of the winter solstice and midwinter as a time for rest, reflection, and spiritual musing, but the later dates were still early enough in our area so that the meetings could be an enticing, warm respite from the cold.

Our discussions then turned to recruiting individual participants for the meetings. We set a goal of having eight to twelve people including the three of us. Alice and Liv selected and approached individuals from the religiously-unaffiliated environmental activists they knew. I selected and approached members of the Trinity church community who I felt would be able to, due to interest and personality, interact supportively with Alice and Liv's selectees. We began approaching individuals in October, and the final participant selected and confirmed by late December of 2018.

Alice, Liv, and I organized hospitality needs for the meetings. One major decision was where to host the group. We considered using the church or using a neutral location like a coffeeshop or even a participant's home. The church we felt could suggest a bias or covert agenda to the unchurched participants, so that was eliminated as a possibility. We then considered using the outdoor store. Alice and Liv's inventiveness and comfort at offering their store as a home for interactions like this in the past led us to think that their store was just the atmosphere we wanted for the participants. With that choice made, we found three Wednesday evenings where our schedule was open and planned light snacks and drinks to support a 7PM start.

Once past the holidays, we checked in at least weekly throughout the final weeks of planning. In the final preparatory meetings, we confirmed the participants, reviewed the topics and hospitality details, and shared support for one another with our excitement and energy. Two weeks prior to the first meeting of the experience, we sent out an initial survey⁷⁰ that primed the participants for the topics and ideas that they would be asked to reflect upon and let Alice and I confirm that our selections would make good participants. Alice, Liv, and I continued holding meetings between each of the experience meetings themselves to check in on how we felt the meetings were progressing and to review plans for the next meeting.

4.1.2 The three meetings

A narrative description of each meeting follows below. These narrative descriptions are offered here in order to provide context for the research drawn from the Act of Ministry. Written leader guides structured the meetings.⁷¹ No meeting went exactly according to plan, however, and so each description below includes indications of why these deviations from plan were experienced.

4.1.2.1 First session

We gathered at the outdoor store at 7PM on Wednesday, January 31, 2018. Even though most of the participants knew each other at least by acquaintance, we began with introductions. Along with their names, who invited them, and one reason they were

⁷⁰ See Appendix B for survey form

⁷¹ See Appendix C for the leader guides

interested in participating, I asked them to respond to the following prompt: describe the earliest memory you have of being in nature. Offering the prompt was more than an icebreaker: it immediately opened the group to considering a doorway experience. This opening activity took more than the planned thirty minutes for each person including the leaders to offer their introduction.

Following the opening activity, I gave a more in-depth review of the project, offered my thanks for their participation, and reminded the participants that their participation was voluntary. I then offered the group a metaphor for understanding what we were aiming to do. I used the image of stocking fish in waterways. Our reflections were like fish added to a pond that we could then fish in, seeking deeper meaning. We aiming to fish both for inspiration for what we as individuals and as a group might be called to do on behalf of the environment and for our own spiritual nourishment.

I then took fifteen minutes to offer a description of Deal's doorways, dynamics, and reverberations pathways through which one develops a sense that nature is sacred. I pointed to how the word sacred might be off-putting for some, and that research points to less religiously connoted words for such an experience that would be more acceptable for groups with mixed experience and familiarity.⁷² I especially focused on the term transcendence as one that engaged both psychological and spiritual language fields. Transcendence then could be a safe middle ground for us no matter our perspective on spirituality and religion.

⁷² Deal, 143-159.

The meeting continued with Alice and I offering two deeper reflections. I offered my backpacking experience on the mountain and she offered her visit to Standing Rock. We worked together to point out the various doorways, dynamics, and reverberations at work in us that we could identify as adding that sense of transcendence to our experience and thus our valuing of nature as spiritually significant.

By this time the ninety minutes we had planned to use was almost over. As a homework assignment in preparation for our next meeting, I asked each person to prepare a reflection on a personal experience of nature as Alice and I had offered earlier. I asked them to especially draw connections between other experiences and knowledge they had gained over their lifetime. In this way the sharing of their doorway experiences and dynamic connections could serve as openings for others in the group to make dynamics connections of their own.

4.1.2.2 Second session

The second session convened one week later on Wednesday, February 7, 2018. I led a brief review of our past meeting, emphasizing that our intent today was to continue stocking the pond with our reflections, insights, and joy. To afford more time for the work, the group was split. The participants formed two groups of four, each with two members from the church affiliated cohort and two from the unchurched cohort. I led one group and Alice led the other. As group leaders we invited each person to offer their reflection and then after each reflection invited the rest of the group to offer connections from their own perspectives. We used three questions to help guide these conversations:

- 1) What doorways in our lives does this reflection connect to or remind you of?
- 2) What dynamic connections do you experience as you consider the presenter's reflection?
- 3) What actions or changes of perspective does the presentation prompt in you?

This work took the entire ninety minutes. We concluded by briefly coming together as a full group to report out highlights from the conversations and then to assign homework for the third session. The homework for session three was to review the cultural voices that inform their environmental views. The participants were asked to return ready to share their thoughts of how those voices impact US public environmental policy, and what the voices might think of our local community's relationship to the environment.

4.1.2.3 Third session

Our third meeting was held one week later on Wednesday, February 14, 2018. The general format of the meeting was a brainstorming session for us to collect ideas for action and advocacy in our community. We began with the group gathered around a newsprint easel. After an opening cycle of general check-ins, I asked each person to write up to five post-it-notes. Each post-it note was to briefly describe an action that a person's homework sources prompted in them. The aim was for each participant to share five environmental action ideas. After five minutes for writing and then posting their notes on the newsprint, we took time for each person to describe what they had posted. The participants were encouraged to make connections to and between other posted ideas. We then held a second round for posting ideas, drawing inspiration from each other's comments and posts.

Following this brainstorming, I had the group work together to cluster the ideas, focusing on common characteristics. Anyone could stand, move post-it notes into different categories, and share in conversations and explanations of choices. I noticed as they clustered the ideas that their posted actions fell into the two major areas of education or advocacy, with just a few that fell in between these two. I chose to interject a brief comment describing a spectrum of community action where different actions could be sorted based on how much they challenge the community and us to take direct action.⁷³ The list of grouped post-it notes quickly moved into a spectrum of community action, with more educational activities to the left and more advocacy-styled activities to the right.

With the positive energy of the room and the desire to push for us to develop some first steps toward taking up these ideas and putting them into action, I broke the group into the two groups from session two and asked each group to take one idea from the newsprint and then pitch to Alice and myself their idea for how to pursue them. They were asked to think of us as the institutional stakeholders they needed for moving forward. We agreed that this was a fun imitation of the popular television program at the time called “Shark Tank.” This helped us focus our remaining time and demonstrate a bit of progress, as a more thorough exploration of some of the ideas would take weeks or even months for research, preparation, and implementation. Each group pitched a

⁷³ David Gortner, “GCM 930 Public Witness Community Partnership Class” (Virginia Theological Seminary, June 26, 2017).

proposal, and following the proposals Alice and I agreed we would not pick a winner as they were both exciting. The process was more important than the product.

While we had at that point spent the allotted ninety minutes for our session, I wanted to conclude our time with a guided mediation. After offering anyone who needed to leave the opportunity to go (no one did), I led a thirty-minute meditation involving an encounter with a valued mentor or friend who offered a word of encouragement. This was meant as a closing blessing for the participants, even as it stretched our time together past 9PM that night.

4.1.3 Act of Ministry concluding thoughts

Most participants voiced a desire to continue meeting in some format. I offered that once I had collected data for my study that I would be open to meeting and continuing our conversations. The possibility of building on this ministry added extra incentive to complete the data gathering process that fed the research project.

4.2 Research design

The research design was a phenomenological study. The research aimed to point toward “the *essence* of the experience for individuals [by] incorporating ‘what’ they have experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it.”⁷⁴ To point toward the essence of the experience the research will “construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet...remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any

⁷⁴ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, Fourth edition. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 79.

explication of meaning can reveal.”⁷⁵ The research sought to describe what it was like for the participants to attend and interact in three meetings about their experience of the relationship between active engagement with the environment and spirituality, with the goal of pointing toward the Act of Ministry’s meaning for them. Describing the essence of the experience is the goal of such a design, not an analysis or explanation of the participant’s experience.⁷⁶

In particular, this study used an interpretive phenomenological approach. An important part of interpretive phenomenology involved bracketing of my own experience with the Act of Ministry so that the research could attain a rich description of the participants’ experience. This bracketing of my experience was not intended to exclude my influence on the research. Instead, raising up my own experience with the Act of Ministry allowed the research to “come to terms with (my) assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character.”⁷⁷ Interpretive phenomenology in this way appreciates the uniqueness of the observer’s position and how that shapes the resulting description even as the goal is to move past it. Interpretive phenomenology even points toward how the research process itself then shapes the researcher, in that it invites the researcher to “become more fully part of...the world.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, Second Edition. Kindle Edition. (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 18.

⁷⁶ Creswell, 77.

⁷⁷ Van Manen, 47.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

4.2.1 Data collection

Data for the phenomenological study came from focus group interviews. Each participant agreed to meet with me following the Act of Ministry as part of a focus group. Two focus groups were held: one for the unchurched participants and another for the church member participants. An individual interview was also held for an unchurched participant who could not attend their assigned focus group due to a family emergency.

The focus groups followed a prepared question protocol.⁷⁹ Only one question changed between the two focus groups. When asking about the experience of discussing one's spiritual life in the group, that question attempted to honor the difference in church participation for members of each focus group. Each focus group was audio and video recorded, and transcripts prepared for use in analysis.

Each focus group opened with a prologue where I described how to approach participating in a focus group and my expectations for them in participating. My comments included that the aim was for them to discuss their experiences with one another. I encouraged them not to seek a single consensus opinion but to hear each other's experience and then use that to better describe their own perspectives. I reiterated that they were not required to participate in any way and could choose not to answer any of the questions. Except for one person asking not to answer one question, participation was active, engaged, and to my perception positive and supportive of the research throughout.

⁷⁹ See Appendix D for Focus Group Question Protocol

Two avenues of supplementary data were available but not utilized for the study. The pre-meeting survey served to prime participants for the work in the sessions and offered Alice and me another way of vetting potential participants. The responses did not factor into the research process for several reasons. Three of the participants never returned their surveys, meaning barely more than half contributed data. Of those who did, none were then able to recall the voices of environmental opinion they listed on the surveys when we discussed them at the end of the second session nor when I referenced them during the focus group interviews. The lack of responses and the apparent lack of impact made any data that could be gleaned less important to the research process and I decided to ignore it.

A second avenue of supplementary data not used in the research consisted of the results from an activity during the focus group interviews where participants ranked the action ideas the group generated in the third session.⁸⁰ First, participants ranked them in order of their interest personally. Second, they ranked them in order of their importance to the Warren community. I emphasized that any difference between a person's two ranked lists was acceptable, expected, and healthy. This activity provided valuable knowledge personally for Alice and me going forward as we continue efforts to organize the local community around environmental action, but it did not yield thick description to inform a phenomenological understanding of the participants' experience in the Act of Ministry.

⁸⁰ See Appendix E for Focus Group activity form

4.2.2 Participant descriptions

Below is a brief description of each participant. This information is drawn from the self-reported demographic information on the pre-experience survey and my own knowledge of the participants.

Table 1. Unchurched Participants

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Employment</i>	<i>Family and Home Status</i>
Alice	39	Self-employed outdoor store owner	Partner of Liv, mother of three, niece of Petra and Brian
Liv	43	Works with Alice	Partner of Alice, mother of three
David	62	Retired federal employee	Married
Karen	42	Part-time employee of Alice and Liv	Married, mother of three
Elaine	53	Local healthcare professional	Single

Note: David has children, but his children no longer live in the home

Table 2. Church Participants

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Employment</i>	<i>Family and Home Status</i>
Myself	42	Episcopal Priest	Married, father of three
Petra	71	Retired federal employee	Divorced from Brian, aunt by marriage to Alice
Brian	74	Retired tradesperson	Divorced from Petra, uncle to Alice
Nathan	57	Forester	Married, father of two, including Trevor
Trevor	23	Forester	Single, living at home with his parents

Note: Petra and Brian have children, but their children no longer live in their homes.

4.2.3 Setting

The first focus group, for the unchurched participants, was held on the evening of March 15, 2018 at Alice and Liv's outdoor store. The second, for the church participants, was held on the afternoon of March 25, 2018 in my office at the church. The interview with Karen, the unchurched participant who could not attend her assigned focus group due to a family emergency, at the outdoor store on April 6, 2018. The two main focus

groups went for over two hours, while the final interview lasted just over one hour. In each situation we sat in a small circle, very similarly to how we gathered for the Act of Ministry. The camera and microphone were placed in view of all the participants.

4.2.4 Data analysis

Several stages of data analysis unfolded in pursuit of a phenomenological description of the essence of the experience of the Act of Ministry for the participants.⁸¹ Initially, the focus group recordings were listened to and the transcripts read multiple times to grow a sense of general themes and observations. Significant statements were coded using a provisional coding strategy.⁸² These codes aligned with how participants' statements exemplified Bronfenbrenner's human development theory, Deal's pathways of developing a sense of nature as sacred, and Bass's post-Christendom evangelism framework. This process did lead to confidence in the design and potential outcomes of the Act of Ministry, but did not yield a clear sense of the essence of the participants' experience.

Next, a more thorough pass through the data was undertaken with the intention of getting past any connections to the conceptual frameworks and Act of Ministry design. All of the transcripts were coded again, this time using values coding.⁸³ This method seeks to code significant phrases and passages in participants' responses by what values, attitudes, and beliefs are being expressed. This pass resulted in 434 coded citations.

⁸¹ Creswell and Poth, 193-195.

⁸² Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3E [Third edition]. (Los Angeles ; London: SAGE, 2016), 168-9.

⁸³ Saldaña, 131-133.

These coded citations were explored with the desire to find interconnections between them and then grouped into initial clusters. The codes from the initial provisional coding process were then reintroduced, clarifying the understanding of those clusters in terms of the conceptual frameworks. Eventually, seven themes emerged. Key exemplar citations that help to highlight each theme were identified in the transcripts and brief descriptions were written of each theme. The results chapter describes the themes through a deep exploration of the exemplar citations.

4.2.5 Trustworthiness of research methodology

The research pursues trustworthiness in the results through multiple strategies.⁸⁴ To increase the transferability of the results, the findings utilize “rich, thick descriptions” of the exemplar citations that both explain how they embody the theme and contextualize the citation in terms of the speaker offering it and the prompt or prompts that led to it. To offer confirmability of the results, the full transcripts of the focus groups are included in the appendix for critical review.⁸⁵

The research utilized many strategies to maintain objectivity. Throughout this thesis I point toward my own experiences to invite readers into the shape of my perspectives and potential biases. In the results descriptions of each theme I highlight my own perspectives as I raise up that theme’s evidence from the transcripts. I also offer

⁸⁴ Creswell, 246. While Creswell favors the term validity and its quantitative components for these elements, he offers how his observations align with what others describe as trustworthiness, the term I favor.

⁸⁵ Creswell, 251-253.

below a reflection on how the Act of Ministry itself, the relevant experiences that led to it, and the research process, impacted me.

4.2.6 Personal experiences with the phenomenon

Trustworthiness in the results is also improved by reflecting on my own experiences. Here I offer a section of reflections on my personal experience with the phenomenon at question, namely the Act of Ministry. Demonstrating an awareness of my personal experiences serves to bracket my experiences and perspectives, a vital element in interpretive phenomenological work.

My own experiences in nature have had a profound effect on my life in terms of acquiring a sense of the sacred. My experience on the mountaintop in 1998 described in the introduction continues to serve as a touchstone to my life, grounding my relationship with God with its transformational effects. This seminal experience hiking on the Appalachian Trail along with countless others from that summer and my life since leads me to see each of Deal's pathways at work in me, all working to grow a sense of nature's sacredness.

Before participating and leading this project, I had few opportunities for small group exploration of my sense of nature's sacredness. While my experiences in nature and their impact on my faith life were not secret, times to explore these experiences with others who claim similar transcendent experiences in their lives were only coincidental and informal.

My leadership of and participation in these conversations impacted me in many ways. Beyond helping to motivate the development of this document and its arguments,

the experience has energized my reflections on the theological ramifications of sacred encounters in nature for the life of the church. Likewise, this experience has led me to celebrate the sacramental ramifications of experiences in the natural world, a space where, until now, I had held the spheres of “church sacrament” and “natural sacrament” separate from one another.⁸⁶ Such a distinction no longer makes sense to me. I feel less able to defend such a posture. The experience of a small group space to reflect on nature as sacred has certainly been transformative for me, an evangelizing encounter where the good news of God emerged and has inspired great change in me.

4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I described the Act of Ministry and the phenomenological research study that drew on data offered by the participants in focus group interviews. I reviewed the Act of Ministry’s development and its three sessions. I described the philosophy guiding the phenomenological study and the data collection process, offered a brief description of the participants, and testified to the trustworthiness of the study. I also offered a description of my experience with the Act of Ministry and its associated themes.

The aim of the phenomenological study of the Act of Ministry is to develop a description of the participant’s experience, guided by the research question, “what is the experience of discussing nature’s sacredness in this context?” In the following chapter

⁸⁶ John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics*, Kindle Edition. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), location 146.

(Chapter 5) I describe that experience, categorizing the participant's reflections offered in the focus groups as falling into seven themes. The discussion in Chapter 6 will then take these seven themes into conversation with the contexts and conceptual frameworks previously described in order to support the thesis that by sharing reflections in a small group setting about the experience of the sacredness of nature, churched and unchurched persons will build relational bridges toward mutual evangelistic community.

5. Findings

I found seven themes which described the essence of the experience of the Act of Ministry for the participants through analyzing the focus group transcripts. Below, a brief introduction to each theme is followed by key citations from the focus group responses that exemplify the theme. A discussion of the citation or group of citations follows, including background information, connections to other answers the participants offer, and key conceptual frameworks. Through this discussion of the citations I raise up the essence of the experience of the Act of Ministry for the participants.

Table 3. Seven Themes

1	Initial fears and surprises
2	Validation of self
3	Valuable and common purpose
4	Desire for personal growth
5	Desire for greater community change
6	Not my belief system
7	Location of God

5.1 Initial fears and surprises

Many participants named initial fears that they confronted through the Act of Ministry. Participant's initial fears arose from many sources. Their responses indicated that participants experienced a pleasant surprise as such fears abated during the course of the Act of Ministry. One such source of initial fear stemmed from insecurity over the religious and spiritual topic matter. Both Alice and David noted how the Act of Ministry helped them overcome such fears when asked to comment about how it felt to discuss spirituality during the meetings.

Alice: I feel like I got very comfortable that first night when you asked who or what your earliest memory was. I felt like that right there, regardless of just... to hear everybody talk about being little and having the experience of nature and the effect that had on them. I've always put nature and spirituality together. That's my church out there, always has been. I guess when I learned that everybody in the room, regardless of who goes where and does what, I was comfortable. I felt like we were all sort of on the same playing field and had the same kind of connection. (125)⁸⁷

David: I had a little trepidation about it because I haven't gone to church really since I was in college which is a long time ago. We raised our daughter a Catholic actually, or we at least sent her to a Catholic school but that doesn't make her a Catholic. She decided not to be Catholic. I have this problem of-- organized religion doesn't necessarily mean you're spiritual and vice versa. Like Alice, when I go outdoors, I guess that always felt like a cathedral.

I was a little worried but when you said transcendence, you had me at that point because one, I'm an old English major. I've read quite a bit of literature based on that idea of transcendence. It permeates literature by the way. It's almost everywhere. There is an intellectual way I could relate to it which was non-threatening. It was interesting. (126)

Finding comfort was a happy surprise for Alice and David. Alice found the discovery of common ground with others involved in the Act of Ministry provided emotional reassurance. David found a link to his intellectual resources that helped him to find connection to the rest of the group's experiences. Prior experiences left Alice and David feeling guarded and unprepared for the topics encountered in the Act of Ministry. They were surprised as they connected with others they may not have chosen to encounter otherwise.

Others found surprise in the collapse of stereotype-based assumptions. Two participants, Nathan and Trevor, are foresters. Professional foresters are university-trained outdoor workers who are typically involved in tree harvesting, where they use

⁸⁷ Numbers in parenthesis refer to the page number in the Transcripts (Appendix F) where the cited text is located.

their expertise to advise lumber companies and the government forestry service by identifying tree species, conducting environmental surveys of forest tracts, and estimating the value of standing timber. Many environmental activists hold a negative view of foresters and make assumptions about their motivations and perspectives. Both Liv, the co-owner of the outdoor recreation store, and Brian the retired tradesperson, voiced how their initial assumptions collapsed after encountering Nathan and Trevor.

Liv: Kind of made me think not to judge a book by its cover like with (Nathan and Trevor). They typically wouldn't be somebody I would approach. You know what I'm saying? Like burly all that. They're not like what I think. Just give people a chance to hear what they have to say first. (127)

Brian: One of the things that struck me, I had mentioned that I knew where a white cedar is and someone had carved in it. You had said, "I'd like to see that tree." (Speaking to Nathan) I thought that's wonderful. Someone wants to go look at that tree, which again shows how much we have in common....

For me, I come in...I have a negative feeling about the forestry. To me, they sold their soul to the oil patch, to whoever wants to do whatever and it really bugs me. Then when I meet two foresters and know that that's not what they are in it for. They're in it because it's important, and so that is-- I wish I knew somebody, and I'm sure they were in forestry that are like you guys. I had a bad experience when we had the No Kinzua Resort Rally. I dealt face to face with them. And A) they sell their soul. It comforted me to know that there's professionals out there that know what they're doing they, that care. If they say the tree needs cutting, it needs cutting. (143-4)

In her comment, Liv echoed David who earlier had used "don't judge a book by its cover" in how he characterized the experience of meeting new people, and several of her companions in the unchurched focus group interview would later also use the phrase. Liv connected it directly to her experience of encountering Nathan and Trevor. Even Brian in the church participant focus group, who knew Nathan and Trevor from the worshipping community, found his initial expectations of the foresters surprisingly overturned through the Act of Ministry. Liv and Brian's negative stereotypes collapsed as they shared together in the experience of encountering Nathan and Trevor. Interestingly,

Nathan and Trevor's experience mirrored Liv's as they shared how their stereotypical views of women like Liv who are involved in outdoor recreation and activism collapsed through the experience in the Act of Ministry.

Nathan: Well, I have to admit that I've used the phrase "hairy arm-pitted, granola crunchin' earth muffin" more than once. [laughter]

Trevor: That's said by both of us frequently.

Nathan: I used that term more than once and probably should not be as proud as I have been... That being said-- maybe it was-- maybe it goes back to that whole thing of what attracted me and made me willing to listen... Just the fact that the three of them were so passionate about really filling a need for someone. Whether or not I agree with the whole idea of what went on at Standing Rock, I don't - I don't know if they have an answer on how to share that right now, but the fact they are passionate enough about it to say, "Look we're just going to close the shop, we are going to load up the van, we are going to drive out there in shifts, we're going to take food and blankets and whatever else they need and just go out there and say here it all is."

That triggered something in me with what they were then saying about Standing Rock and about keeping the Boonies clean, and about how they react and feel about our local environment made me more willing to listen to them. They made a sacrifice without any need for personal gain and that triggered something in me, that I was willing to listen to them more so. (165-6)

For Liv, Brian, Nathan, and Trevor the relationships offered in the Act of Ministry carried meaning powerful enough to challenge internally-held frames of reference. The Act of Ministry brought the participants into contact with another in such a way that they could see past issues that previously would hold them separate.

The participants' change was not a change of perspective on the actions and motivations of that person, however.

Liv: I still don't really understand the whole cutting thing. I get it before there was any cutting, the forests were just fine. (138)

Liv still does not appreciate the role of managed forestry. Nathan similarly did not change his view on the motivations of environmental activists. The surprise for them is

that these judgments are no longer barriers to relationships that convey value. The common valuing of the environment as a spiritual anchor helped them to overcome the power of stereotypes that would have kept them apart.

Initial fears were assuaged and negative stereotypes were challenged all due to the opportunity to enjoy relationships. These new relationships offered more than just polite challenge to personal perspectives and a pleasant surprise as they fell away. The relationships nurtured in the Act of Ministry conveyed validation for the individuals involved.

5.2 Validation of self

The discovery of others who have similar experiences resulted in feelings of validation for one's own life experiences and perspectives. The experience of such validation of self was a noted high point for many participants. Brian responded with just such an experience of validation when asked about the spiritual impact of taking part in the Act of Ministry.

Brian: With myself, it proves something to me. It proved to me that I'm on the right track. With myself, it proves something to me. It proved to me that I'm on the right track. It's always been important to me. I threw my share of beer cans, don't get me wrong. I've done everything you shouldn't do out there, but it was a long time ago. When I turned the page and started life together, how we looked at things, and then it got with me where I really, really, really could see mother earth going downhill fast, and nobody caring.

All they wanted was a bigger paycheck, that's it. I didn't agree with that. As a matter of fact, I passed up some chances to make some money, because they just went against my grain. Going through this, and it's helped me when I can sit there and I'm looking at that river, to know, I'm headed in the right direction, and I have been for several years. It helped me realize that, but what was important was a lot of people like me, and I met some of them, and that strengthens my feelings, my insides, my heart. It was a good experience.

Where else can you sit down with strangers and discuss something like this? Could you imagine going out for lunch at the Moose Club with eight or 10 people

and have the talks that we've had? You can't. It had to be set up, organized, parameters, and it did its job. I'm sure for everyone, whether they call themselves Christian or not. (162)

Karen expressed similar sentiments when asked if her sense of connection to nature has changed over the course of the Act of Ministry.

Karen: I don't think it's changed my original arc as for being disconnected and connected because I feel the most connected now. Now, I think, now that I'm older, I can see-- When you reflect on something, of course you have a better view point. I think it's just given me validation that what I have experienced is okay and justifiable, and real. You go out there and you're just... is this real?... It's a real deal. I really think it was very helpful for me to experience this, to be able to put some validation on-- When I went to Los Angeles and I did put my feet in the Pacific and I felt my anxiety actually melt away, that was a real thing. You realize that that was-- [exhales] You were being taken care of and you needed nature to be taken care of. (194-5)

Brian found validation for his life choices, specifically in his growing awakening to acting in harmony with the environment. The Act of Ministry 'proved' that his path in life was a good one. Karen reflected on how meeting others and hearing their stories validated her life experiences. The Act of Ministry led her to know in a new way the realness of her transcendent encounters in nature.

The participant's reflections suggest a mechanism at work in this validation. Their experience suggests that participants feel a sense of isolation in appreciating their spiritual connection to nature. For them, the Act of Ministry connected them with other's experiences in such a way that this sense of isolation was relieved, pierced by the potent common experience of transcendence. In turn, what was private and isolating was now validated. Participants might have once felt alone or marginalized due to their understanding of the experience in nature, but the Act of Ministry changed that through this validating process.

Another value for the participants uncovered in the data involved how the participants valued the sense of common purpose in the midst of diversity.

5.3 Valuable and common purpose

Evidence arose that members of the group valued finding their common purpose in the midst of diverse perspectives. Participants found that the circle of people to which nature's sacredness was apparent was larger than they previously thought. The discovery of how their sense of nature's sacredness was shared by a broader group of people than they knew brought them joy, confidence, and satisfaction.

Petra desired to respect the otherness of people's stories, and deeply valued the participant's story for its value to her.

Petra: Just the group, to hear other people's stories. I don't want to say not take ownership of them, but they were all so profound that it just became meaningful to me, too. (147)

Karen sees the "underlying current" of nature's value that connects the participants to something larger.

Karen: I think it is interesting to get somebody else that has been here... It just made my heart feel good that there's more people that love the earth and want to do best for it, and I looked forward to it every week for three weeks...I do because just talking with the people that were there and the sense of community, and just the shared experiences, I think we all had different experiences but they still had the same underlying current that you could pick out that we all love nature, want to be out in nature, and have seen things happen out there that are only otherworldly. Amazing, miraculous things have happened out there. (177)

David values the experience of participating in this particular group of Warren residents who are rising up as part of a groundswell of awareness.

David: What I notice here, coming here is there are a range...not in this meeting but in Warren, there's such a range of people's relationship to nature. It's not all good clearly. I guess I do make a moral judgment about some of the ways I see how the earth is treated here. I know there's a long history of it. I know there's an economy that's kind of based on it. I know there are families who've lived here for a very long time and for them, it's kind of normal.

I agree with something Alice said, which is that I just get this feeling that there's this enormous groundswell of, I don't know, love of nature here and it isn't

kind of allowed to emerge for a number of reasons....In this group, I think it's been a real interesting diversity of approaches, I think all of us have different ways to make a living but there is something central about nature...Anyway, I think this has been a very, very interesting group of people. (116-7)

Alice's value in the experience is especially poignant. When asked about her sense of connection to the environment over her lifetime, she found just how much her current connection to the environment helped her to see the value of the Act of Ministry.

Alice: If I'm looking back, my least connected time was just a whole different life from top to bottom. Whereas now, I almost feel as though I'm so connected that it like hurts my heart. It really does. I know it sounds very hippity-dippity but it's like I can feel all of it. Even when we talk about climate change and global warming and changes in the jet stream and the storms that are moving through and all these things.

Man, I'll tell you, living right on the river it's like these storms that come through are not normal, to have these many tornado warnings over the last three-four years. You go out and it's like you can feel the trees. The trees are like-- they are beat-up and they are just like, "We are trying to hang in there". I don't know. I think I could probably ramble on for hours.

I just think I'm almost connected to the point where I need something like this. How I can continue something like this, I'm not sure. It's almost like I needed something like this to bring together a group of people, some are like-minded and some have completely different jobs or we're all unique in our own ways but to see how we can all sort of come together, I suppose that this is-- It's all part of how I get there, where over there it's--[laughter]

Matthew: Wherever the story's coming.

Alice: It's a part of it. It's opened up a much larger conversation within myself, within our close group of people and within myself and strangers. (137-8)

Alice's intimate personal connection to the trees along her beloved river that runs behind her house connects deeply with the theological issues at stake in the Act of Ministry. Both a sense of the intrinsic sacredness of creation and humanity's mutual and interdependent relationship were tangibly present in her experience with the other participants. The tree's existence is every bit as sacred to her as her own life, and Alice's experience of life is woven into the experience she sees the trees undergoing. Their pain

is her pain, and so their value to God is her value to God. Life where they are relegated to second class status with no future means that she is, too.

And yet Alice's reflection and those of the others all include this sense that the purpose is greater than any one of them. Alice sees that the pain she experiences needs to connect to others who have "completely different jobs" and others who are "all unique in our own ways." Like Petra, Karen, and David, who sense their experiences connecting to something larger, Alice comes alive in sensing of a common purpose across an even broader swath of people than what they previously assumed.

Evidence of the participants finding value in the experience of the Act of Ministry also revealed two themes involving a desire for change.

5.4 Desire for personal growth

Participants found a desire to grow through the Act of Ministry. Participants' desire to make personal progress stemmed from encountering the ideas and experiences of others, an increased awareness of their current limits of knowledge and appreciation, and from the encouragement of not feeling alone against the greater forces of society and culture. The Act of Ministry was a stimulating experience, a fertilizing of the soil of their lives.

In responding to a prompt to comment on the most impactful part of the Act of Ministry for her, Alice connected the impact of the experience to conversations with her partner Liv that carried on after the meetings.

Alice: I guess I just really enjoyed that the last one (Act of Ministry meeting) where everybody put their ideas out there. Some are very simple and some are much more complex, but there are a lot of things that I hadn't thought of.

There are a lot of good ideas out there. I feel like we have conversations every time that we left here for days, honestly. (113)

Alice's desire to continue growing led almost immediately to these conversations after the meetings. Intense curiosity stimulated by the relationships with trusted others in the Act of Ministry led to dialogs for processing and further exploration afterwards. The need to continue talking, to continue developing the ideas and her application of the ideas' impacts, exemplifies the desire to change that she and others experienced through the Act of Ministry.

Elaine found a similar outcome leading toward a desire for personal growth.

Elaine: I think I've been pretty unconnected through a lot. I think this will push me to maybe starting to connect a little bit more. This shall probably push me into doing more, connecting more, opening my eyes about it. Just to be more aware of the whole picture. (138)

Elaine recognized how others, similarly motivated by their convictions concerning nature's sacredness, had greater knowledge and perspective than herself. Her recognition of that gap led to the desire to grow, to do more to improve her understanding of how to act in relationship to nature having affirmed her convictions. Elaine hoped to do that by connecting more with others. The group's communal comfort and support for a variety of perspectives helped her to identify the gaps in her own knowledge and also provided the motivation to pursue increased awareness and connection through relationships.

Two others found the desire to make personal changes as the positive experience of the Act of Ministry gave them new hope upon which to build. Petra, when asked how the Act of Ministry affected her spiritually, pointed toward clear actions and perspectives that were changed and needed even more change in her life.

Petra: For me, this winter had just knocked me out and being reminded of how much I love the land I love being out there. I was like, "What the hell. I abandoned almost all that." I've really been getting back out there in the woods and just enjoying it and recommitted to trying to be a vegetarian as much as possible. I'm not going to be rigid, but also energy usage. One of the ways I cheer myself in the winter is I have decorative lights. I realized I leave them on 24/7. I've got some timers. It's like a baby step but it's something. Now they're on four hours a day and not 24. (156)

Karen identified how a negative feeling, guilt, was changing in her due to the experience.

Karen: I suffer from a lot of eco-guilt. I think I should do a lot more than I actually do and I think having this community, I feel a little bit less than that because I feel like you don't have to take it all on and that there are people around that are doing good things for the earth, too, and that it's not all bleak. I feel like that we're doing terrible, horrible things to the earth and we are supposed to be, here, stewards for it and we shouldn't be treating it so badly. I think that eased up a little bit, that I still have it but not as, straws, stupid straws. I have been at restaurants and stuff refusing the straws. I have felt embarrassed before, "I don't want a straw, thank you." Just like, "I don't need a straw, thank you." You get the look. (184-5)

Important here is to note that Petra and Karen's desire to change their behavior required for them a new attitude that the Act of Ministry inspired. The despair that previously clouded Petra's progress in living into vegetarianism and reducing consumption was relieved. The guilt and shame that plagued Karen were replaced with courage and conviction. Each received the powerful gift of hope. Hope gives each person reinforcement and encouragement. The resulting actions of each finds support as the Act of Ministry led them to successfully counter self-defeating thought processes.

Even more deeply inward, David found the Act of Ministry led him back to a practice for feeding his inner world.

David: Well, it was interesting timing for me. Typically, I think things come along when you need them. I've been retired now for a couple years and I've hung out most of my adult life with scientists and technical people, bureaucrats, and almost to a person, I think of them as being materialists. They really do limit their thinking to the material world and what science can define. Some of that is an expectation that the public has for people in natural resources I think....I don't

know what that means but when I was younger I used to meditate. I recently prayed.

In the last couple of months, (I) started meditating again and that's really been important to me. I don't know where it will go, if anywhere, it might stop tomorrow, I don't know. That's my personal practice, at least I have one now which is something I haven't had for a long time, I don't know where it will lead me. Anyway, I don't know if this experience had motivated me in one direction or another or if it was just part of the mix just the right time. (127)

David's experience of the Act of Ministry helped him to acknowledge his need for inner nourishment. A deep, spiritual yearning came to light through the interaction of the group experience and reconnected him with his earlier spiritual practice. Leaving the Act of Ministry, David desires to reconnect with his spirit and has embarked on the journey inward.

For Petra, Karen, and David, the Act of Ministry prompted a desire for personal growth. The three classes themselves did not require a change to be made, but the experience encouraged the desire for change. It brought confidence, reassurance, and reawakening to the participants.

These desires for personal growth paralleled similar deep conviction for participants to pursue changes in the wider community.

5.5 Desire for greater community change

The Act of Ministry motivated a desire for inward growth and also a desire to change the community around them. The well of inner strength developed and inspired by the encounter with others opened the participants to motivating change in their community. The participants together became a sign that communal change was possible, even as the Act of Ministry also opened new ideas for how to motivate those changes.

When asked if they had made any changes in the four weeks since the end of the Act of Ministry, Nathan named how the Act of Ministry led him to make a career change that brought him in touch with his reinforced values of good stewardship.

Nathan: The big change was I went from a professional life that is purely extractive; buy and cut timber. Ideally, we make beautiful- it ends up being made into beautiful furniture, paddling, and all that. That was where I was coming into the whole concept here. The idea was, really what am I doing? At 57, what am I doing with the last few years of my career? Have I really accomplished what I was doing?

It keeps coming back to the time I felt most satisfied spiritually, emotionally, was when I was consulting, when I was working with private land owners, when I was being able to talk about good forestry. Out of that, came the opportunity to pursue that as a career again. Now...a big part of my work will be making money for large corporate entities...-I won't deny that, but I also get to go back and re-establish that connection I had with private landowners and talking about stewardship and sustainability. The people that I'll be working for are very, very focused on sustainability. It's one of their major charges.

While it is extractive, while they are growing and harvesting timber to make money for their investors, they are very focused on doing it in a sustainable way. I'm really excited about that. That was definitely a call from God. It didn't take any time, we didn't have to discuss it. It was a given. When it came up, there was really no struggle making a decision that this is the right thing to do. (153)

Nathan's response is evidence of change that is both inward and outward. The key is that the Act of Ministry brought him more deeply in touch with his inner conviction to be a voice for wise land management, something he had the opportunity to do if he changed jobs. Nathan's work as a forester, where efficient extraction leads to higher profits, left little space for him to make an impact with customers that aligned with his inner convictions. The Act of Ministry helped him to honor those convictions and respond to the opportunity to bring his skills to a company more in line with his values. This shift lets him be an advocate for healthier land management, a critical component in a community living in harmony with the environment. The Act of Ministry then served to raise up in him the importance of working for greater change in the community.

During the interviews, the focus groups were asked to rank a list of actions that were developed during the third session of the Act of Ministry. Participants ranked them in two ways, first by what they saw as important to the community, and second by what they personally felt called to do. Brian explained why he chose his first-place options.

Brian: My number one is H, direct pressure on government agencies and private industry. Working in the industrial field around refineries, chemical plants, coal-fired power houses, nukes, all this stuff, they'll do whatever they can do, period. The only thing that makes them change their mind is a law. I really feel pressure.

That was my personal. My community was, teaching people to be more active and engaged, A. (150)

Brian recognized that for the community the most important variable may be in teaching and motivating others to become engaged, but for him, his personal conviction is to use his time to pressure government for legal changes. For him, the Act of Ministry grew both his perspective on the needs of the community and on his own gifts of place and experience. His increased awareness leads to the pressure to act in the most effective way he can.

Alice found similar motivations to take steps through her place as a business owner.

Alice: I think we maybe scratched the surface on something larger. I had no idea what to expect coming into this. I'm still not even really sure what has happened. I do feel like I missed all you guys [laughs] when we don't meet, which tells me that there's definitely something there. It's made me think about things in sort of a larger- I don't know, the spectrum just got larger.

What it's made me think is there's a lot more people here, even folks that maybe we don't think would want to be involved in something like this that they would. We all have some sort of connection and I feel like we'd be really surprised if we tried to do something, craft something on a larger scale. (114)

We're getting recycling bins for the shop, like official recycling bins for the shop...At the same time that we're doing this, we're also getting ready to begin-- Well, we're sort of going through a strategic planning process within (their store) and it's like a five-part process. Right now, it's just the core crew. I dusted off the old business plans. We've been passing them all around to everyone.

There's a lot of things that sort of...systems and processes and something as simple as making sure that everything's recycled...That's just the simple one. That's the one where that's easily checked off the list...I think there's just a lot of simple things that we can check off the list if we just decided to do it. (122-3)

Alice connects an increased hope generated through the Act of Ministry with both clear action steps and more vision-like dreams rich with possibility. The move to get official recycling bins, a simple yet onerous task that involves working with local government, was both easily accomplished and yet only a tiny part of a larger vision for community change. The business plans, the foundation upon which she and her partner could dare to risk being small business owners, are now back on the table as increased conviction leads to a more careful examination of all the things they could and should do to lead the larger community.

A connection exists here between the theme *valuable and common purpose* and *initial surprises*. Alice notes that “there's a lot more people here, even folks that maybe we don't think would want to be involved in something like this that they would.” The possibility of more people open to the sacredness of nature ignites her to bring greater change. People from different perspectives and backgrounds that she might not have thought would be open to this could actually be brought in.

And even the business itself and all the decisions and compromises that go into participating in the economy, come under question.

Alice: Now, I just feel like these last couple of years, two, three years-- at what point as an outdoors-based business are you being irresponsible for not speaking up for the natural resource? At what point are you--

I just started to feel guilty I guess, is what it is. I'm at that point where I feel like-- and I've always been very, very, very careful, or at least I feel like I have, not to rub people the wrong way because it's my livelihood, it's how I put food on the table. Like I said earlier, (I try to) trick people into wanting to take

better care of things and clean up after themselves. When I left that meeting⁸⁸ all those years ago, my initial thought was how do I get every fracking guy into a canoe and out on that river? [laughter] How do I make them fall in love with this? How do I get them all to come on a hike with me? (137)

Alice responds to the question of her current sense of connection to the environment and cannot deny the sense of conflict between her needs to protect her and her family's livelihood and the strong call to advocacy. Her conviction of nature's sacredness, stimulated and reinforced by the Act of Ministry, drives her to push the boundaries of her outdoor store's business model. Instead of getting people out on the local waterways and hiking trails for their recreation needs, Alice desires to turn the business towards an intervention and education model bent on changing the perspectives of those in the local community and beyond whose industry is a direct affront to that sacredness.

The Act of Ministry was an experience of raising up desires for change in the greater community. The Act of Ministry also raised doubts and concerns as to their understandings of foundational beliefs and practices. One powerful facet of the experience of the Act of Ministry was in how it allowed participants to re-evaluate belief systems.

5.6 Not the belief system I was taught

From the unchurched focus group arose a theme of *Not the belief system I was taught*. Many in the unchurched focus group had difficulty separating language about

⁸⁸ Alice is referencing a locally held, state sponsored public hearing on fracking. Fracking is a recently developed process for exploiting undeveloped oil and natural gas deposits that has brought increased petroleum-extraction interests to the local area.

spirituality from religious teaching and experience they had received when younger. In asking how they experienced the Act of Ministry's many conversations around spirituality, many immediately raised distinctions with their experiences of religious participation.

Karen: I think it just helped reassure me that, for me, nature and spirituality are pretty much the same. I can go out on a hike and I can feel closer to God than ever being inside anywhere. Almost every time I'm outside, I feel something, I see something, there's some warm feeling that I get, that I have yet to have it inside a church of God. It's just, ever since I was little, I spent a lot of time outside and it just seemed like it was just very "home." Odd but that's how it felt. (186)

Elaine I think it (the Act of Ministry) opened me up a little bit more to think about it. I don't know if I ever really thought about it which is weird because I had 16 years of Catholic education [laughs]. (125)

Liv: There is a complete difference between religion and spirituality though. I was forced to go to church when I was little. I stopped going when I was...17-- Me and my mother used to get into heated arguments because they grew up in the church. Their mother, they all went to church like... it was just a whole different generation and me being gay really didn't help much when they're preaching at you. That's why it was awesome of you when you came in. You made me just feel comfortable like from the very get-go. I was like, "Yes, Pastor Scott, anything for Pastor Scott." (126)

In these reflections, Karen, Liv, and Elaine contrast their previous experience with religious practice and education with the impact the Act of Ministry had on their appreciation for spiritual matters. They reveal that they had a negative view of religious topics and experiences before the Act of Ministry. In some ways, though, that view has now changed. Karen contrasts her expectations of a "church of God" to her experience of the natural world. She finds the buildings and the expectation that they should be refuges for experiencing the sacred not true for her. She has greater confidence due to the Act of ministry in her rejection of religious practice as it centers on worship buildings. Elaine both reveals how little impact formal religious education had on her self-concept and how

the Act of Ministry has led her to reevaluate religion and spirituality. Liv's experience is one where past pain over religious topics may have found some healing and hope.

These mainly negative connections with the religious resources in their background was their only source for language to point to as evidence of the life of the spirit. For the unchurched participants this language was only useful as a foil to the valuable impact of the transcendence available in nature, a value reinforced through the Act of Ministry. Organized religion as they understood it before lacked positive value. That there could be a new window of potential positive value for organized religion and for a bigger God, as expressed by Liv and possibly Elaine is a refreshing one, yet this did not somehow redeem the past. This experience was leading them not back to church but to something beyond it.

Alice left behind the language of organized religion as she gave evidence of the Act of Ministry challenging her beliefs.

Alice: I guess this just made me dive deeper into how it affects me being outside when it comes to spirituality and reverberations and doors that opened, and how that affects you and how that affects the people around you. I think I'm going to reflect on it more especially in July when the crazy season comes and everything is moving very fast. It would be nice to sit down. When I try and to do that, I meditate at times during the summer because I need whatever I can to slow me down because it just moves so fast.

I guess it (the Act of Ministry) made me look at it in a different way, I've always thought that being outside is my rock. It's where I go when I'm confused or when times are tough or just when I need to get away from everything or it's also where we share lots of laughs and all of these things. I guess it just helps me dissect it a little bit more into a different type of experience as far as spirituality goes and how it affects me and how that affects others. (129)

Before the Act of Ministry, Alice understood her relationship with nature to be a resource for strength. Nature was her "rock." Her experience of the Act of Ministry involved being pushed beyond that solid foundation. The Act of Ministry revealed how

these past encounters with nature and ones she may have in the future lead toward an expansive space, rich with challenge and growth opportunities. The Act of Ministry pushed her to see wider impacts, ones that transformed her confident rock of strength into an invitation to explore deeper, more challenging spiritual spaces for herself and those she loves.

For the unchurched participants, misgivings over religious teaching were reconfigured in the encounter with more religiously affiliated people who shared similar passion-filled experiences encountering nature's sacredness. The unchurched participants' previous religious experiences had a sour quality, a sourness more bitter in comparison to what they experienced in the Act of Ministry. The Act of Ministry led to validation of one's own spiritual being and a desire to grow and engage on spiritual topics. This theme then echoes the theme *desire for inward change*, but instead of encouraging growth through the elimination of resistance and despair the change is leading them toward discomfort and revisiting sour memories in search of new possibilities.

If the unchurched participants were pushed beyond the limits of what they understood of faith systems, the church members likewise were challenged in their beliefs. For them, the challenge was to acknowledge God's presence outside the life of the church.

5.7 Location of God

The *location of God* was a theme evident in the responses of the church member participants. They could clearly see God at work in the lives of the unchurched

participants, and this awareness challenged the stability of their own faith practices. In responding to how they experienced the discussion of spiritual life with those they knew to not be church members or religious practitioners, a rich conversation over the location of God emerged.

Trevor: It wasn't like one group was more polarizing in taking control of the conversation, it never went that direction. It was just more of maybe this group (churched participants) understood that group's views. We don't need to push it over that edge. We're all here to talk about the environment, to talk about nature. That's spiritual enough I think for some of us.

Brian: I had hoped that it would open some people's eyes to the spirituality that is really deep inside them and they don't identify it. Being with Christians, they say that we're just kind of normal too. Maybe they can identify, maybe it would help them.

Matthew: You definitely felt that going on in the room?

Brian: Yes, I don't think any last chapters have been written.

Petra: ...I'm thinking, these people aren't necessarily expecting that or wanting that, the non-church goes in the group. You know what? They might be closer to it than I am. I'm looking for it and they're not. Sometimes that's when God gets you, when you're not looking. He jumps out of behind that bush.

Matthew: I want to go over the edge then. Can you tell me, did you experience the sense where you could see God in their lives that they weren't even able to see? Could you actually see that at work in our meetings?

Petra: Absolutely.

Trevor: Sure. Especially in those little breakout groups. When Alice told her story of hiking up, and then into the mountain lake, and just the view that it has, that's God's work. That's God's work, whether you like it or not, that's God's work. David talking about dreaming out of this dream, God wanted you to do that.

Nathan: ...For them to do that, to go out to Standing Rock and just say, hey, here are people in need, they're being oppressed. Whether or not I agree with the politics of it all, just the fact, that they have a need, we're going to go out and fulfil it. Boy, there's the hand of God at work. I guess, maybe they didn't get on to that. I don't know.

Petra: ...Who am I to say, well, they don't go to church and they don't call themselves Christian. Therefore, I'm closer to God, than they are. What the hell? (158-60)

The church member participants recognized God at work in and through the unchurched participants. This recognition of God's presence and action alone brought energy and excitement to them, but it also critically revealed how they received this in

light of their new relationships. The church members understood that their naming God's presence could be threatening to the unchurched participants. Making their view of God's location was an unsafe topic. The church participant's unwillingness to use God language revealed deep inner conflict. This fear of naming the holy reveals that their understanding of God, as they live it through their participation in the ministry of the church, is insufficient. There is something more, beyond their understanding of God, that is valid, and this valid relationship is demonstrated not by their church attendance and participation but by the unchurched participant's approach toward spiritual and religious life. To Petra, the unchurched can even be 'closer to God' than she is. Perhaps God, as these church participants have been taught to understand the divine, is too small.

The Act of Ministry confronted the church member participants with relationships whose validity questioned their own meaning making systems. The location of God was beyond the limits of their practice. Their confidence in the definition of a properly maintained relationship between God and humanity defined by church membership and participation was challenged. The Act of Ministry revealed a location and reality of God that was worthy of celebration for them, even as recognizing it also meant re-evaluating the relative strength of their own relationship with God as they practiced it.

5.8 Conclusion

The Act of Ministry was many things for the participants. It was an experience of initial fears and misperceptions made surprisingly insignificant and meaningless through an encounter. Passionate personal feelings, values, and experiences were validated.

Horizons for relationship were broadened. Desire for change was kindled. The limits of beliefs and religious understandings were challenged.

The Act of Ministry was an experience of movement. Fears and doubts moved toward reassurance and hope. Timidity moved toward daring. Solo spirituality moved toward a community of sharing centered on sacred nature.

But did it, as I stated at the outset, move participants to build bridges toward evangelistic community? I turn now to discussing how the conceptual frameworks presented in chapter two and the contexts in which the ministry was undertaken as described in chapter one, in connection with these findings, help to answer that question.

6. Discussion

The aim of this study was to raise up how the experience of the Act of Ministry, as revealed in the findings, supported my thesis. My thesis argued that by sharing reflections in a small group setting about the experience of the sacredness of nature, church members and unchurched persons could build bridges toward mutual evangelistic community. In this chapter, the findings are discussed, drawing them into deeper conversation with the conceptual frameworks presented earlier and with contemporary research. The frameworks drawn into the discussion include Deal's psychospiritual process for developing a sense of nature's sacredness, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development, and Bass' post-Christendom model for evangelism. The chapter first addresses a very real objection to the thesis, then interprets the findings, names limitations and suggested improvements to the Act of Ministry and Study, before offering recommendations for further research and a summary reflection.

6.1 Objection to the thesis

I want to acknowledge an important objection to the thesis before discussing how the evidence argues in favor of it. The thesis claimed in part that the Act of Ministry could build bridges toward evangelistic community. By including the term evangelistic, the thesis could be understood to imply that the community developed through the Act of Ministry would bear evidence of a recognizable Christian faith. Most would expect that a recognizable Christian faith would include reference to Jesus Christ. However, there was no acknowledgement of Jesus Christ in the Act of Ministry nor any reference to Jesus in the focus group interview data.

It is therefore important to contextualize the discussion that follows by saying that the thesis argues only that the relationships developed could bear evidence of bridges being built toward such a Christian end. I admitted earlier that describing a robust Christian ecological theology was beyond the scope of this paper. I do maintain that a structurally coherent systematic Christian eco-theology is possible and even perhaps vital for the Christian worldview. The ecotheological principles shared earlier in this paper (i.e., intrinsic sacredness of Creation and mutual and interdependent relationships with Creation) are essential elements of such a robust ecotheological system and consistently informed the work of the Act of Ministry. Thus, the relationships that developed through the Act of Ministry can be understood as developmental indicators along a trajectory toward revealed Christian community. It is with this understanding of the thesis' argument that I offer the discussion that follows.

6.2 Interpretation of the findings

The seven themes that emerged in the study's findings revealed evidence that bridges toward evangelistic community were built. The primary structural framework for understanding the evangelistic dimensions of the Act of Ministry was Bass's post-Christendom model of evangelistic community formation that proposed a development trajectory of belonging, behaving, and then believing.⁸⁹ Participants were expected to experience belonging in the small group, adapt their behaviors to align with the values and expectations of the group, and then uncover common beliefs to the group could

⁸⁹ Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 199-203.

subscribe. I shape the discussion below around how the findings bear evidence of this stepwise pattern of post-Christendom evangelism.

6.1.1 Belonging

The first step in Bass' post-Christendom model of community formation expected that individuals would find a group in which to experience belonging. The first three themes that emerged from the participant interviews, *initial fears and surprises*, *validation of self*, and *valuable and common purpose*, revealed an experience of belonging taking place for the participants in the Act of Ministry. The theme *initial fears and surprises* described how sharing reflections on similar transcendent experiences in nature helped the participants to break down fears and become comfortable with one another. Nathan revealed this pattern as he observed his reaction to Alice, Liv, and Karen. "They made a sacrifice without any need for personal gain and that triggered something in me, that I was willing to listen to them more." (166)⁹⁰

Alice and Liv similarly recognized such a personal experience in encountering Nathan and Trevor. Liv, echoing David's earlier mention of it, voiced this experience when she offered how meeting Nathan and Trevor made her remember the wisdom "don't judge a book by its cover." (127) All of them recognized that what they share in common concerning the experience of nature overcame what might hold them apart if not for encountering one another. Before the Act of Ministry, participants would have held themselves apart due to perceived differences based on profession or even dress. Through

⁹⁰ Numbers in parenthesis refer to the page number in the Transcripts (Appendix F) where the cited text is located.

the invitation of the process of the Act of Ministry, they understood that they belonged together.

Other research that looked at using storytelling in interfaith youth work observed a similar experience, where discovering common values between various groups generated a sense of belonging across diverse groups.⁹¹ Instead of staying defensively apart, interacting with others through activities like this study's Act of Ministry resulted in belongingness. The theme *initial fears and surprises* described how participants here experienced that belonging. Participants experienced initial fears based in negative stereotypes collapsing in surprising ways. Participants' stories of encountering sacred creation led them to discover something in common so powerful that they understood and trusted that they belonged together.

The second theme, *validation of self*, offered further circumstantial evidence that the Act of Ministry evoked an experience of belonging for the individual participants. The finding of one's life experiences being validated diminished the participants' sense of isolation and marginalization. Brian reflected how meeting people like him in the Act of Ministry "strengthens my feelings, my insides, my heart" (162). Similarly, Karen noted that the Act of Ministry "made my heart feel good that there's more people that love the earth and want to do best for it." (177) The participants' reflections align with other studies that have found small groups which share similar understandings and

⁹¹ Eboo Patel, April Kunze, and Noah Silverman, "Storytelling as Key Methodology for Interfaith Youth Work," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 35–46.

experiences provide “consensual validation” to the participants which in turn increases their sense of belonging.⁹²

In the third theme, *valuable and common purpose*, participants described joy in experiencing belonging in this group because they sensed they could accomplish more now that they were together. The Act of Ministry resonated with participants’ sense that this is part of something even larger going on in the greater community with which they wished to participate. Alice spoke of how “we all have this connection” (125) and that she was “needing something like this [the Act of Ministry] to bring together a group of people, some are like-minded and some have completely different jobs or we’re unique in our own way but to see how we can all come together.” (138) Deal’s research into the experience of those engaged in developing a sense of nature’s sacredness highlights this impact. “As it is for many affiliated with religious institutions, participants [in his study] frequently find belonging, community, and ideals worth striving for through their organizing practice.”⁹³ Participants in this Act of Ministry give evidence to this, as they experienced belonging as they worked together to share their profound perspective on the value of the environment with one another.

As a conclusion for discussing belongingness, weaving these three themes into Deal’s psychospiritual process of developing a sense of nature as sacred reveals a synergistic benefit for the participants. *Initial fears and surprises*, *validation of self*, and *valuable and common purpose* each raise evidence of how previous doorway experiences

⁹² Hansong Zhang et al., “The Effect of Religious Diversity on Religious Belonging and Meaning: The Role of Intellectual Humility,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10, no. 1 (2018): 72–78.

⁹³ Deal, 205.

of participants became fodder for energizing dynamic pathways through sharing their stories.⁹⁴ The process Deal observed actually expects that the energy generated from following any one pathway would become fuel for activating another pathway.⁹⁵ The Act of Ministry took advantage of that propulsive effect, assisting participants in engaging dynamic pathways through the small group sharing project. While growing their sense of nature's sacredness, participants also received the experience of belongingness in the group. It could be said that the individuals received a double benefit by strengthening their sense of the sacred while at the same time developing belongingness to a new group.

A question arising from observing this mutual benefit is if participants in a similar Act of Ministry built around a different topic or common experience would find similar results. The spiritual force of what Deal describes as occurring for those finding nature to be sacred may be of such a quality that the participants' experience was unique or especially strong. Importantly for this study, the sense of belongingness that developed in the Act of Ministry tracked with Bass's expectation of evangelistic community formation, and the further areas she expects are identifiable in the results as well.

6.1.2 Behaving

Behaving, the second step in Bass' process of post-Christendom community formation, expects that individuals would adapt their behaviors to align with the values of the group in which they experience belonging. Themes four and five, *desire for personal change* and *desire to change the greater community*, revealed how the Act of Ministry

⁹⁴ Deal, 234-5

⁹⁵ Deal, 213.

had such an impact on the participants. In *desire for personal change*, participants revealed how a desire to improve their personal actions in relation to the environment emerged due to the Act of Ministry. Petra's desire to invest more in vegetarian living (158) and Karen's renewed confidence in communicating her desire to create less waste at restaurants (186-7) both emerge from the power of the group to influence one another. Petra's and Karen's efforts reveal the strength of the group formation experience in that it spurred in them the desire to improve their behavior.

Similarly, the Act of Ministry encouraged in some participants a *desire to change the greater community*. Nathan pointed to the Act of Ministry as a motivation for his taking advantage of an opportunity to change employment so that he could "go back and re-establish that connection I had with private landowners and talking about stewardship...and sustainability." (153) Alice revisited her business plans in order to focus the business on public education and environmental activism. (123-4) Both Nathan and Alice made these significant changes in order to use their working lives to promote their vision for creation care. Theirs is a deep behavior change, where they realigned whole life systems to better focus on values assumed to be important to the community formed in the Act of Ministry. Nathan and Alice's decisions and actions, behaving in alignment with the group's values, demonstrate the second step of post-Christendom evangelism.

These two themes also reveal how the Act of Ministry led to behavior changes as expected by Bronfenbrenner's framework of human development. Contemporary understandings of Bronfenbrenner's concepts support seeing "proximal processes" like sharing personal stories and engaging in activities together as critical toward promoting

individual development.⁹⁶ These prominent elements in the Act of Ministry strengthened reciprocity, Bronfenbrenner's term for how strong relationships lead to mutual development.⁹⁷ Through meeting one another and discovering belonging, participants found the willingness to dedicate themselves to living out ideals they inferred were mutually held by the group. The Act of Ministry brought together a group of people who found belongingness together, and from that behavior changes arose inspired by shared values of the new group. But, could participants then take Bass's third step, the development of common beliefs?

6.1.3 Believing

The third step in Bass' post-Christendom community formation, believing, expects that the group would determine a shared set of beliefs that support their values and common behaviors. The last two themes in the phenomenological study's findings, *not the belief system I was taught* and *location of God*, revealed that issues of belief were encountered through the Act of Ministry. The evidence in theme six, *not my belief system*, described how the Act of Ministry caused the unchurched participants to re-evaluate belief systems to which they had been exposed previously in life. Elaine referred to her past experience with 16 years of Catholic school as she observed that "(the Act of Ministry) opened me up a little bit more to think about it". (125) Elaine admits in this statement both that she had closed the door on faith practice to some extent and that the

⁹⁶ Jonathan R.H. Tudge et al., "Uses and Misuses of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 1, no. December 2009 (n.d.): 20

⁹⁷ Bronfenbrenner, Kindle location 816.

Act of Ministry had led to her to question that decision. Liv and Karen also referenced how the Act of Ministry led them to re-evaluate their experiences in faith communities. The Act of Ministry led Karen and Liv to make further affirmations of how church experiences in the past were not fulfilling when compared to the types of stories shared and affirmed in the sessions. (186, 126)

Theme seven, *Location of God*, offered similar evidence of participants encountering issues of belief. In this theme, evidence arose of church member participants observing that God was surprisingly present in the lives of the unchurched participants. Statements like Trevor's in describing his understanding of the spiritual life of the unchurched participants, "That's God's work, whether you like it or not, that's God's work"(159) and Petra's, "who am I to say, well, they don't go to church and they don't call themselves Christian. Therefore, I'm closer to God than they are. What the hell?," (160) both reveal how their beliefs were being challenged. Trevor's faith practice informed his understanding of his new-found partners, seeing in their lives vital experiences of faith that needed to be named. Importantly, Trevor only shared this when "pushed over the edge"(158). His faith practice before this would be to reserve such observations. Trevor's saying "whether you like it or not" speaks to his need now to "go over the edge," to name God's action no matter whose life is involved. Petra similarly admires the spiritual life the unchurched participants describe. That admiration leads her to examine her own spiritual experiences that have come through her spiritual practices and find them wanting. The strength of Trevor and Petra's statements reveal how unexpected and powerful their realizations are as they compare the experience and practice of the unchurched participants to their own.

Each group appears to have experienced its belief system challenged by the Act of Ministry. In that challenge was the recognition that something of value may be found outside their own understandings. The discovery and celebration of their common experience led the participants beyond the status quo, beyond just appreciating their own beliefs and the beliefs of others. Research by Foley expects that reflective encounters between people with diverse belief positions would be one of “holy envy for other ways of believing,” that would also encourage “maintaining an integrating trajectory for both individuals and communities”⁹⁸ His observation of “integrating trajectories” described a strengthening of the individual and communal beliefs of the separate groups. In my study, I observed that while the experience of the Act of Ministry followed similar lines of mutual discovery and personal spiritual development, participants found their own belief systems more tenuously held than before. They found something in their new-found partners that they needed to integrate and honor. Participants’ initiative was to seek a common expression that honored the community they found amongst those whose eyes were opened to nature’s sacredness like their own. The participants then did not strengthen their own beliefs so much as begin the process of leaving their own belief systems in favor of a common position, one outside the present practice and understanding of either group.

Such belief questioning as revealed in the findings is evidence of only small, perhaps introductory steps toward developing a belief system as is expected in the evangelistic framework.⁹⁹ An affirming statement of what the community believes and

⁹⁸ Foley, 92-3.

⁹⁹ Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 209.

celebrates was nebulous and remote at the conclusion of the Act of Ministry. It is fair to admit that evidence for this step in Bass' post-Christendom community formation framework is the weakest, likely due to the short timeframe of the intervention. Still, it is significant that in only three sessions the strength of the participants' experiences in the Act of Ministry were strong enough to evoke a re-assessment of one's accepted relationship with religious systems. Issues of belief were on the table, deeply engaging the participants in explorations that were far beyond friendly respect for different faith backgrounds and traditions.

6.1.4 Thesis and findings

The thesis proposed that the Act of Ministry would build bridges towards mutual evangelistic community. The findings gave strong evidence that belonging, behaving, and believing, Bass' post-Christendom pattern of evangelistic community formation, were experienced by the participants. Participants clearly experienced belonging as they encountered one another through shared stories. Behaviors began to change as the values of the group influenced the participants. The possibility of common beliefs became an active area of exploration and wonder. While the Act of Ministry did not lead to a recognizable Christian community being formed through its three short sessions, bridges toward such an outcome were built.

The evangelistic possibilities raised by the Act of Ministry deserve further exploration so that the potentials revealed in this study could be realized. Congregations

willing to engage in similar conversations with environmentally active people in their greater community could find it a fruitful endeavor. I am disappointed in some ways with the end results of the Act of Ministry after this deep examination of its effects. The positive results point toward the potential for further transformation, had the Act of Ministry lasted longer. The passionate spiritual experiences of the participants and the power of the connections made through sharing them in such a group make me even more hopeful going forward. Further action should look to improve this model. Several limitations in the Act of Ministry and the Study are apparent that should be addressed for such future work.

6.3 Limitations and potential improvements to the Act of Ministry and Study

Two factors limited the Act of Ministry. Time limited its potential in several ways. Participants readily stated their desire for more opportunities to meet as the last session concluded. Considering that the evidence for behavior and belief development was limited, it is highly probable that more time could have yielded stronger evidence of evangelistic bridge building.

More meetings could be added to expand opportunities for exploration. The initial sharing experience in the first meeting, for instance, could have been multiple meetings in which participants could further explore stories of doorway pathway experiences in conversation. The second session asked participants to demonstrate the dynamic pathway work of weaving connections between memories and other learnings. Many admitted that this work needed more time and guidance than what was offered. The third session,

which already ran sixty minutes longer than planned, could have used multiple meetings with which to build strong, actionable plans.

All three sessions were time-constrained. Each topic and activity could have used more space for exploration than just three, 90-minute sessions. The Act of Ministry then could be improved by expanding the per session time. The meetings themselves could be extended beyond the 90 minutes if breaks and healthy activity variety were included.

A second limiting factor in the Act of Ministry concerned a lack of preparation of the church member participants for evangelism. In the development of the Act of Ministry, I was unsure of the extent to which the groups shared the ecotheological principles undergirding the study. I feared preparing the church member participants with evangelism strategies could have led to a souring of the relationship between the two groups if such theological principles proved to be upsetting. Having concluded this research, I see now how much this limited the Act of Ministry's evangelistic potential unnecessarily. The unwillingness to push the experience "over the edge"⁽⁴⁸⁾ may very well have stemmed from a lack of encouragement to bring their Christian background into more overt conversation with the unchurched participants in the Act of Ministry. Research in evangelism strategies has argued that preparation can lead to a more confident commitment on the part of church members to engage in "naming the Holy" in such encounters.¹⁰⁰ The addition of such content may have pushed the conversation into more overtly religious topics than what was experienced in the Act of Ministry, leading to stronger evidence of bridge building.

¹⁰⁰ Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism*, 137.

The study's trustworthiness was limited in at least two ways, both involving the coding process. I coded and analyzed all data myself. The study could be improved by involving more researchers in this phase of the work. Similarly, the findings were not taken back to the participants to member check. Inviting the participants to shape how their responses were interpreted could enrich the insights drawn from their input. Incorporating both of these steps could greatly improve trustworthiness in the data and results.

6.4 Recommendations for further research

Three avenues for further research arose for me in the course of this project. One possible project focuses on adding ecotheological elements to the current worship experience of Trinity. This project increased my awareness of how our worship space isolates us from the outside world. Connecting Trinity's worship life more directly to the rest of creation could serve as another way to build bridges toward relationship with those outside the current worshipping community and strengthen intuitive connections congregants have to the spirituality of nature. Involving environmental themes in the congregation's life could also serve as a laboratory for exploring ecotheology in practice. Trinity's worship space is beautiful and grand, yet it is also a stark, strong barrier between the sacred space we maintain inside and the sacred space of the natural world outside. An analysis of our liturgical language and actions could offer places for overtly piercing this barrier.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ The COVID-19 pandemic being experienced by the world as this thesis was in its final stages adds another poignant context in which this exploration of deeper connection to nature has impacts.

A second avenue for further research involves contributing to the ongoing work of developing a thorough Christian systematic ecotheology. Santmire described four areas needed for developing an ecotheological foundation which I agree are essential to this work: biblical exegesis, Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology.¹⁰² Biblical work is a primary need. Kavusa summarizes the current state of biblical exegesis utilizing ecological hermeneutics as being in only a “germinating phase.”¹⁰³ Furthering efforts at ecotheologically oriented biblical interpretation and these other areas of ecotheology would bring further insight to the possibilities and potentials of building ecotheologically-centered religious communities.

A third avenue for further research involves another qualitative research project aimed at examining congregation building within an ecotheological framework. In the midst of working on this paper, I became aware of many congregation-scale projects currently underway. One such congregation is the Church of the Woods in Canterbury, New Hampshire. The congregation is a recent church plant that began its worship life entirely outdoors. Led by the Reverend Stephen Blackmer, the congregation expresses itself on its website (as of January 2020) to be “rooted in the Episcopal tradition” while offering, “a place and community for communing with God and nature.” It prominently features outdoor worship, rain or shine, and only recently built a simple building, what they refer to as a barn, for use in particularly bad weather.

¹⁰² H. Paul Santmire, “In God’s Ecology: A Revisionist Theology of Nature,” *The Christian Century* 117 (December 13, 2000): 1301-

¹⁰³ Kivatsi J. Kavusa, “Ecological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Biblical Texts Yesterday, Today and Onwards: Critical Reflection and Assessment,” *Old Testament Essays* 32, no. 1 (2019): 255.

The congregation's move to build the barn I find most interesting. If ecotheology contends that we are built for mutual and interdependent relationship with the rest of creation,¹⁰⁴ then tension should be expected when a desire for safety or comfort leads a group to move away from direct interaction. Running inside, out of the elements, could be experienced as an abandonment of principle. The congregation and its leadership chose to adapt their model of ministry possibly due to internal pressure. It could be that the community's decision is at odds with the convictions of its ecotheological foundations. I would ask as a way of gaining access to this delicate and painful nexus of conviction and necessity, "what was the experience of this decision in the community?"

Deal's research offers a starting place for understanding what the congregation might have experienced. His reverberations pathways describe how taking an action on behalf of one's environmental convictions leads to inner experiences that are complex. Moral ambiguity, a sense of futility, and even possibly despair accompany the many positive experiences when one acts in response to the ecotheological principles evoked by transcendent experiences in creation.¹⁰⁵ This congregation's experience would offer a place for exploring those complex emotions and moral realizations as they confronted the practical needs of securing a space for worship during poor weather. It also opens for me another avenue for exploring the mapping of the experience of the sacred onto Christian theological principles. Is there an essential element of our neediness as humans that reveals itself in this inability to live in intimate harmony with the rest of creation? Is this

¹⁰⁴ Moltmann, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Deal, 206-7.

an opportunity for exploring anthropocentrism in a way that equates such human centered decision making as sin? And if sin, how do we then understand the story of redemption?

6.5 Summary and concluding personal thoughts

In this chapter I discussed how the Act of Ministry as experienced by the participants offered evidence of community formation that supported the thesis. By sharing reflections in a small group setting about the experience of the sacredness of nature, church members and unchurched persons built bridges toward mutual evangelistic community. I discussed an objection to the thesis and offered suggestions for improving the Act of Ministry and Study. I also discussed recommendations for further research.

As this paper concludes, I wish to address two issues of personal importance. The first is racial justice. The bulk of the research and writing of this paper took place prior to 2020. Events in that tumultuous year led me to want to learn more about racial justice, and so too my congregation. Members of my congregation and I participated in the Episcopal Church's *Sacred Ground* curriculum¹⁰⁶ and other diocesan-led workshops. These experiences have helped me to recognize with deep regret the absence of racial justice in this research. While socioeconomically challenged in many ways, white residents of Warren County benefit from many programs that systematically exclude black, indigenous, and Latino citizens, and thus their ability to access the environmental opportunities white citizens so easily enjoy. The intersectionality of race, class, and

¹⁰⁶ "Sacred Ground: A Film-Based Dialogue Series on Race & Faith." accessed 26 January 2021, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sacred-ground>.

culture on the experience of sacredness in the natural world needs to be included in any future work.

The second issue pertains to the scope of this paper and the larger implications for my ministry. This paper only examines a small window into how ecotheology might inform the church's work of evangelism. For me, this paper points toward much more. It is imperative for me to help the church grapple with how ecotheology informs the tradition of the church. That work will necessarily stretch beyond the realm of evangelism and into liturgy, formation, and resource management. I do not seek to abandon tradition in this, but to follow the Holy Spirit's leadership into helping the church better reflect the wisdom that ecology and environmentalism offer in the quest to follow Jesus faithfully. Drawing others into that conversation and relationship, especially those similarly impacted by the spiritual resource of the natural world, I feel is an essential first step that this research demonstrates.

7. Afterword

I began the work that has led to this study intuitively knowing that something very important had happened to me out there on the Appalachian Trail in 1998 and in other places of natural beauty and recreation since. I could tell that those experiences connected deeply with what Alice was engaged in as she continued to ask questions and seek answers after her journey to visit the Standing Rock protests. Her desire to know more inspired me to help further the conversation.

Alice and I brought our small group together in the hopes of extending our search for the questions and answers that urge us on in our lives. I began that work thinking that ecologically-oriented spiritual experiences could be something of a bridge for folks like Alice and I who experience them, a bridge for drawing new friends into the life of the church.

Now I see the bridge metaphor differently. The bridge being built is not for new people to walk into our communities of faith. I know now that both those in the church and those outside the church have large canyons of knowledge and faith to cross on the way to where we are going. Our increasing appreciation of nature and of God's intentions in creating it compels all of us to seek a new way to be. This project has opened my eyes to how far a journey it will be in order to get to that place. It will be far more than a series of small adaptations for science and faith, for culture and church. The questions are leading us beyond ourselves and our schools of thought toward a community more in tune and at peace with the kingdom that is ultimately God's possession and not our own.

The bridge being built then is for all of us, church and unchurch, science-minded and faith-guided, to walk across together to that new place. I am convinced we

need each other for this work, that we are being called to work together to build. A small step or two was made in that direction, and through the process of pursuing this action I have had my understanding of the issues around ecotheology, evangelism, and church leadership challenged and transformed. The next steps are only slightly clearer than the steps that led to this project. Some answers were found, but more questions beckon me on.

Journeys through forests and wild places for me involve following trails. Those trails are almost always marked by patches of paint splashed on trees and rocks. Called blazes, they are a concession to human neediness at the expense of nature's sacredness. We human beings need the reassurance of a bit of human-placed color so we can keep going deeper into the woods. I have new appreciation for the blaze marks of my Episcopal tradition and the shoulders on which I stand as priest and church leader. My eyes also more clearly see the divinely placed blazes, the thunderstorms, rainbows, research, and new communities forming, that are beckoning us to engage in the sacramental experiences available as one ventures into the wild spaces of this world. These signs lead deeper into the woods, into the arms and body of creation which is our partner, our sibling, our fellow beloved and redeemed before God.

8. Appendices

A. Invitation Letter

Nature and Spirituality: Reflection for Action

15 January 2018

Dear Prospective Participant,

Gratitude and Introduction

On behalf of Trinity Church and [Outdoor Store], I thank you for your willingness to participate in “Nature and Spirit: Reflection and Action”. Our desire for you is to receive support for your life as it relates to our environment. That support we hope will come through the opportunity to reflect on the power of nature in your life, exploring our community’s needs in terms of environmental awareness and advocacy, and in sharing those reflections in a supportive small group.

Beyond this primary goal we also hope that this experience helps both of our organizations to be stronger advocates for our local environment and community. Our conversations and reflections we hope will offer many insights in how to best help the greater Warren community to be in a healthy and enriching relationship with the natural world around us.

Our Schedule

January 31 -	Initial meeting, reflections from leaders
February 7 -	small group sharing, initial brainstorming of community needs
February 14 -	further reflections, identifying key community needs

Each meeting begins at 7PM and is planned for about 90 minutes. We will provide light snacks to help us stay healthily fueled for our work together.

The Commitment

We ask only for your commitment to attend these three meetings. Please let Alice or myself know that you can meet this commitment as soon as possible. We do hold the door open for further meetings if some or all of us see that such work together could be beneficial, but further participation will be entirely up to your desire.

Questions?

Alice and myself are eager to respond to any questions. Please do text, call, or email us. Our first meeting will include time to answer questions and provide more information, too.

Doctoral Studies assistance

This experience is also an element in my studies toward a Doctor of Ministry degree. To help me in my program, I am asking for two gifts:

- 1) Completion of a pre-experience survey and informed consent document. They are attached. The survey and consent can be returned to me prior to the experience or before the start of our first meeting.
- 2) A focus group meeting with me after the experience, to be scheduled separately.

Contact me with any concerns or just curiosity!

The Rev. Matthew R. Scott
Vicar, Trinity Memorial Church

B. Pre-Experience Survey

Demographic Information

Name:

Age:

Opinion Scales

On a scale of 1 -7, with 1 being "Strongly Disagree" and 7 being "Strongly agree", answer the following

- 1) I find experiences in nature to be transformative to me personally
- 2) Belonging to a church is important for spiritual development
- 3) Those who do not believe in God can be moral and spiritual people
- 4) I find religious practice enriches my life
- 5) I exemplify environmental awareness and activism in my life choices
- 6) My local community has a healthy relationship to the environment
- 7) The United States public policy views of the environment influences my choices towards the environment
- 8) As I review my life, my present relationship to the environment is the best it has ever been.
- 9) I believe that we will someday become an environmentally friendly society and world

Short Answer questions *You may answer on a separate page, by typed response, or by email)*

Please briefly describe your household, defined as those you live with or see on a daily basis.

Engaging in environmental awareness and activism can sometimes lead to feelings of frustration or futility. What small groups that you are involved in do you turn to for support in this and other areas of your life?

Briefly describe your perspective of our local community's relationship to the environment.

What are some prominent voices (individuals and organizations) in the greater culture that inspire you to be concerned about the environment?

When over the course of your life has your relationship with the environment been at its strongest? When was it weakest?

Likewise, when over the course of your life has your awareness of and pursuit of a spiritual life been strongest? When was it weakest.

C. Session Outlines and Homework handouts

1st meeting - January 31st

- 7PM Introductions
Participants and Leaders
Hopes for our time together
Explain DMin project and answer questions
- 7:30 Overview of topic
Church environmental theology in the wake of 20th century- from domination to steward
Doorways, Dynamics, Reverberations - how we experience transcendence in nature
- Break
- 8:00 Leaders share stories
Matthew - The Turtle, the Storm, the clean-up, worship on the mountain
Alice - Pilgrimage to Standing Rock
- 8:25 Homework assignment: Prepare a five min share that speaks to Doorways, Dynamics, and Reverberations

2nd meeting - February 7th

- 7PM Gather, review last week
- 7:15 Participants break into small groups to tell stories
- 7:45 Report out to big group
- Break
- 8 Deeper look at local environmental situation
Regional/National/International
- 8:15 Brainstorming on local needs and opportunities
Homework: research areas that have impacted you while we talked

3rd meeting – February 14th

- 7:00 Check-in
- 7:15 Post-it notes project
Create 3-5 post it notes of action items inspired by sources reviewed for homework
Post them to board and explain them
Group works to cluster them
Break into two teams (mixed groups!) and Shark Tank pitch them to Matthew and Alice
- Break
- 8PM Discussion and last steps
Guided Meditation – meeting a spiritual guide in nature

1st Session Homework Handout

Preparing to share your 5-minute story and reflection

By reflecting on what you shared, heard, and learned in the first session, prepare to share a 5-minute reflection during the second session. Consider the examples you heard in the first session as guides. Describe an experience in your life that involves nature and the outdoors. Include in your reflection how the experiences and connected thoughts and actions exemplify the three areas of spiritual significance: Doorways, Dynamics, and Reverberations. See below for brief reminders of these.

Doorways - your experiences

Doorways are experiences that invited a person to value nature and the outdoors beyond their physical reality. They are often surprising moments, unexpected beyond one's planned-for hopes for their time in the outdoors. Early childhood, moments of transcendence, moments of awareness of environmental value, and being confronted with spiritual doubts all can be characterized as doorways.

Dynamics - your thoughts and reflections

Dynamics refer to the moments and processes where nature and the outdoors connect with your deep personal identity and concerns. Dynamic encounters are the messy ground where questions and answers are worked, where our experiences, learnings, and ideas meet and teach. This process in itself becomes a source for realizing the sacred in nature.

Reverberations - your actions in response

Reverberation are built from the experience of acting on behalf of the environment, nature, or outdoors. There are many possibilities that could be considered reverberations, like personal choices about how to live in relation to the environment, choices in professional work or volunteer associations, or taking part in local or global environmental activism. The experience of reverberations revealing our understanding of the sacredness of nature can seem similar to dynamics (and they can feed one another), but reverberations are built on our internal and external actions as we address our relationship with the environment.

2nd Session Take Homework

Next week we will share ideas of personal and collective action on behalf of the environment. Please research and reflect on the sources of information you trust and rely upon.

Investigate the following two questions

- 1) What are the primary concerns that your sources are focused upon?
- 2) If they (your sources) were asked to look at Warren County, what concerns would they raise and what ideas might they point toward for making a positive difference in our community in terms of its relationship to the environment?

D. Focus Group Questions

Introduction

- Desire to hear you discuss your experiences and opinions in the company of others who shared the experience.
- You do not need to come to any consensus opinion. If someone else's response stimulates you to add something, please do.
- Just as with the classes, you are not required to answer or participate in any or all of this focus group.

Questions

Area One: Discuss your overall impression of the three classes

- Please share what was the most impactful moment from the experience for you
- The objective of the class was "To find mutual support for environmentally conscious living through sharing experience and community". Did we do well? How do you know that?
- Class One - each participant shared a reflection on their earliest childhood experience. How did it feel to share?
- Class Two - How did having a week to develop a personal sharing help you go deeper, making dynamic connections for yourself and then with others?
- Class Three - Please review the nine areas we developed for advocacy and education during the third session. On the left, rank them where you want to put the most energy personally. On the right, rank them in the order of how important you feel they are to the community.
- What actions have you taken concerning the environment since the classes ended?

Area Two: Spiritual value and experience

- To unchurched group - How did you experience the topic of spirituality in our discussions? How did it meet any expectations you may have had coming into the classes? How did it challenge you in any way? Did you feel open and supported in sharing your thoughts and perspectives on the spiritual experiences of nature? How do you know that?
- To church members - Discuss the experience of discussing spiritual life with the group. How did the presence of those you knew to not be church members challenge you in any way?
- To both - Considering where you are now in life, have the classes affected your perspective on your spiritual life and spirituality in general? How?

Area Three: Psychological frame of reference questions

- Compare the dynamics of your current family unit with your experience in the group.
 - o How do you experience support and conflict?
 - o How do you value our small group's perspectives in comparison with your family?
- How have your views of US public policy changed as a result of our time together?
- You were asked to bring to the third class some personal reflections of the perspective of groups you find influential in your life. How did the classes impact your views of those influences? Are there new influences you are interested in listening to?
- At this time in your life, how does this experience affect your perspective on being engaged in environmental concerns?

E. Focus Group Community Action worksheet

The document on the next page is the worksheet used during the focus group interviews. It consists of the action items generated and organized during the third session. This was used as an activity during the focus group interviews to re-engage the participants with the results of that session.

The list is broken into three sections: Educate, Mixed, and Advocacy. These categories were discussed during the third session and draw from research on community organizing.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ David Gortner, “GCM 930 Public Witness Community Partnership Class” (Virginia Theological Seminary, June 26, 2017).

Educate Focuses

A **Teaching people to be more active and engaged**

Monitor government actions

On how to speak out more about local issues in terms of the environment

On how to organize folks, show up informed

Help people feel connected and aware

Getting like-minded people together

B **Youth, Community, and Professional Education**

To educate young people on reducing waste, recycling, and reusing items

How can I advocate for the environment in my volunteer activities

Implementation of youth outdoor programs

How can I advocate for the environment in my profession?

Begin water quality testing in Conewango watershed

I want to better understand my role as an environmental professional

C **Personal Actions to help us learn more**

Garden and can more to use local food year around

Start beekeeping hobby again

Backpacking more

Read more intellectual books

Transition to vegetarian to minimize environmental impact of raising animals for food

Work with horses more

Re-read Monkey Wrench Gang!

Tend my own garden (metaphorical and literal)

Mixed Focus

D **Actions that involve educating others and ourselves**

Eradicate invasive species. Educate about designated wilderness/LNT

Work towards a better understanding of forestry practices (community education)

E **Community Actions we can sponsor that will help us be more aware**

Adopt orphan wells

Get rid of plastic bags

Eliminate single use plastic bags and bottles

Reduce straw use

Littering

Create local composting location

Advocacy Focuses

F **Actions that will require political advocacy for change**

Recycle bins with the garbage downtown
Snow removal (much is currently dumped into river)
Better personal recycling

G **Actions that will lead to greater advocacy and support**

To get the schools more involved with recycling
Promote pure water to practice endangered species - mud puppies
Participate in western Penn Conservancy Bio-Engineering projects on
The Brokenstraw

H **Direct Pressure on government agencies and private industry**

SO2 Non-Attainment Area - participate in EPA Comment period
Pressure politicians & corporations to reduce air & water pollution
Pressure oil & Gas industry to reduce environmental impact
Organize protests, demonstrations
Stage letter writing campaign
Advocate citizen stewardship

J **Actions that will involve greater organization, planning, and risk**

Protect aquifers in region
Use business following as catalyst for change

F. Transcript of Focus Group Interviews

Focus Group 1: Un-churched Environmental Activists

Matthew: My first question, hopefully, it's pretty straightforward. Will you please share with me what was the most impactful moment from these three classes that I call the Experience? What was the most impactful if you could pick one that you're taken away?

David: I'll start with something because it bothered me.

Matthew: Sure.

David: I thought about it since. I made this flippant remark about rereading *Monkey Wrench Gang*. [laughter]

David: I am kind of a fan of Ed Abbey. I realized how just unthoughtful that was. There are a couple of foresters in the room, and of all people that you want to be careful around when you talk about the *Monkey Wrench Gang* is foresters. I should know this. I felt like an idiot. I've worked around with foresters for most of my life. Anyway, it struck me as just something I wanted to kind of get out of my chest but also just to reflect on because you just have to be-- I wasn't thinking. I certainly don't. I'm not a proponent of violence especially with regard to some of the violence that's described in that book-- Anyway. There are plenty of other events and moments that kind of caught my attention. That's the one I was just reflecting on today, what a stupid thing to say.

Matthew: Thanks. Doesn't go in order by the way. [laughter]

Alice: I guess I just really enjoyed that the last one where everybody put their ideas out there. Some are very simple and some are much more complex, but there are a lot of things that I hadn't thought of. There are a lot of good ideas out there. I feel like we have conversations every time that we left here for days, honestly. Why I can't seem to recall any of these conversations-

Liv: Yes. I know right?

Alice: [crosstalk] I'm not sure. But it wasn't something where we left here and then--

Liv: You forget about it?

Alice: Yes, we didn't talk about it. It was more or less- even just random phone calls in the middle of the day. I can't stop thinking about this.

Liv: It's just like a unique group of people.

Alice: Sure.

Elaine: Yes. You know? Yes. It's a different group. I did take away that I don't get out as much, hiking and stuff as most of you did. As I always said, "The river is where I'm at", but it was interesting to see that take. I just spend a lot of time in the car and just to start looking out in the woods as I drive, and taking that in, and thinking about the different things. Just how can we, even that driving corridor, take better care of it and not just out and in the heart of the woods. I started doing that I think a little bit more since talking with everybody.

Matthew: Is there a specific moment during the classes you were at that sort of connected with and taught you that lesson or helps you build on that lesson?

Elaine: I think it was more the second class. All that sharing and the different aspects there I really started in. It's so easy when you're driving and zone out and not see anything. Just to start paying attention to that, that brought that out.

Matthew: Cool. Thank you. Go ahead.

Alice: I feel like I already answered once.

Matthew: You can answer twice.

Alice: A really specific-- I will never be able to drive up Mohawk again without thinking of Petra. Learning that like the clouds that there was-- I think you guys really were in the other room, but the clouds-- she was-- I'm not even sure that I was born yet. They lived out near Chapman and they were driving up Mohawk and the clouds were so low that when she got to the top of the road, she was actually above the clouds. I thought about that so many times. I don't think I'll ever go up Mohawk again without thinking about her being above the clouds. It's kind of changed that drive for me.

Liv: I didn't know that story.

Alice: You were at the other--

Matthew: You're in the other group. You were stuck with me.

Liv: I like you. [laughter]

Matthew: Liv, do you have a specific moment that you could think of that really connected for you, your most impactful?

Liv: I'd say it was the last group thing. Like Alice said, all of the ideas and even the whole Edward Abbey thing because I just had a conversation with her in the car on the way here about Edward Abbey. I don't feel bad because I was going to say the same thing. [laughter]

Liv: I'm just like, "Yes, all right. Me and David, we got this." [laughter]

Matthew: Cool. Thank you.

David: If I could add, it was a series of moments. In fact, it was pretty much the entire experience for me, just one moment after another. I guess I feel like I'm- I think I'm the person who's the outsider, right? I migrated here. I've only lived here three-and-a-half years. I think you can--

Elaine: I'm a migrator but longer, 27.

David: But it's much longer. Yes, exactly. I think most everybody else was raised here.

Matthew: Only eight years.

David: Eight years.

Matthew: But its multi-generational around here.

David: Just listening to the sense of place, the stories about growing up, and on the water, and fishing, and just being in the place. I've seen that elsewhere, everywhere I've gone. I've had it myself. I grew up somewhere and lived there. I've spent long periods of time in one place. But, there's a difference really. I don't know what it is about here.

There's a guy I occasionally volunteer with who works for the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and he's been out west. He worked for the Forest Service and he keeps coming back.

I've had a number of conversations with him around, "why here? What do you like?" I like it here too. I'm trying to put my finger on what exactly is it. He gives me some of those standard answers about just the combination of everything. I think that combination idea is big somehow. At any rate, it's always nice to hear people talk about a place they loved and this is clearly one of those places.

Matthew: Thank you.

Liv: I had to move away to come back and actually enjoy it here.

David: You kind of did the same?

Alice: Yes, I left in first grade and came back in eighth grade then left the day after graduation, but I would never to move back again. [laughter]

Alice: Yes, took about 12 years off and yea.

Matthew: Cool. Let's move on. Our objective for this experience was to find mutual support from environmentally conscious living through shared experience and community. I'm a really wordy guy, sorry. Hearing that again, how do you think we did?

David: Can you say that again? [crosstalk]

Matthew: Sure. I know it's very wordy. [laughter]

Matthew: Again, the objective that I wrote was to find mutual support from environmentally conscious living through shared experience and community.

Liv: I think we did amazing. I think we all had something in common.

Matthew: Yes, plenty to share.

Liv: The ones I was- I'm not saying skeptical of was Nathan and Trevor. I didn't know where they fit in like I knew pretty much everybody else, like what their thoughts are. I like them, guys.

Elaine: I think we did. Yes, definitely hit that.

Alice: I think we may be scratched the surface on something larger. I had no idea what to expect coming into this. I'm still not even really sure what has happened. I do feel like I missed all you guys [laughs] when we don't meet, which tells me that there's definitely something there. It's made me think about things in sort of a larger- I don't know, the spectrum just got larger.

What it's made me think is there's a lot more people here, even folks that maybe we don't think would want to be involved in something like this that they would. We all have some sort of connection and I feel like we'd be really surprised if we tried to do something, craft something on a larger scale.

David: I have to admit, just kind of in preparation, just to get in the spirit of things today, I read a few pages of Wendell Barry. He talks about how the way we treat the earth is the way we treat each other. You cannot separate those two things, people and the planet, from this idea of community or many other things. It's everything that has to do with a connection whether that's a human relationship or relationship with animals, with water, with air, et cetera.

What I notice here, coming here is there are a range of here in Warren, not in this meeting but in Warren, there's such a range of people's relationship to nature. It's not all good clearly. I guess I do make a moral judgment about some of the ways I see how the earth is treated here. I know there's a long history of it. I know there's an economy that's kind of based on it. I know there are families who've lived here for a very long time and for them, it's kind of normal.

I agree with something Alice said, which is that I just get this feeling that there's this enormous groundswell of, I don't know, love of nature here and it isn't kind of allowed to emerge for a number of reasons. A lot of them economical I think, but I think that I've met engineers that worked for the refinery and foresters who are out there cutting down trees and that's their living. You can't judge a book by its cover. Everybody's got a depth to them around nature here. Even people that are out in it a lot, you can't help but walk, you're right here, you've got the river across the street.

I mean that's a phenomenal presence whether you're aware of it or not, it can't help but affect you and you can't help but have a connection to it somehow. This is a complex place but I think that there is an enormous number of people here who aren't speaking up. They're not really identified by political group or social group that are just in love with nature. We're just on that edge of really kind of stepping out and stepping up.

In this group, I think it's been a real interesting diversity of approaches, I think all of us have different ways to make a living but there is something central about nature. I don't think there's many things you can do living here, whether you're an accountant or a lawyer, you're working indoors all day where you just can't get away from nature here. It's just- I mean the weather [chuckles]. It's a force that--

I've lived in places where you walk outside and never even think about the weather because it's just always "nice". You can really get out of touch with it and you don't see water. You don't even know where it comes from, the water you drink comes out of the ground from somewhere miles away. Anyway, I think this has been a very, very interesting group of people.

Matthew: Thank you, Maybe they're feeding for that one, I think we have it pretty good and covered. Everyone felt like we got toward the objective and inspired a lot. That's good. Now we'll take a look at each class. We took three, so I know Elaine-- but you're going to get to feed into this. You're going to get it. In my first class, one of the feature things we did was I asked you to share your earliest childhood experience in nature. Actually, it was one of our introductory activities, gets you to talk a little bit. I want to ask just how did it feel to do that. How did it feel to share an early childhood experience with people you didn't even know in that case? How'd it feel to share that?

Liv: I love sharing stories.

Matthew: Yes, it didn't bother you at all?

Liv: No, not at all.

Matthew: Oh good, more stories!

Elaine: I actually was nervous. These guys won't believe it but I can be a shy person. These guys will laugh but just getting out and putting myself in front of people and speaking, it's tough, but I do it every day. Opening me up is tough sometimes, but it was good though. It was tough but it made me think of other things, so it was good.

Alice: Made me feel like I should know it, a memory from further back. [laughter]

Alice: Honestly. I feel like everybody had a very similar-- it just really made me sort of look at people on a whole a lot differently at least in this area. For the most part, I think we're all somehow connected whether it's the mud puddle outside or family, and friends that take you out there. Kids love being outside, you know what I mean, especially when we're talking about at those little tiny ages. I didn't mind sharing. I just felt like I should

be able to think of something much earlier than what I did. It was nice. It got my brain actually thinking though about, you know, way back in the days. Yes.

Matthew: David, how'd it feel to share an early story?

David: Few thoughts. One, it's refreshing to be asked a question about something other than work or what did you do, or what do you think about this or that. I guess I realized just how infrequently a question like that comes up in typical conversation. You can have really good friends for a really long time and not talk about that story and so that's very interesting to me.

Also, the other thing that made me reflect on my childhood and just how close to nature I was without even knowing it. I think little kids are just naturally so connected to the landscape that they don't really have a separation yet between themselves and the ground [chuckles], the creek, whatever. It's a lot more fun telling a story like that than telling a story about high school or college, or something like that.

Matthew: Good topic. Well, that question builds on my second one. Because in the second class, you were asked to take a week and prepare. So instead of just a spur-of-the-moment, try to think of something. You were given a week and you're asked to go a little deeper to make some connections and to talk about those dynamics we talked about. Where do these stories start to teach you things? What was that experience like? How did that help you make those? How did having that week? What kind of connections, if you can remember, did it help you make to have a week to think about it?

Elaine: I actually did that one on the fly though part. I did think all week and I'm like, "I don't know." I don't know, that just popped in and it wasn't on the fly for me, so maybe subconsciously things were percolating that I wasn't aware of it, and finally, everything clicked but just seemed to be on the fly for me so, I don't know with you [chuckles]. I don't--.

Matthew: That could be preparation too by the way, just so you know.

Alice: I'm trying to remember. I feel like I spent the first probably half of that week trying to remember stories from when I was younger. [laughter]

Alice: Honestly, that's what kind of threw me off. it just helped me to sort of wade through things so there's- what a big task [laughs] sort of in the grand scheme of things to pick something and not so much present it but... I guess I would say the week was good but I don't know if I used my time as wisely as I could have, because I was still sort of stuck on the memory. Yes, I enjoyed listening to everybody in the second week.

Matthew: Okay, did that experience help you make connections hearing other stories deeper?

Alice: Sure, absolutely. Yes.

Matthew: Anything jump out of you that you have taken away from that? I know you continued to have conversations afterwards too, so that becomes a great mixture of connections but--

Alice: Well, on our side over there, it went from one spectrum all the way to the other. Petra talking about the clouds up there on Mohawk and then it went into man and the destruction and war and it was a complete- the spectrum was very far. Elaine, I actually think I probably thought more about what you said than anything else, it's a lot [laughs].

Liv: It was a lot.

Alice: Yes.

Matthew: Thanks. David?

David: It isn't like I set aside time every day to work on it like a homework problem but in those-- I'm lucky, I have time during the day. I can set aside for just thinking... if my wife lets me. [laughter]

David: I thought a bit about it. I know my own process was-- I thought about all the -- I don't think maybe this is normal. I thought about all of the dramatic encounters I have had with nature in one form or another. I kind of ruled all those out because I wanted something that really went a lot deeper than just the normal scary thing that happens in nature. There's a lot of things in nature that are scary for a good reason and I don't think we can ignore those. Then we talked about Hiroshima and the bomb.

Matthew: Wow.

Liv: I wanna be on your side. [laughter]

Matthew: Ours was good, too. [laughter]

David: I guess we touched on that idea of, are humans part of nature, are we separate, enormous question, is war natural, things like that came up. I think it was just enough of just asking the question when I had free time, my thoughts went in that direction that week. I really didn't know what I was going to talk about until really maybe the drive-in.

Matthew: Yes, undecided.

David: Right.

Matthew: Settled. Yes. It could be all part of the process too, I do a lot of the sermons too. [laughter]

Matthew: I have a great idea, I'm not sure then I'm going to drive to Saint Francis, that's what I'm going to preach. Usually, I do get to write more than that by the way.

Elaine: You have two hours, three times a week to think [laughs].

Matthew: All right, little art project. Well, it's not really an art project-- survey. How about that? On the third session, we actually came up with a list of actions. I'm going to show them to you. Elaine, you get to participate even though you didn't get to help make this list but you're going to get to reflect on a little bit. I've got it here and the one thing I've have added-- I tried my best to kind of summarize like a theme in each one of these areas.

Remember we sort of grouped them in nine areas and some of you already saw these. The only thing I did was I added the bold theme but tried to get a sense of why does this fit in education, why is it a middle ground, and why is it an advocacy issue, and what we were trying to get at. It may not be perfect but I stay true to what we came up with in that third section. I didn't edit the areas.

What I'm going to ask you to do is to actually rank them tonight, so I'm going to give you time, you have time. As a matter of fact, you want to get a walk around, get a glass of water while you are doing this, that's great. What I want you to, on one side, if you notice on the left side, it says personal. Rank them based on how important they are to you personally. Which ones you would most want to get engaged with, because that's the most important to you individually.

On the right side, I want you to rank them one through nine based on which ones you think are most important for the community and its okay if that's different. It's okay if you're in one place but you're thinking "What Warren County really needs is this, but I'm not cool with that." Of course, if you agree perfectly with personal and community, that's great too but it's okay to be different.

On the left side, I want you to rank the one through nine as best as you can based on what you are personally passionate about, the ones that really connect with you. On the right side are the ones you think are most important for Warren County. You have pens? I got magazines. I want to give you let's say five minutes minimum and then we'll check in. At this point, if you want to get up, use bathroom, get water at this time, this would be great too, so here.

[crosstalk]

(Break till 39:40 min mark of recording)

Matthew: If you'd put your names on, it'd be great too on the print. Again, confidential, it doesn't go anywhere. We're not going to publish this paper like, "Look, what they thought! What were they thinking?"

Could you talk briefly about why you picked your number ones? What about them spoke to you? What about them do you think speaks to the community or as most important to you? If you want to say that, go ahead.

[silence]

Matthew: No one talk at first--

Liv: No, my number one for community or I guess my number one period is protect the aquifers in the region just because it's water.

Elaine: Okay. I think going on in groups of-- I was using the bold category groupings and--

Liv: No, I didn't. Was I supposed to?

Alice: I don't know

Matthew: I was trying to be helpful to try to give a sense of what's going on.

Elaine: Okay. I didn't pick one of each. I actually put the number one under the youth community professional education. To educate because I think it starts small and mine was in letter "e" community actions that would pick them up, get rid of plastic bags, lemonade bottles, litter. That was one of my pet peeves. I wasn't up here long, I joined the exchange club. We do the parade and we were always the first people out in the parade. I went to Holy Redeemer. I just walked to the start, walk the parade route. Then I walk home and watch the parade that way.

Never felt I'd get to the middle of the block between Liberty and second market. It's emptying out and there is just garbage everywhere. I'm like, "You people packed it in. Why can't you pack it out?" There's a garbage can here and there's a pile just where they were standing four feet away. It just irritated the crap out of me [laughs] so that's where I pick those.

Matthew: Personal passions, part of the deal.

Alice: My personal one was the same thing, action settled in both greater organization planning and risk, protecting aquifers but also using the business following as a catalyst for change. I think that river cleanup has sort of been one of those things where there's an art to it. You can get people involved and you can get them feel good about what they're doing but you have to craft in a way that you sneak it up on them. Anyway, at the end of the day, they removed a whole bunch of garbage and they feel really, really great about it and they have a better connection.

I'm not saying grab your torch and pitchfork by any means when I say use a business following as catalyst for change. I do think that there's something there. It's hard to figure out exactly how to craft that and I've been working on that for what feels like years. Community, I'd put youth community on professional education as well, especially youth. I mean any community, all of them but boy, you can really change it if you can just instill it in young people although they don't really stick around.

Matthew: Plant seeds.

Alice: Yes, absolutely.

Matthew: I know you don't have children but you work with children?

Elaine: No.

Matthew: I heard something about teaching or something, maybe that-

Elaine: No.

Liv: She's a doctor.

Elaine: I'm an optometrist. Yes.

Matthew: Well, there you go. There's a lot of people--

Alice: She's hilarious.

Matthew: Trying to make a connection, my apologies.

Elaine: No problem.

Matthew: I didn't ask about professions when I worked on the intake. Well, yes, thank you.

David: Well, I noticed just, in general, I got these inversions going on, for example, the first most important thing I have rated for community is youth, community, and professional education. That's number nine on my personal list. It's incredibly important as a community effort but it's not the thing that I'm involved in. I don't really think of myself as someone who would contribute much there.

There's a lot of overlap here by the way. The thing that I rated personally number one is the strike pressure on government agencies because that's what I do. My wife was out of town yesterday and she calls me about 6.30 at night and I realized I'm still working on the email to Kathy Rapp (state representative). [laughter]

David: Which has taken me about three hours to work on. That's my number one. In terms of really the bigger scheme of things, how important is that to the community, I've got it rated as eight. I'm just really not clear yet about whether it really matters and it's more maybe a comment on the state of politics, the main thing.

Matthew: Thank you. Can I collect those back? You're not going to need this. Although , if you want a copy of this, just the list, that's anytime.

Alice: Well, that just an interesting brain twist.

Liv: I didn't mine as a category, I did mine individually.

Matthew: That's fine because certainly, we develop them individually to those who have links into those individual pieces. Absolutely, that's fine. I was just trying to give a little bit of a categorical--

David: That would be hard.

Liv: It was. That's why I was-- [laughter]

Matthew: Nothing else I found-- a few of them had direct overlaps that there was "speak out more on local issues" in teaching and then there's "speak local issues in government" direct actions. I was like, "Well, there's a difference?" We're talking about teaching people how to do it in the teaching piece. I'm trying to make it more clear. Anyway, good. The last question in this area then is, have you taken any actions in regard to the environment since our classes ended? If you'd be willing to describe them and then say whether the class in some way helped influence you to do that.

Alice: We're getting recycling bins for the shop, like official recycling bins for the shop.

Matthew: Like from the town?

Alice: Yes.

Matthew: The blue ones and the green ones.

Alice: Yes.

Liv: We have them. They're back.

Alice: Larger recycling bins. One little recycling bin doesn't help, at least here. I mean for us here, that's full in one day. She's got a real problem. [laughter]

Liv: I drink a lot of Diet Coke.

Matthew: These cans are getting back in. Yes. That's awesome. Do you feel the class helped sort of say, "We can do this right now or not."

Alice: At the same time that we're doing this, we're also getting ready to begin-- Well, we're sort of going through a strategic planning process within (their store) and it's like a five-part process. Right now, it's just the core crew. I dusted off the old business plans. We've been passing them all around to everyone. There's a lot of things that sort of...systems and processes and something as simple as making sure that everything's recycled. I guess it's all coming together.

Matthew: Awesome. How about another with this--

Alice: That's just the simple one. That's the one where that's easily checked off the list.

Matthew: But it's a good one.

Alice: Sure, I think there's just a lot of simple things that we can check off the list if we just decided to do it.

Matthew: Good for you. I want to know about that business planning later but that's for the church. Other things you've done. Anybody else have done something ostensibly for the environment or in the environment since the class and whether it linked in somehow?

Elaine: I really haven't.

Liv: I tried to recycle better, Alice, just to let you know. [laughter]

Alice: Just to let me know? [laughs]

Eliane: I'm going to be obsessed with recycling. [laughs]

Alice: Oh my gosh. I get really upset if I see like--

Liv: Sometimes I'm just lazy and just easy to toss it.

Alice: Yes, but no. It's not easier to toss it.

Liv: It's really easier to toss it. [laughter]

Matthew: I offer relationship therapy. [laughter]

Matthew: It's great. I got a great classroom. We could work this out.

Alice: You're doing great. Good job.

Matthew: David, anything? I know it is winter...

David: don't know that there was a connection here but let's say there is because I like the idea.

[laughter]

David: There are a couple of air quality issues that are current and they began during these classes. I think there was a connection. I've been taking some political action, and trying to get some reaction to some things that are occurring. I think on the intake form or something, there's a question about when have you felt least connected to nature or had the least spiritual connection to nature. I think I said something about when I was in the Forest Service, which is most of my adult life because it's a bureaucracy. You get to know the rules and the regulations, and those become somehow the things you're judged on, your knowledge of those.

I'm kind of detecting the same thing in political action. You have to really know these regulations and laws and those are kind of dispiriting to me. You have to do it. There's no way of getting around it. The better your command is of that, the more likely you are to probably succeed. You've got to keep that in mind. Anyway, I've just been more aware of that probably because of the conversations we've had here. When I put down a copy of Act 13, Pennsylvania Act 13 which I seem to be spending a lot of time reading, which is oil and gas, I try to do something that's going to counter that dispiriting bureaucrat kind of mode that you have to get in to do that kind of work.

Matthew: Thank you. You're past halfway. Pat yourself on the back. We're going to shift focus a little bit now. Some of these questions you may hear reflection based on your intake survey that I gave you. I want to get some of your opinions now and after the classes. For you guys, I want to ask, the topic of spirituality was in the room. We've mentioned that right up front, try to explain a little bit and agree to a group language. I want to ask you, how did you experience that topic in the classes? I'm going to give you some follow up on that too. Maybe I'll start with this one. Did it meet your expectations going in of what spirituality conversations might be like?

Alice: I don't think I really have any expectations. I just came with an open mind. I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I'd say it met my expectations.

Matthew: Cool. Keep the bar low? [laughter]

Alice: Well, I just think we didn't really even have a bar.

Matthew: Can you characterize your experience? It sounds...you said you're open to it.

Alice: Sure. You mean like the experience of all of us?

Matthew: Talking about spirituality or spiritual experience.

Alice: I feel like I got very comfortable that first night when you asked who or what your earliest memory was. I felt like that right there, regardless of just... to hear everybody talk about being little and having the experience of nature and the effect that had on them. I've always put nature and spirituality together. That's my church out there, always has been. I guess when I learned that everybody in the room, regardless of who goes where and does what, I was comfortable. I felt like we were all sort of on the same playing field and had the same kind of connection.

Matthew: Thank you. Others? This idea...how did you experience the conversation about spirituality? Did it meet your expectations, coming in?

Elaine: Almost like Alice. I don't know if I had an expectation to go by. I think it opened me up a little bit more to think about it. I don't know if I ever really thought about it which is weird because I had 16 years of Catholic education [laughs]. You would think in

that time, connected more but I think I didn't like or nothing-- It didn't meet or not meet because I wasn't sure what to expect.

Liv: I think I'm just a spiritual person typically. There was no bar. I really know what we're doing really until ... kinda still don't know what we're doing. [laughter]

Liv: Just hanging out with friends.

Matthew: There you go.

David: I had a little trepidation about it because I haven't gone to church really since I was in college which is a long time ago. We raised our daughter a Catholic actually, or we at least sent her to a Catholic school but that doesn't make you Catholic. She decided not to be Catholic. I have this problem of-- organized religion doesn't necessarily mean you're spiritual and vice versa. Like Alice, when I go outdoors, I guess that always felt like a cathedral.

I was a little worried but when you said transcendence, you had me at that point because one, I'm an old English major. I've read quite a bit of literature based on that idea of transcendence. It permeates literature by the way. It's almost everywhere. There is an intellectual way I could relate to it which was non-threatening. It was interesting.

Matthew: Anyone want to add anything to their comments on that one? I have a follow up I can add but I don't want to miss that level first.

Liv: There is a complete difference between religion and spirituality though. I was forced to go to church when I was little. I stopped going when I was...17-- Me and my mother used to get into heated arguments because they grew up in the church. Their mother, they all went to church like... it was just a whole different generation and me being gay really didn't help much when they're preaching at you. That's why it was awesome of you when you came in. You made me just feel comfortable like from the very get-go. I was like, "Yes, Pastor Scott, anything for Pastor Scott." [laughter]

Liv: Telling me not to go to church was even better. I was like, "Yea, buddy."

Matthew: I didn't mean it that way. [laughter] I was trying to meet you your expectation. [laughter] You're more that welcome to come to church. [laughter]

Matthew: Interesting. This isn't my question but I want to follow up in this way, we've quickly moved from spirituality to church and what I would call religion which is different than spirituality. We say it in the church too, we agree. There's a whole lot of people in the church who aren't spiritual and there's a whole lot of spiritual people who aren't going to step foot in the church. We'll agree on that immediately if you didn't know that. I hope any good pastor or priest would say that.

I want to move back towards spirituality and away from church a little bit. Did these classes and the talking about the spiritual life in this way change your

understanding of spirituality in any way? This may be hard for you to describe, these may not have a language but we'll try. Stretch yourself and say, "You know what? I'm willing to think of it in this way or move in a new way with it." Or it didn't. It was nice, however.

Liv: Kind of made me think not to judge a book by its cover like with (Nathan and Trevor). They typically wouldn't be somebody I would approach. You know what I'm saying? Like burly all that. They're not like what I think. Just give people a chance to hear what they have to say first.

Alice: Yes, don't be so judgy over there. [laughter]

Alice: Judge Nelson. [laughter]

Liv: Even if you had to. [laughter]

Matthew: You recognize that change of heart as a spiritual experience?

Liv: Yes. I'm just cold sometimes [laughs]. I'll be the first to admit that.. [laughter]

Liv: I really feel like I can read people.

David: Well, it was interesting timing for me. Typically, I think things come along when you need them. I've been retired now for a couple years and I've hung out most of my adult life with scientists and technical people, bureaucrats, and almost to a person, I think of them as being materialists. They really do limit their thinking to the material world and what science can define. Some of that is an expectation that the public has for people in natural resources I think.

It's either law or sciences and they're either on litigation or doing research or something. I can see in my own self now an evolution over the last few years that I can get away from that and I can expand, that I can open myself up to other possibilities. I have been doing that. What's nice about this is as someone who does not have a church, I don't get a chance to talk to-- Even my friends right now are mostly scientists and materialist, you don't really talk politely about in polite conversation about religion or spirituality, which I think most people are putting together.

I don't know what that means but when I was younger I used to meditate. I recently prayed. In the last couple of months, started meditating again and that's really been important to me. I don't know where it will go, if anywhere, it might stop tomorrow, I don't know. That's my personal practice, at least I have one now which is something I haven't had for a long time, I don't know where it will lead me. Anyway, I don't know if this experience had motivated me in one direction or another or if it was just part of the mix at just the right time.

Matthew: You feel a connection somehow? That's a benefit--

David: I do. I guess I would just express the same thing have already heard here, which is it would be nice to have something like this go on, in some way. I think we'll probably

see each other outside, our doors or see each other maybe doing some kind of political activity of some kind but this is going to be a pretty rare opportunity, could be, unless we work on that.

Matthew: We'll talk later.

David: Okay. [laughter]

Matthew: Elaine, anything? Has it changed your spiritual life in any way or affected you in some way?

Elaine: I think it caused me to go internal more.

Matthew: Creative language.

Elaine: Yes, to think on my own more about things and not to sort of let it go because I can just ignore the news and the things but start thinking more on my own about it. I don't think it was hard for me to separate spirituality and religion or the church but I think I've started doing that long ago after 16 years of catechism. [laughter]

Elaine: The beatings of the nuns and the-- [laughs]

Matthew: More about discipline than actual spirituality.

Elaine: Yes. I think it helped me to start thinking more about some of the stuff.

Matthew: Any more on that?

Alice: This is going to be another one of those, "Now, I'm going to spend the next week thinking about it". Sort of the thing as David was saying, when something happens at just the right time, with everything going on out in Couderport with that frack water facility that we went out for first of those meetings just before it started.

I remember us talking about it and me saying, "I wish we had already gone through whatever it is that we're about to go through. I don't know even what it is but I feel it might help a little bit with this situation and how to sort of approach it." I moved a lot as a kid, sometimes three-four times a year, lived in inner city a lot and when we finally got ourselves on the outskirts and away from the concrete--

Matthew: Concrete forest?

Alice: Yes, I just really realize the impact that being outside had on me I think at a really young age. I know as an adult in hard times, it's where I've always found my footing. Some people would probably see it as maybe a bad thing in business, just that I really-- my passion lies way more in helping people to make those connections. To really have... to fall in love with being out there and having a natural connection with whether they're paddling or hiking or backpacking or climbing or whatever it is that they're doing.

I guess this just made me dive deeper into how it affects me being outside when it comes to spirituality and reverberations and doors that opened, and how that affects you and how that affects the people around you. I think I'm going to reflect on it more especially in July when the crazy season comes and everything is moving very fast. It would be nice to sit down. When I try and to do that, I meditate at times during the summer because I need whatever I can to slow me down because it just moves so fast.

I guess it made me look at it in a different way, I've always thought that being outside is my rock. It's where I go when I'm confused or when times are tough or just when I need to get away from everything or it's also where we share lots of laughs and all of these things. I guess it just helps me dissect it a little bit more into a different type of experience as far as spirituality goes and how it affects me and how that affects others. If that makes any sense...

Matthew: Totally.-

Alice: Yes, okay. Maybe a little bit? [chuckles] This is a lot.

Matthew: Yes. That's why I want to give you more space. Is there anything else? You listen to each other a little bit now and talk about this idea, any more that's come, or you can hear connection to the class or something else? It's okay. Let's come back to that. Moving on to our last section actually, can you believe it? My last section of questions.

This is going to link in to stuff you may not understand, I'm here to explain. On my pre-survey, I asked you some strange questions about relationships to other groups and listening to like, US public policy was a question which you already keyed in a little bit. My first question I want to ask about now, having experience this class, could you compare the dynamics of your current family unit? Remember my question on there was about describe current family unit, who you live with, who you see on the daily basis.

Compare the dynamics of that unit with your experience in this group. Here's a couple of ways to answer. Can you compare how you experience support and conflict in your family unit versus this unit? Could you compare how much you value your family unit's values and perspectives versus these groups' values and perspectives? I can go through that again. There's a lot, right?

Overall, I want you to try to compare your family unit. You guys are going to talk about each other right now. There's other people in that unit too and it's okay to have different experiences but compare the dynamics of your family unit versus how you experience the dynamics of this unit, of this group the you're a part of. Start anywhere you want. I help guide the conversation from there. Can you compare the two or contrast them as the case may be?

Alice: I think my family unit is pretty similar. I probably get a lot more pushback from my kids than I did from anybody in this group, that's for sure.

Matthew: Can you say a little bit more about that, what that experience of difference was when [crosstalk]

Alice: Well, I got a couple that are in debate class right now,

Matthew: They're trained in it?

Alice: It's awesome actually. Now, it's a daily topic of discussion. If nothing happened in debate class, I make sure that they understand that things should have happened. If this is your topic, these are all the different things that you could talk about on this topic. It started our own little debate class. I think that I knew just about everybody in this class. I didn't know the foresters. What are their names?

Matthew: Nathan and Trevor.

Alice: (Nathan and Trevor). Did I just make up their name, forester 1 and forester 2?
[laughter]

Matthew: Really, they might agree to that actually. [laughter]

Alice: I didn't really feel like there is much- I don't feel like there is a whole lot of debate. I think it was more sharing. In our household, everybody has the same sort of thoughts except for when it comes to movie night. That's really the only time but they all feel about nature the way that we feel about it so it's very similar.

Matthew: Similar values? Okay, but different communications, right? Fair enough?

Liv: I judge them like I judge everybody else too. [laughter]

Matthew: Do you want to add a different perspective? [crosstalk]

Liv: No, that's honestly, basically-- Yes.

David: This is a tough question. [laughter] My wife is still working for the Forest Service. She's still a bureaucrat and a lot of what I've recognized, just talked about a little bit about this kind of materialistic worldview, it's either legal or it's scientific or a combination of the two. She still has to have that. She expressed a little bit of concern. She's a little worried I'm going to join a cult or something. [laughter]

Liv: You'll be springing from the van with maybe a big scissors. [laughter]

David: We've been together for a long time and we pretty much had this kind of...Forest Service...and that approach and that perspective is something we shared. One of the things you recognize immediately when you retire from anything is that your identity has to shift. My wife's been a Forest Service employee for 40 years. It's going to be really tough for her when retirement comes and I don't know when that is. She keeps putting it off.

Part of me is feeling like, "Well, I've changed quite a bit in the last couple of years since I retired," and she doesn't have that luxury yet to do that. That's really tough.

My daughter is 27. She was living with us earlier and was really, I think, starting to fall in love with the nature here but she grew up in Arizona. She's lived her entire life in either Arizona or California. It was a big reach for her.

Even though we hiked and camped and everything as she was growing up; and she still loves it when you can get her out there, it's just that there are so many other distractions these days, so many of the things that pull people to excitement. Nature can really be exciting, I can say that. It can really get your adrenaline going but it's not predictable like going to a concert or hitting the bars or [laughs] whatever it has to be.

I've become more aware of that shift in her as a Millennial. What does that mean? Where does nature fit for her? That's still something I haven't figured out completely. Now, she's moved back to Arizona so it's kind of...going to watch it from a distance. It really is central to my family unit in so many ways. I don't think I would have thought about that until I had this experience.

When I think about all of the conversations over the years about trees, and forests, and watersheds, and wildlife, it's been central. Definitely, a little bit of opportunity here for some evolution on my part. It just made me more aware of where the people are and why they're there. It's not necessarily a bad thing. I guess I'm feeling lucky that I've done my time, so to speak, and now I can be a lot more independent.

Matthew: Thank you. Again, comparing your experience in your family unit with your experience here, both on the topic and just how they work together.

Elaine: Very different because my basic family unit here is me. My parents are three hours away, my sister's in Florida so I don't have a-- We never really talked deep about anything, I don't think. It's not where I go to do it so it was interesting here to be able to do that. I'm at home, by myself, and I talk to the walls [laughs]. It's a very different type of thing.

Maybe something I can broach with them, a little bit more of it. They're not nature, they're not outdoors people. They never did much of that so it's just a totally different experience, and neither am I, things I do, drive my dad up a wall and with worry, more or not [laughs], things of that nature. Being out in the water alone or open-water swimming or whatever I'm doing out in nature, it seems to bring out this fear but we've never really been on that nature, that plain, so it was totally different.

Matthew: Okay. Thank you. Another question I asked you on the survey was about US Public Policy and how it affects you or how you view it. I'm wondering if the classes at all changed that for you. Do you hear public policy in a different way? I know David you've talked about your approach toward being engaged with US public policy probably changed a little bit. Is that maybe a way of getting at this question but has your view of the US public policy been affected by having a chance to talk about your values, your spirituality links into your relationship with nature, and just getting to meet these other people?

Alice: Oh boy, that's tough since public policy is changing by the minute. [laughter]

Matthew: How do you know what the US public policy is to-- There's that problem too.

Alice: I don't even remember what I wrote.

Elaine: I don't remember [laughs]. I'm like, "Did I answer that question?" [laughs]

Alice: I'm assuming I probably feel the same way as I did then. I've always paid attention even under... trying not to get real political, I guess It's sort of a political question though. Even under the last administration, there were things that I took action as far as writing letters and making phone calls but now, I feel like it's crisis management on a daily basis and this kind of calms me. I think it might be just the thought that there are others that feel the same way. Certainly, we have friends that once a week, we all get together and everybody kind of--

Liv: Events?

Alice: Yes.

Matthew: This is the women's group?

Alice: This is the Cha-Chas.

Matthew: The Cha-Chas, okay.

Alice: There's no dancing. Well, sometimes there's dancing but not cha-cha. [laughs]

Matthew: If the spirit moves.

Alice: Right, [laughs] but within a group, I think that I've sort of taken on a role of-- Even with my kids' friends' parents, I've even taken on a role of, "Hey, when I drop Alex off, can you kind of catch me up on what's going on in the world?" I've always paid attention. Now, I have no choice but to really, really, really pay attention. Not that I know what to do but I always try to lay out some sort of plan to at least sleep a little better. That I've done something versus nothing and-- Yes, I don't even know. That's a tough question.

Matthew: You're doing great. That was a great answer. Because you really pointed that and you explored it, so thank you. That's all I could ask. Anyone else want to chime in, have a thought?

Liv: I just want to light a match and burn it all down.

Matthew: Is that different than before?

Liv: No. (laughter)

Elaine: I just put my head in the sand when it comes to the politics. I've never been into politics. I just think they're all lying, backstabbing. It's tough to listen to any of them and take anything what they say is- anything is going to happen.

Matthew: Well, I guess yes, public policy is set by politicians and bureaucrats, but did our class help you- did our time together help you view it differently I guess? Or appreciate it differently? Or that's the wrong word, maybe unappreciated differently. Or not, it's just like, "whatever, it's policy, I don't care."

Elaine: Yes, I guess I've never been that intent on it to know whether it's changed it or not, because I barely watch the news ever. It's probably is it good or bad that I don't--

Alice: You're not missing anything on the news.

Elaine: Yes, really get into the policy and what's going on and I sort of try to keep my world where I think it should be.

Matthew: Got it. That's over there somewhere else you don't want to be.

Elaine: Yes.

Matthew: That's great. That's fine

Elaine: Yes, it all does affect me in some way or other, but--

Matthew: You're not going to let it.

Elaine: Yes.

Matthew: It doesn't rise to the level of I've got to do something about or engage it.

Elaine: Right.

Matthew: To put words in your mouth. Got you.

Elaine: Yes. [laughter]

Elaine: Good words. Yes, that's really good. I think that's about it

Matthew: David, did you get to answer? I know I think I--

David: This is an interesting topic for me, but I'll just say, through my career, through my work life, it was important to maintain a kind of neutrality, right? Because there are Republican and Democratic administrations, and so policies changed. Sometimes they changed dramatically based on- but not always but often. The thing is you- as in your

role, you had to pick that up. Pick that policy up and run with it. You've always just kind of look back at what the law say. That's what we got to do.

By the way, the stuff I'm doing now is political activism. When I talk to these people who are working in government, I just have so much sympathy for them, because I know exactly where they're coming from. These are good people. They sometimes do things that just really get me, and I'm thinking how many times did I really just tick somebody off because I said, "Well, the law says this is what we have to do". I guess what this has made me think about is policy is just such a human invention, isn't it? Does nature care? Nature's being affected, don't get me wrong, but nature bats last, and it's stepping up to the plate right now.

Liv: We're just going to wipe it all out.

Matthew: You're not going to need a match.

David: One of the things I have trouble with is I always feel like I'm a downer like I'm just such a cynic. I just go in these cynical directions and I try to stop myself, but really, is it cynicism or is it realism? I don't really know anymore. I think coming at the environment from a spiritual perspective is much more accurate and it's much more encompassing, holistic, then coming at the environment from a legal or scientific perspective somehow.

I'm not saying don't come at it from a legal or scientific perspective, but those are so lacking in fundamental areas. Really, think about it, an administration can change, and we can have totally different policies toward nature. That's always been something that's bothered me a bit. There ought to be more stability and I actually think stability is a very, very important ethic when it comes to just about everything we do, but especially nature. It's kind of like the Seneca I'm talking about, seven generations. That's stability. You just don't have that.

Matthew: It's not profitable.

David: Right. [crosstalk]

Liv: Makes me light my match. (laughter)

Matthew: Well, thank you. I think we've- that's come up a few times too, because it does affect us when we are on some level aware. Where do we want to engage it? Another, in the third class I asked you to bring in, to help with our reflections and brainstorming, those groups you find influential or what I said those voices you turn to. Could be authors, it could be interest groups, it could be newspapers or magazines, or the Sierra Club, for instance, could be that voice that really influences you. Have your views of those influences changed, and are there new ones you're now interested in listening to?

Alice: I would like a complete list of every book that was mentioned, the author, and honestly--

Matthew: Yes, we should have kept a sketchbook where we could kind of just--

Alice: Oh my gosh, there were so many things thrown out. Yes, I would love to-- I'm being serious actually.

Matthew: Absolutely

Liv: I might go to a library.

Elaine: I know. (laughter)

Matthew: Great answer. Anybody else want to chime in on that? How does it affect both the ones you already like to listen to and then maybe are you open to new ones now because of the class?

Alice: Made me want to finish my book too, Katy Lee. She was one of mine-- and I've read bits and pieces about her. Listening to everybody and just putting all of this together.

Liv: I'm more aware of the whole timbering thing. I always knew that we had to clear it so that fires don't start and all that stuff, but them talking about it even more in-depth, made me understand even a little bit more.

Matthew: You guys tend to go last, so I'm going back and forth like a tennis match here.

David: Well, I have to say, I've rediscovered Wendell Barry, and you can read and reread him. The depth of that guy doesn't stop. It just is amazing what he knew. When I look back at what he knew and when he knew it. Now, it blows me away more and I understand it, and now I have more perspective on it. You could go back to Thoreau or Emerson, and they're talking about the same things. It isn't like these are just things that we are starting to see the effects of now.

The environment's been under attack by humans for a very, very long time. I was visiting a ruin outside of Rome and this archaeologist was giving us a little tour. She said, "See this tree, this wood. That came from 1,000 miles away from here. They cut down all the wood in Italy. They had to go over the Alps to get wood to build things with". I'm thinking, "Boy, this just--" [laughs]

What is it about us as a species that we just can't keep our hands off of trees for example, or minerals, or water, or you name it. Now, that's not saying there haven't been groups of people who've done a very, very good job of living in a very sustainable way. Anyway, I go back-- you can read Wendell Barry anytime and it would be worthwhile.

I'm looking for new voices though, and I just would say that the big NGOs, the big nonprofits like Sierra Club, interest me less and less and less. I don't know. I get it. They have to raise money. They have to pick their issues in a way that helps their fundraising for example.

I work for this little bitty nonprofit. We have hardly any money and we spend a lot of our time trying to raise money. I think what we've all realized is "Forget it, let's see what we can do without money. Let's just spend some time on the water." If you just get

out there for a few hours a day, you don't have to spend your time trying to raise money to spend a few hours of it in the waters, just get out there.

Anyway, I'm also looking for music that's resonating with me. I'm not doing a very good job of finding that outside of the Native American music for example that I think does a very good job, some of the world music, but not finding anything... I don't listen to a lot of current music so I don't know where that's going. Maybe there's somebody who's doing more nature music of some kind. We've got to have music. We've got to have a soundtrack.

Liv: The Medicine People...I heard them at Standing Rock. Anyway, I would listen to it a lot. He's very spiritual and he's Native. He's Native American but it's more of like a little bit everything.

Alice: It's like a relaxing, calming but upbeat, the same with Xavier Rudd and didgeridoo and different instruments that you don't normally have with your music.

Elaine: I guess it just made me think "Maybe I need to get out of my own little bubble".

Liv: Come hang out with us.

Elaine: Yes, and listen to some of these. Like you said, the Sierra Club and some of these big things you see that it's become its own little-politicized thing. It made me open my eyes a little bit more and go- I just sort of get in my little hamster wheel and keeping my world just to keep it going. I might need to step outside on some of these other-- I do my part. Like I said I'm a radical, not radical but I'm a pretty intense recycler, and littering, but I don't really get out. I do it on my own, fix stuff up or whatever. I need to do a little more.

Matthew: Yes, being engaged.

Elaine: Yes.

Matthew: Cool. This is the question I've been struggling to tell. The question on the survey talked about at this time in your life, when were you closest to nature and when you've been farthest away. It's called a lifespan question. I asked you to compare parts of your life as like an arc of time. This question is keyed in that way. You've got to think of your life in terms of "Where am I in my lifespan, in my story?" How did these experiences affect your perspective on being engaged at this time in your life compared to how you were engaged at other times in your life?

There's two ways you can attack it. You can compare how you were engaged earlier or how you expect to engage later or you can try to think of those times you were most and least engaged and how this class affects your feelings about those? Most of you answered their comments about the idea of your life as an arc and this has happened at this one time, this one experience, and how does it affect that sense of my life as a one journey connected story?

Alice: I think my least connected time was when I was in the Navy as well. You do what you're told and that's what you do. There's real black and white. There's no real grey area. I think I was probably least connected than-- I'm still outside a lot, but I also had three children at the same time, although we were outside a lot. When you're in the military, you're owned by the government and so, therefore, you don't really have a voice.

Certainly, for the last few years, I would say at least, if not four or five years, I really struggled with, "What do you- how do you--" I sat down with a meeting on the other side of the PA Wilds here. Gosh, this had to be five, six, seven years ago and it was right when Marcellus Shale was coming. It had already sort of hit the eastern side of the state. Really it was partnered with the PA Wilds and DCNR and DCED.

They talked about-- this is coming to all of our forests and our rivers and there's nothing we can do as DCNR and DCED. It's happening and it's going to be- there is some commissioners not from Warren but there are some commissioners there. County planners were there and they really just said, "We don't know what's going to happen but it's going to be up to all of you to go to your community and to figure out if you can put something together to where you can make sure it's happening responsibly because it's a big deal." It's how I feel about Utica coming at this point.

We've been fortunate over here. The landscapes have completely changed on the eastern side of the state, the Pennsylvania Grand Canyon, it's a whole different, I mean, you know, five acres at a time with big towers and lights and night and all of that good stuff. The few that we have around here are pretty hidden, at least out of sight, out of mind, hidden. Ever since then, we were still-- AO was still in such infancy then. I think we had just opened the store. We're dealing with a horrible year of flooding from the national mandate to close down Kinzua dam because it'll flood on the Mississippi and all the overhead and stress from just opening a shop in rural Pennsylvania.

We continued to build our customer base and our social media following. That was the second year of river cleanup, just keep on building on all these things. Now, I just feel like these last couple of years, two, three years-- at what point as an outdoors-based business are you being irresponsible for not speaking up for the natural resource? At what point are you--

I just started to feel guilty I guess, is what it is. I'm at that point where I feel like-- and I've always been very, very, very careful, or at least I feel like I have, not to rub people the wrong way because it's my livelihood, it's how I put food on the table. Like I said earlier, trick people into wanting to take better care of things and clean up after themselves. When I left that meeting all those years ago, my initial thought was how do I get every fracking guy into a canoe and out on that river? [laughter]

How do I make them fall in love with this? How do I get them all to come on a hike with me? I want to get every one of these guys because what they were saying is they're not from here, they have no connection here, they're coming up from Texas and Louisiana and Oklahoma. It's "why do they care if they've spilled something and not reported it?"

If I'm looking back, my least connected time was just a whole different life, from top to bottom. Whereas now, I almost feel as though I'm so connected that it like hurts my heart. It really does. I know it sounds very hippity-dippity but it's like I can feel all of it. Even when we talk about climate change and global warming and changes in the jet stream and the storms that are moving through and all these things.

Man, I'll tell you, living right on the river it's like these storms that come through are not normal, to have these many tornado warnings over the last three-four years. You go out and it's like you can feel the trees. The trees are like-- they are beat-up and they are just like, "We are trying to hang in there". I don't know. I think I could probably ramble on for hours.

I just think I'm almost connected to the point where I need something like this. How I can continue something like this, I'm not sure. It's almost like I needed something like this to bring together a group of people, some are like-minded and some have completely different jobs or we're all unique in our own ways but to see how we can all sort of come together. I suppose that this is-- It's all part of how I get there, where over there it's--[laughter]

Matthew: Wherever the story's coming.

Alice: It's a part of it. It's opened up a much larger conversation within myself, within our close group of people and within myself and strangers. I think that's it. That's all. Sorry. That was long. Trying to do all my weeks-long thinking.

Matthew: Guys, we'll bring the tape recorder for next week.

Alice: Yes, right. Please.

Matthew: There's this idea of a lifecycle, lifespan, life journey, where you're at now, where've you been and how did this class maybe play a role.

Elaine: I think I've been pretty unconnected through a lot. I think this will push me to maybe into starting to connect a little bit more. This shall probably push me into doing more, connecting more, opening my eyes about it. Just to be more aware of the whole picture. Although, I think I know some like you were talking about, the forestry, understand the need to cut but try to figure out why we seem to need to consume everything that we live on.

Liv: I still don't really understand the whole cutting thing. I get it before there was any cutting, the forests were just fine.

Elaine: Well, they took care of themselves.

Liv: Yes.

Elaine: Yes.

Alice: I get the cutting part. I just don't get the whole let's cut these things and ships and send them out and bring them back. That's cheaper than like just that part with my mind.

Matthew: How cheap gasoline is.

Liv: Yes. Sorry.

Matthew: Again, this idea of lifespan. Where does this fit in all of this? Give it some perspective.

David: Well, at least in this group, I have one of the longer lifespans among us. I've got a bigger arc to work with.

Matthew: You have a long way to go and more. [laughter]

David: Yes. It is funny there. People talk about these passages, these life stages, they really do occur. I'm really fortunate. I think about this a lot that I don't have to really do that day-to-day economic grind anymore. I could, tomorrow because we could all be back a lot closer to nature in a year or two, who knows? There are so many similarities between when you're really a little kid and when you get older, when you get at a certain age. It really is funny. You have to live it, to really go "Well, it's just funny." I feel the same way now as I did when I was three or four or five-years-old about that.

It's not like you're thinking like a little kid the way we do as adults. You want to get back to that. It's that innocence that just fitting into nature without even trying. You don't have shoes on, at least in the summer, rarely had that many clothes on. You just get up and you run outside and you don't stop running until it gets dark. Then they have to find you and bring you back home. Then it just starts the next day. That's kind of where I want to be now. [laughs]. I want to get back to that and I'm working on that a little bit.

Yes, I think that we're all going to have periods of time in our life when we have opportunities and also we have times in our lives where we have responsibilities that prevent us from doing some things that we like to do. That never stops. It's complex but I do feel like old age is a time when you really do have an opportunity. As bad as everything is in like a capitalist society, so long as we still have this some big concept of retirement, where we actually let people have a period of their life where there isn't a lot expected of them, at least not the economic sphere. It's really a healthy--

The thing is it made me re-evaluate everything to not have to get up and make that money every day. I just wish everybody can have that experience. I know there are societies where you don't have to be old to have that experience. I think that has a lot to do with where we are. We have a system. We have a capitalist system. It may be around for a lot longer, it may not be. I don't think any of us know but it puts a lot of pressure on you at certain stages in your life. It's hard to get away from those pressures. I feel least connected to nature when I have to earn a buck. I guess that's been my experience.

Matthew: Thank you. Life is a journey. Where you at now, where have you been, and how has this class may be affected in some way?

Liv: I guess just not to take her for granted. Like nature and like-- what is that?

Elaine: That's my phone. [laughter]

Matthew: That was pretty cool.

David: They're hypnotized now. [laughter]

Liv: I think the least time...when I felt unconnected with nature, probably when I was like in my teens because that was a whole different lifetime. I think this is the most-- Since we've been together, I'm always been a tree hugger. I remember getting made fun of it because I used to wear tree hugger shirts.

David: In Warren?

Liv: In Warren. Yes, I didn't care. I had no care. Even when I lived in Hollywood, we could walk to Griffith Park, it wasn't complete nature but at least I could still get out there. I've always tried to live someplace where at least there's trees. I really like trees. They're like water. Even LA's river sometimes flows. [laughter]

Matthew: That's right. Once in a while.

Liv: Now, I think this is probably the most I've been connected. It's my every day.

Alice: That's what we do.

Liv: Yes. I don't know anything else to say.

Matthew: Okay. [laughter]

Focus Group 2: Environmentally oriented church members

Matthew: If I can have each of you briefly introduce yourself, just give your name. You can use your real name for this one. Your name and a brief description of what you've been doing lately would be really helpful to tag your audio levels.

Trevor: Just what I have been doing lately?

Matthew: Yes, what you've been doing lately.

Trevor: I'm Trevor and I've been doing a lot of camping and boy scout stuff recently. Obviously, work, I do conservation forestry.

Matthew: Thank you, thank you, Trevor.

Brian: My name is Brian. I've been just trying to stay warm because I'm retired.
[laughter]

Petra: I'm Petra. The thing I've done most is four times in the last week I've hiked the Akeley swamp and every time I've seen tundra swans.

Matthew: Tundra swans.

Nathan: Really?

Petra: Once I saw otter and once I saw sand hill cranes.

Nathan: Really?

Trevor: Amazing.

Petra: They are actually a pair nesting up there. I would not even ignore what I was seeing, but I was with a birder and she identified them for me.

Nathan: We're going to have to go.

Nathan: My name is Nathan. I too had a very refreshing weekend camping with Boy Scouts. I just recently made a career switch.

Petra: Really? Cool. I'm assuming it's cool.

Nathan and Trevor: Very cool, very cool it's pretty cool.

Petra: Congratulations.

Nathan: Thank you. Kind of stemmed from this whole project.

Petra: Really? Did you know that?

Matthew: Not yet, but that's actually a question here. [laughter]
Just hold on or you can talk about it now if you want to. I'll take it anyway.

Nathan Whenever you're ready.

Matthew: Thank you. Audios were good so, too high there. My voice is loud and Trevor's is loud, which is fine. Talk as much as you like. I'm going to adjust the microphone. My first question is asking or my first set of questions talks about just you overall impression of the three classes. Maybe my first would be maybe a general question for you. Could you share, please share what your most impactful moment from your experience was. The experience of meeting three times, you can include the survey and the pre-survey if that's important or significant as well. What's your most impactful moment?

Petra: For me, it was when we were in the breakout groups over at the outfitters and we were-- I don't even remember what the discussion was, but David, he was talking about hiking-- more like he wasn't hiking. He was fighting fires and also doing work to prevent fires out west in the mountains. He was talking about being able to drink directly from the streams in the mountains. It hit me, "Oh, my God we used to be able to do that around here too." I'm 71, I can remember back in the day, we can drink in streams. People way older than that, they don't know that. That was the bang moment.

Matthew: Thank you.

Trevor: I definitely think it was the last meeting where everything was tied together and we had the whole personal activity. I think that really-- I think it just allowed everybody to really see where people's minds were going with things and how we were going to take what we've been talking about and use it and what we think needs to be really emphasized on.

Petra: Then I had to agree that too. That wasn't an emotional moment for me, but that was insightful.

Brian: What really opened up my eyes and my ears is getting to know people that care about things that I care about. Then, getting to know you guys, you two. I think like you folks do, and that's a compliment.

Nathan: Thank you.[laughter]

Brian: It's refreshing to know there's other people that worry and care.

Nathan: I think the breakout moment for me came, again, with the... breakout group. I thought it would be too difficult, that I would not, I would be butting heads because I was

one of most many in my group. It wasn't hard. It was easy to find common ground. I think that was a...kind of a hallelujah moment.

Matthew: Anything else in that vein for you, any of you?

Brian: One of the things that struck me, I had mentioned that I knew where a white cedar is and someone had carved in it. You had said, "I'd like to see that tree." (Speaking to Nathan) I thought that's wonderful. Someone wants to go look at that tree, which again shows how much we have in common.

Matthew: The second question is about the objective of the class. On the initial invitation, it said that our objective was to find mutual support for environmentally conscious living through sharing experience and community. Father Mathew wordy, right? But, let me ask you, did we do well there? I will read it again to you. The objective was to find mutual support for environmentally conscious living through sharing experience in community.

Trevor: I definitely think so. I know we both came in to it, he touched on it a little bit, worried being the two in the industry that are actively working on removing trees, things like that and knowing how some people, we know people in the room prior to that and how some people think about things and stuff. We were worried about us really butting heads. I definitely think-- and that's why I really liked the post-it note thing at the end. It allowed us to really talk about what we do and how it is actually for the environment and what we do is really for the environment, and helping the environment, and being able to make that aware. I really, I brought a lot of everybody together on those kind of things.

Nathan: I echo the same thing.

Petra: I have to say I have always considered myself a tree hugger. For a long time I was don't cut any trees down no matter what. I have so evolved since then. Now I see that it is renewable. The plastics and the styrofoams, and that sort of thing are what is being destructive not trees. The real decision came for me, I flew to Ireland to hike. This was probably 12 years ago. There's no trees in Ireland. They cut them all down because of agriculture. Every once while there was a tree. They were gorgeous, but so was everything else. We flew back and we were landing, and we were circling over Philadelphia and it hit me, there are more trees in the city of Philadelphia than there probably are in all of Ireland. It was-- that's the real, that's where my change started.

Matthew: So for everyone agrees we really met the objective and you gave me some reasons why which is great. That was the follow up question. Brian.

Brian: For me, I come in...I have a negative feeling about the forestry. To me, they sold their soul to the oil patch, to whoever wants to do whatever and it really bugs me. Then when I meet two foresters and know that that's not what they are in it for. They're in it because it's important, and so that is-- I wish I knew somebody, and I'm sure they were in

forestry that are like you guys. I had a bad experience when we had the No Kinzua Resort Rally. I dealt face to face with them. And A) they sell their soul. It comforted me to know that there's professionals out there that know what they're doing they, that care. If they say the tree needs cutting, it needs cutting.

Matthew: Anything else from the experience of the group that helped you feel that you have obtained the objective or whatever you've reached to a bit objective of mutual support for environmentally conscious living through shared experience in community?

Nathan: I think what opened my eyes was that if everyone is able to just stop for a moment and put their agenda aside and listen what everyone has to say, we all find common ground. It's a spectrum. It's not black or white. It's not either end of the spectrum. It's a continuum across the whole spectrum and you can find your own place in that. That's what I found.

Petra: I just found it was a group of people that--I'm not as you know, I am not a meeting person, but this it was a group of people that I'd like to be involved with in the future somehow. Whether it's just emergency phone calls...hey there is a meeting we need to go to... loose knit, but to think this is a group that I might see again.

Matthew: Any other answers? All these are all good by the way. Silence is fine too.
[laughter]

Let me move on. I want to ask a specific question about each class and as I ask your opinion of it, how did you feel to do that. In the first class, one of the first things we did was I asked each participant to share a reflection on their earliest childhood experience in nature. I just want to ask you, how did you feel to share that, especially being the first class? You both may already talked about may be people didn't know, but how did it feel to have a chance to tell that story or to be asked to tell that story?

Trevor: I guess it was the first time I was asked. I used to just say it. This is what I used to do as a kid, simple as that. It really didn't bother me. I wasn't uncomfortable talking about. It wasn't the first time I'd talked about it. It was the first time somebody said, "I want you to tell you this." In the past, it was just yea, when I was a kid I use to get mud on my face and go and do this. That's the first time I really talked about it.

Brian: I uh...with that, it just seemed to be such a, almost a foolish question. All I know is nature really. I certainly haven't done my share, but I was raised in a boonie. When I went out and played, I'd watch for rattle snakes, had to do this, I had to do that. Later on thinking about it, after thinking about it I think of many personal things that happened to me in nature. I couldn't put my hand on the first one at all. Just was a way of life.

Petra: Although I wasn't raised in the woods, but I was raised on a farm between... two creeks bordered island. The story I shared was when I laid in the field behind our home and said goodbye to Kinzua. I hadn't told that story to very many people. It was emotional. Still is. (laughter) I re-lived that and the one thing I remember talking about was I was laying in this field and maybe for the first time and the only time in my life I

was right down there on the ground and experiencing what's down there that we never see. It's just amazing.

Nathan: I talk a lot. [laughter]

Matthew: The gift of gab is a blessing, its ok.

Nathan: I guess that's the Welsh in me. I can sense very quickly. I guess I...I find a comfortable level very quickly with someone and sense their acceptance of what I have to say. I am comfortable with that. It's not hard to really--semi-personal. I don't tell people my deepest, darkest secret, but, certainly, in context of what the conversations were, I didn't feel I had to be that guarded because we were all there ready and willing to share that. We had that preset mindset coming into it. I didn't have a difficult time with it.

Your visceral feeling of being so close to the ground (speaking to Petra). One of the things that my father always said is that he would love if God would just lift everything up three feet and give it a good shake, and see what would fall out. If you could just lift the whole forest floor up just to the bare earth and give it a shake, what would fall out? All the little things that look scary and creep, and crawl around. That was his fascination with that.

Petra: From what I read, the what is on or under the ground far out numbers-- maybe not in quantity, but maybe diversity. I just find that fascinating.

Nathan: The world's largest living organism is not the blue whale. It is a mycorrhiza fungi attached to the roots of forest trees.

Petra: In Oregon?

Nathan: Everywhere.

Petra: Really?

Nathan: Everywhere, everywhere, right up here on the in the Allegheny.

Trevor: It's the same thing

Nathan: It's the same thing. Yes.

Matthew: Thank you. Class two, I asked you to take a week to think about a reflection, maybe pick a different one or develop the same one. Then, also be willing to share about those connections, those dynamics that that experience connects you in your life and be able to share for about five minutes about them at the second meeting. How did it help you do that, to have a week to prepare it?

Petra: I don't even remember. That's that.

Matthew: That's actually when you had the breakout sessions. You were given a week to prepare for that breakout session so you could talk more at length.

Trevor: I was another one of those once I heard the-- I didn't prepare, flat out tell you, I didn't prepare.

Matthew: Please do.

Trevor: I'm horrible about those things, I am very good at talking off the cuff. Almost every keynote speech I've given was written on the back of a business card with five bullet points and a quote. And I just go and do it. I'm just very used to that. That one, it was one of those Alice told her story. I got mine, I've told this story a thousand times, here we go.

Petra: Remind me what your story was because maybe that would trigger my memory.

Trevor: I am trying to think what mine was.

Matthew: I don't need what the actual story was, just your experience of giving it and prepare. The question did it help you and how did it help you to get some time to prepare before you give the story.

Petra: I can't remember.

Brian: My preparation was just like yours. My mind wandered all week thinking about it. I took a few notes, but what I wanted to do, maybe what I interpreted the instruction wasn't right. I figured, well, I'll just keep my mouth shut let somebody else say something. [laughter] Then, just like you, just go with it that's all.

Nathan: I sense of trend. [laughs] It was a difficult time. It was in a rough period I was going through professionally. I didn't have the focus time. That was one of the things I was upset about is that in that time to focus on things that made me happy, that intrigued me. All that was part of the whole focus group thing, the whole meeting together and discussing, I wasn't able to devote the time I wanted to. I kind of waited and had an epiphany. I'm going to talk about this. I would have preferred to have had the contemplative time.

Petra: I did. I know I worked at it. I don't remember [laughter]

Brian: That's comforting.

Trevor: About the story you told?

Petra: I don't remember the thought process. I don't remember the story either.

Trevor: Yours was the-- it was all foggy in the valley. You drove up Mohawk and you were up in the bottomless clouds. I can remember yours, but I can't remember...I like had ten different stories and I can't remember everything I told. [laughter]

Petra: Thank you. Yes. That came to me earlier on because that was such a red letter. Then, I totally forgot until now, thank you.

Matthew: Does hearing about it stimulate some thoughts about the preparation process?

Petra: I didn't have to think about it much in that process. I remember that was such a ground breaking, 'hammer between the eyes' moment.

Matthew: Cool. Anything else about the first or second class that you want to share before I ask you about class three? Go ahead.

Petra: Just the group, to hear other people's stories. I don't want to say not take ownership of them, but they were all so profound that it just became meaningful to me, too.

Matthew: I'm going to ask you something about the third class. This is going to be your worksheet there.

Petra: Good Idea.

Matthew: Get a little paper project. [laughter] I have constructed or reconstructed the list that we created using the post-it notes in the nine areas that we developed. Then I gave each one an attempt at a heading. It's just an attempt. That's the bold underlined piece of that. It was an attempt at a heading to try to summarize what we're getting at with that group. It's certainly flawed. If you want to go a different direction, fine. For instance, there's some that are very similar, but in different groups. I was trying to capture why are they different in the two groups with that sub-title. What I want you to do now is I'm going to ask you to take a pen. Since you need something to write on, I got pens right here for everybody. Take a pen.

Male Participant: Thank you.

Matthew: Write all over yourself if you want to as well. There you go.

Petra: Thank you.

Matthew: Moving fast, too much coffee. I'll give you a book. This is Jaroslav Pelican's book on Christian history. I'm sure it'll put you to sleep tonight. [laughter] I'm just kidding. You can leave it here. What I want you to do is review it, take your time. I'm going to give you lots of time for it. Here you go. Then I want you to rank them in two different ways.

On the left side, they're two-sided by the way, front and back. Same paper. All nine are there on the form. On the left side I want you to rank them, one being the most important, nine being the least important to you personally. You see at the top of the page is actually the heading, personal. Which one just you personally, is the most important. Then nine is the least important. The one you're like, "That could be the one I never get to." Rank as best as you can.

Brian: It's not necessarily one out of each group. It could be--

Matthew: No, the whole group. Rate them by group. I got one in front of me. Let's say you're looking at B, "How can I advocate for the environment in my profession," is the number one thing?" Then you rank all of group B, one. You're ranking the groups once in a line.

Brian: The whole, good.

Matthew: Yes. That might be difficult. I know there's going to be some political stuff going on in your head about which one do I really want. That's fine. Take your time.

Petra: This is personal in that it's important to me or personal in that I would be willing to tackle this?

Trevor: I think you're looking for importance.

Matthew: Where you want to put the most energy.

Petra: Where I want to put my energy?

Matthew: Yes.

Petra: Got it.

Matthew: Thank you. Good clarification and maybe go back to my question. When you're done with that, on the right side, I want you to rank them one through nine. One being most important, nine being least. For what do you think is most important for the community. There's all of us in a Greater Warren area. In other words, it's okay that it be different. That you want to put your energy at one place, but at the community needs it in a different place. Just asking your perspective. I'm going to give you lots of time.

(Pause for ranking)

Petra: I'm much more comfortable with my personal ones than with the community.

Matthew: It's two different questions.

Petra: Yes. It really is. Although it's interesting how many of them kind of were close.

Matthew: Yes, they're close, because there's an affiliation in play. [laughter]

Petra: With one exception, they were all, again, one way or the other.

Nathan: Really?

Petra: Yes.

Nathan: Mine started out then like that.

Petra: We don't need our names on these?

Matthew: I will need you to put your name on them before you hand in. If you want to do that now, that's fine. Just like everything else, nobody but me will see it.

Petra: Pete. [laughter]

Matthew: I think it would be Petra. Petra. That's the female Peter in Slavic countries, Petra.

Matthew: I'm sorry, I'm entertaining. A couple of questions about that sheet before I have you hand him in. It's valuable data to me. Tell me why you picked your ones for personal. Tell me what are your ones and why if you wouldn't mind?

Nathan: My one personally is youth community and professional education. We can't make sound decisions if you don't have all the information. We do an injustice to our youth if we're not giving them facts and not opinions. That was my number one for personal. Actually, it was the same for community. We need to educate. We need to be better informed of the facts before we start making decisions. Once we form an opinion, that's fine whatever that opinion is. We need to have all the facts first.

Matthew: Thank you.

Trevor: I used D as my number one for personal.

Matthew: Which one is that?

Trevor: That's actions that involve educating others and ourselves. I guess in grouping these I would have felt that could have been dumped into B.

Matthew: It could have. This is more things to do as opposed to see.

Trevor: Into the youth community and professional education, which was my number two in personal. Education is a big thing for me and making sure you understand this is actually what's going on, not an opinion from somebody else. Then for community, I flip-

flopped the two. Youth community and professional education, I felt was the most important thing for the community. All too often, we are hearing people's opinions and not the facts. Then, the actions involved asking others was my two for that one. I kind of flip-flopped them.

Brian: My number one is H, direct pressure on government agencies and private industry. Working in the industrial field around refineries, chemical plants, coal-fired power houses, nukes, all this stuff, they'll do whatever they can do, period. The only thing that makes them change their mind is a law. I really feel pressure.

That was my personal. My community was, teaching people to be more active and engaged, A.

Matthew: Teach people how to do community organizing, how do you speak out, how do you write, good. Thank you.

Petra: For me, it's just where my heart took me, which is personal actions to help learn more; backpacking more, intellectual books, transitioning to being a vegetarian. I don't want to... [laughter] recreate *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. I love that book, those books. Tend my own garden, metaphorically speaking. I haven't had much luck with-- [laughs] He's the gardener, I'm not. I just eat stuff. Did you want our community one too with the--?

Matthew: Sure, everyone else had the data. That would be my next question anyway.

Petra: So community, it was community action we can sponsor that will help us be more aware. The plastic bags, the plastic bottles, that's a huge issue for me. I can see myself trying to hand out re-usables. Please us this. Picking up litter. I used to take the kids out on the spring litter pickup. Composting. I think of a local composting thing would be great.

Matthew: Can I ask you a follow up? Both, Nathan and Trevor, you used the word facts. Do you feel like this experience gave you the chance to talk about facts in the environment?

Nathan: Yes.

Trevor: Absolutely.

Matthew: Can you describe what some of those facts are that helped you, or that you sensed were getting talked about in a way you'd want to hear them talked about?

Trevor: Part of it. We've already touched on here, it's just clarifying some things. People might not understand, I'm using what I do for living as an example because it's easiest way. People might not understand why we are clear-cutting that section of a forest. This was a time for us to really, that's why we did it. We are helping with succession of forest ecosystems by doing this. We are mimicking a natural occurrence. That's what we're

doing. We are making sure that the right parts are all in place before we do that. We're not just going in and clear-cutting it with a field underneath.

We're making sure there's advanced re-generation in there that's going to grow. That's why we did that. That's the example there. We talked about, I remember we talked about adopting orphan walls. You brought up part of how that all works and everything. I just think little things like that where people in the room have thoughts on things, and then you have other people in the room that can almost answer those thoughts for people, clarify what you're thinking and say, "This is really why it's happening." Everybody comes together and gets on the same page. "Oh! That makes a lot of sense."

Petra: What he said.

Nathan: This is kind of interesting. It just came to me as I start to observe where we are in the Church Calendar. I'm very much a doubting Thomas. Thomas wanted put his-- feel Christ's wounds before he believed he'd risen. Show me the facts. Show me you measured something. I can measure things. I can show you. I can do a crop-tree release and I can show you the positive growth. I can show you the change in understory vegetation and the songbirds that come back to a forest. I can measure that and show you that. If you have something you're passionate about, opinionated about, gather the facts and show me the facts, then I can see where you're coming from, then there's something measured.

Matthew: Thank you. Does anybody else want to just chime in? I know I asked Nathan and Trevor because they used that word in their initial answer. Do you have an opinion too?

Brian: What was the question again?

Matthew: This word "facts", that there is a feeling that facts are important and they got expressed somehow in this experience, and that matters. We need that. I just wanted to clarify what they meant by facts. That's a big word for only five letters. It's a big word. That's why I wanted to hear more about that description.

Brian: My feelings about facts is that that is the basis of truth, but I don't trust, I don't trust. There's just too many factions out there that put out their own facts.

Nathan: Or manipulate the facts.

Brian: Or manipulate the facts.

Trevor: I won't argue that. That's why I tend, when we look at these things, I'm not a news person, I'm not a media person, I'm not a fan of that because everybody's got their own agenda. They play things that they know are going to spark something in somebody to go, "Rawr! We've got to go after this." I like to go after a scholarly. I'm going to look for facts, I'm looking for scholarly research. I'm going to go to- I can't remember what I

used to use in college. It was on Google. Google something. Anyway, nothing, but research papers.

Those were facts. I know they've done the actual research. It's not a facts that was taken by a reporter and spoken in a different manner, or put in big red letters somewhere to make it look bad.

Nathan: We discussed this. We were talking with Jerry, we were sharing our favorite authors and we got into Michael Crichton and his book *The State of Fear*. What a great way to manipulate science for your own agenda.

Matthew: That's a good book mentioned in here.

Petra: If I looked at the group, there were three people that were professionally, in one way or another knowledgeable in ways that the rest of us were amateurs. It was you, you and David. Having had a chance to get to know the three of you, I trusted the facts that you stated. It also drove me to do some re-- and it's hard for me to pull apart the Wednesday nights and this. It's getting scrambled in my head.

Matthew: One follows the other.

Petra: I started doing more research on some of the things like environmentally clean cleaning products and that kind of stuff, or meat eating. How bad is it? I dug more into the facts. I also trusted some of the facts that was coming from professionals in the room.

Brian: I just got a big packet of information from Penn State, a friend had gathered for me. I trust it when I read it, when I look at it, I think, this is how it should be done. I learned a pile. I really did. It was fact. It wasn't someone's dream or ambition. It was what's happening now.

Trevor: You got the right college. [laughter]

Matthew: Who has an agenda in this room? [laughter]

Brian: Now, is that a fact? (more laughter)

Nathan: That's a passion there. [laughter]

Brian: Actually, I was thinking about you two guys, which helped me read these things relaxed, and take stock in it.

Nathan: There's a big difference in the 50 federal land grant colleges out there, have a different test, with a different way of gathering and analyzing data as opposed to an independent college, a private college who are perfectly allowed to have their own agenda and front their own or support their own cause.

Brian: Their wishes.

Matthew: I'll bring you forward a little. One last question in this area about the classes and your experience. My official question is, what actions have you taken concerning the environment since the class has ended? I want to make that open to suggest, what things have come from that you have acted on in your life since taking this experience in these classes? Some of you already talked about research, Nathan you talked about something that you felt linked in your professional life. That kind of stuff. What's come from it?

Nathan: The big change was I went from a professional life that is purely extractive; buy and cut timber. Ideally...it ends up being made into beautiful furniture, paddling, and all that...The idea was, really what am I doing? At 57, what am I doing with the last few years of my career? Have I really accomplished what I was doing?

It keeps coming back to the time I felt most satisfied spiritually, emotionally, was when I was consulting, when I was working with private land owners, when I was being able to talk about good forestry. Out of that, came the opportunity to pursue that as a career again. Now, all be it a big part of my work will be making money for large corporate entities, that's not--I won't deny that, but I also get to go back and re-establish that connection I had with private landowners and talking about stewardship and sustainability. The people that I'll be working for are very, very focused on sustainability. It's one of their major charges.

So while it is extractive, while they are growing and harvesting timber to make money for their investors, they are very focused on doing it in a sustainable way. I'm really excited about that. That was definitely a call from God. It didn't take any time, we didn't have to discuss it. It was a given. When it came up, there was really no struggle making a decision that this is the right thing to do.

Trevor: The offered him the job the next day.

Nathan: That too yes.

Matthew: Your current boss seemed not really-

Nathan: He really doesn't care. He doesn't show any emotions. Obviously, it's a right thing to do.

Trevor: Three and a half hour interview.

Petra: Nice.

Brian: That makes us feel good because we know someone whose heart is in the right place ,that wants this thing to be right. You may be working for a business, but someone's going to work there and I would rather be Nathan. That's the way I look at it.

Nathan: Thanks. I appreciate that.

Trevor: He gets to work with his son professionally out. It's the same company.

Petra: Really?

Matthew: How many times does the son get the dad a job, that's really cool. [laughter].

Nathan: He did not have a small part in it. He had a pretty big part of it. I jokingly have—I jokingly, doing joke with his boss when I see him, "You need to hire me. I'll do that. I'll take other pressure off you and I'll just do that work. You just need to hire me to do that." They actually asked Trevor if I was interested in the job. I sent him a letter, a resume and boom interview or a call for an interview, interview three and a half hours long. By noon the next day, they offered me the job. It really felt divinely...

Brian: Back where you belong.

Nathan: Yes.

Petra: This won't be in your paper at all.

Matthew: Are you kidding? [laughter]

Nathan: You're welcome for the A.

Matthew: Finding a calling in life? That makes all the clergy people with doctorates are all happy. Sorry. Go ahead.

Nathan: Going back to when I first started into consulting before Trevor was born, Tammy cried all the way. We home had a dinner date with my prospective employer at that time and his family. Tammy cried all the way home, cried all weekend long.

Petra: Because you took the job?

Nathan: It was a significant pay cut back then, it was significant. This new job is more money, more opportunity. I'll be running a branch office, I'll be the manager of a branch office and then staff forester, get to expand working with private landowners. When I first started into consulting, it was a \$6,000 step back. When you weren't making money to begin with to give up \$6,000.

Petra: When you've gonna to start a family too.

Nathan: We had, Angela was literally a year old. That was huge. All Tammy would say is, "This is God's calling. Somehow we'll make it happen." We were like, "Well, okay. We'll only eat peanut butter and jelly." We never did. We had the struggles like everybody else did, but we never ever went without. We never couldn't pay our bills. Never turn the electric off, never had to shut the gas off or anything like that. It was always the opportunity to make due.

Petra: This company, when I'm out hiking, am I going to see that sign that this land is owned by and it's owned by?

Matthew: No, these are by private landowners and how to work the land. You won't see the company.

Petra: Okay.

Trevor: Some of the properties, and this is really off topic, real quick. Some of the properties that we manage, the large largest group we work for is FIA, Forest Investment Associates. Their headquarters are around of Georgia. They own millions of acres.

Nathan: Throughout the United States.

Trevor: They have the all investment groups that they manage and they have a regional forester all over the place that cover all these things. Some of the properties will say Oak Hill Timber Holdings managed by FORECON Inc., which is one of the investors under FIA.

Petra: That's not going to be Colin's Pine?

Nathan: No. What often happens is that they are very big. The forestry model in South is vast landowners and not a lot of small private landowners. If you want to have definitely go deer hunting, you form a hunt club. Then that hunt club then leases 10,000 acres. You're charged with agreeing with how that forest-- You have some input into how that forest is managed for the game or whatever recreational pursuit you have.

But, you're also required to-- You do the value line maintenance, you provide the security so that there aren't meth labs and tire dumps and all that, in exchange for your fee, which basically offsets the cost of the taxes every year. A lot of here in Pennsylvania, here in Warren County, a lot of these FIA lands are posted. They have been leased in that kind of southern forestry model, there is restriction to it. Again they're charged with, "We expect you to harvest so many does, white-tail deer, a year because they're impacting on how we grow the forest, these foresters."

I can't speak and say sure someone taking a walk on the property is right or wrong, just call first and ask permission. Find out that you'll get it.

Petra: The woman I hike with is 87. On occasion, we'll get to a place where it says, this is 'This is posted. We'll look at each other and say...they're not going to arrest tiny little ladies. We're good.

Nathan: The concern is absentee landowners having to deal with locals knowing that there's no one watching. I can go dump a-

Trevor: refrigerator.

Nathan: Refrigerator over the back.

Trevor: Pouching.

Nathan: Pouching, that kind of stuff.

Petra: If we know ahead of time we do ask, but if we get to the point and we haven't asked, we usually like, "We're going."

Brian: This is new here, in my life there are so much posted property now.

Matthew: I want to pull you back to the questions because I don't want you to lose all your energy. If there's anything we haven't filled there, I do have some more questions.

Severall: Sure.

Petra: Remind me what that question was.

Matthew: This is important. What-- Have you done anything since those classes that you can link back to classes? I asked specifically on environmental issues that you've done. Have you tried vegetarianism them for a day. Have you like changing your career is another big thing that stems from this experience. I claim that.

Petra: He's got the star. [laughs].

Nathan: No. That was just very--I came in, it was a very personal thing and that was fulfilled.

Matthew: Yes, it was huge. Others, it is important, too. Talk about other things you've done.

Petra: For me, this winter had just knocked me out and being reminded of how much I love the land and I love being out there. I was like, "What the hell. I abandoned almost all that." I've really been getting back out there in the woods and just enjoying it and recommitted to trying to be a vegetarian as much as possible. I'm not going to be rigid, but also energy usage. One of the ways I cheer myself in the winter is I have decorative lights. I realized I leave them on 24/7. I've got some timers. It's like a baby step but it's something. Now they're on four hours a day and not 24.

Nathan: That's a big difference.

Petra: It is.

Nathan: 75% fewer cost that gotten used. That's significant.

Petra: It's almost shameful to talk about. It's something.

Nathan: That's a big difference. That's a huge difference.

Petra: Thank you.

Matthew: Brian, Trevor, anything has come for you guys that you're going to link?

Brian: It's helped me become more aware, become numb to everything going in the wrong direction. It opens my eyes up. It helps me because I see there's other people that care too, they really do care. They will do as much as they can do in the time they have. One of the big things that I'd noticed, I never did like street lights. Of course, I'd never lived in the city. Every country road or down River Road, there's more giant street lights like this. It's like daylight, that's affecting nature, big time. That really bothers me.

Matthew: Light pollution.

Brian: It is a massive problem.

Nathan: Get out on the waterfront, like the night we had this weekend.

Trevor: Outside of the troop, I plan a lot of things for the counsel as far as events and stuff. I have tutors for the boys, council-wide. One of the things that we do is a camporee. All the troops camp in one spot and participate in one activity. The last couple, I've planned were mostly based on the competition, and their shooting sports, or something we did a camporee for.

I said, "You know what? We're getting rid of all that." I pitched the idea. I pitched the idea to a group of boys first to see if they would go for it, if they would come for this. I got a lot of shaking heads and yes, we would come and do this. I pitched it to the district and they're all for it. We're going to have a camporee, we're looking for a place to stay, probably with the conservation district.

Then, in the mornings, on Saturday, all the troops are going to get wood duck box kits. They're going to build wood duck boxes, and then the afternoon after they eat lunch at their campsites, we're going to carpool everybody to Akeley swamp, and we're going to put all the wood duck boxes up.

Petra: Nice.

Trevor: We're going to do like a conservation weekend camporee. We haven't done it or something like this in a while, we don't do enough of it. I'm sure it is good PR for the boyscouts, community service. Plus, it's just something that these boys need to be involved with.

Brian: That's wonderful.

Petra: The conservation district, when I first moved up to that area, lots of bluebird boxes. The bluebird boxes are mostly on the ground in pieces, that's another idea.

Trevor: I love seeing wood ducks. That's why I followed with wood ducks. Let's do wood duck boxes.

Nathan: The bluebirds are back this time of year. It's just that bright blue. You see blue jays all over the, but the bluebirds just stand out.

Petra: I've always wanted like a bird feeder three weeks ago.

Nathan: Springs coming [laughs].

Petra: Just one, that was enough.

Brian: You've got a see star five bud.

Matthew: That has finished all my classes about the class experience themselves. What we want to do to other smaller groups of questions with a little bit different focus. This next group of questions, just two of them actually, there's some tough questions if we didn't move on. Is where on the spiritual value of the experience. What did it do for your understanding spiritually?

Maybe a shift in language, a little shift to focus from the actual nitty-gritty of the classes. It may take you different directions. My first question to you is, share with me, your experience in discussing spiritual life with the group. How did the presence of those you knew not to be church members challenge you or encourage you?

Nathan: I can answer that right away. I was looking for more opportunity. I don't consider myself a great evangelist, but boy, when I want to share, I want to share. When we start talking about the environment and God's calling, boy, that's where I'm at. I wanted more opportunity to share that. We seem to get almost, with the whole group. We didn't get enough chance to go over the edge.

Matthew: Yes.

Trevor: For me. I could definitely echo that. It's definitely more evident in this conversation here today, than the conversations we have there. It wasn't like one group was more polarizing in taking control of the conversation, it never went that direction. It was just more of maybe this group understood that group's views. We don't need to push it over that edge. We're all here to talk about the environment, to talk about nature. That's spiritual enough I think for some of us.

Brian: I had hoped that it would open some people's eyes to the spirituality that is really deep inside them and they don't identify it. Being with Christians, they see that we're just kind of normal too. Maybe they can identify, maybe it'll help them.

Matthew: You definitely felt that going on in the room?

Brian: Yes, I don't think any last chapter's been written.

Petra: Good point.

Matthew: Thank you.

Petra: Yes, really, I would not have been surprised to see Alice and Liv show up or Karen. I don't know about David, or around Elaine. But I was thinking, you know...this could, and maybe it did. These kinds of things take a long time. One of my more personal prayers, like David like Joan Chittister is always talking about, seeing God in the world. I want to do that, I want to see God, literally see him when I'm in the woods. I'm thinking, these people aren't necessarily expecting that or wanting that, the non-church goers in the group. You know what? They might be closer to it than I am. I'm looking for it and they're not. Sometimes that's when God gets you, when you're not looking. He jumps out of behind that bush. [laughter]

Matthew: I want to go over the edge then. Can you tell me did you experience the sense where you could see God in their lives that they weren't even able to see? Could you actually see that at work in our meetings?

Petra: Absolutely.

Trevor: Sure. Especially in those little breakout groups. When Alice told her story of hiking up, and then into the mountain lake, and just the view that it has, that's God's work. That's God's work,[laughter] whether you like it or not, that's God's work. David talking about drinking out of this dream, God wanted you to do that.

Petra: Do you know how blessed that is. You could still drink out of a stream.

Nathan: Well, for me, it would be Alice and Karen, and help me out.

Petra: Liv.

Trevor: Liv.

Nathan: Liv, "Hey, we're going to pack up the van with blankets and food." What more basic. I'm just going out and ministering to someone needs. Whether or not you support what they're doing, or not support, they're in need, you have an opportunity to fulfill the need they had, that they can't fulfil for themselves. How much more basic is that in Christianity? It's just seeing someone else's basic needs.

Then after all that's done with, then maybe you could talk about God's place in this earth, and how that can relate to your life. I had a dear friend. She would go on and on, and on about going someplace, and preaching the word of God, and then feeding them. I'm like, "You have it all backwards, just go and feed them."

You don't have to have any preconceived notion, that, "If you come and listen, let us talk to you for three hours about some God you've never even heard about, who flies against everything you've ever believed in, and then give you something to eat, because

you're starving." Just go feed them, and by your good works, they'll say, "Hey, what's going on here?"

For them to do that, to go out to Standing Rock and just say, hey, here are people in need, they're being oppressed. Whether or not I agree with the politics of it all, just the fact, that they have a need, we're going to go out and fulfil it. Boy, there's the hand of God at work. I guess, maybe they didn't catch on to that. I don't know.

Matthew: Certainly, they don't have a language for it.

Nathan: They didn't have the language for it, yes.

Petra: Who am I to say, well, they don't go to church and they don't call themselves Christian. Therefore, I'm closer to God, than they are. What the hell? [laughs]

Nathan: Are they anymore spiritual than me? Are they any more spiritual than me?

Petra: Honestly, Alice and Liv, their love of the earth is way beyond almost anybody else I know. They spend their time and their money.

Brian: They've raised their kids that way.

Petra: They've raised their kids.

Matthew: Brian, anything you would want to add to the group?

Brian: Just a point for Alice, she's fierce, that's what she is.

Petra: She is fierce.

Brian: You would never know it. Weighs 70 pounds and fierce. It's about the environment, about the outdoors, about the water, about the air, about the trees, about the creatures and critters. Why is she like that? I feel, because of God. She hadn't put a name on it yet, but it doesn't matter. She's there, and I'm sure God understands.

Petra: Yes, that wasn't her upbringing.

Brian: No.

Matthew: Anything else, the sense of God at work the room, especially the others who are with us? Then that impacting, did it make it more challenging for you or more inviting for you, or not the feeling up for you? That experience of the spiritual going on in the room, anything else you want to say about that?

Brian: It kind of did make me not talk so much about spiritualism. Kind of made me hold back because I don't want these folks to try to think I'm trying to sell them an idea.

Nathan: You said something that I really keyed in on, Brian. Spiritualism and spirituality. Not to correct you, we don't use those terms correctly. Sometimes, I mean. When I hear spiritualism, I think a Lilydale. [laughs]

Brian: I understand.

Nathan: Me, that's not what you meant. That's where people get something simple as that. They confuse people. We may say spirituality, our personal connection with our creator. People hear spiritualism. I don't use the word 'dogma', but just a thing you kind of do. If you want happiness, you have to pay someone money and they're going to read tarot cards or whatever and tell you what's wrong with you. I think people hear spiritualism and think spirituality. I don't want to harrass you.

Brian: No, I mean, that is right. I agree with that totally.

Matthew: Do you guys agree with Brian though, that there is a piece you're holding back that you are afraid of, sounds like yourselves or something?

Nathan: Yes. I'm sitting here with the five of us. Of course, it's easy and comfortable because we have the common ground. I'm like, "I have missed an opportunity." Then I say to myself, "Wait a minute, maybe I didn't miss an opportunity, maybe I said something that one of them will key on, on some point," or did something, or just put something out there in persona that someone will say, "Hey." They'll come to their own decision.

Petra: If you or I, and I'm assuming you too. If you're with let's say somebody who's into spirituality if they started talking like we're talking now.

Matthew: Spiritualism.

Petra: Now I'm flipping it, I automatically... I'm checking out, and I'm not connecting with them, and I'm not being there. I have to assume that maybe that would have happened if we would have been pushing our agenda there, or bringing it up a little too much. How much is too much?

Brian: That wasn't our goal to begin with.

Petra: No.

Brian: It was just to discuss how the two are related. Nature, and the creator, without using certain words.

Matthew: Anything more, I sorry to laugh at that, "I don't use certain words." Do what we always do, just avoid that part of our dictionary. Anything else? Now, that's about the group, now, how about you personally? Has this experience affected your spiritual life

personally, and if so how, can you describe that? That means that you would have to have some certain knowledge of what you were like before, and now after.

If you could talk about that, or not. I mean, if it's like, "Yes, another class," good nice talking. How did this experience affect you and your spiritual life now?

Nathan: I have to say thank you more. There was a point, last week or week before last. Three weeks ago, where I could not sleep and I woke up three, four o'clock in the morning, and said, I'm just going to do Morning Prayer. I couldn't go back to sleep, but I got over that whole anxiety and all that junk that was going on. Today, I said, "You know what, I've been given this great opportunity now, and I said thank you."

I haven't sat down and said 'thank you.' Now, here in this whole time, we're going through something, "Wow, I'm saying thank you [laughs]." I need to recommit, restructure and be saying thank you more often.

Matthew: Thank you. Anybody else? Haven't said something that has happened to them spiritually that they can link to this, that knew a different way might be?

Brian: With myself, it proves something to me. It proved to me that I'm on the right track. It's always been important to me. I threw my share of beer cans, don't get me wrong. I've done everything you shouldn't do out there, but it was a long time ago. When I turned the page and started life together, how we looked at things, and then it got with me where I really, really, really could see mother earth going downhill fast, and nobody caring.

All they wanted was a bigger paycheck, that's it. I didn't agree with that. As a matter of fact, I passed up some chances to make some money, because they just went against my grain. Going through this, and it's helped me when I can sit there and I'm looking at that river, to know, I'm headed in the right direction, and I have been for several years. It helped me realize that, but what was important was a lot of people like me, and I met some of them, and that strengthens my feelings, my insides, my heart. It was a good experience.

Where else can you sit down with strangers and discuss something like this? Could you imagine going out for lunch at the Moose Club with eight or 10 people and have the talks that we've had? You can't. It had to be set up, organized, parameters, and it did its job. I'm sure for everyone, whether they call themselves Christian or not.

Nathan: I think you're right, I think never would have happened spontaneously, there had to be a catalyst. Just coming together for your dissertation, that catalyst opened everyone's mind of just enough to start listening and talking.

Matthew: You personally, anything, Petra, Trevor? Again, you can pass it off if you choose.

Petra: I didn't really put this into words until now, but I think I'm humbled by my experience with the non-church goers. I don't know if I can say that they're non-Christian, but the non-church goers in the group, their love and their passion for the earth which is part of God, and also my renewed commitment to be out there. I tend to think of it like if

I need to commune, I need to be in a holy space. No,[laughs] maybe the whole earth is holy, maybe that's where I can be?

Trevor: I struggle sometimes because everybody in the room is answered a question, I always feel obligated when you've answered the question.

Matthew: You can say you have no answers. That's totally fine.

Trevor: This sounds terrible, but I don't feel like I've changed anything spiritually. As far as that goes, I don't do anything differently. It did allow me to appreciate more some of the experiences I've had. Not everybody has been able to live in New Mexico for summer and backpack for a job for summer. Not everybody's gone on a 14-day canoe trip in boundary waters or a 10-day snorkeling, sailing trip in the Keys. It just allowed me to appreciate some of these experiences I had been able to have in nature.

Something I've always said as a scout leader is my job is to-- I tell parents this as, "My job is to make sure your son has the same experience I had." It's just maybe appreciate that more and just to step back sometimes and just have a "whoa" moment. I did that this weekend. Boys were down at the waterfront, I went up on the bank a bit more, got set in amongst-- there were white pine region that was there. Brought Jack over, just hugged Jack, and just looked out at over little reservoir, just sat there for a while, and just having more of those kind of time, moments.

Matthew: Cool. Thank you. It was a very good answer. Very good. Anything else from around that topic? This wraps up the spiritual topics, and thank you, this is rich. Anything that you want to say on that? Thanking about God, God language or anything? All right.

We move in this last section. This is more trying to get back at some of the questions on the survey that you may have answered and may have gone, "Why is he asking that question?" I can't tell you why, but I want to ask the questions, you'll hear the connection, perhaps. One of the questions the survey asked you about your current family unit; who do you live with, who do you see on a daily basis, who you're living with. Now that you've had this experience with this group that we just formed, Can you compare how your family unit functions to how that small group functions? I'll give you an idea. How do you experience support in conflict? There were times we have some conflict in the room with a small group. There's times you have conflict at home with your family unit. Where is that different or similar for you between your home unit and that group, the experience group?

Nathan: I did not have to work as hard to reaching consensus with the group as I do at home.

Trevor: That's probably pretty accurate.

Nathan: It's funny. Tammy and I stopped to-- We were at Walmart or something and we wanted a snack. It's going to be late for dinner. Just went over to the hot bar, and said something-- The girl behind the counter said something about, "You guys didn't take-- you didn't argue at all. You just made a decision quick and that was it," and she said,

"How long have you been married?" We said, "It'll be 34 years." She was like, "34 years? What was the key to your being together for so long?"

We both have always said, both Tammy and I, we always said, "We never went to bed mad at each other." Granted there had been days we've seen-- there had been fights that we've seen daylight. We've always made that pact with each other that we'll never go to bed angry at each other, never go to bed on an argument. We've always hashed it out. With the group, it was like, "We're going to be gone in an hour and a half."

If someone says something that was prickly and I didn't agree with, I didn't want to see them again for another week. By that time, there'll be so many other things going on that it just becomes unimportant and I can just refocus myself, go back into the group, and come again with an open mind. What they said a week ago isn't going to make any difference. I can get over that, and I can move on. I didn't have to worry about... reaching a consensus. It was okay to disagree without any impact.

Whereas, Tammy and I, we have, to this day, we'd hope that we-- We argue, we're both opinionated people, we're both aggressive type A personalities. We have to reach consensus because we made that pledge to each other. That's one thing I didn't feel I had to do that in the group. I didn't have to make someone happy or make them agree with me.

Matthew: Yet, the ability to disagree was still there.

Nathan: Yes. In our current political climate, we're hearing that, "I like discord. I like--" People arguing now. What we had was discourse, and a chance to talk, and air views, and have opinions, and all that stuff. The others are just junk.

Matthew: Good. Other folks? Comparing the family unit or whoever you're seeing on a daily basis with your experience at that group, small group?

Nathan: You're part of that, too.

Matthew: Well, yes, there's you guys are across here.

Nathan: You have that opportunity to have a certain level of opinions. I'll admit I do say, "Hey, I am the head of the household. You are going to listen to me. Today. You're given that opportunity. At least, I think, you do.

Matthew: Trevor will give his answer in a moment.

Nathan: Yes.[laughter]

Trevor: I don't have an answer.

Matthew: Fair enough.

Trevor: I don't have an answer for that one.

Matthew: Okay. Anybody else? Can I give you some talk about the difference or the similarities?

Petra: Well, I live with a dog and two cats.[laughter]

Petra: Although I try to be respectful and honor them as living beings, I'm the queen.
[laughter]

Matthew Hard to deal with a cat mask. [laughter]

Trevor: How is that possible?

Petra: It's messing with Teddy [laughs]. Well, they're very dog-like, my cats. [pauses] The group brought something new to me, lots of something new. New experiences that I can hear and somewhat share. Certainly, I honor and respect them at a level I don't treat my pets with [laughs]. It's hard because I can't compare my family unit to people. Go ahead. I want to hear how you're in this panel discussion [laughs].

Brian: I can see, Alice, my niece. I know her history, I know her well. It's no big deal for me about her talking about God. I'd love it someday if she would just say, "I'm so happy I came to church." I'd love that. Knowing her, and then comparing her and my kids, Kevin and Laura, they're the same. They don't go to church, but inside, they are more real than most people. They just hope for the best for everything, always. There's no meanness. Just not like sad and I can identify with—Alice and Liv, they're the same kind of people. How they got there? I don't know. When I was around, how my kids turned out so good, I don't know, but they did. I can see it, it's in the family, and I'm grateful and thankful.

Matthew: Thank you. Thank you. Now, tell me how you value the opinions and ideas that were talked about. This was about environments. I know you want to stay there, but if you want to broaden that, fine. Compare how you value that group's opinions versus your home unit's opinions. Petra, to help you stretch, you can stretch it to other family members, or beyond the cats and dog to help you maybe get a better tangent. How do you value it? Do you value the same? Is it different? Having a conversation of how the environment go at home versus how it went there, and where do you place your value?

Nathan: Well, I have to admit that I've used the phrase “hairy arm-pitted, granola crunchin’ earth muffin” more than once.

Petra: Say it again.

Nathan: Hairy arm-pitted, granola crunchin’ earth muffin. [laughter]

Trevor: That's said by both of us frequently.

Nathan: I used that term more than once and probably should not be as proud as I have been.

Matthew: That's getting into the paper somehow. [laughter]

Petra: He's glad I asked you to say it twice.

Nathan: That being said-- maybe it was-- maybe it goes back to that whole thing of what attracted me and made me willing to listen-- I don't mean to discount David and Elaine they just didn't have as much interaction with them but I know Karen quite well because the boys are in the their scout troop and-- like I jokingly said Alice stole our idea for gear shop in town but I really respect what she's done as a businesswoman. I really respect what she's doing and Liv kind of comes along with that.

Just the fact that the three of them were so passionate about really filling a need for someone. Whether or not I agree with the whole idea of what went on at Standing Rock, I don't-- that's mine-- I don't know if they have an answer on how to share that right now, but the fact they are passionate enough about it to say, "Look we're just going to close the shop, we are going to load up the van, we are going to drive out there in shifts, we're going to take food and blankets and whatever else they need and just go out there and say here it all is."

That triggered something in me with what they were than saying about standing rock and about keeping the Allegheny clean, and about how they react and feel about our local environment made me more willing to listen to them. They made a sacrifice without any need for personal gain and that triggered something in me, that I was willing to listen to them more so.

Trevor: I'll echo that and it kind of goes outside all the discussions that occurred. I'm the kind of person that I will listen to your opinion and what you're saying more if you've done something to back it up, like that. All too often in college and I'm not trying to pigeon hole but you've got the wildlife professors and you have the forestry professors and the wildlife professors I could not stand. There was one wildlife professor that I liked, the rest of them I could not stand.

They would publicly bash the forestry students in lecture and then what we do and things like that and it bothered me, and they would present their opinions in the lecture. I'm sitting here and I'm like, "You've done all this research but what have you done to back any of what you're saying as far as we are causing the problem that forestry is destroying--" and one professor in particular was the ornithology professor and the whole thing of how logging practices and forestry are degrading and destroying scarlet tanagers population because it's creating habitat fragmentation and I said. "Woman, do you go outside?"

I said it. I've seen more scarlet tanagers in shelter woods and clear cuts than I've seen in any other forest around. That's what they like. So stop blatantly going about your agenda, and I discredited her, and I do that and I shouldn't, but that ticked me off and I just you're done. But you said with Alice and Karen and Liv they have their opinions on something but they went and did something and backed it up. They actually care about it. Some of those professors that I had they did-- "My name is on the paper so I know I'm right", that kind of stuff.

Nathan: But they did it in a way that was very, very visceral, they saw a need, they met the need first and that was something very visceral for me. Yes, you have an agenda, something you felt passionate about but you went and dealt with something at a very, very basic level. You didn't go out there and paint signs and dance around. Maybe they did later and I don't know, but they went out and first of they went and saw people's needs and saw to people's needs.

Petra: One thing I would add you were saying they didn't do it to gain, they actually had to kind of not broadcast what they were doing because it would've impacted their business.

Trevor: That's the other part

Brian: So much of what they believe in they have to keep mum but that doesn't stop their personal action out there. A real quick tidbit, there was an Indian fellow, not American Indian and they were renting canoes when they were down on the river, you know down on the 62 and this guy had a pop can and he threw it. Alice went over and got right in his case said, "You get that pop can and put it in a garbage and you get your ass out of here." She wouldn't rent the kayaks to them.

Matthew: She does that from time to time. She does this way when they cross the line.

Petra: That's not the Alice I know. [laughs]

Matthew: Doesn't do it all the time but when it's clear, they stand their ground. I want to bring us back though-- I'm getting some evidence I don't want to ask this question, I know it's a hard one. I'm asking to compare the experience of that group with your experience at home around this topics, and maybe you're talking about authenticity and I hear that and you're talking about the parallel. I just want to come back and say, "How does that compare to when you talk about the environment at home in that way." Just give me some link, you know.

Trevor: That was tough for us because we have almost identical opinions on things when it comes to that.

Matthew: So it almost doesn't get discussed.

Trevor: If it gets discussed it's more I need to vent to him and he's needs to vent to me while something that came up here. Something like that, and that's like to rant about *Monkey Wrench Gang*.

Nathan: I have a different opinion about that than you. Honestly, my wife gets left out of it sometimes. Sometimes she has a different opinion, she may be more content to just sit back and observe our debate or maybe-- now I'm putting words in her mouth. Maybe she is happy when there's discourse but accord that makes a happy family for her. She's very

family oriented. So when there is an argument in consensus or agreement or agree to disagree, that may be where-- you have to ask her that question. That was my perspective.

Matthew: Maybe somebody else is trying to get that sort of make that comparison to how it functions there for example at home.

Petra: I guess that two people that I would think of as being in my pack obviously Brian is the first person, the other one is 87 year old woman Evelyn that I hiked with. She's a birder and she went to Penn State. I don't know what her degree is but it's plants and-- so anyway she can identify the plants in the forest and she can listen like this and tell me what bird that was.

This group has such a broader level of experience both professionally like you two and David, but also in being out there like Alice and Liv and then the amazing adventures that they've had, I mean-- if you take out the destructive element they're almost a 'Monkey Wrench Gang', as far as I know they don't do anything like that, but if they did I'd join. [laughs] So it's just a broader level of experience and knowledge and enthusiasm, that was just really cool, I really want to continue one way or the other to be exposed to this group of people.

Matthew: Anything else in that? We can move on? I've got plenty. I wanted to make sure I had a chance to try to dig into that. That's probably the hardest-- I hope it's the hardest question to give. I was actually comparing groups of people that you're functioning in and that's hard to do.

Petra: I guess the other thing I meant to include. I said there's two people in my group and I just talk about much but with Brian we have been in each other's lives since I was 12 years old, he was 16, so I've lived either with his experiences or have heard of his experiences, so again this was new territory for me.

Matthew: That was it, home is a very known place, this is very unknown. Great. One of my questions in the survey I asked you about your opinion on US public policy about the environment and some of you wrote extensively, some of you wrote few sentences. Can you tell me if your views have changed at all since having this experience of US public policy on the environment? How all of you understand that phrase because as I read people have different understanding of that phrase, which is fine. In your perspective has your opinion of US policy changed since having this experience.

Petra: Not because of this experience but because of what's been happening in the country during the experience. The EPA being gutted and that kind of thing, so the timing was fortuitous. [laughs]

Nathan: I agree, I agree, I agree.

Matthew: Anybody else? Quick on that one, yes or no, not really.

Brian: I guess maybe again I keep saying this but it proved to myself that I like the way I think. I think I think in the right direction for most things.

Trevor: Sometimes I just stay in my bubble. [laughter]

Matthew: That's a great answer.

Trevor: I should follow politics and things like that more but I'm sorry I get too much other stuff going on then I care more about figuring out what I'm teaching the scouts I might then what half the env-- and on both sides of the political spectrum say I don't care which affiliations they're all in, half of them are all idiots anyway.

Matthew: Half? You're generous.

Petra: Yes, really. [laughter]

Trevor: I stay in my bubble very often, I don't like watching the news because half the time I just get pissed off.

Matthew: I realize we're running a little long but I guess the next question I'd like to take a little bit of time on, so I have several sub questions that may come up. Well my other questions on the survey, I asked you to name other voices that you listen to, what I call third party or those personal sources that you've drawn in. Some people named the Sierra club, some people named authors that they listen to, some people named civil groups-international groups it didn't matter...that the influence your understanding of the environment you talked about in the survey, and then we talked about it again at the third class. I actually asked you to go mine those resources for what maybe your passions or when you chose somebody to start that, putting up the post-it no project with their input. How did the classes impact your view of those influences and of other people's influences? You might be a Sierra club listener but you had to listen to someone who read the *Monkey Range Gang* for instance. How did this class affect you to have to be in talk about those influences?

Trevor: Well, to be frank and honest, it made me solidify my opinions on Edward Abbey more. I read *Desert Solitaire*. it had its moments. Everybody says that's the greatest book in the world. I'm sorry, but there's a whole chapter about this guy who is preaching about trying to fix the environment and here he is he pulls his truck up to the side of the Grand Canyon and throws tires in it for sport. That bothered the heck out of me. And yes there's an Edward Abbey quote that I use all the time that I love to death. It's my favorite quote in the world.

I think it was David who was telling a story about him driving through the town just chucking beer cans out there on his car, stuff like that. It made me realize maybe I have the right opinion on him. Maybe people need to understand that a little bit more.

Matthew: Thank you, thank you.

Petra: What I'm finding it's the same with the anti-child trafficking ministry as with this. I can only allow so much ugliness into my life at this point. I try to protect myself from too much knowledge that's negative, and I try to focus on, "All right, but what can I do? I can do this, I can do that." I'm not going to allow myself to be debilitated by too much news that's negative. I can appreciate you more. I find that if there's a specific like you and I have done this with proof but well, more with the Wednesday night group is, okay no-- we are going to look on the internet dig out some real information, some facts and get them straight, make sure they're reliable source. But to just open myse-like I get the Sierra club magazine. I don't read a heck of a lot of it because it's all-- I know you read the headline, okay, That's all I'm going to be. [laughter] It just don't take me down and there's nothing I can do about it.

Matthew: Thank you, thank you.

Nathan: Would you repeat the question again?

Matthew: Sure, I asked you at the third class to and also on the survey about those influences in your life that you draw on for environmental support, awareness, inspiration, mentioning either there's like a Sierra club or wildlife fund or maybe there's a local group or authors like Wendell Berry and Aldo Leopold others like that. Has your opinion on them changed at all? Either yours or other people's sources by being exposed to other people talking about their special in that third class when we were sharing our different ideas and passions running.

Petra: I guess I didn't really answer that question.

Matthew: You did.

Petra: Did I?

Matthew: Oh, yes.

Petra: Okay.

Matthew: Oh, yes and very well actually.

Brian: With me, it's taken a lot of years to figure out who I want to support. Now I know I've made good choices. I see things that have happened, how things are being preserved, reserved, how more land is being bought by the conservancy and I'm happy that I'm able to be a part of it, that's the only way I can be a part. I learned so much that way like the Sierra club, right now they have a battle going on, they're going to try and make grizzly trophy hunting legal and I'm against that.

First of all the only ones that can do it it's somebody this wealthy, and I wouldn't mind about that if I didn't belong to the Sierra club. The wolf parks, I've long supported our wildlife federation and they're doing their best to protect the wolves and they're

losing it. They just don't have enough voice or power, but they do this stuff with lawyers, they're fighting the system with lawyers. Which is the only way you're going to fight the system I think.

I don't live in a bubble, it's not there. I take part and not to say you folks don't in your way but I know what this side stands for and what this side stands for. I want to vote for the side that most is like me, that what's important is what's important to me and so I can't be in that bubble. I have to be in part of it and it's not easy. But I'm satisfied. I really, really I appreciate my Sierra club magazine more now than I ever did. Everything I get, everybody just loads you up with...I used to get average now eight pieces of meal a day, junk.

I look forward to getting the wildlife federation magazine. I look forward to reading if anything is moving forward. If they've had any good fortune and fighting legislation that can be damaging. That way I'm going to learn about it, is to belong to these things because it won't be in the paper. It reaffirmed that that's important for me to keep doing that. I have a guilt trip with it too. I know that there's a hell of a lot of hungry, suffering, miserable people. I'm putting money into mother earth. That's just as important and I really do.

Petra: I have to say one of the reasons I can be in that bubble. I do this both politically and in this issue, is I don't want to hear all that negativity. [laughs] God help me. I will call Brian up and say, "Tell me who to vote for." Because I don't want to sort through all that stuff-

Nathan: Why can't there be five or six options.

Petra: -to make that decision. I know he and I agree.

Matthew: None of the above would be great too.

Brian: Yes.

Petra: We agree and I'll just say, "I don't want to hear the background. Just tell me who to vote for, I'll vote for them."

Matthew: That's your trusted source.

Petra: Yes. Sometimes he insists [laughs] on telling me stuff, "I don't really want to hear that. Cut to the chase. Write a letter to who. That's all." I missed your comment when I was saying that. What did you say?

Nathan: I said why can't it be five or six options. Father Matt said, "Why can't there be none of the above." I'm really at the point now I wish there'd be none of the above.

Matthew: There's actually a theory on how that would work, politically. If none of the above wins the election, nobody on the slate is allowed to run. You have to have a whole new pool the candidates.

Trevor: That would have make things so much easier.

Brian: Yes.

Nathan: Because I'm at the point now--

Matthew: I'd worry about time. I do want to finish this last question. Anymore though about that sense of influences in your sources that you like. Any changes there for you?

Trevor: It reaffirmed who I liked and who I don't like.

Matthew: Good. A little reaffirmation. That's a great feeling.

Brian: Yes. That's what it's about.

Matthew: I'm looking for that like, "Wow. I never thought of reading that kind of thing too as the other one." Did it open your eye like, "Wow. I need to read more of that stuff."

Nathan: I'd say probably I would just like to go back and re-explore Wendell Berry more. More of his works than just the few that I've read. I'd like to explore more of that so far. As organizations that I look to with respect. I definitely would like to get more involved in the Isaac Walton league. I definitely would like to get more involved in that. Now, the career change, the job change, I will have more opportunity to become more involved professionally with the Society of American Foresters.

Matthew: Neat.

Nathan: Take that a step further than they ever have. I'm looking forward to that.

Matthew: Cool.

Nathan: That definitely has all spun out of all this.

Matthew: Yes. Any more comments there. Again, I appreciate. I know we're going over but this is great stuff. We have a lot of good information. My last question then. Yes. This is fun. One of my question in my survey asked you to talk about where did you feel most-- it looked at your life span. Where in your life have you felt most spiritually connected to the environment, when have you felt least spiritually affected or in connected with the environment. This is looking at your life as one whole arc of a story so far Trevor. [laughter]

I'm asking you similarly to say, has this experience affected your perspective of being engaged in environmental concerns, at this point your life. Thinking about being more

connected, less connected. Has this moved the football a little bit on that during this experience?

Petra: Probably the most disconnected I've been has been this last winter. This class was my aha moment. What the hell. This is what I love most and I've disconnected. I'm just walking the damn dog. I feel it's just renewed my, "Get out there and enjoy it."

Nathan: A day like today helps, too. [laughter]

Petra: Yes. Sunshine-

Trevor: I'd probably be at home asleep.

Brian: Yes. [laughter] You're starting to fade.

Petra: Does he have to drive home or you're going to take him?

Nathan: No, he can ride.

Petra: Good.

Nathan: Definitely the last two years have been my imperative least to connect with the environment. Certainly my high school, college years were definitely a period of a very close connection. Those 16 years from 1990 to 2006 were a very close connection spirituality with my spiritual life and the environment. I'm looking forward for the next probably many years.

Brian: I'm like a beating record here. Again, it just shows me that I'm on the right track. I was born in the boonies and what else did I know. This is the way the world is. You live out here. Then I just accepted. This is common. This will always be. Then after I got out of the service, tried to make a living and so forth, it's a turmoil and all. I slowly learned how important-- it would just turn my stomach to see a pipe down at the refinery dumping oil. I've seen it happen right smack into the river. I'm thinking, "Oh, my God. Why can they do this?" If it were me, I'd probably be in jail. After I retired, the world went away. I had more time to think about what I really think is important and it is Mother Earth. From taking it for granted, to know that I have to take care of it or it'll disappear. That's what's happened. The older I got, I'm going to say in that aspect, the smarter I got, but what to do with these feelings, I don't know. Right now just stay on the same track.

Matthew: Good news.

Focus Group 3: One on One with Karen

Matthew: I'm going to try to run this as much as I ran the focus groups. It's a one-on-one interview. It might move faster through some sections, slower through others, just depending on where the conversation goes. You are the only one I want to interview like this. It's not because you're special or different, because it's just the way it fits. Maybe first I should say, I'm sorry about the death in the family.

Karen: Thank you.

Matthew: That's never pleasant. Not something you want to do. Are you handling it well, do you think?

Karen: Yes. It was my mom's oldest brother and it brings a whole bunch of stuff back when she is gone. You take on guilt, grief that, probably, was for her, too. It was just like, "OK. I just can't be around people." I was trying but I couldn't find it to get here. I was like, "I'm sorry, I can't." Liv said, "Just don't worry about it." I'm like, "Okay." [laughs]

Matthew: That's the right decision. That's the right decision, really. You got to care for yourself. I tell people all the time, a death brings up all the other deaths before, all the other griefs and you have to relive it and deal with it, where it is that day. Maybe it's a little different than it was but it's still there.

Karen: There really haven't been anything on her side.

Matthew: Wow. It's for everybody's {sic} experiencing that. It's definitely fresh and new again. Wow. It was an uncle, then?

Karen: Yes.

Matthew: In that case, it makes this completely normal and fine. I did check in with my adviser to make sure how to do this. They were like, "You want the data." The most important thing for me is the data and also, to continue to pick up the conversation with you about what this has meant for you and where we might take it forward. That's all. It serves both purposes, still, even though it's a one-on-one and not a focus group. [phone beep]

Karen: Sorry.

Matthew: It's all right. What I'm looking forward today is to hear your opinions on the experience. I brought my transcript of my interviews, my focus group with the 'our' group,-

Karen: Cool.

Matthew: -the group you saw. I'll pick up some important things that they said as we go through the questions. You have a little bit of a chance to reflect along with others, even though it's virtual and not real. I'll try to sound like Liv and Elaine.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: I'm not looking for you to agree with anybody else or, necessarily, have to disagree with anybody else. The hope and desire is to explore your feelings and experiences, see why they are different, where they are the same, and what's important for you. Don't feel like you have to match up with other people and don't feel like you have to match up with any kind of expectation you might detect in what I'm asking. The most important thing is to hear as authentically as possible, you, in the midst of this. Then, just as with the classes, with the experiences, and everything else, you are not required to answer this. At any time, you just want to be like, "You know what? I don't want to answer that," cool. That's actually valuable information for me, too, in this. Don't feel like you're denying me what I need, like, "That's not for me to write about, why is this question causing that? What parts of the study does that help me understand better?" All good, all right?

Karen: Yes.

Matthew: Again, this is confidential, just like with everything else. I will be creating a transcript of it but from there, I change the names and I'm going to do my best to forget about it. I still have to come up with creative descriptions for you all, so that I can-

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: -both describe you, yet, not point at who you are. Like I said, I think I want a class that can't say, "Noelle, owner of an outdoor store in Warren, Pennsylvania."

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: That's not fair. That's actually breaking the rules. I have to defend your anonymity, which is great.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: My questions are broken into three areas. My first area that I want to ask you about is the actual experience of the classes, the three classes we had. The first thing I want to ask you is, would you share what, at this moment, you find to be the most impactful moment from the experience, from the three classes?

Karen: There's no group. I can't think through when somebody else is answering.
[laughs]

Matthew: Let's say you weren't first. When we had this interview with-- Do you know that I broke the group in half? I had the folks like you, Liv, Alice, Elaine, David. Then I had my church folks in another group; they were separate. That one was David, Elaine, Liv, and Alice. David actually began that conversation by saying-- Actually, one thing that he continued to think about, was his flippant remark about rereading *Monkey Wrench Gang*.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: He wanted this little piece about apologizing and feeling bad about it but it did get us all rolling a little bit in terms of, sometimes, the things that are most impactful aren't what you expect or the highlights. Now, others did point to them. Alice talked about that experience of sharing the earlier story and also, at the same time, feeling ashamed that she couldn't think of one younger in her life than what she came up with at the time. There's that both/and. It was impactful and yet, really pushed her back a little bit. That's [sic] been some ideas of what people took away.

Karen: I think probably the most impactful for me was the team-building with the post-it notes and getting so many more ideas than going beyond what I even thought. It was cool to see how Petra was just like, "Let's go get them. [laughs] Let's go." I think that had a big impact on me learning to observe what other people thought of and learn some new ideas on how to make the world a better place.

Matthew: Neat. You're not alone in that, either. Liv pointed that out. Alice came back to it, as well, in talking about it. Another impactful thing that Alice talked about, was when Petra-- sorry, Petra talked about driving up over Mohawk Drive during the second session, when we asked people to go a little deeper and talk about that experience. That Alice said, "I'll never be able to drive up Mohawk again without thinking of that experience." That's about it.

Then David also reflected on how he feels like he was-- One of the most impactful things for him was that he felt like the shortest-term member of the group. He'd been here at least only a few years. He went three-and-a-half years, I was eight, and everyone else was lifetime. The sense of being deeper connected to this specific place, because of the chance to reflect with other folks who'd been there. Any thoughts or feelings about that?

Karen: I think it is interesting to get somebody else that has been here. Like Brian. I would love to pick his brain about all sorts of stuff. He seems to have grown up here out in the woods. He actually grew up and Trevor, who raised himself out in the woods, it's a very neat group. I like that community feeling of those people. It just made my heart feel good that there's more people that love the earth and want to do best for it, and I looked forward to it every week for three weeks. [laughs]

Matthew: I have a feeling we'll meet again. There's a lot of people. My second question, then, was focused specifically on what was the objective. No one remembered it. I had to remind people. The actual objective was, of the experience, was to find mutual support for environmentally-conscious living through sharing experience and community. I know

I'm a wordy guy, it's my fault, but my question is, how did we do? Did we do that well? Then, how do you know? Want to hear it again?

Karen: Yes, one more time.

Matthew: Sure. The objective of the class that was on the invitation letter was that, "We are to find mutual support for environmentally-conscious living through sharing experience and community."

Karen: I think we hit the nail on the head.

Matthew: Yes?

Karen: I do because just talking with the people that were there and the sense of community, and just the shared experiences, I think we all had different experiences but they still had the same underlying current that you could pick out that we all love nature, want to be out in nature, and have seen things happen out there that are only otherworldly. Amazing, miraculous things have happened out there.

Matthew: Can you think of any specific experience during those classes that helped you hear that? Is there a certain story that made you think, "Wow, that's true, I can get this," or was it a surprise to hear from certain people?

Karen: I knew Alice and Liv very well, and Nathan and Trevor, I kind of know, but not real deep. Petra and Brian, I hadn't spent much time with, at all. Everybody's story, I loved hearing their story. Their experience [sic] what made them them. I could sit and listen to that all the time. I can't really think of anything right now that would pinpoint it as to one specific thing, but I might come back to that.

Matthew: OK. Alice echoed what you talked about, missing already, not meeting. Then David dovetailed on that and talked about how the experience helped him even more clearly see how there's a wider range of relationships with people and nature here in Warren. Not all of it good, he said. He also felt, and echoing, again, Alice, that we're on the edge of something, on some sort of stepping out and stepping up in this community. This helped him better feel that way. He closed just by saying, "I think it's been a very, very interesting group of people. [laughter]"

Matthew: My next three questions are focusing directly on each class. The first class, really the first thing I had you do, was to share an experience when you were a child. Your earliest childhood memory that involves nature. How did it feel to share that?

Karen: Right from the start, I think that group felt very comfortable. I didn't feel like I was embarrassed. Usually, I'm embarrassed to speak in-- I felt very comfortable and I think you did a nice job with getting everybody acclimated and warmed up. I didn't mind sharing it. Usually, I'm like, "Share? I'm good. I'm good." [laughter]

Matthew: Then in the process of telling it, then do you remember what exactly what you shared?

Karen: Yes, it was about going fishing when I was little. I could still smell the-- when April comes and the snow is gone, and you have that earthy smell. That always makes me want to go fishing. Not that I was very good at it and I kept talking through it. My dad was like "It's a quiet--" [laughter]

Karen: I was like, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Matthew: "They can hear you." [laughter]

Karen: I didn't mind sharing it and I felt good afterwards. I didn't feel embarrassed. Sometimes, after I share, I'm like, "You shouldn't have said that or you shouldn't...that kind of thing" I think that it was good. It felt very comfortable.

Matthew: Why do you think it felt--? It sounds like it didn't feel like you were embarrassed. Why did it feel more comfortable? Can you pinpoint or think of a reason why it felt more comfortable?

Karen: I'm not sure. I thought we're all here for a common good and we're all here for the same thing. I don't know. I just didn't feel like I'm-- missing a word, I don't know. [laughs] How you feel like you're not going to say something. It was sharing my story. I didn't feel like I was going to say something wrong or not accurate or something.

Matthew: The content of the share was as important as the people you're sharing it with to feeling comfortable about it?

Karen: Yes, and to know what I'm talking about. I really want to make sure that I know what I'm talking about so if somebody's like, "You're wrong." [laughter]

Matthew: Officially stupid.

Karen: That's right. [laughter]

Matthew: That's great. Great insight. How did it feel to hear other people share their story? You already said that but-- [crosstalk]

Karen: I could listen to people's stories all the time. I always find it very interesting.

Matthew: Maybe something we need more?

Karen: Yes.

Matthew: My next piece, or or the question about class two falls along with that. You were then given a week to think of a story. It could be the same one or could be a

different one that you experienced a connection with nature. A transcendent nature, a connection with nature but then to come back prepared to talk about that experience, to think of having maybe five minutes to share, not only the experience itself, but what it's meant to you and where it's made, the language I used was, "Dynamic connections in your life," or those other things that connect us to deeper meaning. How did that feel or how did it help to have a week to think about it?

Karen: I think it helped me because I could get my thoughts in order, edit it as I went. It was such a powerful story that it wasn't anything that I didn't feel uncomfortable sharing at all.

Matthew: Do you feel like you actually spent that week productively preparing to do it? Some other people immediately admitted as if it was a confession.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: but that they're like "I didn't think about it much but it just came to me that day," which is fine, too. There's nothing wrong. Do you feel that week you had, gave you time to be productive and really put something new into it?

Karen: I didn't look at it that way. I looked at it like, I knew that was the story I wanted to share but I just wanted to go through and edit it so it made the most sense to everyone because there's nothing worse than somebody telling a story and you're like, "They don't know how to tell the story." [laughter]

Karen: Trying to [phone rings] get it into some sequence that made sense.

Matthew: You can answer that. [pause for call]

Karen: I think a week was helpful.

Matthew: Good, I'm glad. I don't want to say I was disappointed with people who were admitting that because that's normal. I don't think it really hurt the experience for anyone. I wanted to hope that for at least for some people, given the time, it actually gave value to it for themselves.

Karen: I think it did and I think, for me, it was probably more productive than if you would've sprung it on me because I would've [sic] be like--

Matthew: How am I going to get this out? [laughter]

Karen: You have no idea. [laughs] If it was one day and it would be awful. [laughs]

Matthew: Not many of us are professional storytellers ready just to go off for two hours.

Karen: That's right. [laughs]

Matthew: I should take some training to do that. Now you get a little art project. Not really an art project. If you're not an artist, you can relax now, since it's not really art. We did come up with nine focus areas during the third class. I went ahead and I've put them together and then I also added—I also added a heading to them. The heading is simply my wording to try to get a sense of what's going on with that cluster. Though it's not too perfect and if you want to debate one, that's fine. Scratch it out, put what do you think that cluster is really focusing on. Also, organized in those areas. Which one's education? Which are advocacy? Which is a mix? There's that sort of schema on top of the list.

What I want you to do now, is take some time and I'm going to actually get up and move away so you just have some time. I want you to do two things. I want you to rank them in order of importance. On the left side of the paper-- Did I get it right? I think it says personal on top. On the left side of the paper, I want you to rank one through nine about what's most important to you, personally. Just where you're at as a solo human being. Then on the right side of the paper, rank them one through nine, one being most important for what you think is most important for the community. That can be Warren, it could be Northwestern Pennsylvania. It could be however you feel connected to a community. Try not to do the world but try to keep it a little more to the local area. One through nine. I've got a pen for you. You can change answers if you want to, that helps. Take your time. Most folks, we did this both sessions, took at least 10 minutes. I don't want to deny you the chance to reflect.

Karen: It's how I think the community is--

Matthew: What do you think is the most important for the community? Which one, If we were to get a gang of people together, what's the most important thing we should be doing off that list?

Karen: I may need to tweak some numbers. I don't have a very high opinion on what the community is doing environmentally.

Matthew: Talk about that.

Karen: I need to change some of mine a little bit.

Matthew: The personal is just what you personally with your relationship in nature thinks the most important.

Karen: Not what I'm currently doing?

Matthew: Right. There can even be a bit of difference there, too.

Karen: Because that's what I hoped to do and what I'm currently doing, there's a lot of differential.

Matthew: Go with what you hoped to do.

Karen: I've changed all my numbers. [laughs]

Matthew: You want to do it one more time? Keep that because I want you to talk about a little bit. First off, if you would describe to me what your number ones were in both categories? What were your most importance [sic] for you, personally, and then what you felt was most important for the community?

Karen: Did I do it wrong? Was it number one most important, number nine most im--

Matthew: Least important. Did you go backwards?

Karen: Yes.

Matthew: It's all right. Just tell me that at the top, "I went backwards with the numbers." That way, I don't mess up when I go to analyze the data. I'll just flip it around when I do.

Karen: Nine was my highest.

Matthew: Your four is right, correct? [laughter]

Matthew: Your five is correct.

Karen: I'm just straight in the middle.

Matthew: Five is correct.

Karen: My number one on here is- [crosstalk]

Matthew: Your most important.

Karen: -youth community and professional education.

Matthew: For you, personally? Why is that? Tell me more.

Karen: I think we're missing a community-- Warren has a good community but I think as far as the environmental activists, not activists used in, you know -- but the ones that really appreciate how gratitude towards the environment, they're out there. We just have to find them and get them together. This was a little sample of-- There are people out there, like "we're here," and I just think to have the community and to educate the young ones so that they can take that wherever they go, and hopefully spread out and help the environment when they can. What else?

Matthew: That was echoed by a lot of people, as well. They thought that was a place that-- You said that was you, personally, right?

Karen: Yes.

Matthew: A lot of people actually put that as the community one. That's what they tell is most important for the community here, even if they didn't personally feel passionate about it. They thought it would be the best thing for the community. Then understanding why. The youth are the ones we can most reach. There's an expression Alice used and Liv backed up that, we can work with the adults but they've already set some patterns. It's lot harder to fix but there's a right group of people who we can be engaged with without really having to change the world in a much more profound way.

I think you're the only one who has really expressed that sense of why do we do community education. It's because we know there's more people like us out there who need this kind of support. That's the word I'll use to say this. That we need this, we need to know we're each other's here [sic] and just support each other in that.

Karen: We could have some backup when you want to do something or start something new, there are people that are willing to help you out and back you up or say "No, it's a terrible idea." [laughs]

Matthew: "We tried that, it's not going to work. Here's where your roadblock's going to be but nice idea. I'm glad some gumption.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: -Let's try and use that.

Karen: Keep that going. [laughs]

Matthew: Keep the fire. [laughter]

Matthew: That was your personal? What was your community one, then? What was your most important for the community?

Karen: Is that why you're supposed to have one for each? One, two, three?

Matthew: Yes, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine.

Karen: [whispers] I did it all wrong

Matthew: You want to try it again? I do need it ranked that way so it matches up everybody else.

Karen: Can I have a new sheet?

Matthew: Sure.

Karen: [chuckles] No?

Matthew: Do I have one? I have one. [crosstalk] I think I finally was environmentally conscious and made right number. [laughter]

Karen: I will change it because I thought it was--

Matthew: You ranked them on a scale of one to nine like a Likert scale?

Karen: Yes

Matthew: Got it. I noticed the ranking.

Karen: Somebody can think, get you like that and then I'm out here going, "I like that and that's a good idea, too."

Matthew: You're a creative lateral thinker, it's great. We need people like you in the world.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: It's hard to survey you because you're always giving a different survey than I'm asking for.

Karen: [laughs] I have no idea. The most important thing, number one. I'm just going to leave my personal but switch it around as I go.

Matthew: In one of the strategies, we did talk about or some people discovered was, picking your most important and least important was easier than working in. That way, it can help sort it a little bit for you.

Karen: Can I just say that I think they're all important?

Matthew: Sure, use relative scale. That's absolutely fair and valid. It's close enough. It's a first-time survey. Just need your opinion. It could change in an hour.

Karen: It probably will.

Matthew: [laughs]

Karen: Then I'll be like, "I don't know."

Matthew: Your number one for your personal still is the same, the community, the education for community?

Karen: Yes.

Matthew: What was your number one for the community? It's okay if something you don't want to do anything about. David actually nailed it. He gave a number nine to what, for himself, for what he gave to the community. "Community," he said, "is what you want. The youth and education," he said, "that's the last thing I want to be doing." Just give you a sense of the-- That's fair.

Karen: I think the recycle bins downtown, snow removal, and better personal recycling, as far as the community goes, I think that could be a huge thing.

Matthew: It doesn't sound like a heavy lift and yet, there's opportunities for heavy lift [crosstalk] that are going to work there, too. Cool. Would you mind putting your name on that for me, [chuckles] again? [crosstalk] Only I see this.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: I got everybody else's right here. All nine of them.

Karen: [laughs] You'll be like, "What was she doing?" [laughs]

Matthew: Appreciate it. That's actually going to help us when we start whatever group comes out of this, it's going to help. We're going to use that as our starting point for us, where we go. Take everyone's opinions and then try to break it into what we can really gnaw on as a group. And who we would want to invite in, but that's for later. We're going to move. Last question in this group about the experience itself, can you think of any actions you've taken either for the environment or for your spiritual life that you feel have resulted because of this experience? Since we finished meeting, has anything happened that you've done or been involved in, that you can feel a link?

Karen: Does it have to be environmentally-

Matthew: No.

Karen: -or spiritually, sort of?

Matthew: If it's linked to the experience, it counts, in my opinion.

Karen: Not person. Could be a specific person?

Matthew: No, just you. What have you done?

Karen: I suffer from a lot of eco-guilt. I think I should do a lot more than I actually do and I think having this community, I feel a little bit less than that because I feel like you don't have to take it all on and that there are people around that are doing good things for the earth, too, and that it's not all bleak. I feel like that we're doing terrible, horrible things to the earth and we are supposed to be here, stewards for it and we shouldn't be treating it

so badly. I think that eased up a little bit, that I still have it but not as...you know, straws, stupid straws. I have been at restaurants and stuff refusing the straws. I have felt embarrassed before, "I don't want a straw, thank you." Just like, "I don't need a straw, thank you." You get the look.

Matthew: Every straw counts.

Karen: It's [sic] teeny-tiny, miniscule thing.

Matthew: If 300 million people did it? It's all good.

Karen: Does that fit?

Matthew: Yes, absolutely. Just thinking about those connections, what are even the first fruits that are coming for people? Extensively, I ask you about actions but even the sense of the change of feelings is a really important piece. Interesting you bring up eco-guilt, too. We just did for Lent, a program. Our Lenten study focused on a letter that bishops of the Episcopal Church wrote. One whole chunk if it was to acknowledge our guilt in the way that Christians practice. The idea of forgiveness and grace, that when we admit, when we come to God with our feelings of guilt that we can understand forgiveness, in a way, and a new calling and claim upon us, which is supposed to be life giving. That was something I hadn't thought about in that context, but something we need to think about and even in the church context. How can we do that more helpfully and allow people to acknowledge that, and then let that experience empower them? It doesn't have to be denied, it can be accepted. It's good stuff. Anything else come to you in the last six weeks, now?

Karen: Not off hand. I'll come back to that.

Matthew: Sure, if something comes up, let me know. We're going to shift focus. That ends to our asking for direct reflections on the experience. Then we're going to talk about some different angles. These next questions are a little more directed at the spiritual life and what was it like to talk about that in the group. Spirituality was a topic and was discussed in the room and I'm wondering about your experience of that in the room with other people. People you don't know, people with the different backgrounds, and different take on what spirituality is all about. Did you have any expectations coming in and did it either meet expectations or challenge your expectations, coming in and talking about spirituality in that group?

Karen: I didn't really have expectations. I wasn't sure what to expect.

Matthew: Expectations can be anxieties, expectations could be like, "This might be weird."

Karen: I'm pretty open to just about anything. I just was like, "Sure." Nature and spirituality, it seems like it's one with me. It piqued my interest. I just thought, "We'll see what this is about."

Matthew: Cool. Did you feel challenged in any way by the mix of people in the room and how they were coming about talking about spirituality or not able to talk about spirituality, as the case may be?

Karen: No, I didn't.

Matthew: Did you feel supported in sharing your thoughts?

Karen: Very much.

Matthew: Can you tell me how? Can you tell me where you felt that support for talking about spiritual things?

Karen: Knowing Alice and Liv, I just know I have their support for everything and the rest of the group just felt very comfortable. I could walk to them on the street and they probably would help me with whatever they could. It just felt very, very supportive.

Matthew: Neat. Considering wherever you are now in life, did the classes affect your feelings, thoughts about spirituality in any way? Mature, develop, change?

Karen: I think it just helped reassure me that, for me, nature and spirituality are pretty much the same. I can go out on a hike and I can feel closer to God than ever being inside anywhere. Almost every time I'm outside, I feel something, I see something, there's some warm feeling that I get, that I have yet to have it inside a church of God. It's just, ever since I was little, I spent a lot of time outside and it just seemed like it was just very "home". Odd but that's how it felt.

Matthew: "That's home," that's a very powerful word to use. Have you ever been scared outside?

Karen: Only when I let my anxiety get a hold of me.

Matthew: Because you talk about that running outside to look for peace, like the ocean.

Karen: If you let your brain get into overdrive, you get people's words and like, "You got to go outside by yourself. You go [mumbles]. Have you been [mumbles]?" There are places where I go. Heart's Content is a place where I feel never have felt scared, around Chapman, Penny Run. Always feel like there's something there protecting me, always. When you first go out there, I'm like, "There's something over here that I just feel there's a draw." At Hickory Creek Wilderness, I did not get a good-- I felt like there was a lot of anxiety.

Matthew: Do you get a sense that you're actually attuned to that, in that way, to sensing the world?

Karen: Not that I thought that before. When you start to think about it, you're like, [whispers] "That's weird. That's really weird." Out at Rimrock, I don't get a really good feel because I think it's in my head like I'm going to fall. [laughter]

Karen: I'm going to run out of-- Not that I ever go off the trail, I'm always on the trails.

Matthew: At Rimrock, you have to walk it.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: Otherwise it gets bad.

Karen: That was nice. [laughter]

Karen: I don't know, I hadn't thought of that until this second. I don't know if it's my anxiety-- I'm sure it's my anxiety or other people's anxiety that they put on me that I take on. I have a hard time getting rid of that, though, because it always voices in my head like, "You shouldn't do that. You're a girl, you shouldn't [mumbles]." That kind of stuff.

Matthew: You can notice that some places, some locations, some areas are more welcoming and homing than others. Are you aware of it in the moment or in reflection on them?

Karen: Usually right in the moment. [crosstalk]

Matthew: You're like, "Wow, this not a good place for me to be."

Karen: I should have turned around at Hickory Creek because I did not get a good feel there. I was probably in a half mile and was like, [whispers] "I don't know about this." That was weird because usually I'm like, [happy humming]. Whatever, look around. I won't go back there by myself, I'm sure I won't.

Matthew: Being alone versus being with other people changes that sense of the place, too, of the homing?

Karen: I think it makes it less...intense, disperses everything. People are chatting and stuff. I don't get to really hone in on what my surroundings--

Matthew: One way or the other, whether it's less or more homing, right?

Karen: Yes.

Matthew: There is some value that you can get from it, if it's a good experience, if you're alone.

Karen: Definitely, and every time at Chapman Dam doing Penny Run, I always come out just-- It's a mile or mile and a half but if you need something quick, that's where I go. Every time I come out and like, [exhales].

Matthew: Better. [laughs]

Karen: Even have that walk down the driveway afterwards just like, "That's what I needed."

Matthew: Wow. Good news. You have a facility and a willingness to explore that language of what it is to have a spiritual encounter. That's really wonderful. Much of the group, Elaine and David, Alice, and Liv, had trouble negotiating the line between religion and spirituality. I even called them out on it at one point during the conversation. Said, "We keep coming back to this idea that it's not like church. Let's just surrender the idea of church entirely. Let's just try to focus on the spiritual." The ability to just engage in that conversation of that transcendent experience was, actually, rather difficult to hold on to for them.

That was really neat to hear from you about that and I appreciate it. We shouldn't feel bad about that either, since we don't get to do this very often. I think everyone has to recognize that this experience of being together and sharing, reflecting, does let us go places we don't get to go very often.

Karen: Or ever. [laughs] I have never put this into words before.

Matthew: Really?

Karen: I always knew that being out-- When I was little, we lived way in the middle of a valley and I could wander all over the woods and stuff. I was just drawn to it and I don't know if I was drawn to it because of my spirit or if I was drawn to it because that was my environment. I don't know. When I got here, it was years and years and years before I went back outside. Once I got back outside, it was just like, "Oh, here we are, this is it."

Matthew: The fascinating next piece for you would be to contemplate-- This may not ever be able to be fully answered, but how much of that is how you have been uniquely made, to be that person and to surrender that other people may not? Then what does that make of you for others? Human beings are always built back for the community. How was this unique piece of me meant for others? That is a lot to go wandering around in [laughs] [crosstalk]

Karen: That is. How do you get the answer to that?

Matthew: Start prying into the world of vocation and what about calling to the rest of the creation. That's profound stuff. Wow.

Karen: I don't know how to put that in because if I could work that piece of the puzzle, a whole new world would be open for me.

Matthew: It may be beyond the purview of what I wanted to do in this, but just as a pastor,-

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: -tell you that, continue to explore that and be open to that, and as much as you're willing to talk to God about it, to tell him directly that- you're wondering about this because he will reply. I don't know how. I pray it's not as bad as it is for me, often, which is like a two by four to the head but he will reply if you ask.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: Go back to Penny Run and when you're experiencing that experience, go like, "Why? What is this all about?" Then go back to Hickory Creek, maybe with a friend because we are sent in the world two by two to borrow the biblical analogy. Maybe you need that friend to go figure out what that's about. "Why do I need this?", and to find the friend who you can be quiet for for half an hour while hiking because you both need it, and can expect each other to have that space. With the strength. All those ways, you are open to this, you're experiencing it. Other people can be and you could guide them but that may be one of the most valuable questions you have right now. Sorry. [laughter]

Matthew: This is where you also get this spiritual experience of, "Gosh, why me? Why can't I just wander in the woods and be in the woods?" Because that's who you were made to be.

Karen: That's right.

Matthew: Sorry to leave it there but maybe we can and we come back to that just you and I at some point or with others if you want to bring it up. We're going to shift focus again, now in my third area of questions and it's my final area of questions if that helps you feel, "Yay, we're almost done."

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: I'm going to ask you some questions that relate back to the original survey I gave you. I have that somewhere but you don't need that actually to see it to answer these questions. In this survey, I asked you some, what might have sounded like strange questions. I'm trying to tease out some issues of relationship and where you get your connection and your understandings from. My first question relates back to the question, where I asked you in this survey, to describe your family unit that you're currently living in, the people you see everyday, the people you're living with.

I want you to compare your experience of being in that unit with your experience of being in our group that met three times. I want you to talk about the difference and the similarities in two ways: How do you experience support and conflict both in your family unit and this unit? Then, how do you value the perspectives of those two groups? Your family unit and then that group, this and that. If you want us to keep the focus on environmental values, that's fine, that's what we'll really talk about. If other ways help you experience that. We can talk here for a while. How do you experience support and conflict? Is it different, the same? Then I'd given that value question, how do you experience values from those two groups?

Karen: I feel very supported in both groups.

Matthew: Cool.

Karen: The conflict, I tend to shy away from. On all of it, [laughs] I'm trying to think of conflict that I experience in the focus group.

Matthew: It had to be a lot more subtle, especially with an active family unit, you're going to have a lot of conflict in there, easy to point to.

Karen: A lot over socks or whatever. [laughter]

Karen: We're trying [sic] to mediate the conflict. [laughs] I just don't handle conflict all that well at any point, on anything.

Matthew: Were you aware when David talked about the *Monkey Wrench Gang*? [crosstalk]

Karen: I felt uncomfortable.

Matthew: There you go, that's conflict. How did that group handle conflict and what was your experience of that?

Karen: When they talked about it, I didn't know much about the *Monkey Wrench Gang*, other than it was a book from the '60's or '70's.

Matthew: Early '70's, I think.

Karen: Set this eco thing up. I hadn't read it. [crosstalk]

Matthew: It's a eco-terrorist handbook. [laughs]

Karen: I had watched the documentary, *Damnation*. He had talked about it and sent him on his way. I was like, "Maybe I should read that sometime." I haven't got to it. Then as David was just describing the author and how he was not how he had presented himself, and then Trevor was like, [makes sound]-

Matthew: [laughs]

Karen: -just that, I don't know. [laughs] I got some place to be, right? [laughter]

Karen: Other than uncomfortable, which is usually handle conflict.

Matthew: So it was similar.

Karen: I don't know, conflict's bad for me. I try to avoid it at all cost. [chuckles]

Matthew: There's five ways to handle conflict and avoidance is one, active avoidance works [crosstalk]

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: I'm more of the fighter. "Conflict, let's go fight.-

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: -Yay." That's a very good reflection on it and you feel that in both those groups the same way?

Karen: Yes.

Matthew: That's conflict at home. Susie and Tommy get at it and you're like, "God, I want to run away."

Karen: Go figure it out.

Matthew: Then now talk about the value of the environment between the two groups and how do you sense that value in each group? Is it different? Is it the same? Is the approach similar or different?

Karen: How do you mean, the value? How do you quantify that?

Matthew: Where is your family in terms of respecting the environment and valuing the environment versus how is that small group's experience in valuing the environment?

Karen: We do pretty well. I'm always talking about the environment and if I read anything, I always bring that up to discuss it and talk about it. I always try to make them-- To talk, not make them responsible but talk about being responsible, as far as, taking this as they go on through. We recycle in there. The boys are in charge of that and all of that but I say, to value it. I always feel like I can do more. That's the eco-guilt.

Matthew: Yep, and anxiety, isn't that nice?

Karen: Yes. [laughter]

Karen: The value, I think, from the focus group was high. I think they all felt we were doing what we could and there was room for improvement, certainly.

Matthew: Do you feel the same kind of support around environmentalism in both groups?

Karen: I think my household has given up and they're just doing what I say, which is fine. [laughs]

Matthew: You're the mom.

Karen: "Go recycle."

Matthew: The parental unit's going to have a different responsibility and a different network, but that's going to mean a different experience for you between two groups.

Karen: I think the focus group was-- I don't know.

Matthew: No? Just kind of tease out any description because that's really important for my survey in a different way. Another question I asked you on the survey was, to as best you could, explain your view or explain how you understand US public policy on the environment and what's your relationship to it. Do you like it? Do you hate it? You think it's stupid? You think it's fine. How do you handle that? Then to ask you if that experience of us talking together has changed your opinion on US public policy, at all.

Karen: I will say that my knowledge on public policy is very limited. I don't have whole lot of working knowledge that I go from but from what I've been fed via Internet, it doesn't seem like it's going in the right direction. I would say, I have more people I can go to if I wanted the information now that I didn't have before.

Matthew: Cool.

Karen: That if I wanted to figure out something, I think I could reach out to David and he could explain it. [chuckles] I don't know if it's really changed my opinion or anything because I don't feel like I had a working knowledge and I still don't, really, as far as, absolute public policy.

Matthew: Like, "Act 13 says the following and I don't like it. I have no idea"

Karen: I don't know. [laughs]

Matthew: Now, you know people you [sic] turn to that. You have a resource. Cool. During our third class, you are asked to bring opinions and ideas from those sources out

on the greater world that you draw from. I made the comment to the folks who had brought The Sierra Club, for instance, or World Wildlife Fund or Greenpeace or something. They are picking radical ones but-- They might be less radical but they're worth news.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: Do [sic] whatever you want and I asked you to bring into the third class those ideas both from them and then what they might say about the Warren community if they were to come and look at it and say, "Here's the problem's here." That was meant to be a launching pad for us to then share and it ended up being very fruitful, I think. Here, my opinion. Have your opinion of your sources changed and have you now thought of other sources you want to turn to because of the experience, because of the classes?

Karen: My opinion on my sources are still good. I still value them and I have a whole new world of-

Matthew: Yes?

Karen: -places to go that I hadn't realized before.

Matthew: Anyone that are burning on top, "I need to learn more about that group because I heard about it?"

Karen: There are a few authors that Nathan had mentioned that I was going to follow up with him at some point and get the names of those because I thought they sounded interesting to get-- Because I just felt like, personally, just in a rut. I was just like, "This is mom, this is dinner." Then going to that group, I was like-- [exhales] It's just refreshing and just opened it up to a whole different-- You're just going and just like, so much better, this is just great." It's just opened my world to a whole new information.

Matthew: I'm going to say, that's actually something we talk about very upfront in this group that we shared, that we really wished we had kept track of the authors and books that got mentioned. It's actually among one of the first things I ask each person in the group, is to come back with two or three authors and then write two or three sentences of what you got from the book, and we're going to create a resource list.

Karen: That would be awesome.

Matthew: Another thing that came up during this time is music and David mentioned looking for music sources, as well. That reminds me that not only is it written word and text and verb, and poetry; we talked about Wendell Berry poetry and stuff like that, but it's also art in music that also helps us to inspire and grow what we need in this movement. That's one of my first things I think that we need to at least start tackling. Let's start building that resource list and have it available. Maybe even put it on the website somewhere. "Here's some resources for nature and spirituality that you need to

grow." I'm reading this huge tome on what's called Deep Ecology, which is the philosophical stuff that actually led to *Monkey Wrench Gang* and ELF and stuff. This is the philosophical stuff, not the radical stuff.

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: These folks actually broke away from the radicals once they took off. They're like, "We don't have anything to do with that."
[laughter]

Matthew: -We know why you're doing that but, no, we're going to be over here on the peaceful side."

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: I'm reading that background information from the '50s and '60s. [crosstalk] Arne Næss and George Sessions, these guys are still alive. They're in their 80s and 90s and still writing. E.O Wilson from Harvard University and others.

Karen: Wow.

Matthew: It's 400 pages. Like, "Why?-"

Karen: [laughs]

Matthew: -Why can't books be small?"

Karen: little. [laughs]

Matthew: Good. I am glad that's sounds wonderful. Yet, here I am, already talking about what I want to talk about after we're done with the interview. Last question, can you believe it? Last question. One of the other questions on my survey talked about deciding where you are in terms of your life span, in terms of an arc of your life. In the survey, I asked you, can you talk about a time when you are least connected to nature in your life and when you've been most connected to nature in your life?

All I ask now is, has this experience changed your perspective on that sense of an arc of life and being connected and not connected? Are you more connected now, less connected? Do you value those times differently? Again, looking at your life as an overall story arc and has this experience changed your sense of that? [silence] This is a deep one.

Karen: I don't think it's changed my original arc as for being disconnected and connected because I feel the most connected now. Now, I think, now that I'm older, I can see-- When you reflect on something, of course you have a better view point. I think it's just given me validation that what I have experienced is okay and justifiable, and real. You go out there and you're just, is this real?

Matthew: "Is this just me?" It's real. [laughs]

Karen: It's a real deal. I really think it was very helpful for me to experience this, to be able to put some validation on-- When I went to Los Angeles and I did put my feet in the Pacific and I felt my anxiety actually melt away, that was a real thing. You realize that that was-- [exhales] You were being taken care of and you needed nature to be taken care of.

Matthew: Neat.

Karen: It helped me more than change any-- It just added some help for me to see some things.

Matthew: I love the word, validation. That's a really powerful word, too. To be validated is to be told who you are. You know you can stand there.

Karen: All through my life, I didn't have a lot of that and to be able to give myself like, "I feel completely different now that I'm standing here." To see, if you're in nature and you can change 180 how you're feeling and it could be good or bad. It depends on if you're out in Hickory Creek. [laughter]

Matthew: More importantly than good or bad, is that it's real. Validation doesn't have to be good or bad but it makes it real. It takes us, it's transcendent.

Karen: That's amazing.

Matthew: I'll share a couple of things with you because this is where people spend some time and I gave it some space. Alice, she said, "Looking back, my least connected time, during the navy and when the kids were young, my life was crazy. Then the fearful times when starting (local business)." She also feels a little bit more guilty now because she has resources and she can't say, "No," to use those resources for what's important anymore. She can't hide behind the fact, "I got out of the store." That does put a sense of painful pull that hurts.

She says, also, "I feel almost more connected to the whole--" I'm going to read the whole thing. "I'm looking back, my least next time was just a whole different life from top to bottom, whereas now, I almost feel as though I'm so connected that it hurts my heart, it really does." I love this. "I know it sounds very hippy dippy but it's like I can feel all of it." Then, "you go out and it's just like you can feel the trees and the trees, they're beat up and just, we're trying to hang on. I just think I'm almost connected to the point where I need something like this. How we continue this, I'm not sure but I needed something like this to bring a group of people together. Like-minded, have completely different jobs and unique ways of living, but it's all part of how I get there." It's good.

Karen: That is good.

Matthew: It's good. Liv and Elaine echoed that, "That's feeling of being unconnected and now this makes me want to be more connected." They realize the value of being connected. Then David closed the whole thing with his reflections, "It's not like you're thinking like a little kid the way we do as adults. You want to get back to that. It's that innocence that just fitting into nature without even trying. The thing is, it's made me reevaluate everything to not have to get up and make the money every day, now that I'm retired," he was talking about. "I wish everybody could have that experience," because he realized how much making the money kept him from this experience. There you go.

Any last comments, things that you were expecting to get to talk about today or things you think I should know about the experience or what this has meant for you or what it could mean? For my research, but then after that, I'll turn off this and we can talk about other things.

Karen: I was glad that it happened. I was glad that you put it all together and it was very interesting and yet comforting, too. I just think the group was a perfect group of crosshatch of people. The demographics were great. I enjoyed it. I don't know. [laughs]

Matthew: Yay. [laughter] Thank you and thank you for participating. Thank you for jumping on board. I'll turn this off.

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