Why Are You Here? The Quest Towards Purpose, Vocation, and Right Livelihood

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ABSTRACT

The yearning for a life of meaning and purpose has been on the rise for over a decade (Abdullah, 1999; Albion, 2000; Burgess, 2006; Kang, 2006; Kessler, 2000; Levoy, 1997). Many in the western world (though not only in the West) have been aborting the traditional belief in workplace loyalty and life-long job security, and have been shifting their professional lives towards their passions, meaning, yearning to make a difference, and leaving a legacy behind. “Why am I here?” seems to be the inquiry driving these trends, and the deeper, metaphysical implications of this seemingly straight-forward question are profound, for they refer to our desire to make our life matter, be greater than our personal and individual scope, and make it rich in meaning (Jensen, 2008; Muller, 1997; Palmer, 2004; Whyte, 2002). Such meaning, vocation, or right livelihood in one’s life is specific and unique for each individual according to Victor Frankl (2006). It hints at the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualization (Maslow, 2009), which is the ultimate destination of a journey one embarks on. One needs to know what one desires in life, how one is made, and how one belongs with the rest of the world (Whyte, 2002, p. 11), in order to reach that highest level of self-actualization. This research project explores the outcomes of a guided inquiry into one’s right livelihood, blending individual and group processes with direct experiences in Nature from the wisdom of Applied Eco-Psychology through a proprietary Why Me?© framework.

Keywords: Applied ecopsychology, organic psychology, life purpose, right livelihood

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My parents have instilled in me the love of books and for learning from a very young age. Despite my best resistance to parental advice, it has proven invaluable and I thank you deeply for being persistent with me.

Guardian angels come in different forms and my students, clients, and friends at home and abroad certainly qualify for the highest possible order. Within the journey of this project, a few stand out.

Jill Bamburg. We met when I heard your talk about Bainbridge Graduate Institute, in 2005. After a series of emails, you ended up inviting me to the program and the community, which has been an incredible blessing for all the years since—both personally and professionally. It also played a core role in this project, and I am eternally grateful for your invite.

Brent Cochran. My deepest and eternal gratitude for that short and casual 15-minute conversation, in June of 2011, that birthed this project and gave it a tangible form. If there ever were an example to the fact that dreams and visions can happen easily and effortlessly, when the time is right, this would be it.

Megan Herscher and Andrew Bernhardt for offering two wonderful retreat locations, to conduct the first two Right Livelihood Quests and help launch this work.

Alison van Buuren. I met you the same summer this research project was born, and the parallels between you and the Right Livelihood Quest in my life are becoming more visible as we continue walking alongside each other. The rich, humbling, and juicy blend of learning, growth, and humility is one that I cherish deeply, and know it will continue for a very long time—and I am looking forward to growing further with you both in my life.

A special mention goes to my puppy dog Tobi, my personal Guru, teacher, companion,

guardian, and playmate. You kept me sane and centred with your wagging tail, deep presence, and playful personality. You knew when to ask me to be with you, listen, get present, go for a walk, have a cuddle, or play during all the times I have been focused on work and this research project. By doing so, you provided me with the opportunity to take much-needed breaks, stretch, breathe deep, and allow my creativity to re-emerge while being away from the books, the data, and the computer. Even more so, among many other gifts, you kept me connected to my heart, and continue doing so even now. This project and all the emerging learning is dedicated to you, for being by my side for all these years. While you left us on August 1 of 2017, your spirit will continue to be with me until the end of time.

Learning about our humanness has been a fascinating journey, where every path and direction seems to have no end. Everything somehow relates to everything else. The more I explore and experience this web of life, the more I realize that I cannot acknowledge only some people—because it will exclude related others. Therefore, I want you to know that if you are, or have been, a part of my life for any duration, you have played a role in me being who I currently am. As such, you have participated in this research project, and I honor you for what you have contributed to me along the way.

Thank you all. I would not have made it thus far without your belief in me, support, comments, perspectives, feedback, listening, questioning, trust, and—beyond everything else—love.

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Introduction

Brief Summary of the Problem

Is that all there is to it? How much meaning is there to what I do? Is there more to life? Why am I here, really? I remember struggling with these questions during my undergraduate university degree, before I started my first job. Much like what Tolstoy, one of my favourite childhood writers, was quoted saying: "I felt that something had broken within me on which my life had always rested, and that I had nothing left to hold on to" (Tolstoy, as cited in James, 1985, p. 132). After graduating without a passion for computers but with a degree in Mathematics and Computer Sciences, I started working as a courier, zooming through the streets of Tel-Aviv on a scooter. As fate would have it, I ended up working in the computer industry for ten long years, while questions about meaning, passion, and purpose kept whispering their persistent—and often annoying—words in my ear. Eventually, these questions sent me on a turbulent, challenging, demanding, and rewarding journey that relocated me from Israel to Canada; there, from Montreal to Ottawa to, currently, Vancouver. More importantly, though, that journey took me from working with computers to working with people, conducting individual, group, and organizational learning journeys through executive coaching, facilitation, and education. This research project is, in a way, the outcome of a large and significant part of my own life. Even though this has been my journey, it is also the journey of many others who keep asking the same question, "Why am I here?" (e.g., Albion, 2000; Burgess, 2006; Capra, 1989; Kushner, 2002; Levoy, 1997; Palmer, 2004; Wilber, 2001)

One of the defining moments of my journey happened in the fall of 2002. At that time, I was facing another transition in life, inquiring into what's next, and felt a call to explore Patagonia. Thus, I ended up cycling and backpacking solo through Chile and Argentina for nine

long weeks. It was my own quest, an opportunity to take myself away from the regular daily life, and listen to the whispers of the Universe in a different and foreign context. That particular defining moment happened during a five-day hike in the untamed ruggedness of Torres del Paines National Park in Southern Chile. Hiking through the wilderness, surrounded by a majestic and timeless silence (see Figure 1), I felt and heard the whispers of the mountains and the wind, "Yes, it is dark and foreign and unknown. Life often is like that. Yet, there is a path. Follow." Following that voice led me to, among many other areas, the study of Applied Eco-Psychology and this research project.

***Figure 1*. Torres del Paines National Park, Chile**

Frankl wrote about life being a quest for meaning, rather than pleasure or power (Frankl, 2006, p. x). He quotes Nietzsche, saying that "He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How" (p. ix). This is something that I can relate to, when I think about my years of yearning for that elusive something I knew and sensed, yet could not articulate, envision, or grasp.

There is a growing number of courses, programs, and workshops that aim at helping

people find their life purpose, vocation, "true north," meaning, full self-expression (you name it) and then reorient their lives around it. Many people achieve transformational results by participating in these programs. Yet, both research and experiences point to the fact that many more others remain unfulfilled and lost, still searching for a way to make a meaning and lasting contribution (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Kosine, Steger, & Duncan, 2008; Leider, 1997; Miller & Rottinghaus, 2014). This trend and the craving for a life of purpose is growing, as evidenced by the following examples:

- A study conducted by Net Impact (2012), for example, showed that 72% of college students and 59% of employed adults classified meaningful work (defined as that which makes a difference or has positive social impact) as one of their most important goals in life. It is important to notice that meaningful work ranked above children, a prestigious career, wealth, and leadership in importance, and only below financial security and marriage (Net Impact, 2012).
- Similarly, a study commissioned by the Career Advisory Board revealed that 30% of adults (aged 21-31) identified meaningful work as *the* most important indicator of a successful career; 71% rated it among the top three (Levit & Licina, 2011).
- Scholars and authors have argued for re-establishing the value of calling and vocation as pathways for meaningful life and work (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1986; Brennfleck & Brennfleck, 2005; Colozzi & Colozzi, 2000; Guinness, 1998; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Hardy, 1990; Schuurman, 2004; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).
- Through the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NETVUE), operating under the umbrella of The Council of Independent Colleges (n.d.), between

1999 and 2002, 88 colleges and universities were awarded $171.3 million through Lilly Endowment grants to promote "the theological exploration of vocation."

The problem this project addresses is that when one's belonging in and with the rest of the world, with beings of both human and non-human kind (Abram, 1996; Jensen, 1995, 2000), is not fully understood and experienced in a comprehensive and holistic manner, the results of the inquiry into one's life purpose will be incomplete at best (Watts, 2003; Watts, Snelling, & Watts, 1990). Many of the current courses and programs do not really address the role nature might play, whether we look through the ancient lens (Suzuki & Knudtson, 1992, p. 5) or through the lens of Eco-Psychology (Berry, 1991; Capra, 1996; Cohen, 2003, 2008; Plotkin, 2010; De Quincey, 2005, 2010; Winter, 1996). Yet, if we are to explore such a topic as one's life purpose, an area that clearly has a scope beyond the individual (Albion, 2000; Burgess, 2006; Kushner, 2002; Palmer, 1999), we might need to widen our scope of inquiry by directly addressing the fact that we are an inherent part of our interconnected universe (Cohen, 1997, 2003; Harkness, 2005; Kumar, 2002; Plotkin, 2003; Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007). After all, we do not exist in isolation from each other, our communities, or our environment (Capra, 1996; Schlitz et al., 2007; Winter, 1996), and many of our choices carry consequences that will inevitably impact the world around us (Hathaway & Boff, 2009; Jensen, 2000; Macy, 2007; Wilber, 1996). When we do not look at such an inquiry through the widest lens possible, it limits the impact of such programs, which O'Murchu describes as follows:

> We belong to a greater whole from which we receive our very being and without which we have neither meaning, purpose, nor uniqueness in the great cosmic drama. We discover our true uniqueness not in isolation, competitive individualism, but in convivial cooperation with the great evolutionary unfolding of our planet and our universe. (1999,

p. 60)

Working Hypothesis

Using a holistic lens of inquiry into one's life of meaning and purpose, the research direction emerged with the following hypothesis:

Integrating the principles and practices of Applied Eco-Psychology will enable me to guide a group of individuals to do the same in an inquiry process that helps them gain clarity on their right livelihood.

The inquiry into this hypothesis will be explored in detail in the literature review section, review of the Why Me?© framework, through the findings of this study, and in the course of my evolving learning and reflection throughout this action research project.

Purpose of the Exploratory Aspect of this Project

To explore the impact of a four-week guided research process (named "Right Livelihood Quest"), combining individual and group learning inquiry (through the proprietary Why Me?© framework), with outdoor experiences of Natural Systems Thinking Process (NSTP) and Applied Eco-Psychology, with two different groups of participants. Their evolving sense of right livelihood in their personal and professional lives was examined.

Brief Summary of the Project Procedures

This project focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on past and present students of Bainbridge Graduate Institute (BGI)[1]. BGI teaches a unique and integrated graduate degree

[1] In the summer of 2015, BGI was renamed/rebranded as Pinchot University (see for more www.pinchot.edu). In 2017, Pinchot University was acquired by Presidio Graduate School (see for more www.presidio.edu), however for this research paper, I chose to keep the original name of the school.

program, an MBA in Sustainable Business, and the majority of students coming to BGI are looking at drastically shifting their professional lives towards work in the field of sustainability, being change agents and engaging in meaningful work that makes a difference in the world. However, many, if not most, do not have a clear sense of what their new professional direction is going to be when they graduate. Additionally, a few students invited their spouses—who were also interested in exploring their right livelihood— to participate in the project[2]. There was a balance of genders (almost equal numbers), current (about 70%) and past students, including some non-BGI participants (about 30%), in a mix of currently employed (about half), unemployed (about 20%), and under-employed participants. Because of scheduling and location limitations, there were two separate groups of participants who went through the same process, within a week difference. The first group had nine participants, the second 19.

The project itself consisted of four phases. There was a pre-reading phase, in which participants read a recommended book (Levoy, 1998) at their own pace. The next/second phase lasted three and a half weeks, and was done individually and remotely by each participant. On Monday morning of each week, an email was sent outlining the weekly tasks, readings, reflections, and an activity in nature (inviting the participants to do this activity once or several times during the week). Additionally, there was a private online dialogue area for participants to connect with each other and share experiences, insights, and questions.

The third part concluded the four-week process in the form of a three-and-a-half-day residential retreat. The retreat included the experiences and insights from the first and second phases, and integrated them via the proprietary Why Me?© framework into a cohesive, engaging, and evoking inquiry. This framework examines one's life purpose in the world through three

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[2] Hereafter, "right livelihood" remains a term, whereas Right Livelihood Quest (capitalized) is the brand name for the overall process and this research project.

different dimensions, which converge and intersect at a crucial central point, leading the inquirer to a deeper clarity and understanding of their life path and purpose. In the final phase of the research project I interviewed the participants. Eight participants from the first group and 19 from the second made themselves available and were interviewed. The interview transcripts became the data for this research project.

While the literature review provides the theoretical backdrop to understanding the notion of interconnectedness and belonging, the interactions with other participants in pairs and small groups, as well as practices of Natural Systems Thinking Process activities grounded and solidified this research. These practices were borrowed from the variety of NSTP activities either as-is, or customized and modified to fit the specific inquiry process of the Why Me?© framework. Participants experientially connected with the natural world, making their personal understanding of interconnectedness and belonging tangible and applied. The guided inquiry through the Why Me?© framework provided the participants with a completely unique, new, and in many cases, transformational understanding of their life's path and trajectory. Thus, by engaging with this research project, participants gained clarity and understanding of their life path, vocation, and right livelihood.

The overarching method for this project was action research, which can be described as "a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time" (Dick, 1999). It is a spiral, iterative, and emergent process, alternating between action, critical reflection, and continuous refinement of the research process itself in the light of the ongoing understanding of the research topic.

Additionally, through "involving people [who might be affected by the change] in the planning and the action and by being flexible and responsive to situation and people" (Dick,

2002) it becomes participatory action research. As Stringer (1999) describes, the research becomes "a social process in which people reconstruct their lives together through continuing cycles of exchange, negotiation, realignment, and repair" (p. 44). As such, the action research process of ongoing exploration and refinement fits the nature of life itself, given that "life is an experiment to discover what's possible" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1999, p. 11).

Once the four-week research completed, each participant was interviewed individually and the interview recorded. The data was analyzed, using a qualitative approach, whereby each interview was carefully reviewed and mind mapped. The mind map was expanded with each subsequent interview, thus surfacing emerging key themes, patterns, insights, and impacts of the study.

Definition of Terms and Clarification of Concepts

Right livelihood.

The concept of "right livelihood" originally comes from Buddhism—it is one of the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path, and refers to work that is compatible with one's continual spiritual development (Bodhi, 2000). Prior to this research project, I was a faculty member teaching a course called, "Creativity and Right Livelihood" at BGI. When the curriculum at BGI changed, the course disappeared. When the research project started, the participants kept using the Right Livelihood name. I decided to keep the name, primarily because it is fitting to the research and the inquiry process, and also in honor of participants' journey towards a life of making a lasting difference, which brought them to BGI in the first place.

Life purpose.

The phrase "life purpose" is used as synonymous with "right livelihood" for this research,

yet is used in various other ways in related work and literature. It refers to a life lived towards a greater purpose, beyond our individual scope and focus (Albion, 2000; Burgess, 2006; Leider, 1997; Levoy, 1997; Muller, 1997; Palmer, 1999). In some cases, it can be about one's job or career as there is an increasing number of people who express their deepest passions and meaning through their jobs (Harkness, 2005). However, it is most commonly about a lot more than just work—"many people may be married to work, but their real desire is to have an affair of the soul" (Secretan, 1997). The concept of life purpose is summarized eloquently by Kushner (2002):

> Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power. Those rewards create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through it. (p. 18)

The description of *purpose*, *life purpose*, or *right livelihood*, that I will adopt here for the research, has to do with the ways in which an individual realizes her or his gifts, skills, talents, and potential to uniquely impact the world, in a scope that is larger than the individual's personal benefits, gains, and existence. The literature review section will elaborate on this brief description.

Holistic worldview.

It is important to bring this concept forward, as it serves as a prerequisite, of sorts, to the notion of Social Learning, where people learn by observing others (Bandura, 1977). And not simply observing—social learning is one way in which people learn from others in social contexts and also simultaneously change their environment, and, often, worldview, in a two-way process (Blackmore, 2010; Wals, 2007). For such learning to occur, we need to be in the

presence of others and be connected to them in some form. Capra states that “the more we study the major problems of our time, the more we come to realize that they cannot be understood in isolation. They are systemic problems, which means that they are interconnected and interdependent” (1996, p. 3). The discoveries in quantum physics, Eco-Psychology, evolutionary biology, complexity, and chaos theory have brought profound change in our worldview; from the mechanistic worldview of Descartes and Newton to a holistic, ecological view of the world (Briggs & Peat, 1999; Capra, 1989; De Quincey, 2005; O'Murchu, 1999; Zukav, 2001). It is worth noting that while we do have a modern language to describe this concept, holistic worldview is not a new concept. For instance, Ubuntu is a social philosophy that originated in South Africa and premised on the belief that all things and people are interconnected and bound together. For many in South Africa, Ubuntu defines the meaning of being human. Ubuntu means honoring the dignity of each person, valuing the good of the community above self-interest, and striving to help the people in the spirit of service while developing affirming and enhancing relationships with everything around us, people and planet alike (Lessem & Nussbaum, 1996; Nussbaum, 2003a, 2003b; Van Der Colff, 2002). Ubuntu can be summed up as “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Nussbaum, 2003a, p. 3).

There are similar concepts in the Eastern hemisphere and ancient wisdom. Indra’s Net, an ancient Hindu myth illustrating the unitive principle of the world, talks about the god Indra who once wove a net to encompass the world, fastening a knot on each bell. Thus nothing could stir—not a person, not a leaf on a tree, not a single emotion—without ringing a bell, which would, in turn, set all the others to ringing (Levoy, 1997). Similarly, Taoists come from an old tradition with roots stretching back to the twilight days of tribal sorcerers, adept at working with nature (De Quincey, 2005). One of their most common foundational principles, Yin and Yang,

refers to the fundamental relatedness and connectedness of opposite forces (Ferrini, 1999; Reid, 1989; Stevenson, 2000). The premise of a holistic worldview is that everything is related, connected, and mutually dependent, whereby "we all contribute to the dynamics of a vast web of interdependent and interconnected nested systems; so although we are creators, we are also participants" (De Quincey, 2005, p. 53). According to this worldview, our many systems are not merely related in some passive manner; we are talking about a dynamic and interconnected system where everything impacts and is impacted by, everything else (Harkness, 2005). As Hippocrates said, "There is one common flow, one common breathing. All things are in sympathy" (as cited in Levoy, 1997, p. 114). Any living system, then, is based on connectedness, which is

> the defining feature of the new worldview—connectedness as an organizing principle of the universe, connectedness between the "outer world" of manifest phenomena and the "inner world" of lived experience, and, ultimately, connectedness among people and between humans and the larger world. (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004, p. 194)

Eco-Psychology.

Eco-Psychology, or Ecopsychology, is the study of the relationship between human beings and the natural world through ecological and psychological principles (Cohen, 2003; ICE, N/D; Plotkin, 2003; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995; Winter, 1996). Roszak (1992) formulated this term with the purpose of bridging our culture's longstanding, historical gulf between the psychological and the ecological. Eco-Psychology suggests that there is a synergistic relation between planetary and personal well-being and that the needs of the one are relevant to the other (ICE, N/D; Roszak et al., 1995). At times, associated and related terms have been suggested and

used: psychoecology, ecotherapy, global therapy, green therapy, earth-centered therapy, nature-based psychotherapy, or shamanic counseling (Roszak et al., 1995; Winter, 1996). The underlying assumption is the same: "ecology needs psychology, psychology needs ecology" (Roszak et al., 1995, p. 5). Even though Eco-Psychology is considered a "new" science, once upon a time all psychology was ecopsychology as the ancient healers of the world (the ones our society used to call "witch doctors") knew no other ways to heal other than to work within the context of the reciprocity of their natural environment (Abram, 1996; Brody, 2000; Davis, 1996, 2001; Roszak et al., 1995). Thus, both in the area of Eco-Psychology, as well as in the concept of a holistic worldview, modern theories and ancient ones are really two sides of the same coin. Additionally, the experiential aspect of Eco-Psychology is also paramount to this research, as posited by Winter (1996):

> Direct experience in nature is usually required for these deeper kinds of spiritual understandings [whereby both gestalt and transpersonal psychology tells us that our ordinary experiences of ourselves as separate autonomous beings is incomplete and inaccurate]. We usually cannot feel the full depth of our ecological being from information on paper. (p. 264)

Natural Systems Thinking Process.

Natural Systems Thinking Process (NSTP) is described as an easily learned, scientific means to consciously gain wholeness through tangible sensory contact with natural areas and people's inner nature (Cohen, 1997, 2003). The process was developed by Cohen (1993, 1997, 2003), a pioneer in the field of nature-connected learning and psychology, in the early 1970s. It has been documented extensively (Cohen, 1993, 1997, 2003), and taught to thousands of individuals worldwide through the variety of educational programs of The Institute of Global

Education. The process is intended to enable individuals to "create thoughtful moments in natural areas that let nature itself teach them [people] what they need to know in order to restore into their consciousness the wisdom and integrity of their natural intelligence" (Cohen, 2003, p. 10). This process will be further elaborated upon in Chapter 2.

Overview of the Conceptual Why Me?© Framework

The Why Me?© framework has been birthing itself through me (it would be presumptuous of me to assume I have "designed" or "developed" it) since the year 2000, as I was inquiring into my vocation and purpose, while also helping many of my clients and students find theirs. The framework is now officially "seeing the light" through this research project.

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***Figure 2*: The Why Me?© Framework**

The Why Me?© Framework guides participants through three dimensions of inquiry—**[COPYRIGHTED INFORMATION REMOVED]**. Eventually, the central point, where the dimensions intersect, is where one's right livelihood emerges.

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Two important concepts are at the core of the framework. The first is the difference between *essence* and *forms*. Within the context of inquiries into life purpose, meaning, or vocation, there is a lot of focus on specific careers (Albion, 2000; Harkness, 2005; Kang, 2006; Leider, 1997; Levoy, 1997). For instance, one can take the Strong Interest Inventory® (Psychometrics, 2015) and be categorized into several possible careers, based on themes, skills, and abilities. In the language of this framework, these are all *forms*—they are impermanent. People change as they progress through life, environments change, circumstances change, and

life itself constantly changes and evolves (Capra, 1996; Maturana & Varela, 1987; O'Murchu, 1999; Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007; Wheatley, 1999; Wilber, 2001). This framework, as well as the overall inquiry of the research, focuses on the *essence* of her or his right livelihood, which is one's soul calling (Levoy, 1997; Plotkin, 2003; Schlitz et al., 2007). While the *essence* is perhaps less tangible and concrete to articulate clearly, it does not change throughout one's life. *Forms* are merely tangible expressions of the *essence* of her or his right livelihood; such vocations/careers/jobs/projects come and go, as the individual progresses through life "not in clear-cut, predictable steps, but in spurts, pauses, and leaps" (Harkness, 2005, p. 72). Thus, a *form* is an embodiment of the *essence* and its delivery mechanism into the world at a particular timing (Plotkin, 2003, p. 305). When one has uncovered the *essence* of her or his right livelihood, and then connected to a *form* that expresses it through her or his career or vocation, one engages with it fully. This engagement takes place while knowing that when the current *form* comes to an end, it simply means that a new *form* is just around the corner. It does not mean she or he is "back to square one." The *essence* will find a new way of expressing itself, because an awakened soul will not go back to sleep, and will keep listening to the

> world [that] never stops calling, never stops acting as though it belongs to us, and its pain is always gathering force like storms offshore. It sends out flares the way we send signals into space, always hoping that someone will come across them, will understand what they mean, will trace the calls. (Levoy, 1997, p. 106)

The second important principle is the type of the question that guides the inquiry of the Right Livelihood Quest. Very common questions most individuals ask are, "What am I to do with my life?" or "What is my life purpose?" (Harkness, 2005; Kang, 2006; Thomson, 2001). Such questions, while valuable to an extent, do come from a place of will or wilfulness, of being

proactive about life, which is a common characteristic of action-driven and action-oriented cultural norms and perspectives (Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002; Storti, 1994). Here, the framework and the research process approach the inquiry into her or his right livelihood from a place of being open and listening, asking the question: "What has my life been preparing me for?" Similar to Palmer's words, "Today I understand vocation quite differently—not as a goal to be achieved, but as a gift to be received" (1999, p. 10).

The key principle of the Why Me?© framework is that the primary focus is on the Need of the World. It is very different from many other approaches that focus on our personal healing first (Bennett-Goleman, 2002; Greenspan, 2014; Lesser, 2005; Watts, 1989; Winter, 1996). We look outside of ourselves, focusing our attention and intention on what the world needs, which aligns with the teachings of Muller, asking "What is my gift to the family of the earth?" (1997), or of Kushner, who writes of our yearning "to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through it" (2002, p. 18). When looking at the impact and insights of the inquiry through the lens of the Why Me?© framework, research findings show that when that happens, most participants noted that as they focused their Greatest Gift towards the Need of the World, her or his Deepest Pain has been diminishing, fading, and decreasing in potency, as if magically receiving the healing it needs.

We are all balancing on the thin edge of a life of passion and a life of comfort and convenience, a push and pull. With that, once a person sees and connects to the *essence* of their right livelihood, often it is due to the magnitude of the vision that has opened up for her or him through the process that the initial reaction will be, "Why me? Could I not have had something more comfortable and convenient instead?" This push and pull, this duality, as well as the name of the framework, is summarized eloquently by Plotkin (2003):

> Alongside our greatest longing lives an equally great terror of finding the very thing we seek. Somehow, we know that doing so will irreversibly shape up our lives, our sense of security, change our relationship to everything we hold as familiar and dear. But we also suspect that saying no to our deepest desires will mean self-imprisonment in a life too small. And a far-off voice within insists that the never-before-seen treasure is well worth any sacrifices and difficulty in recovering it. (p. 10)

Project Significance

None of the participants of this research project have participated in any of the courses of The Institute of Global Education and Project NatureConnect (both of which focus on the work of Dr. Michael Cohen and the teachings of Applied Eco-Psychology). As such, they are independent of the teachings and the philosophy of NSTP; the research interviews will uncover whether the participants have a deep and rich connection to the natural world as a result of the Right Livelihood Quest.

Additionally, this study assumes that such inquiry will create deeper understanding and meaning of one's right livelihood when done in nature, incorporating the principles of Applied Eco-Psychology and NSTP. If this is indeed true and the holistic nature of such inquiry is important, the imperative for further growth and expansion of this work will have been proven.

Lastly, what better gift—honor, really—it would be than to be of support and service for the participants uncovering their Right Livelihood, and bringing their passions and contributions into the world.

Main Objective

The main objectives of this research project are two-fold:

- To assess the impact of the research project (Right Livelihood Quest) as a possible approach to help individuals uncover their life purpose.
- To present the research project conclusions as they relate to the project purpose, identified academic areas, individual participants, the field of Applied Eco-Psychology, and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Social Learning

Social learning and its close sibling, social constructionism, were fascinating, and fascinatingly challenging areas to explore and articulate. Something innate within me knew what I wanted to articulate yet the right words to express that inner knowing were missing. It is as though anything I would say will be a simplified, inaccurate, shallow, and limited picture of what is possible when we begin to explore the full potential of language, conversation, and their impact on our lives. Nevertheless, despite it being challenging, I see this area as imperative and paramount for this research project, for here we explore how our language, and the conversations we are having with each other shape our reality, our learning process, and our worldviews. Many echo the importance and power of language. Jaworski concluded that "we do not describe the world we see, but we see the world we describe" (as cited in Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, 2008, p. 11), and Gergen proposed that "the world does not produce our concepts; rather, our concepts help us organize the world in various ways" (1999, p. 11).

A good place to start this section is with a description of what "learning" is. Human beings would not have survived for as long as we did without opening to, absorbing, assimilating, and integrating new information—learning is a basic human endeavour, one that is truly lifelong. The study of learning and what it means to know used to be a philosophical undertaking rather than the arena of psychology or education. The Western world drew from Aristotle and Plato while for much of Asia, Confucius defined the nature of learning. Aristotle believed that knowing was a sensory experience, meaning we come to know through our five senses, whereas for Plato knowing involved introspection (Olson & Hergenhahn, 2009). In the east, Confucius defined learning as a moral and ethical endeavor with the goal of becoming

"fully human" (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 25). While for centuries philosophers explored the nature of knowledge and what it meant to know, it was not until the late nineteenth century that learning was investigated "scientifically." This is when psychologists in Europe and North America began to systematically study learning by conducting laboratory experiments and observing behaviour (Ashby & Maddox, 2011; Bolles, 2013; Edwards, 1997; Gouthro, 2017; Guskey, 1987; Vandenberg, 2002; Williamson, 1998). Gagné, in his comprehensive overview of the theory and practices of adult learning, proposed a nuanced definition of learning as "a change in human disposition or capacity that persists over a period of time and is not simply ascribable to processes of growth" (Mills Gagné, as cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 25).

Merriam and Bierema identify five orientations that offer different explanations of learning, as well as applications to adult learning (2013, p. 26). These five orientations (or theories) are presented in somewhat chronological order, and are the behaviourist, humanist, cognitivist, social cognitivist, and constructivist. They are "considered traditional learning theories and are foundational to what we have come to understand about adult learning" (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 26).

Originated by Watson in the 1920s and developed into a comprehensive theory by Skinner and others, behaviorists believe that human behavior is the result of the arrangement of particular stimuli in the environment. If a behavior is reinforced or rewarded, it is likely to continue; if it is not reinforced it is likely to disappear. Thus, what one learns is a response to particular stimuli arranged in the environment to bring about learning. Further, observable behavior, not internal mental processes or emotional feelings, determines whether learning has occurred. Learning for behaviorists is defined as a change in observable behavior. Skinner (1972) in particular felt that a behavioral approach to education was crucial for the survival of

human beings and societies. Despite being an earlier theory of adult learning, this approach and its principles have permeated our lives to this day, which is evident both in language (e.g. "rewarding" a particular achievement) and in implementations of learning (e.g. learning outcomes, competency-based training and development, specific skills for specific occupations, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and other specific training programs such as "assertiveness training" or "anger management") (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, pp. 27-28).

Originally drawing from the philosophy of humanism, by the 1950s humanistic psychologists such as Maslow and Rogers had firmly established this alternative perspective on human nature and learning. Underpinning this perspective is the assumption that human beings have the potential for growth and development and that people are free to make choices and determine their behavior. The spotlight in this orientation is on the whole person including body, mind, and spirit, and the potential of humans for growth and development. The goal of learning for Maslow (Maslow, Frager, & Cox, 1970) is self-actualization, whereas for Rogers (Rogers & Allender, 1983) it is to become a fully functioning person. Rogers was a strong influence in establishing humanistic psychology as a learning theory, especially for adult educators. From his client-centred therapy approach, he is credited with establishing a "student-centred" versus teacher-centred approach to learning, whereby the teacher is a facilitator of self-directed learning rather than a dispenser of knowledge (Rogers & Allender, 1983, p. 20). Humanistic learning theory has had a profound effect on adult learning theory, with three major adult learning theories/models:

- Andragogy, whereby the adult learner becomes more independent and self-directed, is internally motivated, and can use experience as a resource for learning.

- Self-directed learning, whereby adults directing their own learning with the goal of self-development in mind.
- Transformative learning, whereby our perspective becomes more inclusive, open and permeable through transformative learning experiences.

The above three theories have roots in humanistic psychology (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 31).

Cognitivists see learning as a mental process, whereby "the human mind is not simply a passive exchange-terminal system where the stimuli arrive and the appropriate response leaves. Rather, the thinking person interprets sensations and gives meaning to the events that impinge upon his consciousness" (Grippin & Peters, 1984, p. 76). This is the research and work of Piaget, Ausubel (1967), Gagne (1985), and Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive outcomes (1956), among others. Cognitivists focus on insight (the moment when a solution to a problem becomes clear), information processing, problem solving, memory, and the brain (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 32).

Social cognitive theory draws from both behaviorism and cognitive theory, and while it is sometimes included as a subset of cognitive learning theory, Merriam and Bierema (2013) feel the need to present it as a separate dimension (p. 35). They quote Schnuk, who articulates that social cognitive learning theory highlights the idea that much of human learning occurs in a social environment, and by observing others, we acquire knowledge, rules, skills, strategies, beliefs, and attitudes. Mentoring, apprenticeship, and on-the-job training are all modern-day examples of this learning theory.

Constructivists see knowledge as "constructed by learners as they attempt to make sense of their experiences. Learners, therefore, are not empty vessels waiting to be filled, but rather

active organisms seeking meaning" (Driscoll, 2005, p. 387). Constructivists draw from some well-known theorists including Piaget, Dewey, and Vygotsky. From Piaget comes his theory of cognitive development wherein our cognitive structure changes as we mature, allowing us to construct meaning at more sophisticated levels (Wadsworth, 1996). Dewey's notion of experience is that it is a transaction that takes place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment (2007). Vygotsky (1978) drew attention to the very important role of the sociocultural context in how people construct meaning from experience, pointing out the fact that this process is a social process mediated through the symbols and language of a given culture.

Constructivism is foundational to understanding much of adult learning theory and practice. Candy (1991) observed that "teaching and learning, especially for adults, is a process of negotiation, involving the construction and exchange of personally relevant and viable meanings" (p. 275). Indeed, aspects of constructivism, especially the social construction of knowledge are central to self-directed learning, transformational learning, experiential learning, reflective practice, situated cognition, and communities of practice.

After a brief review of learning theories and approaches, let us zoom in on the "social" aspect of the learning process, which is very relevant to this research project.

Since our early ancestors gathered in circles around the warmth of a fire, conversation has been a primary process for making sense of our world, discovering what we value, sharing knowledge, and imagining our future. Both then and now, "we learn, adapt, and bring forth our worlds through the networks of conversations in which we participate" according to Maturana (as cited in Brown & Isaacs, 2001, p. 1). This implies that language is a "world-constituting" (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996, p. 364) form of action. Within the domain of social learning,

Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros posited that social learning is "a narrative creation, not an aspect of the physical world" and that it "resides in the stories of collectivity" whereby it is created and maintained by the human group (2008, p. 15). Jarvis writes that learning rarely occurs "in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives; … it is intimately related to that world and affected by it" (1987, p. 11). Consequently, conversation and discourse are seen as tools we use to learn about, envision, create, and change the world we live in, as well as our individual lives.

Social learning can be formal or informal, or both (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Within the domain of informal adult learning, they mention the model proposed by Bennett of four parts: self-directed, incidental, tacit, and integrative learning components. Integrative learning is defined as "a learning process that combines intentional non-conscious processing of tacit knowledge with conscious access to learning products and mental images" (as quoted in Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 19). Explaining how such learning might occur, Bennett explains:

> Integrative learning may be responsible for creative insight, intuitive leaps, and moments of sudden understanding. Because implicit processing deals with memory fragments, images, and sensory data, it would not occur in a linear and rational fashion . . . For example, adults who are working on a problem— that is they have identified an important learning gap they intend to fill, but have gone as far as they can with conscious thought— may find the solution when they turn their attention away from the problem so that integrative learning takes over. This might happen during sleep or exercise and activities that distract the conscious mind so that implicit processing can occur. (p. 19)

Appreciative Inquiry is a collaborative and highly participative, system-wide approach to seeking, identifying, and enhancing the "life-giving forces" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999;

Elliott, 1999) that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic, and organizational terms. Appreciative Inquiry builds on the premise that people, systems, and organizations grow and evolve in the direction of the questions being asked, using language in a very intentional and specific manner–inquiring into what gives life to a system (Bushe, 1995; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The Appreciative Inquiry methodology was also being used in this action research project. One of the key principles of Appreciative Inquiry is the heliotropic principle, whereby human systems have an observable tendency to evolve in the direction of those positive images that are the brightest and boldest, most illuminating and promising (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Simply said, we humans operate like plants—we move toward what gives us life and energy.

Social constructionism is a closely related concept to that of Appreciative Inquiry. Both explore the correlation between our reality and our use of language. Both approaches suggest that “we have considerable influence over the nature of the realities that we perceive and experience and that to a great extent we actually create our realities through shared symbolic and mental processes” (Fitzgerald, Murrell, & Miller, 2003, p. 5).

Social constructionism is grounded in post-modernist philosophy and posits that it is 'we' who give meaning to social forms. Our language and words form the foundation for social reality. While social constructionism might not have a precise definition, it does have descriptions and explanations. Hosking and Morley (2004) describe it as “a loose concatenation of theoretical frameworks that emphasize both the constructive powers of human minds and their origins in conversations, conventions, and cultural traditions” (p. 1). Gergen, who is considered a key contributor to the field, describes social constructionism as “an inquiry that is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which most people come to describe, explain, or

otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). It is called 'social constructionism' because it aims to account for the many ways in which phenomena are socially constructed—not individually, but in relationships. Not surprisingly, in many of the descriptions the relational aspect of social constructionism is highlighted, whereby language and communication require others to be around us, to be in a relationship with us. Van Der Haar (2002) quoted Campbell, Coldicott, and Kinsella, stating that "social constructionism proposes that realities are created by people communicating with each other through language" (p. 16). Later she also quotes Van Nistelrooij as describing that "social constructionism is interested in communication about and in relationships between people and the sense-making processes that are produced" (p. 16). In their review of the role of discourse in several large-scale change initiatives, Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar (1995) suggest to decentre the individual and instead "begin to view 'relating' as the place where meaning is made" (p. 353). They maintain that discourse is the core of change, since it is through discourse that we form relations, transform structure, and examine our beliefs (Barrett et al., 1995, p. 353). Further, in his richly encompassing soundings of social constructionism, Gergen (1994) paraphrases Descartes' famous "cogito ergo sum" as "communicamus ergo sum" (p. viii), and states that relationship replaces the individual as the fundamental unit of social life (p. 253). Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) conclude that

> constructionism is an approach to human science and practice which replaces the individual with the relationship as the locus of knowledge, and thus is built around a keen appreciation of the power of language and discourse of all types to create our sense of reality-our sense of the true, the good, the possible. (p. 13)

A fundamental emerging commonality in the different aspects of social constructionism is the relatedness/relationship element, as eloquently states by Gergen: “words fail to make sense until there is at least one other person to give assent to their meaningfulness. Sense-making is thus a collective manifestation, requiring the coordinated participation of two or more persons” (as cited in Van Der Haar, 2002, p. 28). According to this perspective of social relatedness, meaning, reality, and future all emerge as a result of us relating to others through discourse, communication (i.e., within this particular context when using language), inquiring, and listening intentionally.

> People communicate to interpret events and to share those with others. For this reason, it is believed that reality is constructed socially as a product of communication. Our meanings and understandings arise from our communication with others. How we understand objects and how we behave towards them depend in large measure on the social reality in force. (Littlejohn, 1992, pp. 190-191)

Confirmations of this relatedness can be found in many emerging theories of new sciences, such as self-organization, chaos, complexity, biological co-evolution, and quantum physics, to name a few. All support the view that in our quantum universe, all life operates within the context of relational interaction (O'Murchu, 1999, p. 34). All view life forces as interdependent and interrelated, as is eloquently summarized by Wilber (2001) in his exploration and comparison of eastern and western philosophies:

> Quantum theory has abolished the notion of fundamentally separated objects, has introduced the concept of the participator to replace that of the observer, and has come to see the universe as an interconnected web of relations whose parts are only defined through their connections to the whole. (p. 38)

In his conversations with many influential thinkers from a diverse variety of fields and disciplines, Capra (1989) quotes Bateson as saying that since relationships are the essence of the living world, one would do best to speak the language of relationships to describe it [the world]. Later, in his synthesis of recent scientific breakthroughs in the areas of living systems, Capra (1996) quotes Maturana and Varela as saying that "the world everyone sees is not the world but a world, which we bring forth with others" (p. 291). This circles us back to the transformative learning theory, described by Mezirow (2000) as a process by which people transform their taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective. This way people continually revise their interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world.

In a very expansive vision of transformative learning as planetary and ecological, O'Sullivan writes that "We live on a planet, not on a globe. We are one species living on a planet called Earth, and all living and vital energies come out of this organic cosmological context" (O'Sullivan, 2012, p. 169). Following it, Taylor invites us to a worldview that "recognizes the interconnectedness among universe, planet, natural environment, human community, and personal world" (Taylor, 2008, p. 9).

Where does this exploration leave us? Learning is a highly social process that requires the presence of others (this research project, and specifically the Applied Eco-Psychology component of it, will also show that not only *human others'* presence is required). It closely aligns to the words of Isaacs (1999), who holds that "learning to inquire together about what matters most is some of the most significant work I can imagine" (p. 48), as inquiring into one's right livelihood is too some of the most significant explorations to undertake in one's life.

Life Purpose and Meaning

Exploring and contemplating the topic of life of purpose and meaning can be a daunting task. Throughout history, there have been numerous approaches and explorations to it (Albion, 2000; Alexis, 2011; Cottingham, 2003; Frankl, 2006; James, 2005; Leider, 1997; Palmer, 1999), with the main perspectives being:

- The theoretical and philosophical lens of the meaning of "meaning" (what people mean when they ask by virtue of what life has meaning) (Baier, 1997; Levy, 2005; Munitz, 1990; Sartre & Elkaïm-Sartre, 2007; Seachris, 2009).
- Supernaturalism with God-centered (one's existence is more significant, the better one fulfills a purpose God has assigned) and soul-centered (meaning in life comes from relating in a certain way to an immortal, spiritual substance that supervenes on one's body when it is alive and that will forever outlive its death) views (Affolter, 2007; Audi, 2005; Cottingham, 2003, 2005; Ellin, 1995; Goetz , 2012; Jacquette, 2001; Smuts, 2011; Thomson, 2001; Tolstoy, 2012).
- Naturalism through subjectivism (varies from person to person, depending on each one's variable mental states) and objectivism (meaning is constituted, at least partially, by something physical independent of the mind about which we can have correct or incorrect beliefs) perspectives (Audi, 2005; Hooker, 2008; Levy, 2005; Mintoff, 2008; Trisel, 2012; Wolf, 2010), and nihilism (what would make a life meaningful either cannot be obtained or never does) (Benatar, 2006; Cottingham, 2003; Ellin, 1995; Smith, 2003).

Despite all such historical explorations, people are still looking for answers (Ford, 2007; Levoy, 1997; Metz, 2012), for that elusive "What is the meaning and purpose of life?" question.

This is what a positive psychologist Haidt called, "The Holy Grail" of all questions (Haidt, 2006, p. 217). He added an important distinction, whereby when people yearn to understand the meaning and purpose of life, they are actually seeking answers to either one or both very distinct questions embedded within the original one: the question of the purpose *of* life, and the question of purpose *within* life. While the former is concerned with life itself, the latter is interested in life as experienced by the individual, as a subjective point of view. Purpose within life, then, is concerned with the idea of a life well lived, and with the questions: "How ought I to live? What should I do to have a good, happy, fulfilling, and meaningful life?" (Haidt, 2006, p. 218). For the purpose of this research, because the emphasis is on the more practical rather than the theoretical or philosophical, I narrowed the scope of the inquiry to a personalized version of this question, focusing specifically on an individual participant in this inquiry. Thus, the question takes the form of, "What is the purpose of your/my life?" (or: "What is my/your right livelihood?").

I want to distinguish between *meaning* and *purpose*. Meaning is one of the five elements of Seligman's PERMA model for well-being (Seligman, 2011), and refers to the sensation of belonging to and serving something that is larger than the self (Kushner, 2002; Seligman, 2011). Meaning helps individuals make sense of the world and come to understand their place in it. It gives an individual a sense that her or his life matters (Palmer, 1999; Steger, 2009, 2012). Meaning can be found in a variety of life domains such as relationships, work, and religion (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). Research indicates that those who have a strong sense of meaning experience greater life satisfaction, stronger self-esteem, positive emotion, and optimism, while those who do not have meaning in life are more likely to experience psychological distress (e.g., Ryff, 1989a, 1989b; Steger, 2012; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, &

Lorentz, 2008; Wolf, 2010).

Purpose is a higher-level construct, and one that is difficult to describe and empirically research (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009); several different definitions of purpose have emerged, primarily within the psychological literature.

Kashdan and McKnight (2009) define purpose as “a central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviours, and provides a sense of meaning” (p. 242). According to them, purpose is central in the sense that it is a consistent and predominant part of one’s personality, self-organizing in that it provides a framework for everyday behavioral patterns, and a life aim that must be perpetually pursued or lived out. Simply put, Kashdan and McKnight conceive of purpose as a core part of one’s identity that provides an ongoing direction for one to aspire towards. To explain something so abstract more concretely, Kashdan and McKnight describe purpose as a compass—it provides direction in life, but one can choose whether or not to follow its direction. Purpose requires a deliberate choice to follow one’s vocation, which is the direction the compass is pointing.

Ryff (1989a) conceives of purpose as the goals, intentions, and sense of direction in life that combine to (a) produce the feeling that one’s life is meaningful, and (b) act to integrate the various aspects of one’s life into a comprehensive whole. Ryff (1989a, 1989b) includes purpose in life as one of six fundamental elements in her theory of psychological well-being, with the others being self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, and autonomy. The important thing to note here is that the outcomes of this research include some of these elements as well, namely self-acceptance, positive relationships, and personal growth that the participants experienced.

Keyes (2011) defines purpose as “an intention and a cognitive sense of one’s life” (p.

281) or as a determination to do or accomplish some end. He further states that purpose involves two elements: psychological purpose, or the sense of direction one has in life (as defined by Ryff (1989a)), and social contribution, or the collective benefit that one's life provides. From the combination of these two elements, four different classifications of purpose emerge: aimless but useful, aimless and useless, directed but useless, and authentic purpose. Keyes (2011) purports that "authentic purpose" (p. 285), which is one that provides a strong sense of direction and is significantly useful to others, is the most worthwhile and fulfilling form of purpose in life. He equates living out one's authentic purpose with the realization of one's vocation: "a purpose for one's life that employs one's gifts, brings a deep sense of worth or value, and provides a significant contribution to the common good" (p. 286). Thus, under Keyes's conception, various types of purposes exist, but the most worthwhile and beneficial one harnesses one's unique capacities to provide a sense of direction in life and benefit to someone other than the self.

Rockind (2011) builds off of several of the definitions presented above, conceiving of purpose as a unique and central life aim that is active, forward-looking, and of impact to others. She views purpose as a verb, as an active way in which one uniquely impacts the world. Her perspective aligns with the premise of this research project, whereby the inquiry into purpose, or right livelihood, is an active process and a journey to continue exploring, rather than a place to reach.

Frankl (2006), pioneer of the study of meaning, speaks of meaning and purpose as inextricably linked phenomena, whereby purpose is a by-product of an individual's attempt to make life meaningful. He explains that there are a "uniqueness and a singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives meaning to his existence" (p. 79). Rockind describes this "uniqueness" as one's purpose (2011). A meaningful life then, according to Frankl, is one in

which an individual elects to act in a way that uniquely and appropriately fulfills the tasks (enjoyable or not) that life sets before her or him. He (2006) explains purpose as one's "why" for living, stating that it allows an individual to make sense of her or his circumstances (past and present) and provides her or him with future goals to live for.

One important distinction to notice is that meaning relies upon one's memories of the past and one's understanding of present circumstances to provide clarity, grounding, and comprehension. Baumeister and Vohs (2001) explain that individuals find, or make, meaning by revising memories of past events and by connecting these memories to present experiences. Purpose, on the other hand, encompasses the notion of what one *will* do with her or his life, or what purpose her or his life *will* serve (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Palmer, 1999; Steger, 2009, 2012). Purpose gives one belief and hope in the future (Leider, 1997; Levoy, 1997; Frankl, 2006). It involves a connection between present and future events so that the future acts to guide present action (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Steger, 2009, 2012). Purpose is forward looking; it pulls an individual forward in life (Rockind, 2011; Seligman, 2011)—purpose is future-oriented, while meaning is oriented to the past.

As is evident from the discussion above, many definitions of purpose exist, but many overlap, at least partially, highlighting the commonalities. First, purpose is repeatedly described as a consistent part of one's true and unique self (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Ventegodt, Anderson & Merrick, 2003), stemming from an individual's unique gifts, strengths, values, passions, interests, and abilities. Second, it is almost always described as something that provides direction and creates goals for the future—goals that act to direct present behaviour. Third, purpose is repeatedly seen as something that one must continually strive or live for, rather than some "end" that can be accomplished. Fourth, purpose is consistently

viewed as something that makes life meaningful. Fifth, purpose is often defined as something that provides a benefit or connection to someone or something other than the self. Finally, purpose is repeatedly held to be something that an individual must deliberately choose to follow or fulfill.

The description of *purpose*, *life purpose*, or *right livelihood*, that I will adopt here for the research, has to do with the ways an individual realizes her or his gifts, skills, talents, and potential to uniquely impact the world, in a scope that is larger than her or his personal benefits, gains, and existence.

Eco-Psychology

Psychology is defined as "the study of behaviour and mental life" (Winter, 1996, p. 4) and helps us examine our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The word *ecology* was coined by Haeckel in 1866 to mean "that branch of science which attempts to define and explain the relationship between living organisms and their environment" (as cited in Holdgate, 1994, p. 27). Over the past 50 or so years, there have been various theories to address the relationship between the two fields—psychology and ecology, or human and nature. One of the earlier theories was the Gaia Hypothesis, the work of astrophysicists Lovelock and Margulis, formulated in 1970 (Lovelock, 2000; Lovelock & Margulis, 1996). They describe the earth as a living, self-regulating system, whereby "it is reasonable to call the Earth alive in the sense that it is a self-organizing and self-regulating system" (Lovelock, 2000, p. 31). The next relevant theory is Transpersonal Psychology, which is the study of transcendent experiences, or "those [experiences] that illuminate the parts of our being that lie beyond our individual, unique, or separate sense of self" (Winter, 1996, p. 242). This theory originated in the early 1970s in

America and grew out of the humanistic psychology of that time. Much of it came through the work of Maslow (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988; Maslow, 1968, 1971), who argued that psychology has unduly focused on the negative, damaged, diseased parts of the human personality. As such, he set out to define and study psychological health in what he called self-actualized persons. He described such persons as "self-actualizing people [who] are, without one single exception, involved in a cause outside their own skin, in something outside of themselves" (Maslow, 1971, pp. 43-44). The term transpersonal—meaning beyond the personal, beyond the sense of the individual ego—was used to describe this new psychology. Maslow described it as "a 'higher' Fourth Psychology[3], transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interest, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like" (Maslow, 1968, pp. iii-iv). Then came Deep Ecology, which was first formulated in 1973 by a Norwegian philosopher named Naess, exploring ways of living in harmony with nature (Naess, 1973; Naess & Kumar, 1992; Winter, 1996), as well as in balance between individuals and communities (Sessions & Devall, 1985). Deep Ecology is a process of "ever-deepening questioning of ourselves, the assumptions of the dominant worldview in our culture, and the meaning and truth of our reality" (Sessions & Devall, 1985, p. 8). Thus, deep ecologists see human beings as embedded in a complex web of biological life, rather than be "at the apex of biological hierarchy. Our true identity is in relationship with the larger ecosystem of which we are a part" (Winter, 1996, p. 247). Capra confirms this view by stating that

> Deep ecology does not separate humans—or anything else—from the natural environment. It sees the world not as a collection of isolated objects, but as a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. Deep ecology

[3] Humanistic Psychology was called "Third Force" to contrast it from psychoanalysis and behaviourism.

> recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and views humans as just one particular strand in the web of life. (Capra, 1996, p. 7)

Winter (1996) stated that "from both the transpersonal and deep ecology perspective, our standard sense of self as a separate, autonomous being seriously jeopardizes our ability to live harmoniously within our ecosphere" (p. 249). This observation leads us directly to the realm of Eco-Psychology, which seeks to reshape modern psychology by showing that it cannot stand apart from an intimate human connection with the natural environment. Instead, eco-psychologists posit that we humans need that conscious connection and engagement with nature (West, 2007) to do well mentally and physically, let alone to flourish, as individuals and as a species (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995). As mentioned earlier in this thesis (see *Definition of Terms and Clarification of Concepts* section), Eco-Psychology studies the relationship between human beings and the natural world through ecological and psychological principles, bridging our culture's longstanding, historical gulf between the psychological and the ecological. This field of study suggests that there is a synergistic relation between planetary and personal well-being and that the needs of the one are relevant to the other; Winter states that, "the needs of the planet are the needs of the person, the rights of the person are the rights of the planet" (1996, p. 250). The main insights are that our ordinary experience of ourselves as separate autonomous beings is incomplete and inaccurate, yet it is not necessarily a theoretical understanding. According to transpersonal psychologists, eco-psychologists, as well as spiritual and indigenous teachers, such a shift in perception goes beyond the cognitive—into a directly perceptual, experiential, or spiritual (Berry & Tucker, 2009; Glendinning, 2007; Grof & Grof, 1992; Neihardt, 1996; Plotkin, 2003; Roszak, 1992; Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007; Sheldrake, 1994; Winter, 1996; Wilber, 2000). The remaining question in this section has to do with ways

of moving from theory to practice, from concept to application.

Applied Eco-Psychology is a subset of Eco-Psychology that translates the concepts from theory into action. Here we come to the work of Cohen (1993, 1997, 2002, 2003, 2008), namely Natural Attraction Ecology and the Natural Systems Thinking Process (NSTP, see *Definition of Terms and Clarification of Concepts* for an overview); both will be used as guidelines in this dissertation. Natural Attraction Ecology Model and process were founded by Cohen in the 1960s, who has been working in this field for a very long time, with tangible, documented, and replicable results and effects on hundreds of people (Cohen, 1993, 1997, 2002, 2003, 2008). It is important to notice that he continues his work as a researcher, expanding the scientific body of work in this field, while also being an educator in the Applied Eco-Psychology field. He has written many volumes and articles over the years, including his dissertation, "Educating, Counseling and Healing with Nature. The Science of Natural Attraction Ecology: How to Create Moments that let Earth Teach" (Cohen, 2008). He begins by outlining the problem we are facing:

> Our Nature disconnected thinking produces our underlying stress. It makes contemporary people the only organisms on Earth that destructively produce garbage, pollution, war, mental illness, loneliness, excessive stress and abusive relationships. These maladies, with rare exception, are absent in nature. (Cohen, 2002)

Then he outlines the solution to this problem, Natural Attraction Ecology Model, which is the outcome of "decades of all-season inquiry into the renewing grace of natural areas" (Cohen, 2008, p. 7). Specifically, the major findings of these decades of research are (quoted verbatim to make sure nothing is omitted, and to honor his research) that this Natural Attraction Ecology Model helps people:

- Transform their destructive thinking into nature's regenerative ways.
- Make conscious sensory contact with the flow and spirit of natural systems.
- Reduce stress and disorders and increase well-being by thinking with 53 different natural senses.
- Create moments that let Earth teach and reduce duality by feeling and thinking like nature works.
- Enable the healing sensitivity of our multiple natural intelligences to transform our destructive thinking into nature's healing ways. (Cohen, 2008, p. 7)

This dissertation will rely heavily on the experiential aspects of Applied Eco-Psychology and Natural Attraction Ecology as ways to gain insight and wisdom from the natural world.

Methodology

Introduction and Method of Research

Action research can be described as "a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time" (Dick, 1999, para. 1). It is a spiral, iterative, and emergent process, which alternates between action, critical reflection, and continuous refinement of the research process itself in the light of the ongoing evolving understanding of the research topic. As there were several different research activities in this project, the iterative nature of action research allowed for and contributed to the ongoing reflection, enhancement, and refinement of the process during these activities.

Additionally, through "involving people [who might be affected by the change] in the planning and the action and by being flexible and responsive to situation and people" (Dick, 2002, para. 4), it becomes participative action research. As Stringer (1999) describes, the research becomes "a social process in which people reconstruct their lives together through continuing cycles of exchange, negotiation, realignment, and repair" (p. 44). Again, this philosophy matches the nature of this research project, where one of the explorations looked into the different ways in which we learn and construct meaning. Overall, the action research process of ongoing exploration and refinement fits the nature of life itself, given that "life is an experiment to discover what's possible" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1999, p. 11).

Stringer (1999) writes that if an action research project does not make a difference, it has failed to achieve its objectives (p. 11). The key objective of this research project is to inquire into how we apply and practice lifelong learning when looking at our individual right livelihood,

by engaging the research participants in a series of activities, experiences in Nature[4], guided inquiries, and intentional conversations.

This research project builds on the premises that (a) Applied Eco-Psychology, Nature (and the NSTP process) are powerful and invaluable allies in one's learning process; and (b) Collaboration with others augments the learning insights for the individual. Let's review these premises in greater details.

Eco-Psychology and Nature as Allies

Ecology is the study of connection, of the interrelationships among all forms of life, and the physical environment. Psychology is the study of the human psyche, of the human mind and soul as it perceives, feels, thinks, and acts. Eco-Psychology brings psychology and ecology together to create a healing context for and a new understanding of the human-nature relationship. Eco-Psychology has emerged as an intellectual and social movement that seeks to understand and heal our relationship with the Earth. It examines the psychological processes that bond us to the natural world or that alienate us from it (Abram, 1996; Berry, 1991; Cohen, 1997, 2002, 2003; Plotkin, 2003; Roszak, 1992; Winter, 1996).

As such, being able to inquire into a topic as important as one's right livelihood within the broader scope of our relatedness to all of life only makes sense. After all, confirmations of this relatedness can be found in many emerging theories of new sciences such as self-organization, chaos theory, complexity, biological co-evolution, and quantum physics (Abram, 1996; Bellinger, 2004; Berry, 1991; Brody, 2000; Capra, 1996; Davis, 2001; Jensen, 2008; Laszlo, 1996; O'Murchu, 1997). All support the view that in our quantum universe, all life

[4] I chose to capitalize Nature, to honor her innate consciousness and the fact that "nature" is not merely an inanimate object—both to me, and to the philosophy of this research project.

operates within the context of relational interaction (O'Murchu, 1999, p. 34). All view life forces as interdependent and interrelated, as is eloquently summarized by Wilber (2001) in his exploration and comparison of eastern and western philosophies:

> Quantum theory has abolished the notion of fundamentally separated objects, has introduced the concept of the participator to replace that of the observer, and has come to see the universe as an interconnected web of relations whose parts are only defined through their connections to the whole. (p. 38)

Capra (1989) quotes Bateson as saying that since relationships are the essence of the living world, one would do best to speak the language of relationships to describe it [the world]. Later, in his synthesis of recent scientific breakthroughs in the areas of living systems, Capra (1996) quotes Maturana and Varela as saying that "the world everyone sees is not the world but a world, which we bring forth with others." Those others are both the human and the non-human kind. The words of Leonardo Da Vinci are a potent metaphor here, in the inquiry of one's individual and unique right livelihood, as quoted by Capra (2002), writing:

> Nature is so delightful and abundant in its variations, that among trees of the same kind there would not be found one plant that resembles another nearby, and this is not only of the plant as a whole, but among the branches, the leaves and the fruit, not one will be found that looks precisely like another (p. 47).

The Importance of Shared and Collaborative Learning

This premise highlights the importance of social, collaborative learning, often referred to as social constructionism. It is grounded in postmodern philosophy and posits that it is 'we' who give meaning to social forms. Our language and words form the foundation for the way we

perceive social reality. Hosking and Morley (2004) describe social constructionism as "a loose concatenation of theoretical frameworks that emphasize both the constructive powers of human minds and their origins in conversations, conventions, and cultural traditions" (p. 1). Gergen, a key contributor to the field, describes social constructionism as "an inquiry that is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which most people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (1985, p. 266).

It is called 'social constructionism' because it aims to address how phenomena are socially constructed; socially means not individually, but rather in relationships. Not surprisingly, in many of the descriptions the relational aspect of social constructionism is highlighted, whereby language and communication require others to be around us, to be in relationship with us. Van Der Haar (2002) quotes Campbell, Coldicott, and Kinsella stating that "social constructionism proposes that realities are created by people communicating with each other through language" (Van Der Haar, 2002, p. 16). Later she also quotes Van Nistelrooij as writing that "social constructionism is interested in communication about and in relationships between people and the sense-making processes that are produced" (Van Der Haar, 2002, p. 16). In their review of the role of discourse in several large-scale change initiatives, Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar (1995) suggest to decentre the individual and instead "begin to view 'relating' as the place where meaning is made" (p. 353). They maintain that discourse is the core of change, since it is through discourse that we form relations, transform structure, and examine our beliefs (Barrett et al., 1995, p. 353). Further, in his richly encompassing soundings of social constructionism, Gergen (1994) paraphrases Descartes' famous "cogito ergo sum" as "communicamus ergo sum" (p. viii), and states that relationship replaces the individual as the fundamental unit of social life (p. 253). Finally, through their work with appreciative inquiry,

Cooperrider and Whitney (1999) conclude that

> constructionism is an approach to human science and practice which replaces the individual with the relationship as the locus of knowledge, and thus is built around a keen appreciation of the power of language and discourse of all types to create our sense of reality-our sense of the true, the good, the possible. (p. 13)

A fundamental emerging commonality in the different aspects of social constructionism is the relatedness/relationship element, as eloquently states by Gergen: "words fail to make sense until there is at least one other person to give assent to their meaningfulness. Sense-making is thus a collective manifestation, requiring the coordinated participation of two or more persons" (as cited in Van Der Haar, 2002, p. 28). According to this perspective of social relatedness, meaning, reality, and future—all emerge as a result of us relating to others through discourse, communicating (i.e., language) in an intentional manner.

> People communicate to interpret events and to share those with others. For this reason, it is believed that reality is constructed socially as a product of communication. Our meanings and understandings arise from our communication with others. How we understand objects and how we behave towards them depend in large measure on the social reality in force. (Littlejohn, 1992, pp. 190-191)

Participants

Most of the project participants were related, in one way or another, to Bainbridge Graduate Institute (BGI); most were current students, a few were alumnae, and there were several spouses of the students as well. The original intent of the research was to involve a diverse range of participants—in age, career and/or vocation phase in life, and their association

with BGI. Eventually, though, it was a self-selecting process, whereby those who were interested in the topic and were available during the final retreat times (Phase III) ended up participating in the research project.

Setting and Sample Size

Two groups of participants were created to accommodate two separate locations and group sizes. The first group, Group A, consisted of nine participants (six men and three women); the second group, Group B, consisted of 19 (nine men and ten women). Both groups included current BGI students, alums, and spouses of past and present students. These numbers allowed for the review of the process when conducted at a minimum, as well as maximum, group sizes. Both research processes had a partial overlap in the project study timing, whereby Phase III of the research occurred during two consecutive weekends.

Length of Project Study

The overall study consisted of the following phases:

- Phase I: This was the pre-reading phase, whereby the participants read the book "Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life" by Levoy (1997) at their own pace and time. It started roughly a month before Phase II. In the initial planning process, several pertinent books were considered; these included "Let your life speak" by Parker Palmer, and "Crossing the Unknown Sea" by David Whyte. The choice was eventually narrowed to one book only, because the philosophy of the book aligns closely with the premises of this thesis project. Levoy talks about the importance of being open to hearing the call, to being open to the messages of both the inner and the

outer worlds, and to the fact that callings come in many different ways. He also includes stories of others, to emphasize his point. Choosing one book for all to read further fostered a sense of commonality for all research participants.

- Phase II: This phase consisted of 3.5 weeks of a guided process, with weekly emails of activities, reflection questions and online dialogues (see Appendix D for the specifics of this phase). Participants engaged in this process individually, at their own pace, wherever they were located at that time.
- Phase III: This phase lasted 3.5 days, in the form of a residential group retreat (see Appendix E for the specifics of this phase).
- Phase IV: This last phase started about a week after completion of Phase III, to give the participants time to reflect on their experience. It consisted of individual interviews that specifically focused on Phases II and III (see Appendix A). The interviews were conducted via Skype with the assistance of a voice-recording software (Call Recorder for Skype, n.d.) that recorded the call in a common MP3 format.

Information Analysis

The research generated raw data through the process of the recorded individual interviews in electronic MP3 format. The information analysis process consisted of three phases:

1. In the first phase, raw data from each individual interview was reviewed, analyzed, and converted to a mind map that depicts concepts, ideas, themes, connections, and pertinent quotes. The mind maps were created using a mind mapping software package (Novamind, n.d.). This phase generated a total of 27 mind maps, one for

each of the research participants[5]. The following mind map (Figure 3) is a sample analysis of one individual interview, with many details removed for simplicity and confidentiality (each of these main branches has sub-branches with further details and, often, direct quotes from the participant).

Figure 3: **Sample Mind Map of the Data Analysis**

2. The purpose of the second phase was to ensure the validity of the initial analysis. All mind maps were posted in a private and password-protected area of my website[6], where the participants were able to access and review the mind map of the research analysis interview in which they participated. Once they reviewed their mind maps, all participants emailed me their approval of the accuracy of the analysis; only then I proceeded to the third phase.
3. During the third phase, all the mind maps were reviewed and analyzed again, as they were consolidated into one comprehensive mind map while paying particular

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[5] While there was a total of 28 research participants, one was unavailable for the individual interviews.

[6] http://www.simongoland.com/

attention to the emerging commonalities of themes and patterns.

Ethical Issues

Researcher's bias.

This research project presented an interesting, and at times challenging, situation of learning about balancing my personal vision and the emerging reality of the study findings. The vision is related to my passion about vocation, meaning, life purpose, my own right livelihood and the belief that such insights and clarity emerge through direct experiences of our interconnectedness and the role Nature plays in such experiences. In this study, I have looked at this passion and belief as my conviction that others might neither share nor experience during the research. What helped me were my 18 years of experience as a professional/executive coach. Furthermore, as an active practitioner and educator of meditation and mindfulness for over 20 years, I know how to be present and engaged with another person, following their agenda while maintaining solid awareness and detachment from my own perspectives, ideas, and wishes. This experience was invaluable when conducting the interviews and being present with each participant and the information they presented.

Additionally, the majority of my research participants were/are students at BGI, a university where I was (at the time of the research project) a faculty member, and, thus, in a position of power and authority. Therefore, it was extremely important for me to remain aware, sensitive, mindful, and open to potentially different perspectives and worldviews that have emerged during the research process, data analysis, and result interpretation, so that the research is not influenced in any way by this power differential situation. My role in this research project has been that of an explorer, a catalyst, and a conductor who, although doesn't make the music himself (Zander & Zander, 2000), is nevertheless orchestrating the many different instruments

into a synchronized voice of coherence, beauty, and passion.

My worldview is a combination of the ecological, experiential, and the interpretive paradigms. I fully subscribe to the interpretive research vision, whereby access to reality is created only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, and shared meanings. I believe that all life is a mystery that is explored as we share and understand each other's experiences. I also believe that all living systems are interconnected and interdependent, allowing reality to co-emerge through our stories and actions; this is the ecological view of the world (Sessions & Devall, 1985; Sheldrake, 1994; Winter, 1996). Given these beliefs, I naturally gravitate towards research methods that are participative and collaborative, exploring the emergence of the different meanings in open, dialogue-like interactions among humans (Bohm, 2013; Isaacs, 1999; Krishnamurti, 2003). Furthermore, I am a strong believer in the experiential learning process, of making meaning from direct experience; Kolb, as cited in Smith (2001), describes it as a spiral/iterative learning cycle, starting with a direct experience, and then reflecting on the emerging learning. Such learning approach aligns to the inquiry of this research project, as many of the concepts explored, as well as the experiences in Nature, need to be—well—experienced, before we make meaning out of them.

The guiding principle of this research was clear and simple—I will make the best effort to ensure there are no ethical conflicts. Should there ever be one, between ethical values or standards and any possible implications and/or impacts of the research, ethical considerations unequivocally take priority. As much as I want this to be a research project with individual impact towards increased clarity for one's right livelihood, it is first and foremost about people. My unwavering commitment is to protect all those involved in the research.

Confidentiality

Several actions were taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of all participants. During the first phase of the data analysis, all personal identifiers were removed from all mind maps. Once the second phase of the data analysis was complete and the participants reviewed and approved their analysis mind maps, all the online information was permanently deleted from its location on my website.

In advance of any research activity, all participants signed a consent form (Appendix C), where I ensured them that no harm would come to them as a result of participating in the research, and no deception will be used.

I also provided an opportunity for the participants to review the preliminary findings emerging from the research to validate and confirm their accuracy; this was done in the second phase of the data analysis where all participants confirmed the accuracy of the mind map analysis of their research activity.

I will keep the raw research data in my possession for seven years after completion of the research project. All data will be locked and protected, by password and 128-bit SSL encryption mechanisms, including a complete copy that will be stored off-site for additional security.

Study Conduct

In the spirit of action research, which is an emergent and iterative process and which takes shape as understanding increases (Dick, 1999, para. 2), there were several feedback loops and cycles of ongoing enhancements and adjustments throughout the data gathering activities. All the emergent learning was incorporated into the research process itself.

An online course from my past has greatly enhanced my understanding of the action research methodology. AREOL (Action Research and Evaluation On-Line) is a 14-week course

in Action Research which was offered by the Graduate College of Management at Southern Cross University in Australia (Dick, 2002), and I participated in it in 2004. This course provided me with a unique opportunity to incorporate the theoretical learning into the practical aspects of my research project.

The following chart depicts the different activities that occurred during the preparation, data gathering, and data analysis phases:

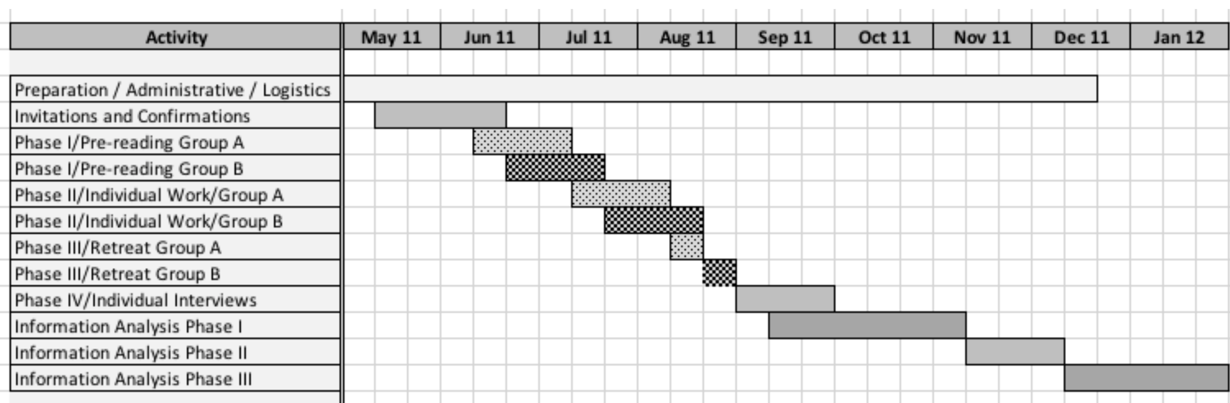

***Figure 4*: Study Conduct Phases**

Preparations and research.

1. I prepared the initial documents: research interview guide (Appendix A), project introduction letter (Appendix B), and consent form (Appendix C).
2. Once the participants acknowledged their interest, I sent the invitation letters and consent forms via email. The signed consent forms were collected during the face-to-face retreat phase.
3. The process of scheduling the different research activities continued during the first part of the pre-reading phase, for both groups (A and B).
4. Additionally, during the pre-reading phase, I finalized the details of the Individual Work phase and all the details related to the retreats themselves—detailed

process, locations, and logistics.

Data gathering.

1. The interviews were performed at times convenient for the participants, using Skype and recorded using a voice-recording software.
2. After the interviews were complete, I reviewed the next phase of the research: the interviews will be mind-mapped and made available for the participants to review and approve all captured information.
3. Once the participants reviewed and confirmed the data analysis, I sent a thank-you note to each of them, thanking them for their time and contribution to this research project.

Data analysis.

1. I performed the mind-mapping analysis using the Nova Mind (Novamind, n.d.) software package.
2. During the first phase of the data analysis, I reviewed the raw data from each interview, which was the MP3 recording.
3. As I reviewed the raw data, I constructed a mind map to represent themes, ideas, patterns, and concepts. This process was repeated several times for each raw data interview, to make sure I capture all that was expressed. While analyzing, I made sure I remain aware of any of my personal biases, so that I minimize their impact on the initial analysis.
4. While analyzing the raw data, I removed all personal identifiers of the participants.
5. The second phase of the data analysis consisted of allowing the participants to review the data analysis outcome, in the form of a mind map, in order to ensure

the validity of my initial analysis. Once the first phase was complete and a mind-map created, I transferred it to my website, to a confidential and password-protected location. Then, each participant was informed via email of the location of the mind map of their interview analysis (only), so they can review, comment, and eventually approve the accuracy of my analysis process so far.

6. During the third phase of the data analysis, I reviewed all the mind maps of the different research activities I created in the first phase. Now I combined the separate mind maps into one comprehensive mind map, consolidating repeating themes and categories, detecting and emphasizing commonalities and repetitions, and noticing possible exceptions.
7. By the end of this phase, I had a complete picture of the analyzed data, which I used in the research conclusions and findings chapter.

Findings and Analysis

Study Findings

This research project was driven by the following hypothesis: a guided process that blends individual and group inquiry with direct experiences in nature helps individuals uncover their right livelihood. The following findings and themes emerged during the data analysis process as key factors that influenced and impacted the participants throughout this research process (see Figure 5). Although I will address each theme separately, they are related, and often partially overlapping.[7]

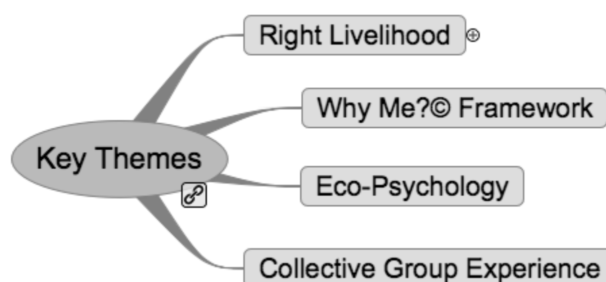

***Figure 5*: Key Research Themes**

Key Theme—Right Livelihood

This key theme resurfaced continually throughout the research. While there have been variations in the ways participants described and understood the concept of right livelihood, be it "*about work that brings exploration and challenge, while also making a difference on a larger scale of my—and others'—lives,*" "*living into those things that energize me and give me life*," or

[7] Direct quotes from research participants are presented in italicized format.

"*that which aligns with who you are, doing what fully expresses who you are (much broader and more encompassing)*," every participant was drawn to the research because they were looking for ways of finding and following an authentic life (Levoy, 1997). Whether a participant was happy with her or his current life and work situation (*"I am quite passionate about my work right now"*) or not (*"I have outgrown my current workplace and job description, and it doesn't fulfil me anymore"*), they were all looking for what's next for them. It was not simply about the next job or promotion, but rather about "*wanting a [more] authentic life*" (research participant)— a life that is a lot more inclusive and holistic in nature, incorporating "*supporting my family*" (research participant) with "*maximizing my potential*" (research participant) and "*meaningful contribution to society*" (research participant). Several participants talked about the aspiration of "*being a part of something bigger and more lasting than my own life*" and "*leaving a lasting legacy that will keep making a difference long after I am gone*."

The participants had different ways of describing the meaning of right livelihood:

- "*Aligning who I am at my core with life around me.*"
- "*It is what one is called to do, merging individual needs and passions with the needs of others.*"
- "*Coming to a place where I can merge my life with my work—and these do not need to be separate anymore.*"
- "*A way of being in a holistic balance in life, integrating caring about my family with positive impact on the planet and its inhabitants, while having joy in and for life*."
- "*I used to know of right livelihood from my studies in Buddhism, where it meant doing no harm and making an honest living. It was a spiritual concept. In my (Western) life, up to now, I have only been focused at doing better at work, so that I*

can make more money so that I can do other things in my life. I am now seeing that these two worlds of mine are not unrelated—I can live my spiritual life, fully, in this Western culture."

Even though they may have articulated it in their own ways, through the lens of their own experience and understanding, ultimately all their perspectives align with the theme of this research project, through the words of Kushner (2002):

> Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power. Those rewards create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through it. (p. 18)

There was both diversity and an alignment of insights—the takeaways—for the participants, in their understanding of right livelihood; one participant described it as:

> *Right livelihood, when I first heard it, sounded like a vocation. Like there is a specific job. Now, it is very different for me. It is that which aligns with who you are, doing what who you are. Much broader and more encompassing, and I am beginning to understand the difference between Essence and Forms*[8].

Such increasing clarity and awareness were repeated by others:

> *It means something different to me now than before. It is a puzzle, a journey, and I am still working on creating my map and adjusting my compass so that I can keep moving forward in the right direction. I fully get now the idea of a right livelihood Essence, and it is actually a relief that I do not have to 'come up' with a Form. I just need to remain connected to the Essence, and the Form will come—when the time is right. I just need to*

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[8] I am now capitalizing Essence and Form, to signify their relevance to the specific concepts of the research project and the Why Me?© framework.

> *listen. So, it means tuning in to what my Essence really is. Without any pressure*.

Some expressed their new understanding of right livelihood as an orientation that is much more encompassing than merely a career:

> *First, I thought it was more related to a career path. Now I see it as something that is much larger; it involves what one does with the non-career time too, like how you live your life, how it connects to values. It is more holistic in nature*.

Different elements of the whole research project and process have resonated in different ways, such as for this participant:

> *One of the things I will take with me is remembering to look for my Essence, rather than a Form. Perhaps it is a really simple concept, yet is a big difference from the common way people look for Forms. So, for me, even if I do not remember any other things that happened that weekend, 20 years from now, the most likely concept I will keep with me is the Essence of what I want to bring to the world*.

For some, the inquiry and the process were confronting, because they had to "*finally face all that I have been avoiding looking into for a very long time.*" Several of the participants had an experience similar to what one participant articulated,

> *The initial reaction for me was very upsetting when I got to see my right livelihood, the Essence, clearly. It was a small child reaction, of not wanting to face the calling. There was a surprise to the discovery, followed up by my inner child throwing a tantrum because of the enormity of the task. Afterwards, though, there was an experience of a huge relief—of accepting this destiny, if you will, and getting to a deep place of knowing and experiencing the truth of it all.*

For many, it was a moment of facing the upcoming change: "*I now know I cannot continue doing*

my life the way I have for the past 30 and some years." For another, it was "*a deep dive, an emotional roller coaster, and quite the roll. It put all the BS behind and really had me look deeply into myself. In a good way*." Such inevitable change process is summarized by Schlitz, Vieten, and Amorok as "change is what happens when the pain of remaining the same becomes greater than the pain of changing (2007, p. 35). This idea of the process being a challenge also aligns with the premise of the Why Me?© framework, which will be explored in more depth in the next section.

Ultimately, participants related to their right livelihood as a yearning to something deep and meaningful, which often has been in the making for a very long time. One of the participants captured it eloquently for many as: "*It is like I finally got the 'permission' to place the yearning of my soul above my societal role, and it is something I have been waiting for a very long time. Like, my whole life!*"

Key Theme—Why Me?© Framework

Right livelihood calls one to step up, expanding their presence and vocation more than before, which is often much more than a person might have imagined for themselves. One participant articulated it as:

> *I am feeling a bit afraid because of what has emerged for me through the Why Me?© framework; the flavor is of some overwhelm because it does feel that what I am called to step into is really big and I wonder whether I am up for it.*

This was a repeating theme for many participants, which they expressed as:

- "*The weekend ended up being more of a challenge than what I have anticipated. Deeply emotional. This is mainly because I did not expect some of the deeper*

inquiries we have been going through, and what these opened up for me."

- "*I was expecting to walk away from this whole experience with something easy and convenient, like my next small step. What an illusion! I am facing a HUGE leap forward, into my full life, and the butterflies in my stomach have a 10-feet wingspan. Yet, I feel totally alive.*"
- "*I am almost terrified. I am excited. I now know that this is my path, and there is no other way around it for me*."

Such is indeed the premise of the framework, which points one towards their Essence, vocation, and work in the world, and it was evident in the way the participants expressed their realizations and insights. The challenge in accepting the call and in seeing the purpose of our lives is summarized eloquently by Plotkin (2003):

> Alongside our greatest longing lives an equally great terror of finding the very thing we seek. Somehow, we know that doing so will irreversibly shape up our lives, our sense of security, change our relationship to everything we hold as familiar and dear. But we also suspect that saying no to our deepest desires will mean self-imprisonment in a life too small. And a far-off voice within insists that the never-before-seen treasure is well worth any sacrifices and difficulty in recovering it. (p. 10)

Different dimensions of the framework resonated and stood out differently for various participants. For some, it was the Greatest Gift[9] aspect of the inquiry that made a significant impact: "*being able to see and name my Greatest Gift was eye-opening, even—dare I say—enlightening. Moreover, beginning to own it is a whole new journey on its own, and one that is already beginning to transform my life*." For a few participants, this concept was familiar:

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[9] I am also capitalizing the three dimensions of the Why Me?© framework (Greatest Gift, Deepest Pain, Need of the World), to emphasize their significance for the participants and the research project.

"*while being able to name clearly my Greatest Gift was important, it was not as transformative as other aspects of the process*," while for others, it was very new:

> *I have never even considered this aspect of myself. I mean, I knew I was good at some things and not so much in others. Now, though, it is like I am showing up in a way that is very different for people around me. It is like everything is brighter, and I am the one carrying this light, that is uniquely mine.*

This is the aspect that Plotkin (2003) summarizes as "Discovering your unique gift to bring to your community is your greatest opportunity and challenge" (p. 13), and Meade (2016) calls our genius, describing it as

> A true calling is aimed at the genius qualities already set within each person. In this old way of seeing, each person has some form of genius, each also has a calling or vocation and a purpose in life. On the outside, it is felt as a calling and on the inside, it is felt as the awakening of one's own way of seeing and of truly being in the world. (para. 4)

For others, it was the Deepest Pain that created the biggest shift. "*Unequivocally, this was IT for me. My biggest take home is the inquiry of the Loyal Soldiers*[10] *part of the Why Me?*© *framework, and how it works in conjunction to my Deepest Pain*." While some participants have done personal development work in the past: "*I have been doing my deep inner work for over two decades, through counselling, men's circles, working with my life coach, Landmark Education, you name it,*" for others it was a completely new area: "*this was my first real structured exposure to a process that has me looking into my inner blocks and obstacles*." Regardless of their background and exposure to this area, though, many participants uncovered valuable insights that emerged through this dimension of the inquiry: "*I could have never*

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[10] The concept of Loyal Soldiers is explained in more details in Appendix E; for now, it helps to think about it as a "persona" or a "sub-personality."

imagined that there will be so much clarity and sense-making from this process of diving deep into my shadow world, peeling layer after layer, only to find that there is so much gold hiding in those shadows" (research participant). One participant captured it as "*I felt like going—or, rather—falling deeper and deeper into the most important rabbit hole of my life*," which aligns to the way Plotkin (2003) writes about a spiritual descent

> Such myths and stories are found in countless cultures. They imply we each must undertake the journey of descent if we are to heal ourselves at the deepest levels and reach a full and authentic adulthood, that there are powerful and dangerous beings in the underworld who are not particularly friendly or attractive, and that we are forever changed by the experience. In contemporary Western cultures, we live as if the spiritual descent is no longer necessary; we live without realizing that the journey is meant for each of us, not just for the heroes and heroines of mythology. (p. 12)

For another group, it was the Need of the World inquiry dimension that had the biggest impact, articulated by some as:

> *I now get 'calling.' I really do. It is when I really see—in my heart and soul—that my life is about something infinitely bigger than 'my corner office' or 'my bank account.' It is about looking outside and beyond my own little world.*

There were clarity and surprise, articulated as, "*It all makes a whole lot more sense now. My right livelihood is really not about me and I am called to step into living a much bigger life and impact.*" One unexpected insight, expressed by several of the participants, was that they felt ease and relief:

> *I actually feel relieved now, because I do not need to go and 'figure things out' (which I tried to do for most of my adult life). I need to remain open, listen, and follow the Need*

> *of the World theme, which will guide me to where I am needed most. It is like a 'pull' instead of an ongoing 'push' which invites me to exhale and relax*.

Ultimately, there was something for almost every participant around her or his Essence. "*I am in the space now where the Why Me?© framework provides me with a map and a way to navigate the rest of my life, looking at purpose, meaning, and vocation*," and another participant confirms it as,

> *I got so many new insights into who I really am and why I am here, and they somehow came at the perfect time for me in life. So, right now, I am very optimistic about the possibilities in front of me. I know I need to keep processing all the insights that emerged. Beyond it though, I feel very excited, because I have a new perspective and new lens, to look at my life and future. This experience could not have come at a better time for me*.

This aspect of a "better time" was repeated by several of the participants:

> *I have reprioritized my life completely and am beginning a whole new business idea - which very much fits into what I have discovered during this Right Livelihood Quest. I made some drastic changes as a result, and even though the thoughts of the new business were around for a while, this became clear and evident as a result of our experience. It highlighted the importance, and the fact that I cannot wait any longer. The sense of urgency kicked in, loud and clear. I am ON it!*

While this theme of clarity and focus was quite common, there was another perspective expressed by a few participants: "*yes I can feel the excitement that comes from all the clarity I gained. Yet, my current fear and anxiety feel stronger and louder, probably because my Loyal Soldiers are having a field day with me*," and "*This feels very BIG and threatening for me right*

now, and I will really need to sit with it more, embracing and breathing deep." Plotkin (2003) offers a way of articulating the interplay of the forces of one's vocation—one's right livelihood—as

> Alongside our greatest longing lives an equally great terror of finding the very thing we seek. Somehow, we know that doing so will irreversibly shape up our lives, our sense of security, change our relationship to everything we hold as familiar and dear. But we also suspect that saying no to our deepest desires will mean self-imprisonment in a life too small. And a far-off voice within insists that the never-before-seen treasure is well worth any sacrifices and difficulty in recovering it. (p. 10)

Key Theme—Eco-Psychology

BGI attracts students who are passionate about social and environmental sustainability. As such, many of the participants were passionate about the outdoors, through a variety of activities and experiences—hiking, trail running, kayaking, skiing, camping, mountain biking, and mountaineering. Several have been outdoors adventure guides and two of the participants started and ran their own outdoor adventure companies before joining BGI. Despite all the exposure and passion for the outdoors, the Applied Eco-Psychology aspect of the research project opened the participants to a very different appreciation of, and connection to the natural world:

> *This is one of the KEY parts I am taking with me, as during the weekend I started feeling stronger where I was wanted, and where I was not. I even started doing it now, in my life, when I am outside. I just recently had an experience where I heard/sensed a warning to stay away from an area that was apparently dangerous. The funny thing is*

that I spend so much of my daily life outdoors anyway, yet now, after this weekend experience, it is like a whole new dimension of the natural world has revealed itself to me.

This theme was repeated by many of the participants in a variety of ways:

- "*It made me open up and become available to the world around me, and connect in a much deeper level. It happened several times. I had several experiences of both feeling wanted/invited—or not—in various places in nature. I felt that the connection I was feeling was infinitely bigger than just me. It is like I stopped being blind.*"
- "*These [activities in nature] remind me how I get too busy and forget to spend time in nature. Usually, it is like going to church for me, a spiritual experience. So many of the activities were a reminder that I need them in my life in a very regular basis*."
- "*Your connection with nature only reinforces your connection with yourself and with others. I came out of the retreat with a reminder of the power of being connected to nature, of being connected to something much bigger than my individual small self.*"
- "*First, I love spending time in nature, to the point of 'needing it.' Hence, the activities appealed to me, on many levels. It reignited for me the sense of curiosity and amazement while getting out of my adult head and into the space of wonderment. It was a great way to start, and continue, the process of the quest. Some of these experiences were very powerful, and even emotional, for me, feeling like I am ready to melt into the universe*."
- "*During one of the activities, there was a moment when none of the pieces made sense for me. I went to nature, and allowed myself to simply stop thinking about anything and just get present to what is around me. And then I felt like I need to write,*

and I started writing, without even knowing what it was that I was writing. Just let the words stream out of me, emptying everything that was coming up. When I looked back at it, after I was done, I was blown away—because suddenly everything connected, and made total sense."

It is evident that most of the participants, if not all, had experienced an increased level of awareness, insight, and clarity of their right livelihood when they took their questions to Nature:

> *The experience of a tree telling me to go away, in the middle of my inquiry, was interesting and impactful, because I needed to be present and listen. And accept what I heard, which was transformative for me—because when I listened and accepted, I got the answer I was looking for*.

At times, the awareness was immediate and obvious for some participants:

> *Some of my past yoga practices have helped dive deeper into the activities in nature. Most of them for me were primarily grounding, 'coming home' type of experiences, which were almost natural for me to follow, with answers literally waiting for me around every tree or bush*.

At other times, for other participants, such awareness was less direct or straight forward:

- *"I found that if I were to go along with all these activities that seemed strange at first look, it did not work well. However, every time I opened up to what happened around me (like following a squirrel into the woods), insights and deeper understanding would emerge for me almost immediately.*"
- "*I had a powerful experience, of an ant biting me in my toe, forcing me to move—and the result was finding an incredible spot, by a rock that invited me to join (once I asked for permission) and provided me with an insight of being both solid and fluid*

(the rock and the water around it). This ended up being EXACTLY the missing piece in the phase of the inquiry I was at."

Their diverse experiences confirm the essence of the theories and perspectives of Eco-Psychology scholars and practitioners alike, who write about the inherent interdependence and interconnectedness of all of Nature: "Instead, deep ecologists see human beings as embedded in a complex web of biological life, rather than at the apex of biological hierarchy. Our true identity is in relationship with the larger ecosystem of which we are a part" (Winter, 1996, p. 247).

For several of the participants, the experiences in Nature created an even deeper—and transformative—impact, which one of them expressed as:

> *You know, I studied deep ecology at BGI. I was an outdoors guide at NOLS[11] and I spend a lot of time in nature. I dig quantum physics. I had the theoretical understanding of our world being not a collection of isolated objects, but a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. This is the first time I started experiencing it for real, and it changes EVERYTHING for me.*

Such experiences align to the theme of non-verbal connection and of belonging to Nature that Dr. Cohen has been practicing and teaching in his NSTP model for over 45 years (1993, 1997, 2002, 2003, 2008). According to him and the experiences of his students, NSTP rebalances our human disconnect from the natural world, by "enabling us to endow our thinking and relationships with the wellness, balance, and beauty of nature's ways" (Cohen, 2003, p. 31).

A special mention needs to be given to the practice of asking permission of Nature to join in; Cohen calls it "Natural Consensus" (2003, pp. 65-67). This practice created meaningful and

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[11] National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS – www.nols.edu) is a global wilderness leadership school.

deep impact for many participants, as evident from their almost-unanimous insights:

- "*I love the whole concept of asking for permission. It is respectful, mindful, and immediately puts me in a whole different space*."
- "*When I did not forget and did it, it was absolutely powerful. I had experiences of connecting with butterflies, trees, ferns, and spider webs (where I was told to stay away, so not to damage the webs)*."
- "*This is one of the KEY parts I am taking with me, as during the weekend I started feeling stronger where I was wanted, and where I was not. I even started doing it now, in my life, when I am outside. I just recently had an experience where I heard/sensed a warning to stay away from an area that was apparently dangerous*."
- "*I loved the way you set up the context for this part. It made me open up and become available to the world around me, and connect on a much deeper level. It happened several times. I had several experiences with both feeling wanted/invited—or not—in various places in nature. I felt that the connection I was feeling was infinitely bigger than just me. It is like I stopped being blind*."
- "*I did it this week* [after the retreat] *when running; I stopped at some point and had the whole environment—the wind and the dunes—cheering me to continue and run*."
- "*I loved asking for permission, and am going to keep this one with me. It allowed me to feel much more connected to the world around me. Also, when I did that, I felt a lot more open and vulnerable—especially when being in nature and looking up. This is something I am taking away with me and am looking forward to doing more. Even for five minutes a day. It will help me remove myself from the artificial world and connect to nature, to the natural cycle of things*."

From these comments, it is evident that nature played a significant role for most of the participants of this research. For some, it provided a little insight, a moment of peace and presence, a missing element. For others, the emerging clarity ended up being very significant:

> *Seeing nature as equal engager in a relationship was very new for me. Doing it for the very last time was profound and powerful for me, as I asked for—and received—much guidance, as I was facing the sunset. There was a big tree in front of me, and I engaged with a transformative interaction with the tree, getting profound clarity around the elements of my Why Me?© framework. All the pieces fell into place.*

From the review of the experiences of the participants, we can conclude that, indeed, Eco-Psychology supports a holistic worldview. This worldview posits that the world is an integrated whole (rather than a dissociated collection of parts), there is a fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and beings, and we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature (Capra, 1996; Cohen, 1997, 2002, 2003; Schlitz, Vieten, Amorok, 2007; Winter, 1996). We can conclude that such learning experiences can be augmented greatly by incorporating Applied Eco-Psychology and NSTP practices, as expressed by the participants going through the Right Livelihood Quest.

Key Theme—Collective Group Experience

The theme of a collective group experience aligns with the notion of Social Learning, whereby we inquire, grow, and learn in and through relationships with others (Bandura, 1997; Barrett, Thomas, Hocevar, 1995; Brown, Isaacs, 2001; Capra, 1989; Cooperrider, Whitney, 1999; De Quincey, 2005; Gergen, 1994; Merriam, Bierema, 2013; Wheatley, 2002). The primary repeating notion among most participants was captured as: "*I could not have imagined a*

more perfect group of supportive travellers on this deep transformative journey." The two main factors that contributed to the richness of the experience for the participants were the diversity of the groups, and blend of individual and group time.

The importance of diversity was expressed as:

> *I really liked the intimate setting of the weekend retreat, and also the way you set up the way to listen throughout the weekend, whereby each person can be a mirror for our own experience. The diversity among people, like age, professional background, community of belonging, really helped deepen my experience. Moreover, even though I knew some people already, I got to know them in a whole different way—especially due to a place where we are disconnected from civilization and technology*.

Another participant articulated it as, "*I really appreciated the diversity of the group of participants. There were people I knew better, and others I have not known at all—and yet, everybody's participation was beautiful and contributed greatly to the overall experience*." It was interesting, and perhaps surprising, to observe how many participants used the phrase "community of belonging" after only a short weekend experience. Many articulated the value of having a group go through the same process together, learning and inquiring within a safe and trusting container:

> *Going through the experience with a group was very valuable and powerful for me. It created a safe space and a sounding board for my journey and experience. As the weekend went on, I clearly saw that people are becoming mirrors for each other—and the cohesion it created for everybody*.

Several of the participants wanted more group time: "*One wish for me is to have had more time to engage in deeper conversations with other participants,*" while others appreciated time on

their own: "*I really appreciated the time away from the group, to allow me to do my own processing. And the overall process was wonderful, interesting, and intriguing.*" For one participant, the group learning created a barrier, which was articulated as, "*One of the important takeaways for me was the awareness of how much I kept listening to everyone else, which caused me to suppress my own voice*."

Ultimately, the importance and the value of having others—diverse or similar—has been a very valuable factor in this inquiry and learning process, as articulated by many:

- "*I really enjoyed going through the process with a group—it was a key for me, because I was able to relate to other people's stories and see myself in them. Hearing their sharing and experiences was very impactful and valuable for me.*"
- "*The process was really powerful one for me, and I enjoyed it immensely. I see it as a very necessary process, and doing it in nature was incredible. I enjoyed the structure, the process, and how it all came together. There was a lot of clarity and healing for me in it. The biggest thing for me, though, was doing it with a group of people and hearing the voices of others and their underlying themes—similar to mine—I start making these connections. Thus, the group process part of it was really powerful and valuable for me.*"
- "*The most significant—and perhaps surprising—factor was the level of trust and openness of all the participants. People really put themselves 'out there' in a very vulnerable way. Even people I did not know beforehand. This was hugely valuable for my process, and I know it was the same for others as well.*"

Historically, the concept of collective learning experience is not new. As Etienne Wenger stated, "they were our first knowledge-based social structures, back when we lived in caves and

gathered around the fire to discuss strategies for cornering prey" (as cited in Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002, p. 5). We have certainly evolved since then, and as our lives became increasingly more complex, the imperative to continue learning in—and with—a community of others has become stronger (Lesser, Fontaine, Slusher, 2000; Pór, 2001; Sharp, 1997; Wenger, 1998). Wheatley (2002a) summarizes it eloquently as, "people learn best in community, when they are engaged with one another, when everyone is both student and teacher, expert and apprentice, in a rich exchange of experiences and learnings" (Sec. 6, para. 8). Thus, we can see that the concept of social learning was confirmed in this research.

Critique of Methods Used and Limitations Encountered

The findings of this study were limited primarily to BGI students and some of their spouses. As such, there already might be an orientation and positive inclination towards looking into life purpose and meaning, since these are the types of students BGI attracts to their program. Conducting another such project with participants not explicitly affiliated with a school and a program that is already focused on life purpose and meaning could have yielded different outcomes.

Additionally, most of the students have already been familiar with me in a faculty capacity, which could have created an appeal to my professional perspective and an additional "blind trust" to what I bring forward. Having someone else conduct such research can also be effective in exploring this particular limitation.

Action research is an iterative methodology, with one of the strengths being its emergent nature. Change takes form slowly while being gradually informed by the growing understanding of those using it (Dick, 1999). This study consisted of one iteration of Action Research cycle,

and thus might be limited in its scope to the possible changes it can bring forth to the participants over time—since aligning one's life to one's vocation is a lifelong process. This, conducting another iteration of this research project, with the same participants, at a certain future point in time, will allow for further learning and impacts to be explored.

Finally, there is the issue of scope and scale, whereby the two research groups were of nine and 19 participants, and a curiosity remains as to whether the process can be scaled up to significantly larger groups.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

As I sat down to write this section, I wondered—will I find what I was looking for? Will the reality of the research findings confirm the value and impact of an experience—such as this Right Livelihood Quest—that I dreamt of when I started this project? These conclusions can be seen, in a way, as a "moment of truth." I felt a palpable mix of curiosity, excitement, and trepidation when I thought about my research hypothesis: integrating the principles and practices of Applied Eco-Psychology will enable me to guide a group of individuals to do the same in an inquiry process that helps them gain clarity on their right livelihood. The following conclusions can be drawn based on the findings of this research project.

Conclusion 1—There is a growing yearning for an inquiry into one's vocation, right livelihood, and purpose.

My 18 years of executive and professional coaching, as well as the ten years of teaching at BGI, have demonstrated to me that many are yearning for a lot more than simply job and income. People are yearning for a life lived towards a greater purpose, meaning, and making a difference with some form of the world at large. While there are many who express it through art, volunteering or spiritual pursuits, many others are looking for more. A growing body of writing and research confirms my observations and experience (Albion, 2000; Burgess, 2006; Leider, 1997; Levoy, 1997; Muller, 1997; Palmer, 1999). Despite the fact that many of the research participants went to BGI, looking for their next career with more meaning (through the lens of business practices focused on sustainability), they still joined this research project—looking for even more direction and clarity: "*what I am walking away with, from this experience,*

is that missing piece that I came to get from my 2-year MBA degree—and did not. Thus, I am DEEPLY grateful" (research participant). This desire to live a meaningful and purposeful life emerged very clearly and explicitly as a repeating theme again and again throughout this research project: "*I have done the career thing, making money, living a comfortable life. It was nice for a while, 'golden handcuffs' style. I am after something more meaningful, with purpose. I want my soul to sing. I want to bring my whole self to the world*" (research participant). Participants were looking into more meaning with their work and vocation, yet many were looking into a much more holistic way of living their lives, both in personal and professional realms. Such life has been articulated by Palmer as "living divided no more" (1999, p. 32), and it was a repeating theme for the majority of research participants: "*For me, it is about an alignment of the highest order. Everywhere in my life, whether at home, work, or with family. I am done checking out some parts of me at the door*."

Conclusion 2—Social learning is a necessary ingredient for the Right Livelihood Quest.

Despite being a short experience—in comparison to the two-year degree at BGI that most participants were undertaking—this research project created a profound and transformational experience for many of the participants, engaging not only their minds but also their hearts and souls. They often used the word "magic" to describe their experiences of deep connections with their small "*quest tribe*" (research participant) and expressed clear desire to preserve this community beyond the end of the research project. Such co-created meaning of a learning experience is articulated by Gergen as: "words fail to make sense until there is at least one other person to give assent to their meaningfulness. Sense-making is thus a collective manifestation,

requiring the coordinated participation of two or more persons" (as cited in Van Der Haar, 2002, p. 28). There certainly was a lot of value and insights in the individual inquiries and solitude time for many of the participants. Without minimizing the importance of the individual reflection and integration experiences, the main areas of benefits expressed by the participants around the aspect of social/community learning are captured by the following points:

- The existence of an ongoing support and collaboration system for the research participants, and the impact such system created on the individuals' insights ("*Going through the process with a group was really a key for me because I was able to relate to other people's stories and see myself in them. Hearing their shares and experiences was deeply impactful, valuable, and quite transformative for me*").
- An opportunity to continue the process of lifelong learning with others, when looking at aligning their lives to their vocation ("*I have done years of deep personal growth, yet am now realizing that most of it were on my own. This atmosphere, of being a part of a group—even though there were some strangers—transformed me in ways I could not have imagined. It ended up being a very rich experience, and I want more learning with them*").
- Wanting to continue to be connected to the environment where the participants were deeply seen and accepted throughout their very personal and vulnerable moments and experiences ("*The level of trust and openness of all the participants blew me away! People really put themselves 'out there' in a very vulnerable way. Even people I did not know beforehand. This was unbelievably valuable for my process, and I know it was the same for others as well. This is THE space where I*

want to continue my learning journey").

Conclusion 3—Nature and Applied Eco-Psychology are an integral component of this process.

It became evident that experiences in Nature provided a much-needed and valuable part of the inquiry the participants engaged with. For some, quiet and short reflection moments in nature were all that was needed at that moment: "*There was this moment when nothing was making sense to me, and I just needed to be away. I stepped out and simply sat by the creek. It took all of five minutes for everything to fall into place. Everything!*" (research participant), whereas for others, it was a deeply immersive experience: "*Every time I went into nature and sat quietly, patiently opening myself up and taking as much time as I could, the dots connected. It was as though everything around me was co-facilitating this process with you*" (research participant). Through the lens of the experiences with nature, participants experienced a shift in perception that went beyond the cognitive—into a directly perceptual and experiential (Berry & Tucker, 2009; Plotkin, 2003; Roszak, 1992; Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007; Sheldrake, 1994; Winter, 1996). Doing so, they deepened their insight and takeaways from the inquiry process of the research. It is what Cohen writes about, articulating the ways the Natural Attraction Model helps people, by "creating moments that let Earth teach and reduce duality by feeling and thinking like nature works" (2008, p. 7). Thus, regardless of the duration of experience in nature, there is compelling evidence that Applied Eco-Psychology and NSTP enriched the inquiry process of this research project, bringing an integral dimension to support those who are yearning for their right livelihood:

> "*OK, Simon, here is the truth. You know that I love you and have great respect for you—both as my instructor for the past two years, and as a human being. So, this quest was*

beautifully designed and powerful. However, without the nature component, it would NOT have been the same in richness, insight, and potency. To me, this was THE main thing that I take away from it, more than anything else. Even more than your teachings!" (research participant).

Conclusion 4—Right Livelihood Quest is an emerging process that needs to continue and evolve.

Action research is an iterative process where an increased understanding of the issue at hand often evolves during the course of the study (Dick, 2002; Stringer, 1999). In this research project, both the literature and the study findings offered deeper understanding into the inquiry and exploration of her or his right livelihood. The insights and transformation the research participants experienced are deep and compelling, yet they are also but a beginning of a lifelong journey. Many participants expressed inspiration and excitement to face their lives after the research project, yet were also clear that such reorientation of their lives will take dedicated and focused time, support, and community of others:

> *I have experienced many exciting, inspiring, and filled with potential starts in my life. They get envisioned, gather energy, attract interest, get started, and then tank because there is no-one to groom and support on an ongoing basis. I do not want the same thing to happen with my right livelihood journey. It is TOO important for my life.* (research participant)

Recommendations

This research project provided me with a unique opportunity to dive deep into a rich inquiry process with many like-minded and like-hearted passionate individuals. The original research hypothesis was, "integrating the principles and practices of Applied Eco-Psychology

will enable me to guide a group of individuals to do the same in an inquiry process that helps them gain clarity on their right livelihood." The following recommendations are based on current literature in relevant areas, research participants' comments, and personal reflections and experiences.

Recommendation 1—Continue conducting additional Right Livelihood Quests.

This recommendation addresses the impact the research project had on the participant, and their desire to share it with many others: "*This experience has to be available to everybody, and also has to become a mandatory course at BGI. I'd even say that in EVERY MBA program!*" (research participant). When witnessing the impact and the transformation the research participants experienced as a result of this process, combined with the passion I, as project researcher has for the topic, it is evident that more such experiences need to become available for many others.

Recommendation 2—Launch a Right Livelihood Quest Community of Practice.

I will briefly introduce a relevant and important concept of a "community of practice," which is described as: "communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). The relevance of the research conclusion is mirrored by the current literature on communities of practice, which makes a case for an organic, nurturing, and caring ongoing approach for a community of practice to continue thriving, learning, and evolving (McDermott, 1999, 2001; Sharp, 1997; Snyder, 1997; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002). This action research project initiated an ongoing inquiry among the participants of this research project; in

some cases, the inquiry and self-initiated dialogues persisted beyond the scope of the research timelines. Many participants expressed a desire and commitment to continue their exploration of right livelihood and vocation in a social setting, both face-to-face and online, with others who have gone through this research project experience.

Therefore, it is recommended that the project researcher launch and support the emergence of a Community of Practice (CoP) to further deepen the learning and exploration of one's right livelihood. This CoP would be a proof-of-concept prototype project, endorsed and nurtured by BGI, with the purpose of testing, exploring, and evaluating the many logistical and operational aspects of a community of practice for the BGI students and graduates after the completion of a Right Livelihood Quest. Additionally, as further Right Livelihood Quests are conducted (see Recommendation 1), this CoP will continue growing and evolving into a space of collaborative exploration of the topic of right livelihood.

Research Project Lessons Learned

This study not only addressed the original research question but also elicited possibilities and ideas for future research; these ideas are described below.

This research addressed the topic of right livelihood, primarily for students of BGI. When looking at the impact and emerging insights for the research participants, whether students or their partners, it becomes evident of the need and the opportunity to make it available to others beyond the circle of BGI—it would be beneficial to make it an open public offering. Further, it would also be useful to explore the possibility of offering it as a possible course within the BGI curriculum. Similarly, there is an opportunity to look for other educational institutions that are already aligned in their programs towards the topic of meaning and vocation for their students and proposing a similar course to augment their curricula.

The literature review on communities of practice described these entities as existing within the scope of a particular organization. Given that the premise of this research is unique in the fact that the suggested CoP would traverse many institutional boundaries, it would be valuable to explore and research the implications of communities of practice in diverse environments, where the only common denominator is participants' focus on vocation and right livelihood.

Action research is an iterative methodology, whereby the desired change and learning often results after several iterations of acting and reflecting (Dick, 2002). It would be valuable to continue further with this research theme, adding more iterations to the cycle of exploring and studying the inquiry of right livelihood over time.

Personal Lessons Learned

As I am facing the completion of another phase of a lifelong learning journey, I am savoring the opportunity to reflect on what has happened over the past few years, and specifically during the process of this research project. This period has been abundant in learning, both theoretical and applied, and I am resonating deeply with the words of Alan Alda: "You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. What you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover is yourself" (as cited in Russo, 2005, Sec. 1).

Qualitative research can be extremely rich in its findings—to the point of drowning in data. I found the visual data analysis to be extremely useful and simple, yet powerful, in representing the findings in a way that allowed me to see both the big picture and the small details at the same time—especially for a visual learner like me. I used the mind mapping technique to analyze the data, and after the first review of the different research activities, key

patterns and themes emerged almost naturally.

Action research proved to be a vibrant and engaging research methodology, which integrates understanding and action, theory and practice. It felt natural, compelling, and revealing at the same time. In this methodology, the researcher is also a participant, which fits well with the quantum physics notion of the observer being a participant (Capra, 1996; O'Murchu, 1999; Zukav, 2001), with the added twist of me being a faculty member for some of the research participants. However, it also leads to an interesting challenge. Orchestrating a research project, while being to some degree a member of the target community, required a very mindful engagement, which I believe I achieved. Due to the time and scope limitations of this study, I performed only one action research cycle of Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect (Dick, 2002). I wish I had done several cycles; this, however, remains as a recommendation for future research.

I was blessed with a technologically adept mind and natural curiosity, which—when combined with my experience in the field of Information Technology—meant I am very comfortable with computers and the Internet. Technology and I have enjoyed a friendly and intimate relationship during this project, with only occasional moments of disagreement. This gift provided me with the opportunity to explore and adapt several software tools that made this research project infinitely easier to conduct.

I had the privilege of participating in what I consider a "local community of practice" in Vancouver, BC, Canada, during my MA in Leadership and Adult Learning degree program, in 2005. We have self-organized at the beginning of the program, and continued to meet regularly for the whole two years of our studies; some of the participants continued their connection for years afterward. This has been a tremendously helpful environment, with opportunities to socialize, share our learning, explore solutions to various roadblocks, ask for help when needed

(there were ample occasions for it), and maintain a sense of ongoing learning in a community. This past experience of a local Community of Practice aligned beautifully with the theme of this research and one of the recommendations, supporting my belief that learning of such deep and important topics as one's vocation and right livelihood requires social learning environments.

Commitment does not exist in the isolation of one's mind; it shows up and is strengthened in conversations and relationships. There was a period during this study when I stopped talking about the project and its importance to me. After that, I lost my passion and interest in the research, losing valuable time. I was lucky to have good friends, coaches, and my own community of practice and support, who helped me reconnect with the original reasons for this undertaking. Then everything started flowing, together with the experience of how reality changes in conversations. This experience is illustrative of my own study—of conversations as tools for changing one's reality. I would, therefore, encourage every potential future researcher to talk about your project with as many people as possible. Each one of those conversations will strengthen your passion and conviction in what you are doing, as well as provide a valuable perspective from a potentially different worldview.

Reflection time is essential during the research, as well as a chance to "change the scenery." I took a break during the data analysis phase, left the daily distractions of my home life, and spent time analyzing the data in a quiet (and romantic) setting of the Tofino beaches on Vancouver Island. This get-away was necessary and much-needed, and allowed me to "fall in love with the data," as was suggested by my support network of faculty researchers. It also provided me with the opportunity to reflect on the data and the process, sitting in front of a large pile of puzzle pieces and allowing the picture to emerge—at its own pace. Often, there is a need to get away from the subject at hand for a while, only to come back and see it in a new light.

This project allowed me to deepen my practice of remaining open and flexible, embracing change, being mindful and aware of the different pieces of information and ideas that kept emerging from often-unexpected directions. There were enough times I needed to remind myself that there is a reason for every single thing to happen in the way it did—whether the reason was clear at the moment or not. Applying systems thinking (Meadows, 2008) during the study, looking at the various interconnected aspects of the project, proved invaluable in understanding both the system and what is the next action that needs to happen.

Would I do anything differently, if I were to repeat this process? One of the key actions would be to start the preparations and the data gathering activities earlier, as hard as it might be for someone like me who frequently operates in a deadline-prompted mode.

Knowing when to ask for help is extremely valuable. While I have certainly used the support available to me during this project, there were times I was going in circles longer than what would have been productive. Creating a support system in advance—and using it—is of paramount importance in an undertaking of this magnitude. Perhaps this is what communities of practice are all about, regardless of their declared purpose—a hobby, a research project, or lifelong learning and exploration of one's vocation and right livelihood.

Finally, as this project reaches its current phase of completion, I am left with a profound sense of humility and gratitude. Humility is for the trust the participants gave in me, opening up to being guided on such a rich, evoking, challenging, inspiring, vulnerable, joyful, and transformative experience—with openness, courage, and an excitement to follow this evolving process. The gratitude is for being given a chance to walk alongside them on this journey, exploring the timeless question, "Why am I here?" The other side of gratitude is for all my life experiences, which led me on this path, navigating my own life along the same question. What a

blessing to feel a little bit closer and more aligned to the words of Markova:

> I will not die an unlived life. I will not live in fear of falling or catching fire. I choose to inhabit my days, to allow my living to open me, to make me less afraid, more accessible; to loosen my heart until it becomes a wing, a torch, a promise. I choose to risk my significance, to live so that which came to me as seed goes to the next as blossom, and that which came to me as blossom, goes on as fruit (2000, p. 1).

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

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APPENDIX B

An Invitation to Participate in a Ph.D. Research Project: Why Are You Here? The Quest Towards Right Livelihood, Vocation, and Meaning.

An Invitation

You are invited to participate in a Ph.D. Action Research Project, conducted by Simon Goland. The purpose of this research project is to inquire into one's Life Purpose and Vocation, which we call Right Livelihood.

The overall process will include a pre-reading phase, followed by a guided process of 3 weeks of reflection, contemplation, and weekly activities in nature. These will be done individually, at your own pace and time. It will be followed by a 3.5-day residential weekend retreat. About a week after the retreat, there will be a 1-hour interview via Skype with Simon Goland, conducted at time convenient to you.

There are several objectives of this research project:

- To engage a group of participants into a multi-dimensional experiential process of inquiring into one's Right Livelihood. The research methodology itself is based on Applied Eco-Psychology, Experiential and Social Learning, and a proprietary Why Me?© framework.
- To explore the notion of social constructionism—how does the language we use and the stories we tell create our personal reality and vocational future.
- To better understand and experience one's belonging with the rest of the world in a holistic manner.

This initial invitation of intent will be followed up by a more formal and detailed Consent Form to participate in this research project.

APPENDIX C

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APPENDIX D

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APPENDIX E

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