

# **Encounters with Nature as a Path of Self-Realisation: A Meaning-Making Framework**

El encuentro con la Naturaleza como medio para la autorrealización:  
un marco de trabajo significativo

**Michael Wilson\***

UK Council for Psychotherapy  
Edinburgh, UK

## **Abstract**

Following an overview of some of the literature and studies which inform this theoretical paper, the article argues that participatory encounters with nature are an important pathway for self-realisation and the expansion of experience through the widening of consciousness. The paper outlines some key cornerstones for a meaning-making framework informing experiences of in-depth participatory encounters with other species and living systems with reference to two cartographies. The paper concludes by suggesting that the framework supports further thinking about participatory encounters with nature as a psycho-spiritual path, the dynamics of participatory encounters with Mystery in a nature setting, as well as emphasising the importance of further research into the psychological effects of purposive encounters with nature.

**Key words:** Consciousness, Nature, Self-Realisation, Spirituality, Transformation

## **Resumen**

Revisando la literatura y estudios mencionados en este trabajo teórico, se estudia la hipótesis de que los encuentros participativos con la naturaleza sean un importante camino para la auto-realización y la expansión de la consciencia. Se subrayan algunas claves para crear un marco de trabajo significativo, con el que comprender las experiencias que revelan un profundo encuentro participativo con otras especies y sistemas de vida, en referencia a dos cartografías. El trabajo concluye apoyando los encuentros participativos con la naturaleza como camino psico-espiritual, así como destacando la necesidad de mayor y más profunda investigación en cuanto a los efectos psicológicos derivados de dichos encuentros.

**Palabras Clave:** Consciencia, Naturaleza, Auto-Realización, Espiritualidad, Transformación

Received: 14 February, 2011

Accepted: 10 March, 2012

## Introduction

This theoretical paper offers some preliminary thoughts on a meaning-making framework for encounters with nature as a path of self-realisation and the expansion of consciousness to widen experience. Following a review of some of the background literature and studies which inform this article the paper continues by considering (1) the idea of a *contracting* and *expanding* experience of self, first in relation to a time and space metaphor as defining the self-concept of the individual, and then in relation to the dynamic between nature and the individual. This will be followed by considering the themes of (2) nature as container, (3) the body as container or alembic, (4) the self-realisation of beings, (5) encounter with nature as a participatory experience, (6) liminality as the space in-between, (7) projection and the numinous ground of being, and (8) the metaphors of *ascending* and *descending*. It is important to note that this paper does not differentiate between self and ego concepts, but takes these concepts to mean conscious awareness. This paper also refers to psyche and self-system as metaphors for both conscious and unconscious parts of consciousness. Also, the capitalisation of terms like Nature, Mystery, Ground, and Dynamic Ground refers to the greater reality or bigger picture within which everything exists.

## Theoretical and research review

The background to this paper is the volume of writing on the relationship of *Homo sapiens* with other species and living systems (e.g., Abram, 1996, 2010; Adams, 2007, 2010; Fox, 1990a, 1990b; Mathews, 1991, 2003, 2007; Metzner, 1991, 1999; Naess, 1973, 1986; Naess & Sessions, 1995; Roszak, 1992, 1993; Schroll, 2007, 2010). For instance, this literature emphasises the importance of maintaining a conscious connection with nature, of which *Homo sapiens* is an intrinsic part (Adams, 2007, p. 274), and in different ways continues to warn of the dangers of losing sight of the reality of the interconnectedness of all beings, and the co-influencing fact of the web of life where nothing occurs in isolation of other things. This emphasis marks a gradual turning away from preoccupation with our separateness and alienation *from*, and exploitation *of* nature (Adams, 2010) to a realisation that our life on this earth is one of many life forms, and that *Homo sapiens* lives horizontally alongside other species rather than in dominion over these; in “kinship” *with* rather than in possession *of*, or “belonging” *to* as an extension of identity (Diehm, 2007, p. 1). Tobin Hart (2000), for instance, acknowledges an easing away from a tendency towards “hyper-individualism” in the West, with its narcissistic absorption in self, toward an other-centred “ecological awareness that recognises our interconnectedness with nature” (p. 37). It is likely that this easing away facilitates a turning towards other species and living systems with an openness to the possibility of knowing the subjectivity of other through mutual participatory encounters.

This co-creative, participatory, perspective draws upon the ideas of Ferrer, Albareda and Romero (2004), Ferrer and Sherman (2008), Washburn (2003), Abram (2010), and others. David Abram (2010), for instance, writes that *Homo sapiens* is blueprinted with a “primordial impulse to animate and participate with our terrestrial surroundings” (p. 277), and for John Davis (1998) this means entering into a “deeply bonded and reciprocal communion” with the more-than-human-worlds (p. 62). Moreover, Freya Mathews (2003) asserts that “When such contact with the self as they [other species] experience it – as subject – is made, and they communicate to us something of the meaning they have for themselves, we do in fact share a deep sense of mutual knowing, but this is a felt form of knowing, only secondarily translatable into information” (p. 78). This is “knowing” (e.g., a tree, bird, or landscape) through a felt-sense encounter rather than through explaining or information gathering. The latter “knowledge”, writes Mathews, “seeks to break open the mystery of another’s nature; encounter leaves that mystery intact”. This means that “the mysterious other retains its capacity to surprise” (p. 78). This encounter is participatory, and the ensuing knowing is transformative (Ferrer, 2002, p. 123). Adams (2010) takes up this participatory theme in his suggestion that “a participatory consciousness...exists in and *as* the community of nature – a nondual, transpersonal, dynamic, and interrelated mind or psyche” (p. 22). My

suggestion is that participatory encounters with nature increase felt-sense awareness of this “community”, and potentially promotes self-realisation and facilitates the expansion of identity.

However, the idea of the expansion of identity in relation to nature is a contentious issue. Plumwood (cited in Diehm, 2002), for instance, draws our attention to a danger here in an idea of an expansion of identity as a self which “rejects boundaries between self and nature” (p. 30). Diehm argues, further, that there is “a certain violence” in this type of engagement (p. 30). But Mathews demonstrates through her writing that the expansion of identity through encounter does not necessarily mean a rejection or violation of boundaries. Moreover, I propose that the expansion of identity or consciousness is an expansion of *experience*, rather than expansion through “appropriation” or “possession” of other (Ferrer in Ferrer & Sherman, 2008, p. 137). Any *experience* of identification of another is *temporary*, in the same way that an empathic response might be a way of temporarily identifying or engaging with another to seek a sense of knowing, in ways suggested by Ferrer and Mathews. This temporary identification might be understood as seeking a type of *kinship* (e.g., Diehm, 2002, 2007; Gruen, 2009). Related to this theme is the phenomenon *participation mystique*, that is, “awareness of symbiotic relatedness with the natural world” (Metzner in Schroll, 2007, p. 44), or as Jung (1921) puts it “a peculiar kind of psychological connection with objects, and consists in the fact that the subject cannot clearly distinguish himself from the object but is bound to it by a direct relationship which amounts to *partial identity*” [emphasis added] (para. 781), which Jung asserts is the same as projection (as cited in Sabini, 2002, p. 113). This supports our earlier suggestion of temporary identification as a way of “knowing through encounter” (Mathews, 2003, p. 78).

Recent empirical studies into the effects of being in nature have found that being in nature is not only mentally restorative (Hug et al., 2009), enhances mental alertness (Berman et al., 2008), and increases vitality (Ryan et al., 2010), but “can also positively enhance perceptions of physiological, emotional, psychological and spiritual health in ways that cannot be satisfied by alternate means” (Brymer, Cuddihy, & Sharma-Brymer, 2010, p. 21; cf. Davis, 2004). Of particular interest is Brymer’s et al. finding that “actual contact and feelings of connection” with nature bring about profound positive influence. These authors propose further research into the specific correlations of aspects of nature with different types of positive influence experiences (p. 24). Furthermore, Cohen, Gruber, and Keltner (2010) report on the “long lasting and meaningful changes in personality” in relation to “experiences of profound beauty” and “spiritual transformations” which evoke feelings like awe, appreciation, and peacefulness (p. 133; cf. Abkar, Kamal, Maulan, & Mariapan, 2010). Studies also indicate the likely positive impact on health and well-being associated with nature settings designated as “sacred” (Mathews, 1991, p. 133; cf. Hild, 2006). For instance, Terhaar’s (2009) investigation into intense spiritual experiences in nature reports on the well-being benefits of individual perceptions, highlighting seven physiological and psychological sensations related to encounters of intense spiritual experiences: “unity, the presence of an ‘Other’, ineffability, timelessness and spacelessness, intense affect, paradoxicality, and noetic perception” (p. 337). These might include the experience of “flow” or “optimal experience” (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990) related to absorption in something beyond distraction (e.g., watching an otter playing).

While some of these studies suggest a healing benefit from being in nature, Santostefano (2008) disagrees with the premise of the “automatic” healing impact of nature on the basis that it does not take into account relational patterns of early life as either enabling or hindering influence or healing (p. 515). However, while Santostefano’s position may in some cases be supported, his point can be challenged by contrasting theoretical views and studies (e.g., Bernstein, 2005; Brymer et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2010). For instance, Bernstein (2005) points out that, in relation to early trauma, psychotherapy sometimes confuses the pathological with the sacred or transpersonal by reducing or minimising encounters with nature as neurotic symptoms of early wounding (p. 11). However, I acknowledge that Santostefano points to a gap in the research of the impact of early relational deficits or trauma on experiences in nature. Moreover, a recent study into the influence of self-awareness of connectedness with nature (Frantz, Mayer, Norton, and Rock, 2005) suggests that the “modern sense of self poses the greatest risk to the

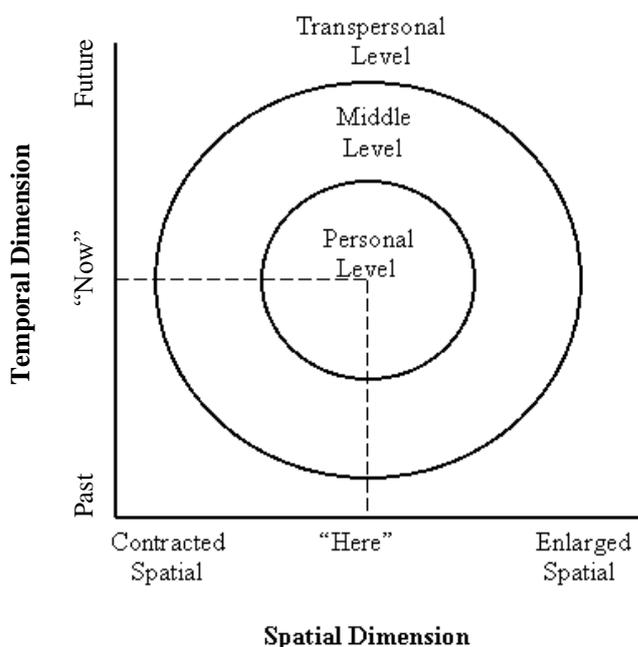
environment”, through a preoccupation of self as object (p. 433). The study reports that this is because heightened *objective self-awareness*, that is, a view of self as “object-like, and separate from nature”, increases self-focus rather than heightened *subjective self-awareness* which increases other-focus (p. 428; cf. Dambrun & Ricard, 2011).

To provide the reader with an insight into the of the type of experience characteristic of participatory encounters with nature, Freya Matthews (2007) gives an insightful illustration in her citation of Frans Hoogland, a Dutch-born initiate into Aboriginal Law:

At a certain time for everybody, the land will take over. The land will take that person. You think you're following something, but the land is actually pulling you. When the land start pulling you, you're not even aware you're walking - you're off, you're gone. When you experience this, it's like a shift in your reality. You start seeing things you never seen before...all of a sudden [the training process you have acquired through your upbringing] doesn't fit anything. Then something comes out of the land, guides you. It can be a tree, a rock, a face in the sand, or a bird (p. 8).

### The expanding and contracting self

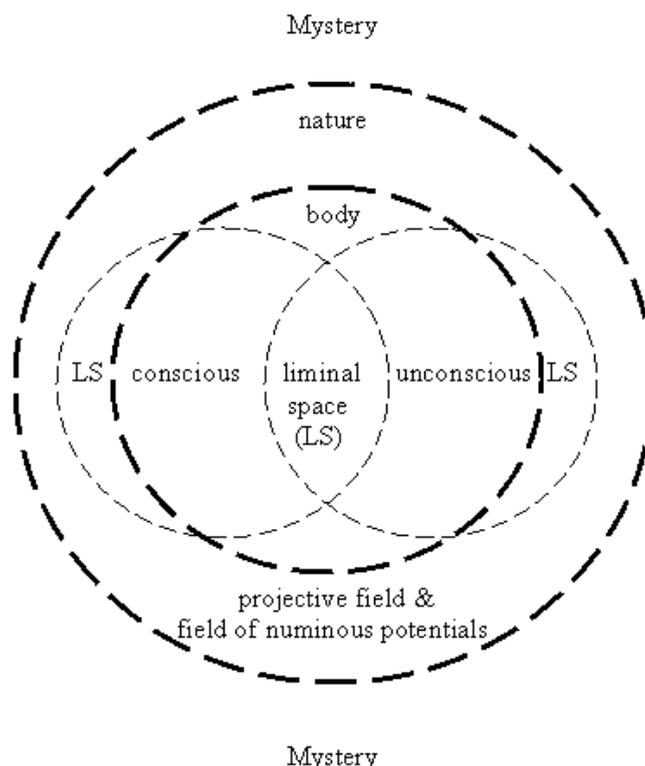
The *expanding* and *contracting* nature of self is a typical experience in encounters with nature (e.g., Cohen, 1997). Harris Friedman (1983) offers an insightful way of understanding this phenomenon through *his cartography of self-conception, including levels of self-expansiveness*, which he writes, “rests on the metaphor of space and time as defining the self-concept of the individual” (p. 37; cf. Pappas & Friedman, 2007). It is worth presenting his cartography here as an important point of reference for my discussion.



**Figure 1:** Friedman’s cartography of self-expansiveness.

Friedman writes that “A key construct in this conceptualization is the *level of self-expansiveness*, which is defined as the amount of the self which is contained within the boundary demarcating self from non-self through the process of *self-conception*. This definition is based on an assumption of the expanded nature of the self. Specifically, the position is taken that the relationship between self and non-

self is inherently unlimited” (p. 38), and “the degree to which individuals manifest expanded self-concepts reflects the extent to which they accept or deny their unity with their *true unbounded selves*” [emphasis added] (p. 39). This cartography is useful because it allows me to suggest that the *now-here* point of intersection can be in two positions at the same time, that is, simultaneously in the personal and middle levels (e.g., the past), or in the personal and transpersonal levels. This means, for instance, that the individual both experiences and is aware of the self-expansion, while at the same time is *also* aware of a perhaps more familiar contracted experience of self. My suggestion is that this contracting and expanding of self is a fluid process, and that any diagrammatic representation of this might benefit from using broken rather than solid lines to imply a constancy of movement, as the following map tries to demonstrate:



**Figure 2:** Cartography of self-system expansiveness in relation to nature

The fluidity of the self-system suggested by the feint broken lines in Figure 2, while mostly contained within the inner heavy broken line representative of the boundary of the physical body, is wholly contained within the second heavy broken line representative of the boundary of nature. Space is depicted here as the distance between the body and a point in nature which could be a tree, a mountain, or the moon. Here the self-system is taken to mean both conscious and unconscious processes which overlap constituting a *space in-between* or *liminal space* (LS). Like Friedman’s map, my image also assumes the expansion of the conscious part of the self-system. Expansion potentially extends from the boundary of the body to a point in nature (e.g., tree, fox, mountain), and is *both* a conscious and unconscious dynamic process. That is, expansion of consciousness is not necessarily always a conscious process, as it can be spontaneous. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the expansion of consciousness and self-realisation through encountering “nature” within other than to refer the reader to an extraordinary example of engaging with the content of the unconscious in Jung’s method and process of *active imagination* as written about and depicted in his *Liber Novus* (2009). The reader might also be interested in the Eames (1977) film *Powers of Ten* which also relates to our consciousness theme. Moreover, the subjective *space in-between*, *liminal space* within, or fluid interface, might also be metaphorically understood as a threshold or border crossing between conscious and unconscious aspects

of the self-system, an inner space consisting of images (e.g., dreams, fantasy, symbols). As my cartography illustrates, there are also the spaces between inner and outer. These in-between spaces are *liminal spaces*, where familiar reality appears to take on symbolic significance. For instance, in moments of liminality a bird is both a bird as well as a conveyor of symbolic meaning.

My cartography suggests that both sides of this self-system (conscious/unconscious) potentially expand beyond the physical boundary of the body, into a *participatory* relationship with nature which is simultaneously (1) a *container for the process of self-expansion of experience and increased self-awareness*, (2) a *receiver of our projections*, and (3) a *field of numinous potentials*, as this paper will explain. First, it might be useful to acknowledge that my cartography of the conscious and unconscious parts of the self-system might also be conceptualised as the figure of eight below, with the *space in-between* sitting at the point of convergence. Viewing consciousness in this way helps to emphasise the moving dynamic of both aspects of the self-system. Though a full exploration of this is beyond the scope of this paper, this will become clearer in the following section with reference to the ideas of Michael Washburn (2003).

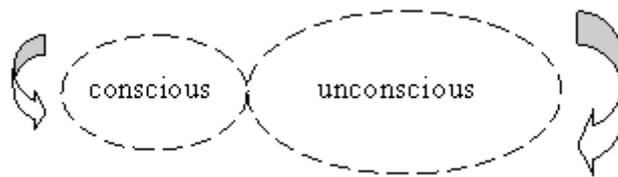


Figure 3: Figure of eight dynamic of the self-system

### Nature as limitless container

Nature is a living, *holding*, container (Figure 2), frame, or field, within which psycho-spiritual unfolding can take place. My suggestion is that this *holding* is similar to the understanding of *holding* in psychotherapy when the therapist's *holding* capacity enables the person to be more open to the unknown, the psychological void, or the unconscious, from which potentials and other things can emerge. Or as David Michael Levin (1985) puts it, the earth "is the source of our individuation, since it [allows us to] stand becoming ourselves" (p. 289). The ground supports our becoming. Levin reminds us, further, that this unfolding or individuating process, or becoming, is that of a "deepening". This "deepening", he continues, is to be understood in terms of our "bodily felt sense of wholeness" (p. 291) *in relation to the earth* as the source of our individuation, which "requires – is – an act of faith, a 'passion' of trust which entrusts our...existence, to the *support* [emphasis added] of the grounding earth" (p. 306). Body is our immediate point of contact with the living earth, and the bodies of the living earth are the first point of contact with *Homo sapiens*. To put it another way, nature is the living container in which we can become fully ourselves if we allow it.

However, the "grounding earth" is not synonymous with the ground itself, but "is the Ground in its elemental presence" (Levin, 1985, p. 284), that is fire, earth, water, and air. We might say that the ground is embodied Ground. The essence of this ground is Mystery, "big mystery" (Abram, 2010, p. 278), or Being, and the ground is "a presencing of Being" (Levin, 1985, p. 270). Or we might prefer to say that nature is embodied Nature, or (which is the same thing) that nature has its being in Nature, or (which is the same thing again) that the Being of Nature allows nature its being. For instance, a mountain, a river, a tree, or an otter is *something of* nature, but it is not Nature itself. It is nature's Mystery which brings nature into being. This Nature is limitless. It follows on from this, with reference to our maps, that the self which is part of Nature (given that nothing exists outside of Nature) is also limitless in its expansiveness.

More importantly, following Freya Matthews (1991), nature is a multiplicity of self-realising systems. It is subject rather than object. This not only means that nature is *holding* us, but it *requires our holding*. The self-realising of the moss under my feet in the forest witnesses my self-realisation while allowing me to walk across its spongy greenness. But this self-realising moss also requires *my* care. Later we will consider the process of our becoming or self-realisation as a participatory encounter with the self-realisation of nature.

It is worth theorising further on the Ground of nature to fully appreciate something of the dynamics of participatory encounters with nature. Michael Washburn's (1994, 1995, 2003) writing on the spiral process of becoming, in relation to what he refers to as the Dynamic Ground, is an important point of reference here. Washburn theorises that encounter with the Dynamic Ground is a spiral rather than a linear process. This is because the journey is always in relation to this Dynamic Ground of Being or deep psyche (2003, p. 2). What this means is that although "the beginning and end of the spiral path are maximally different" (p. 26) by virtue of what is possible through a developmental process, both points "share the same deep foundations. The ego (or conscious part of the self-system), in reaching the end of the spiral path, is once again rooted in the Ground, enlivened and graced by the power of the Ground" (p.5). This means that "The beginning and end of the spiral path are alike in being points at which consciousness is at one with the fullness of life" (p. 36). This implies a developmental separation from the Ground, followed by a potential later return; although paradoxically the Ground is always present (refer to Figure 3). As Washburn (2003) asserts further "The sacred ground from which the spiral path takes leave and to which it returns is precisely *this earth, and our shared, incarnate lives on earth*" [emphasis added] (p. 4). This perspective is strikingly similar to Levin's (1985) writing on "ground", and his idea of the earth allowing us to become ourselves (p. 289). From both perspectives the ground is "sacred". My suggestion is that this "sacred ground" is the Dynamic Ground, the energetic ground of Being, Nature, the unconscious, deep psyche, and Mystery.

Moreover, as James Hillman writes, following Theodore Roszak (in Roszak, Grones and Kanner, 1995), "An individual's harmony with his or her 'own deep self' requires not merely a journey to the interior but a harmonizing with the environmental world. The deepest self cannot be confined to 'in here' because we can't be sure it is not also or even entirely 'out there'" (p. xix). This crucial point supports our suggestion of the expansive nature of self referred to earlier, which participates with nature (Figure 2), suggesting a permeable, flexible or expanded boundary between self and other. For, as Friedman reminds us, the self is "inextricably embedded in the universe", and its expansiveness is "inherently unlimited" (Friedman, 1983 p. 38). This being "embedded" gravitates *Homo sapiens* away from a too narrowing or contracting of identity. Nature knows no boundaries. Psyche is part of Nature, therefore psyche is also unlimited. With reference to the figure of eight (Figure 3), the gravitation is away from overly contracting the left loop, to enabling expansion into the right. While this facilitation is the function of spiritual paths as well as some forms of psychotherapy, my assertion in this paper is that purposive encounters with nature also facilitate this expansion. My assumption here is that self-expansion is both inner and outer.

The idea of nature as container suggests a dynamic holding of the process of becoming, which potentially enables the expansion of self beyond the individual's sensate experience of nature, to also include a transformative encounter in, through, and with, the Mystery of the ground itself. Nature offers itself as a frame within which, and in relation to which, the conscious self expands and contracts, opens and closes. It is in this sense that the ground allows us to become most fully, and most expansively, ourselves. Later we will consider the importance of *ascending* and *descending* of self.

## Body as container or alembic

While nature is the living container which supports the expansion of experience through the widening of consciousness and facilitates self-realisation, the body is the container for the individual's felt sense experience of that development. The conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche constitute the self-system in the body. Moreover, my earlier consideration about the expanding self raises the question as to whether consciousness is limited to the brain, which is one of the hard unresolved questions in the study of consciousness (e.g., Chalmers, 2010; Metzinger, 2009). The assumption in this paper is that it is not.

Following Washburn's (2003) hermetic view that "the body is the alembic in which the elixir, the sacred power implicit in nature, effects a transformation of the 'soul' from base metal into gold, that is, from an imperfect to a spiritually perfected state" (p. 162), we might assume that the "sacred power" is the ground of Being or Mystery. Therefore, the body is another living container, or "temple of the Spirit" (p. 168), which goes through awakening and transformation (p. 149). Supporting this view, it is worth repeating Levin (1985) who follows Heidegger, in his assertion that the earth "is the source of our individuation, since it [allows us to] stand becoming ourselves", through "the wisdom in our bodily felt experience" (p. 298). Washburn (1994) picks up this theme in his assertion that "The integrated person realizes that the body is a native vehicle of spirituality and therefore that spirituality is at home in the body" (p. 311). Levin (1985) continues by stating that the body "*needs and uses our senses to complete its realisation*" (p. 182).

Freya Mathews (1991) develops this theme by asserting that "A self-realizing being is one which, by its very activity, defines and *embodies* [emphasis added] a value (*viz.*, its value-for-itself)" (p. 143). By locating the process of self-realisation within the context of the self-realisation of nature itself, Mathews helps us to appreciate the "value" of our two living containers: nature and body. To highlight this point further, human value exists in *connection with*, rather than separate from, the value of other beings; subject to subject rather than subject to object relatedness. This means that the unfolding or becoming of the individual is always within the context of an inter-dependent system, or co-creative community of other self-realising beings and living systems (e.g., fox, bee, tree, water, air, grass), that are, ecological "selves within wider selves" (p. 15). Mathews continues that "The relation of part to whole in a self-realizing system is systemic/holistic rather than linear/aggregative" (p. 143). This means that there is no Great Chain of Being hierarchy

The first encounter with nature is often through our body's senses. As Abram (2010) poetically reminds us, "The sensing body is like an open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the surrounding earth" (p. 254). "Our animal senses" he writes, "are neither deceptive nor untrustworthy; they are our access to the cosmos. Bodily perception provides our most intimate entry into a primary order of reality that can be disparaged or dismissed only at our peril". By virtue of the fact that *Homo sapiens* is also part of nature, our self-realising, or becoming, is profoundly joined to the self-realising of other beings, on which we wholly depend. As Abram points out, "Incomplete on its own, the body is precisely our capacity for metamorphosis". Our transformation *requires* that we allow for the transformation of other beings. We are intrinsically related to our environments in what Abram calls "an enigmatic and encompassing field of relationships to which we can only apprentice ourselves" (p. 307). Perhaps more profoundly, he writes that it "is only by turning our bodily attention toward *another* that we experience the convergence and reassembly of our separate senses into a dynamic unity. Only by entering into relation with others do we effect our own integration and coherence" (p. 254). With this simple word *only* Abram implies that there is no other way. This conjoins with Mary's Oliver's (1994) words in her poem *Wild Geese*, where she writes "You only have to let the soft animal of your body/love what it loves" (p. 14). This invitation is to *only* live from listening to the wisdom of your body. My suggestion is that both *onlys* are necessary: turning our bodily attention toward both other and self.

## The self-realisation of beings

Continuing our theme of the self-realisation of beings, from earlier, given that *Homo sapiens* is in the process of self-realisation, and fundamentally interdependent on and interconnected with other self-realizing beings, it then makes sense, following Freya Matthews (1991), that self-realisation is to be understood within the context of the universe as a creative “self-realizing system” (p. 152). Matthews (1991) cites Arne Naess in posing this as a “metaphysical fact” and an “ontological given” (p. 148). While Naess prefers not to be precise about his meaning of the term “self-realisation”, Matthews is able to be more specific. *Homo sapiens*, she writes, is endowed with the givens of self-interest, self-love, and self-concern. This gravitates *Homo sapiens* away from self-realisation to a narrowing of identity (cf. our discussion in relation to Figure 3). Conversely, when self-realisation is understood within the wider context of our interdependence on and interconnectedness with nature as whole, then our concept of self widens to allow for “an expansion of scope in our identity and hence in the scope of our self-love.” Self-expansion rather than self-contraction. What follows on from this is that an attitude of “duty” shifts to that of “protectiveness” or “care” for a self-realizing universe of which *Homo sapiens* is a part. Matthews emphasises this shift as a “transition from self-love [or ego-love] to *Self-love*” (pp. 149-151). That is, from the narcissism of ego-centricity to trans-species altruism. This is similar to Washburn’s (2003) notion of transformation of the ego by the Spirit of the Ground, which ego recognises as a “higher essence of its own being” in the process of becoming, which brings forth an “overflow” of love from which others might also benefit (pp. 122-123), including other species and living environments. Within the context of our present theme, this protectiveness, care, and love often manifests as a concern for the earth through some form of ecological or spiritual activism, or other forms of engagement which aims to heal the split between culture and nature (e.g., Berry, 2000; Higgins, 2010; Korten, 2006; Macy, 1999; Plotkin, 2008), and restore our relationship with the earth.

A leading figure in bringing nature back into our developmental models of psychology is Bill Plotkin (2008). His theory of human development supports some of the themes we have considered so far. For instance, he puts emphasis on identity circling around being “holistically ecocentric” during *late adulthood*, with the focus on generosity as the centre of gravity for an individual, as if it were coming *through* the individual rather than *from* (pp. 384-87). This is interesting in the context of what we have already considered about the “overflow” of love, “protectiveness” and “care” as characteristic of this stage of psycho-spiritual maturity. Some indication of developmental progression in Plotkin’s theory lies in the fact that *early adulthood* circles around being “ecocentric”, rather than egocentric, with one’s centre of gravity immersed in culturally embodying the mysteries of nature and psyche. The progression from ecocentric to cosmocentric comes with *early elderhood* with a gravitational pull from the soul of the wider web of life, or Washburn’s Dynamic Ground perhaps. Then, with identity defined by being spirit-centred or cosmocentric, in *late elderhood*, the centre of ones gravity deepens to embrace the cosmos or spirit. Again, there appears to be a parallel here with Washburn’s (2003) notion of Regeneration in Spirit which ego recognises as a “higher sense of its own being” (p. 86).

## The participatory nature of encounter

It follows on from this that the process of self-realisation is *participatory* in relation to the self-realisation of the whole of nature. This view is supported by Will Adams (2010) in his description (referred to earlier) of the experience of self-expansion as “a participatory consciousness that exists in and *as* the community of nature – a nondual, transpersonal dynamic, and interrelational mind or psyche” (p. 20). This means that an individual can “suddenly open *to* and *in* and *as* the nondual presence – or dynamic *presencing* – of an interresponsive fellowship of being” (p. 22). Adams also draws our attention to Gregory Bateson who wrote, that “The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is also immanent in the pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the

individual mind is only a sub-system” (as cited in Adams, 2010, p. 26). While self-realisation may not be synonymous with self-expansion, it is arguable that the latter includes the former. Moreover, self-realisation and self-expansion for *Homo sapiens* is concomitant to self-realisation and self-expansion of other species and living systems, in a participatory unfolding which embraces the whole web of life.

If we were to suggest further that soul is the *experience* of participatory encounter in contrast to an inner essence or Neo-Platonic divine spark, then it makes sense to follow Ferrer (2000, 2002) in his assertion that knowing of Mystery through this encounter is also participatory. That is, the *experience* of soul through encounters with nature is then a co-creative participatory event through which we come to know something of Mystery. Participatory encounters with nature are at the same time participatory encounters with soul, which is grounded in Mystery. Plotkin (2008), for instance, in using the term *soul* states that profound transformation often follows an irreversible soul initiation “where the light of everyday ego consciousness sinks towards the depths” (p. 305), and opens the person to a life in service of Mystery (Jung, 2009; Roszak, 1993), thus precipitating another stage in development of the individual (Plotkin, 2008: 307; cf. Washburn, 2003). Relating this argument back to Figure 2, my suggestion is that the felt presence of soul is an *experience* of profound liminality, and an encounter with Mystery through connecting with the subjectivity of nature (by going out), or by connecting to Mystery as the ground of my being (by going in). Also, given that everything is rooted in Mystery, everything is also in soul. Therefore, *Homo sapiens* is also *in* soul.

What often follows (and sometimes precipitates) a soul encounter is the creation of a ritual or ceremony (an outward orientated activity), or engaging in a conversation with other through what Jung referred to as *active imagination* (an inward orientated activity). Following Levin (1985) the former is often a bodily felt experience, for “body [is the] primary ritual bearer” (p. 171). Interestingly, Jung also defined active imagination as a bodily felt activity. Symbolic language, and symbolic seeing are also important features of encounters with nature, which includes being attentive to the dreaming process, and allowing the dream to work *with* and *through* the dreamer, for as Jung reminds us, dreams are “pure nature” within (as cited in Sabini, 2002, p. 19). This suggests that *Homo sapiens* is in closer proximity to nature than is ordinarily considered. Encounters with nature are not only through our senses, but also through our dreams by virtue of psyche’s proximity to the Ground. This sentiment is beautifully expressed by Mary Oliver (1994) in her poem *Sleeping in the Forest*:

I thought the earth  
remembered me, she  
took me back so tenderly, arranging  
her dark skirts, her pockets  
full of lichens and seeds. I slept  
as never before, a stone  
on the riverbed, nothing  
between me and the white fire of the stars  
but my thoughts, and they floated  
light as moths among the branches  
of perfect trees. All night  
I hear the small kingdoms breathing  
around me, the insects and the birds  
who do their work in the darkness. All night  
I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling  
with a luminous doom. By morning  
I had vanished at least a dozen times  
into something better.

The felt sense experience of participatory encounters with nature then takes on the primitive feel of *participation mystique* (Levy-Bruhl cited in Sabini, 2002, p. 113), that is the trancelike merging with a projection, for instance, “grappling with a luminous doom”, or a symbolic merging with, say, a bird, as the bird might allow a shaman to do. This panpsychist (e.g., Mathews) view accepts that everything can become an opportunity for dialogic encounter, and synchronicity is often a consequence of this (e.g., Jung as cited in Sabini, 2002; cf. Plotkin 2008). These are moments when conscious differentiation between self and other appears to drop away to allow for a more unified experience of nature. This in-depth encounter with nature is less about getting somewhere, but more about experiencing the otherness of other so as to heal the split of separation. For as Abram (2010) points out “our impulse toward participation, our yearning for engagement with the more-than-human otherness, has never been eradicated” (p. 277).

Self-expansion, like self-realisation, is a gradual or spontaneous process which arises out of participatory encounters with other. The gradual process might be facilitated by a considered crossing into nature. One assumes there to be many boundary crossings, transitional spaces, and thresholds, during nature explorations, which mark points of entry into spaces within which encounters take on symbolic meaning, as well as points of departure from the symbolic into the more concrete world. For instance, there is a symbolic crossing, threshold or “border crossing” (e.g., Plotkin, 2008; Shorter, 1982) into a nature setting itself. This might be a bridge crossing a river, or a gate into a forest. Active imaginations or explorations might follow on for this, for example, when one approaches nature’s “altar” one bows in knowing that this bowing is both to Mystery, the Dynamic Ground, *and* humbly to the same Ground within oneself. As we know, active imagination is a bodily felt, participatory activity with aspects of subjectivity, often an inner image from a dream or an image from the deep imagination. This activity is a profound participation *in* the Ground of being, and our bodily felt experience is the interface for this type of encounter. For as Abram (2010) reminds us “The body is precisely our interface and exchange with the field of awareness. It is our *bodies* that participate in awareness” (p. 272). To return to a view expressed earlier, that nature knows no boundaries (e.g., Jung in Sabini, 2002; Wilber, 1996), participatory encounters with Ground *in* and *through* nature can also evoke an encounter with the same Ground *within* the individual, through the images and symbols offered up by that Ground. More spontaneous participatory encounters with the Ground through nature include peak and unitive experiences. As Abram (2010) reminds us “When we speak of the human animal’s *spontaneous* [emphasis added] interchange with the animate landscape, we acknowledge a felt relation to the mysterious that was active long before any formal or priestly religions” (p. 277). These interchanges often remind us of the Ground, but also privileges us with felt-sense experiences of its mystery.

### **Liminality is the space in-between**

As we have considered, encounters with nature often contain experiences of liminality. The space in-between or the liminal space (from the Latin meaning *threshold*) is one of the most important areas of experience in encounters with nature, as it brings new bodily felt meaning, as well as opportunity for the ego to align more fully with the Ground (Washburn, 1995, p. 223) or Mystery, as inferred, for instance, by Mary Oliver’s “grappling with a luminous doom”. An often familiar experience of liminality is in the dreaming process, though active imagination is also an activity of the *threshold*. We awake from the dream with a “taste” of the dream, or emerge from the active imagination as if from another reality, sometimes with a sense of having encountered the *numinous*, mystery or sacred. My suggestion is that encounters with nature are also activities of the *threshold*, in the sense that we turn our attention towards Mystery through the privilege of experiencing other, and that this is a sacred activity.

Moreover, Washburn (2003) suggests that “During initial awakening [that is, self-realisation] the ego is a liminal ego that, caught between mundane and supernatural worlds, is unable to return to its old worldly self”, but is no longer restricted in this way “Once regeneration in the Spirit” or rebirth of the ego

begins (p. 118; cf. Jung, 2009). For Washburn this rebirth is a new alignment with the Ground. The individual on the journey towards becoming is increasingly defined by the Ground itself, and must be prepared to pass through liminal space in the spiral process of becoming. Whereas Washburn appears to attribute liminality to an inner threshold between conscious and unconscious parts of the psyche, my suggestion, as we have seen in Figure 2, is that liminality can be also experienced as an outer phenomenon in relation to nature, or it might appear to move from inner to outer, or outer to inner, or be both inner and outer at the same time (cf. my thoughts on *soul*). This dynamic might be poetically thought of as our dance with Mystery.

### Projection and the numinous ground of being

At the beginning of this paper I suggested that the nature setting (Figure 2), as well as being a community of beings in the process of self-realisation (e.g., Mathews, Naess), is also both a *projective field* and a *field of numinous potentials*. This means that the nature container which supports our unfolding, self-realisation, self-expansion, becoming, or transformation, is able to receive our projections (*the projective field*), and appear to offer the individual phenomena (*field of numinous potentials*) which might hold unique meaning for the person. Specifically, my use of the term *numinous potentials* refers to the idea that through encounters with nature, a co-creative experience of the numinous can bring about a transformation of self. Moreover, numinosity is the felt-sense experience of finding oneself in the space in-between. Taking time to consider these two themes more closely, beginning with the more familiar concept of projection, we know that the content of a projection requires a receiver who is in some way susceptible to accepting the projection. Similarly, nature accepts our projections. Jung wrote that “we need to project ourselves into the things around us. My self is not confined to my body. It extends into all the things I have made and all the things around me” (as cited in Sabini, 2002, p. 155). The *projective field* is everything around me, which includes creative explorations of all kinds, for instance, the ceremonies and rituals referred to earlier. We also project our highest as well as our darkest thoughts into nature (cf. Terhaar, 2009). These projections afford us the possibility of seeing ourselves in that moment. Abram (2010) offers a contraposition to this view, however, when he wonders whether we actually do project “mood” onto our surroundings when he writes:

Well, no, not if our manner of understanding and conceptualising our various ‘interior’ moods was originally borrowed from the moody, capricious earth itself. Not, that is, if our image of anger, and livid rage, has been borrowed, at least in part, from our ancestral, animal experience of thunderstorms, and the violence of sudden lightening. Not if our sense of emotional release has been fed not only by the flow of tears but also by our experience of rainfall, and if our concept of mental clarity is nourished by the visual transparence of the air and the open blue sky (p. 153).

This is a beautiful illustration of our profound participatory inheritance. It is as if *Homo sapiens* is only able to project onto nature because we first “borrowed” the qualities of our projections from nature. Perhaps it makes sense to hold these different perspectives together.

*Homo sapiens* is one of millions of self-realising beings within a creative self-realising universe, the ground of which is Mystery. Poetic imagination alone is able to take the creative leap of considering that everything originates in nature, and that our projections are ways of re-connecting, seeking at-onement, or even giving back something which was first given to us. Abram continues to write that:

In truth, it’s likely that our solitary sense of inwardness (our experience of an interior mindscape to which we alone have access) is born of the forgetting, or sublimation, of a much more ancient interiority that was once our common birthright – the ancestral sense of the surrounding earthly cosmos as the voluminous *inside* of an immense Body, or Tent, or Temple (p. 154).

We are in Nature and Nature is in us. It is often considered that consciousness or self-awareness separates *Homo sapiens* from its origins in Mystery (e.g., Jung; Washburn), and that this initial separateness is perpetuated by believing that we are separate; this is a form of contracting (cf. Figure 3) a consequence of which is that we become estranged from our source of origin in Mystery.

Encounters with nature offer a way of re-remembering, that is, bringing together that which was separate. For in the projection is the potential for re-remembrance of something that is in two places at the same time; *over there* as well as *here*, or *outside* as well as *inside*. Perhaps this re-remembrance is felt as a longing in *Homo sapiens*, a longing to return to our source of origin in Nature or Mystery. Also, perhaps the bird projects onto me something other than fear or threat. Perhaps, too, the forest reveals to me something of its feeling quality while also being receptive to mine. But this demands more than merely thinking about. It demands curiosity, empathy, and an imagination which reaches deep into our tacit knowing of this intrinsic connection. Moreover, perhaps our bodily felt-sense experience of beauty in nature is an encounter with that which is longed for. These experiences might be *soul* experiences as it is often through beauty that the numinous makes itself present.

Turning our attention now to consider nature as a *field of numinous potentials*, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that these *potentials* are projections of an extraordinary variety, and that, like “big” dreams, have a transformative capacity. It is also likely that at the same time these *potentials* are something of Mystery presencing itself to us, or perhaps even projecting itself onto *us*. We might receive these potentials as *gifts* of insight, awareness, and expansions of consciousness. These *gifts* might be moments of self-realisation, of meaningful encounters with other species. These *gifts* might be breakthroughs of intuition, or outpourings of creativity. The *gift* might also be tears for the suffering earth. We might come to recognise that these *potentials*, this presencing, as something embedded deep within ourselves, as well as simultaneously extending limitlessly beyond ourselves, and come to know that it is the embedded something which makes participatory encounters with the Ground possible.

Following Rudolf Otto (1968), the numinous is a mysterious, frightening, fascinating or awesome presence; *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Continuing our earlier theme of the different thresholds of liminality (Figure 2), the numinous is either *subjectively* and/or *objectively* and/or, following Ferrer (2002), *participatively* known, or *inner*, *outer*, and *together*. The new paradigm in transpersonal psychology (e.g., Ferrer) is to think in terms of participation (together/co-creatively/between) rather than dualistically (inner or outer). This participatory understanding of encounters with Mystery through nature draws the individual away from a narcissistically perceived ownership of this experience as something happening *to me* or only *within me*, or of perceiving Mystery as something coming *to me from outside*. Perhaps it is all of these things at different times. But, following Ferrer (2002), I prefer to adopt a participative understanding of numinous experiences so that the transformative experience of encountering the light coming like fingers through the trees is, in that moment, co-created by both person and setting.

There is something about the numinous which appears to magnetically attract the person. Washburn (2003) brings an interesting perspective to assist with our understanding of this phenomenon. He asserts that the “power of the Ground as numinous Spirit initiates a profound transformation”, or breakthrough, which penetrates or engulfs (p. 249) the ego to its foundations (p. 113). The individual is drawn to the attracting energy of the Ground (p. 80) by “*numinous attractors*” [emphasis added] (p. 190), for instance, a bird, a stone, the quality of light, or atmosphere of place, which, according to Plotkin (2008) become signposts on the soul path (p. 339). Murray Stein goes further to write that numinous experience offers a “hint” of awareness “that human life has a link to transcendence and that the individual is a ‘soul’ with potential to come into relation with the spiritual in a wholly natural way” (as cited in Casement & Tacey, 2006, p. 49). This “link” is that *Homo sapiens* consist of *something of* the Ground, but is *not* the Ground. Throughout the ages the wisdom teaching is that to identify too closely with the Ground is dangerous, because over-identification encourages narcissism. The irony here is that

narcissism is *also* a great separator from Nature because of the narcissistic tendency to *appropriate* experiences of encounter with Mystery as self-generated. While it is not within the scope of this present paper to explore this further, it is worth acknowledging that embodying the values of humility and compassion help to minimise this tendency. Abram (2010) appears to support our discussion up to this point by asserting that “This instinctive rapport with an enigmatic cosmos at once both nourishing and dangerous lies at the ancient heart of all that we have come to call ‘the sacred’” (p. 277).

### The ascending and descending self

The experience of self as *expanding* and *contracting* (Figure 1) sits alongside the dynamic of *ascending* and *descending*. This brings our theme of numinosity into sharper focus. Washburn (2003) develops this ascending-descending dynamic by offering a complementary pair of archetypal metaphors. These are the “lighted clearing” and “the shrouded forest” (pp. 188-189); both of which contain aspects of unfathomable numinous Mystery referred to earlier (Alighieri, 1995; Otto, 1968). Washburn reminds us that “the shrouded forest” is where the person encounters the inescapable “negative numinous energy” (p. 189). This is perhaps a reminder, following Meister Eckhart, that the ground of Mystery is dark (McGinn, 2001, p. 59). Also, Terhaar’s (2009) investigation into intense spiritual experience in nature draws attention to two variations of experience as either “a felt sense of benevolent presence in nature” or that “the felt presence is malevolent” (p. 311). Moreover, Robert Ryan (2002) reminds us that for Jung, images of descent also include “entry into the earth, a cave or tunnel or by water – especially large bodies of water – or immersion in water or in a well” (p. 142). Again, mythologies throughout the ages tell of the adventures of the perilous journeys of descent (e.g., Virgil, Orpheus, Psyche); whereas the “lighted clearing” represents “the positive, light side of numinous energy [which] breaks through and becomes manifest” (Washburn, 2003, p. 189). As we know, mythologies also tell of the experiences of ascendance (e.g., Christ, Elijah). These two metaphors are further reminders of the qualities in Rudolf Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Moreover, Washburn (2003, p. 55) points out that “There is no way to ascend to higher spiritual realms without first descending into the depths” (p. 55), which affirms Jung’s statement that the “Psychic depths are nature, and nature is creative life” (as cited in Sabini, 2008, p. 208; cf. Jung, 2009). Yet, we might also say that psychic heights are also Nature.

Furthermore, the participatory encounter of Mystery in the “depths” is also complemented by encounter with the “peak”. Maslow (1971) termed “peak experience” as the, often life transforming, core religious or mystic experience which is a “poignantly emotional, climactic, autonomic response to the miraculous, the awesome, the sacralised”, (p. 348) and the beautiful (p. 166). Interestingly, John Davis (2004) points out that psychological research supports the view that “nature is a trigger for peak experiences” (p.6). And to continue our theme from earlier, these experiences are also unitive (Maslow, 1971, p. 348) or non-dualist (e.g., Plotkin, 2008; Washburn, 2003), though this comes with the challenge of retaining some separateness from the experience by not over-identifying with it as we have already seen. This challenge involves finding ways of benefitting from the formation of “an expanded, more gracious, more spacious sense of self” (Davis, 1998, p. 75), while at the same time retaining a sense of humility. As we know the word *humility* comes from the Latin “humus”, meaning the earth or ground. So humility means to be close to the literal earth. Finally, a contrast to “peak experiences” are “plateau experiences”, which Maslow (1971) considered as more serene or tranquil (p. 348), therefore more grounded or earthed.

### Conclusions

This paper has offered some preliminary thoughts on a meaning-making framework for participatory encounters with nature which potentially facilitates an expansion of experience through the widening of consciousness and supports the processes of self-realisation. I have suggested that this

necessitates a temporary and partial identification with other as a way of knowing. I have also suggested that knowing is kinship-seeking rather than appropriation. My thoughts are that both cartographies, and the figure of eight, offer useful ways of construing self-expansion, and that Figure 2 in particular offers a way of talking about, and holding together, a range of experiences and processes (e.g., expanding, contracting, ascending, descending, liminality, numinosity, participation mystique) linked to psycho-spiritual unfolding through encounters with nature. It was also important to present self-expansion and self-realisation alongside the self-realisation of nature as a whole, to help convey a sense of *Homo sapiens* as living horizontally alongside other species and living systems. At the same time the use of the species name *Homo sapiens* was a deliberate way of inviting the reader to think in terms of *Homo sapiens* as one of many self-realising life forms, also grounded in Mystery. While it has not been possible to offer full accounts of the processes and experiences referred to, I hope that I have been able to engage the reader with the ideas presented.

It is my view that further thinking about participatory encounters with nature as a psycho-spiritual path is of value, and that the development of meaning-making frameworks as ways of mapping the territory, but not defining the country, may help deepen understanding of this path. Further thought might also be given to considering the dynamics of participatory encounters with Mystery in a nature setting. In fact, I am currently conducting a pilot study into the psychological effects of self-evaluated transformation through purposive encounters with nature. Other areas for investigation might include qualitative explorations into the experiences of liminality and numinosity. Moreover, Brymer's et al. (2010) proposal of further research into the specific correlations of aspects of nature with different types of positive influence experience (p. 24) might reveal some interesting findings. Also, following Santastefano's (2008) suggestion that further investigation into the possible impact of early relational trauma on experiences in nature could be a valuable area of study, particularly within the context of the growth in ecotherapy (e.g., Totton, 2011) and ecopsychology (e.g., Scull, 2009). Additionally, my suggestion is that the areas highlighted as being outside the scope of this paper, for instance the figure of eight dynamic, and the importance of the development of values such as humility and compassion to help minimise potential narcissism, are perhaps worth considering more fully, and that each of the themes developed in this paper would benefit from lengthier explorations. Finally, it is perhaps important to note that it has become evident during the writing of this paper that the content is the outline for a larger project.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you goes to two anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Transpersonal Research* for their invaluable evaluation of an earlier draft of this paper.

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**\*Michael Wilson** is a UKCP registered psychotherapist and accredited registered member of the UK Association for Humanistic Psychology Practitioners, psychospiritual practitioner, transpersonal psychologist, and ecophilosopher, practising both in Berwick-upon-Tweed and Edinburgh.  
Website: [www.michaelwilson.uk.com](http://www.michaelwilson.uk.com) Email: [mail@michaelwilson.uk.com](mailto:mail@michaelwilson.uk.com)