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CONTEMPORARY COSMOLOGIES

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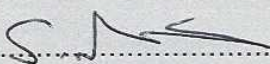
Module tutor: DR. JACK HUNTER

Assignment due date: 16-05-2022 ESSAY TWO

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“THINKING LIKE SUGAR LOAF MOUNTAIN.”

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to consider the effect of the recent pandemic on people's relationship with the natural world. I will explore how far the pandemic can be seen as an extraordinary experience given both the unexpected perceived existential threat and the abrupt shift in daily life created by lockdowns and restrictions. Throughout, I will consider how existing research provides evidence to show that extraordinary experience may result in experiencers developing a deeper connection with nature, often adopting a variety of pro-environmental behaviours, frequently underpinned by a connection that is considered spiritual. For this research project, I collaborated with a small group of people who lived and or worked in the community of Abergavenny, South Wales during the pandemic. As an Abergavenny resident, I consider my position as a researcher reflexively, examining to what extent am I an outsider or insider to the research process given I experienced the pandemic both in general but also in particular as a 'keyworker'. I explore how my initial methodology developed and was adapted to the lived experience of the participants as the project progressed. Further, I saw parallels between my emerging methodology and indigenous research methods. Drawing on this methodology, I consider how much my project was co-created by the community and examine of what value my findings might be to the participants. Findings from this project showed that the participants' relationship with the natural world had changed or been shaped during the pandemic in a variety of different ways, sometimes profound, and often leading to participants adopting a range of pro-environmental behaviours and attitudes.

ACADEMIC RATIONALE

In a recent study considering the effect of the pandemic, Daniel Briggs et al present findings from their research into the social harms of lockdown.¹ Their research is the culmination of a worldwide survey of people's attitudes to the pandemic, their process described as 'in-depth qualitative research.'² Briggs et al conclude: 'Generally, all our participants unanimously regarded the pandemic as a damaging and traumatic period of recent history, and this was made most evident to them through the discernable impact upon their familial and personal relationships.' Moreover, Briggs et al write that their respondents were all 'experiencing an existential threat.'³

Drawing on the insights of Briggs et al, I use their evidence that the pandemic was universally traumatic, to suggest that this period can be viewed through the lens of studies into extraordinary experience.⁴ The work of anthropologist, Jack Hunter shows that research into the relationship between anomalous experience and nature connectedness, covers a broad range of experience from the paranormal, to clinical studies of alien abductees, vision quests,

¹ Daniel Briggs et al, *Lockdown: Social Harm in the Covid-19 Era* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature 2021), pp. 1-368.

² Briggs et al, *Lockdown: Social Harm in the Covid-19 Era*, p. 19.

³ Briggs et al, *Lockdown: Social Harm in the Covid-19 Era*, p. 217.

⁴ Briggs et al, *Lockdown: Social Harm in the Covid-19 Era*, p. 217.

religious or spiritual epiphanies, to more daily contemplative moments.⁵ As anthropologist, Hunter explains, experiences of this nature ‘may have a practical application in elucidating the processes that lead to a sense of connection to the natural world which in turn often result in pro-environmental behavior.’⁶ Examples of extraordinary experience having changed experiencers worldview in relation to the natural world include that of philosopher and ecologist, Val Plumwood who suffered a near death experience after being attacked by a crocodile, described by Bron Taylor as an ‘experience that reinforced her compassion for non-human creatures.’⁷

Similarly, Harvard psychologist, John Mack when researching the traumatic accounts of alien abductees noticed a correlation between abductees accounts and an awakening of an ecological awareness, finding that ‘virtually every abductee receives information about the destruction of the earth’s ecosystem and feels compelled to do something about it.’⁸ Mack also described how many of the abductees had become teachers dedicated to promoting a new, and more nature focused way of living.⁹ Also, Mack reports abductees expressing a deep connection with animals.¹⁰

Taylor gives further examples in his book, ‘Dark Green Religion’ where he suggests that these kinds of extraordinary experience are spiritual in nature.¹¹ For Taylor, this dark green religion is one in which ‘nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care.’¹² Central to this belief is that of a ‘felt kinship’ with the non-human.¹³ Taylor explores these concepts by providing examples of spiritual relationships characterized by a new sense of connection with nature that often follow from an extraordinary experience.¹⁴ For example, Taylor describes the peak experience of Julia Butterfly Hill becoming an environmental activist after experiencing a ‘life threatening injury.’¹⁵ One category of experience he defines is the eye-to-eye epiphany, ‘a profound experience of interspecies communication.’¹⁶ Taylor gives the example of this type of epiphany, one experienced by Aldo Leopold who is now considered to be ‘the greatest ecologist and environmental ethicist of the twentieth century.’¹⁷ Taylor tells the story of Leopold’s epiphany: Leopold was employed to eradicate all the wolves in the U.S. He is nearly successful, but on one trip he shoots a mother wolf:

⁵ Jack Hunter, (ed.), *Greening of the Paranormal* (London: August Night Press, 2019), pp. 1-311.

⁶ Jack Hunter, *Parapsychology and the Ecological Self*, https://www.academia.edu/42942280/Parapsychology_and_the_Ecological_Self pp.15, [accessed February 2022].

⁷ Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 128

⁸ John E Mack, *Abduction*, (New York: Macmillan, 1994), p.413.

⁹ Mack, *Abduction*, p. 413.

¹⁰ Mack, *Abduction*, p.408.

¹¹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 10.

¹² Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 10.

¹³ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 53.

¹⁵ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 94.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.24.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 31.

‘We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes..after seeing the green fire die, I sensed the that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.’¹⁸ As Taylor describes, the outcome for Leopold was profound, it ‘reflected his deepening ethical holism and long-term reverence for wildlands.’¹⁹ From this experience, Leopold developed his influential land ethic and wrote the environmentalist’s ‘sacred text’, ‘Thinking Like A Mountain.’²⁰ Taylor writes that throughout his life as a writer and activist, Leopold ‘sought to awaken a reverence for life’, ‘and a sense of kinship with fellow creatures.’²¹ Developing this sense of kinship, Stephan Harding describes the transformative experience of ecologist, David Abram, after contemplating the activity of spiders in a cave. Abram ‘discovered that he was no longer able to see any aspect of the world as an inert or inanimate presence.’²² Abram became aware of how embedded he was in the natural world rather than separate from it. Harding talks about this as a kind of ‘deep experience.’²³ However, Harding notes:

‘Deep experience needn’t be as dramatic as Leopold’s or Abram’s, nor is it felt only in wilderness areas, for there are many kinds of deep experience. Some people have them whilst tending small window boxes in the city; others experience a continuous, almost background sense of deep connectedness.’²⁴ Reflecting Harding’s discussion of every day connectedness, David Abram describes this transformative relationship with nature in terms of ‘awareness’ -- which for Abram is synonymous with consciousness.²⁵ This awareness is ‘one that is an exceedingly amorphous and ephemeral, one that is notoriously difficult to pin down.’²⁶ Abram adds ‘the awareness that stirs within each of us is continuous with the wider awareness that moves around us, bending grasses and lofting the clouds.’²⁷

To answer my initial research question, I drew upon a broad definition of ‘extraordinary experience’ from those considered spiritual epiphanies to the more everyday but deeply felt engagement described by Harding and the everyday ‘awareness’ expressed by Abram.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of answering my question, I used qualitative research methodology because of its focus, as defined by Monique Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, on the study of people ‘in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or *interpret*, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them.’²⁸ To do this used an initial questionnaire format followed by five interviews. This approach which Hennink, Hutter and Bailey describe as the use of

¹⁸ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.33.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.33.

²⁰ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.57.

²¹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.32.

²² Stephan Harding, *Animate Earth*, (Totnes, Devon: Green Books 2006), p.52.

²³ Harding, *Animate Earth*, p.57.

²⁴ Harding, *Animate Earth*, p.57.

²⁵ David Abram, ‘In the Depths of a Breathing Planet: Gaia and the Transformation of Experience,’ in *Gaia in Turmoil*, ed. By Eileen Crist and H. Bruce Rinker (London: The MIT Press, 2010), pp.221-242 (p.222).

²⁶ Abram, *In the Depths of a Breathing Planet*, p 222.

²⁷ Abram, *In the Depths of a Breathing Planet*, p.223.

²⁸ Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods* (London: Sage Publications, p.10.

‘mixed methodology’ has the advantage of being able to use ‘survey responses to purposively select participants with diverse characteristics.’²⁹ Following from the qualitative work of Brady, I made a ‘request for additional personal comments incorporated in the questionnaire’—this generated a wealth of ‘rich data’ to consider, as Brady had found.³⁰ Also, drawing on the insights of indigenous researcher, Tyson Yunkaporta, who used artworks as part of his research, I invited participants to attach pictures or visuals should they wish. There was a small but interesting response that might be the subject for future research into this question.³¹ All ethical guidelines were respected throughout my research and ‘informed consent’ as described by Hennink, Hutter and Bailey was obtained by signed permission forms.³²

All follow up interviews were a combination of ‘semi-structured and unstructured’, as described by Judith Bell and Walters: I felt this approach allowed people space to move on to another subject at any stage due to the potentially emotive nature of the question so recently after the pandemic.³³ Questionnaires were distributed as Google Forms via email with some hard copies hand-delivered to participants who did not have access to email or own a computer. Participants were people who lived and/or worked in the Abergavenny area during the recent pandemic. Abergavenny is a small market town in a rural and agricultural area with access to the Skirrid, Blorengge and Sugarloaf mountains. Also there is access to hills, forestry and woodland, walks along the Rivers Usk and Gavenny, a canal way, farmlands, local parks and gardens. There is a mixed demographic with relatively affluent middle-class residents and largely working class areas with some parts of the town experiencing high levels of local poverty and child poverty.³⁴ Many of the people who work in the town travel in from outside the area.

Participants

During the pandemic, I worked for a supermarket as a keyworker where I was assigned to work in their petrol station facility. Therefore, a number of participants were drawn from colleagues and customers. Other participants were people with whom I felt I had a rapport, mostly people I had spoken with in cafes and pubs during easing of lockdown and prior to the pandemic.³⁵ Also, I approached a group of volunteers working in the local park, planting bulbs and tending flower beds, one of whom was happy to contribute. Of the 20 replies to my survey, 15 participants had been either working from home, furloughed for a period, or were keyworkers whose working day throughout the pandemic was outside of their homes. Three were retirees. I wanted a broad range of ages to participate and this was achieved with participants including; those in their seventies, 7 people aged between forty and thirty and a further 7 participants in their twenties. Participants represented a range of employment:

²⁹ Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, p. 106.

³⁰ Bernadette Brady and Alie Bird, ‘AA Niche Degree: A Case Study of an MA (in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology)’, *DISKUS*, (2013) 1-15 (p.3)

³¹ Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk*, (London: The Text Publishing Company, 2019), p. 17.

³² Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, p. 71.

³³ Judith Bell and Stephen Walters, *Doing Your Research Project* (London: OUP, 2018), p.213.

³⁴ Monmouthshire Beacon, *One in three children in poverty in parts of the county* (2018) <<https://www.monmouthshirebeacon.co.uk/news/one-in-three-children-in-poverty-in-parts-of-county-294023>> [accessed 5 May 2022]

³⁵ Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, p. 71.

including supermarket workers, public sector workers but also professional, managerial, garden and forestry services, NHS staff, and the hospitality sector. One limitation was the lack of infrastructure, telephone and energy workers and care-workers due to lack of access. Five people were selected for interview. However, at the interview stage my methodology was subject to modification. As Tony Whitehead notes the process of fieldwork was an iterative, creative and evolving one.³⁶ Whitehead emphasises this process: ‘once in the field, situations and circumstances change constantly. Gaining access to participants, being able to document field notes in a timely manner, having to use multiple methods...all required creativity and resourcefulness.’³⁷

Consequently, my interview process became an emergent one: Alexi didn’t want to be recorded, so I took notes. Carol and Alun could only find time to be interviewed in their workplace during breaks so these were unrecorded. Recording was difficult with Geraint and Maria as the setting was noisy. I took detailed field notes. But I felt this spontaneous, extempore unrecorded interview process produced richer results given interviewees were relaxed and in their own environment.

Co-Creation

As the research progressed, I began to see parallels between indigenous research methods and the needs of my community. Increasingly, as educator, Linda Tuhiwai Smith says of Indigenous research, the process was ‘a humble and humbling activity.’³⁸ I felt humbled by participant’s enthusiasm, moving and detailed replies to the research project. I felt this demanded a respectful response from me as a part of the community. Increasingly, I felt the value of the research would be primarily in how it would benefit the community rather than only a part of an academic process. As Tuhiwa Smith says: ‘Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people and to educate. They are expected to lead one small step further toward self-determination. Indigenous community development needs to be informed by community-based research that respects and enhances community processes.’³⁹ Reflecting this, one of my interviewees Ruth asked me: ‘so what you going to do with this then—will it help us?’ And as another interviewee, Carol said ‘I’m looking forward to knowing what we’ve found out!’ I read Carol’s comment as echoing Carol LaVallie & JoLee Sasakamoose’s concept of ‘co-creation’ a process of ‘co-constructing new knowledge’ with participants or co-creators.⁴⁰ As LaVallie and Sasakamoose suggest:

³⁶ Tony L. Whitehead, ‘WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY? Methodological, Ontological, and Epistemological Attributes’, *ETHNOGRAPHICALLY INFORMED COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL ASSESSMENT RESEARCH SYSTEMS (EICCARS) WORKING PAPER SERIES*, (2004), 1-24, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/542d69f6e4b0a8f6e9b48384/t/56495b19e4b0bfd3ce24605d/1447648025111/EpiOntAttrib.pdf> (accessed May 2022)

³⁷ Whitehead, ‘WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?’, p. 20.

³⁸ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd edn. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), p.5.

³⁹ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, p 149.

⁴⁰ Carrie LaVallie & JoLee Sasakamoose, ‘Reflexive Reflection Co-created with Kehte-ayak (Old Ones) as an Indigenous Qualitative Methodological Data Contemplation Tool’, *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 16.2 (2021) pp. 208 -219 (p.214) < https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349280301_Reflexive_Reflection_Co-created_with_Kehte-

“Reflexive Reflection engages participants or community members as co-researchers in the research process to further improve relationship trust, draw on group strengths and resources, and incorporate shared knowledge and action...”⁴¹

REFLEXIVITY

This reflexivity runs through my research project and is intrinsic to my methodology. As we see above in LaVallie and Sasakamoose, reflexivity is central to contemporary ethnography, as Haynes says:

‘Reflexivity is an awareness of the researcher’s role in the practice of research and the way this is influenced by the object of the research, enabling the researcher to acknowledge the way in which he or she affects both the research process and outcomes.’⁴²

On a reflexive note, I feel I experienced the pandemic in the same way as all participants did in general, but also in a particular way, as a keyworker. As I was new to the community only moving here four years previously, I found the process of working within the community and the solidarity I felt with colleagues cemented an insider/emic status I hadn’t felt before—one that underpinned by project. Further, when I walked to and from work, sitting in the cold with others outside when cafés were allowed to be open, made me feel part of a community with those who could or had to venture out. On other occasions, I felt like I was an observer of the pandemic not a participant, viewing the pandemic through the behaviour of the thousands of customers that I served. These feeling informed my research and I considered the complexity of my role as researcher. As Smith says ‘the critical issue with insider research is the constant need for reflexivity.’⁴³ Moreover, I felt my insider status keenly throughout the project given participants often asked if they could read the findings of the project. Like the indigenous ‘insider researcher’ Smith describes, I would ‘have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day to day basis’ after.⁴⁴

Overall my status as insider-outsider during the process is best described by Nicholas Campion, ‘the emic-etic, insider-outsider relationship is therefore not a polarity but a constant shifting set of ideas and experiences which may vary with time and locations.’⁴⁵ My research process and findings were underpinned by this constant reflexivity.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

From the 20 surveys and 5 interviews, 17 participants reported the pandemic as effecting

[ayak Old Ones as an Indigenous Qualitative Methodological Data Contemplation Tool/link/6027d0de92851c4ed56b35cd/download](http://ayak.OldOnes.as.an.Indigenous.Qualitative.Methodological.Data.Contemplation.Tool/link/6027d0de92851c4ed56b35cd/download)>[accessed March 23 2022]

⁴¹ LaVallie & Sasakamoose, ‘Reflexive Reflection’, p.211.

⁴² Kathryn Haynes, ‘Reflexivity in Qualitative Research’, in *Qualitative Organizational Research*, ed. by Gillian Symons and Catherine Cassell (London: Sage 2012) pp.72. <<https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526435620.n5>>

⁴³ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, p.157.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, p.157.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Campion, *Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement: The Extent and Nature of Contemporary Belief in Astrology*, (PhD Thesis, University of the West of England, 2004).

their relationship with nature, in that they became more aware and felt more powerfully connected. This nature connectedness was expressed in a variety of ways but with a common language, discussed below. The three participants who said their relationship didn't change were all strongly connected to nature already. For most participants, this new sense of nature connection resulted in significant and varied pro-environmental behaviours. Participants wrote or talked about being involved in local regeneration projects, gardening, having closer relationship with animals, taking up wild swimming and taking an interest in issues around various kinds of pollution: noise, air, litter, and dog fouling. It was interesting that greenhouse gases were not discussed. Others spoke of a more daily contemplative engagement connected to their well-being. Thus the literature was broadly supported by the findings with the exception of Briggs et al. Participants did not unanimously consider the pandemic an extreme event.⁴⁶ All the participants who did not feel that pandemic was an extreme event were key workers.

'No I don't see it as an extreme experience because I went to work every day the same: same routine, except with restrictions—we were more protected (prison) than you were (supermarket).' Geraint/ Prison Officer.

Geraint added: 'I don't think it was traumatic as I was going off to work so I didn't feel that isolated. My lifestyle didn't change much work wise. It was same routine, same concerns but with covid issues.' In a later follow up interview, Geraint said: 'In my job constant crisis is just another day.' However, he also expressed his experience in terms that mirrored that of extraordinary experiences describing his daily life as: 'surreal...being the only person on the train, a '28 Days Later' moment.' Similarly, Maria and another participant, Cadfan, a tree surgeon who worked throughout, didn't see the pandemic as extreme but both described it as an extreme event for others: Maria said 'not having children lessens your responsibility like thingybob, anxious for her kids.' Geraint added, 'yes, it was beyond distressing watching people get ill.'

However, for those that saw the pandemic as an extreme event their responses were emphatic— 'Absolutely!' being used frequently to answer the question. With reference to Taylor, how far people saw their relationship as a spiritual one was significant: when asked if they had a spiritual experience connected to the pandemic, 10 participants said 'no' but a significant number, 7 participants, described nature related experiences that were overtly spiritual or echoed the 'deep experience that lies below the surface of everyday awareness' as described by Harding.⁴⁷

WHO LET THE DOGS IN?

I interviewed Carol, in her workplace; Carol wrote in her survey that she saw the pandemic as an extreme event. She said:

'It sounds awful but before, the dogs I just took for walks, they were there to greet you in the morning and when you come home. But then we were together 24/7 and I noticed them more. Vets have never been so busy since, not just there's people taking more dogs, not just because everyone got a dog but because people notice their dogs needs more. I do. One day we just sat in the park and made daisy chains—I haven't done that since I was young. And

⁴⁶Briggs et al, *Lockdown: Social Harm in the Covid-19 Era*, p.217.

⁴⁷ Harding, *Animate Earth*, p.57.

love my horse! Being with the horse and Jan was lovely... I noticed he was like a human. He does have a wicked personality, pulls a face sometimes like a teenager when he doesn't want to do something!'

I felt that Carol was articulating a transformative experience akin to Taylor's eye to eye epiphanies, creating a deeper connection with her animals and valuing them more, expressing what Taylor refers to as a 'felt kinship' with the non-human⁴⁸ Mack also mentions that his experiencers 'often expressed a deep connection with animals and animal spirits.'⁴⁹ Toward the end of the short interview—Carol had to deal with a work issue—she asked me how the research was going. I mentioned I was pleased that I had a broad cross section of participants, including someone who was sceptical of man-made climate change. Carol said:

'That's my husband, Rhys that is.'

'But you said he loves nature?'

'He does! But he thinks it's just about money for them, Bojo...Rhys started wild swimming during lockdown. Does it every day, when he can...tiny streams, finds a river, he'll just go in. I'd like to do it too but don't know if I have the balls! I'd like to join Blue Tits.'

'The wild swimming club?'

'Yes, that's at Keepers. Run by a nice lady. Rhys feels so revived after, loads of energy and feeling amazing. Like watching Wim Hof and the celebrities when they felt it was totally a spiritual thing.'⁵⁰

THINKING LIKE SUGAR LOAF MOUNTAIN

Like Carol's husband, Alexi is skeptical about environmentalism and man-made climate change. In his survey he wrote:

'I believe the world is not interested in the environment other than how much money can be made from it.' When I interviewed him in a local cafe—respecting his request not to be recorded—I asked him to expand on this.

'I think it's been overplayed; it doesn't matter what you do nature will win. For the Americans, it's just selling stuff, wind-farms and CO2 projects. Gates, Biden, are awful. Climate change is natural—it goes in cycles. Nature will sort things out.'

Alexi has a long standing relationship with nature, one that hadn't changed as a result of the pandemic—something he didn't consider an extreme event. He had moved to Abergavenny from Bristol, 'a few years ago, to specifically embrace nature more.' Also, Alexi was very aware of local initiatives around re-wilding and concerns about pollution, and people controlling dogs on the local Sugar Loaf mountain. On tree planting, he said:

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.13.

⁴⁹ Mack, *Abduction*, p.408.

⁵⁰ <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m00177q4/freeze-the-fear-with-wim-hof-series-1-episode-5>>

“It all depends on what trees they are planting...trees that are around for 100 years or trees – cheap trees—that last twenty only, like for like, y’know. But they’re not.’

On his survey, in response to my question: “Is there one particular experience ...relating to the natural world that stands out...?” Alexi wrote: ‘Discovering 14 ways to climb Sugar Loaf and meeting different nationalities whilst climbing.’ I asked him why he had spent so much time on one mountain. Alexi replied:

‘Otherwise Sugar Loaf might miss me!’ he replied. We both laughed.

Although not described as an epiphany, Alexi had expressed his relationship with the mountain in terms that echoed Taylor’s reference to Leopold’s book ‘Thinking Like a Mountain.’⁵¹ Alexi’s view showed how deep some participants’ relationships with nature and place are and how they vary, for despite being skeptical of climate change narratives, he was intimately connected to the natural world. I wondered if the pandemic had changed this relationship. Alexi said he wasn’t sure. He said he hadn’t changed his views—however it might make further research and discussion to explore the sense of animism described by Harding as ‘seeing nature as alive and full of soul’ that is contained in his Sugar Loaf ‘missing me’ comment.⁵²

RUTH

In contrast with Alexi, Ruth thought the pandemic was ‘absolutely’ an extreme event. She provided very detailed responses to my survey questions and we also talked whilst she tended newly laid flower beds in the park. Also, unlike Alexi, Ruth thinks there is an urgent man-made ecological crisis. The pandemic had made her ‘more aware of the damage we have done by interfering with ecology, with polluting the planet.’ Ruth’s comments suggested she saw humans as ‘ecologically vulnerable’, as we see in the response to extraordinary experience of Val Plumwood, although this wasn’t generally addressed by other participants.⁵³ No participant suggested the natural world was ‘fundamentally indifferent’ to us as individuals as Plumwood concluded following her extraordinary experience—instead participants regularly expressed ‘appreciation’ and ‘gratitude’ for what a benevolent natural world provided.⁵⁴

As a consequence of Ruth’s new connection with the natural world, she had become active in transforming the local park over the last two years. Ruth wrote that she had contributed to the ‘regeneration of flower beds...planting bee friendly and bird friendly flowers. Creation of wildflowers meadow and woodland area with snowdrops, bluebells, aconites and narcissi.’ Like Alexi, there is a social and well-being aspect to her activism. She ‘could socialise with volunteers and passers-by.’ In our short discussion in the Park, Ruth said: ‘I want to leave the bluebells, flowers behind for people when I am long gone.’

⁵¹ Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.33.

⁵² Harding, *Animate Earth*, p.27.

⁵³ Val Plumwood, *Prey to a crocodile*,

<<https://www.aislingmagazine.com/aislingmagazine/articles/TAM30/ValPlumwood.html>>[accessed March 12 2020]

⁵⁴ Plumwood, *Prey to a crocodile*, np.

TIME

Throughout Ruth's replies, and during her interview, the theme of time recurs. This is also true for many other participants in both survey and interview. The pandemic gave Ruth 'time.' Other key words on this theme were: 'having time', 'finding time' to 'observe' or 'notice' the natural world, words that echo Harding's contemplative route to nature connectedness. For example, Maria, in interview, said, 'we had time on our hands.' Also, Carol said, 'normally, we don't have time. Or make time enough for ourselves, others but not ourselves. We're always checking dairies, so being with my daughter and the horse was lovely, sun on my face, a bit of breeze.' Alun mentioned time frequently during his interview and follow up discussion. I talked with Alun in his workplace. We had to break off for him to do some work at one point. Alun had described the pandemic as an extreme event, answering 'very much so.' As Mack and Hunter's research shows, Alun had taken up gardening following this extreme event.

Alan said:

'I didn't know I was going to enjoy gardening—I thought it was something that your parents did do! I grew honeysuckle; built planters. Not sure how much time I'll have now, but it should look after itself for a bit. I grew chillies I did, dried them and everything—I used to be a chef, see. I will do it still but it's finding time.' 'Having time' was a problem for Alun now he was back at work and had domestic duties, with a family to care for. The challenge for Alun was 'finding time' to stay engaged.

In his follow up interview, Alun said emphatically: 'They, we, need to find a way to do *nothing*! To stop. Like working from home has given people time. To do things, to do more gardening. I'd like to do more gardening. But I don't know how they are going to do it.' For Alun, and others, we were given time, not just to be active but to 'notice'. Alun wrote that he began 'noticing and taking photos of plant life on my nature walks' and 'during lockdown and the pandemic more flowers bloomed and grew in areas that they hadn't before.' There was another theme relating time that might be interesting for further research. Both Alexi and Cadfan discussed the need 'do something' or anything to help nature. Cadfan wrote that 'rewilding (has) more to do with consumerism and guilt than attempting to divine what Nature needs from us. Wait, and let Nature lead is interpreted as purism and reckless inaction.' Similarly, for Alexi nature worked to its own internal clock that needed little interference from humans.

Owen, a writer, one of the people I invited to do the survey—said he didn't have 'time' to complete one. However, when I saw him in the pub, he told me about a profound experience he'd had during the pandemic. In a direct reflection of Harding, Owen sent me an iMessage describing it "It was a common lime tree, nearby the house. Something I did daily. I sat in the same chair in exactly the same spot over a few days and watched a leaf flush," ending his message with a one-word sentence: 'Time!'

BIRDSONG

In contrast with Owen's above experience, when asked if they had any unusual or spiritual experiences during the pandemic the majority replied 'no.' The breakdown was 66% to 34%. However, the number that said they did, feels significant especially given how closely they

resemble those described by Taylor and Harding's research. Like Owen, Richard described what he called a 'spiritual experience'.

'Standing in the woods at dusk and watching how wildlife was changing as darkness came along i.e. songbirds giving way to owls...I had thoughts of how man is such a small part of the environment and yet influence it so much yet wildlife uses only what is available where we change everything to suit ourselves.'

Richard's experience echoes both Taylor's epiphanies and Harding's 'deep connection' moments. It was noticeable how a new connection with nature was related to birds, Carol and Ruth both 'noticed' birdsong due to absence of traffic.

ON NOTICING

The word 'noticing' as expressed by Alun, Ruth and Carol appeared throughout the surveys and interviews. There were a number of other common key words and phrases expressing participant new engagement natural world.

- * noticing
- * discovering
- * looking at (nature) in a different way
- * watching closely
- * observing more what's around you
- * experiencing

The language used here seem to be a direct everyday articulation of Harding's more academic language, for example, Carol's renewed relationship with her animals mirrors Harding's description of Abram's 'deeply interactive, participatory encounter.'⁵⁵ Similarly, Owen's daily watching of a leaf unfurl, reflects Harding's description of 'active looking' or one of the contemplative exercises suggested by Harding to foster nature connection.⁵⁶

EVERYDAY AWARENESS

Participants in expressing a renewed relationship with the natural world, also used other keywords, particularly 'appreciation' and 'awareness'.

- * Appreciate more
- * More in touch with
- * Closer to
- * More aware of / Awareness
- * Taking care of
- * Gratitude
- * At one with
- * Take for granted
- * (for) Well-being

⁵⁵ Harding, *Animate Earth*, p.52.

⁵⁶ Harding, *Animate Earth*, p.42.

Abram is also instructive here for he uses similar language to the participants to describe transformative experience of nature: for example, when describing our relationship with the atmosphere he writes, 'the awareness that stirs within each of us is continuous with the wider awareness that moves around us.'⁵⁷ All the above keywords seem consistent with the everyday 'deep experience' described by Harding, that 'lies just below the surface of everyday awareness.'⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

The findings of my research into the effect of the pandemic significantly supported the literature that shows that 'extraordinary experience' often results in a changed relationship with the natural world, one that is characterised by a new and deeper connection. Furthermore, as previous research shows, this connection frequently leads experiencers to adopt pro-environmental behaviours and concerns. Within the community of Abergavenny participants in the research had noticeably adopted new nature related behaviours and attitudes; including gardening, local regeneration projects, wild swimming, a willingness to discuss local ecological issues and simply spending more time in nature. Participants also described a closer relationship with the landscape, a kinship with animals and 'noticing' birds, plants, trees and flowers. Further, in support of the literature that shows this engagement can be seen as a spiritual one, some participants described explicit spiritual experiences or expressed themselves using everyday terms that mirrored the academic language used to describe nature connected spirituality. One major theme to emerge was that participants suggested that lockdowns provided them with 'time' to notice, enjoy, observe and engage in the natural world in a way that pre-pandemic life prevented. They hoped they would continue to find time to engage with the natural world. Throughout, my research I had to adapt my methodology to the needs of individual participants and the community in order to fit in with their daily lives. As the research developed, I found parallels with indigenous research methodology, where in order to respect the contribution to the project of the community, I was required to be constantly aware of my position as both insider and outsider. Further as the indigenous research methods show, I saw the participants as co-creators: therefore, it became clear to me for the research to be of value that it had to be of use to the community--many of whom expressed interest in knowing the findings and 'what I was going to do with it.' I would suggest the results of this project invites further research and discussion within the broader community on many local issues including finding time to retain and nurture this nature connectedness.

⁵⁷ Abram, *In the Depths of a Breathing Planet*, p. 223.

⁵⁸ Harding, *Animate Earth*, p.57.

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APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

My name is Simon Joseph Nevin. I am an M.A student in 'Ecology and Spirituality' at University of Wales, Trinity St. David. I live and work in Abergavenny. For my current module, I'm undertaking a research project looking at the effect of the last two years of pandemic on people's relationship to the natural world. All respondents to questionnaires will remain anonymous and all replies will remain confidential. Just a note in advance that in submitting this form that you are happy for the information you supply to be used in my research and my eventual research paper. This questionnaire should take you around 15 minutes or so but feel free to spend longer and answer the questions in more detail if you feel that you would like to say more about your experience.

ABOUT YOU

1. What year were you born?
2. Male/female/ other /prefer not to say:
3. Are you married /single/ other:
4. Do you have children?

WHAT YOU DO.

Are you:

Employed?

Freelance / Self Employed?

Retired?

Student?

Other?

2. What is your current profession or occupation, if retired or unemployed what was your previous occupation?

3. During the pandemic did you...

Work or study from home / remotely

Were you furloughed?

Continued to travel to your place or places of work?

Retired?

Other?

WHERE YOU LIVE

1. Where did you live during the pandemic, which town, village or area?
2. Do you still live there?
3. How long have you lived in the area?
4. Did you have access to a garden or outside space in your home?
5. Did you make use of your outside space, if so how?
6. Do you own any animals? If so, what kind?

OUTDOORS

1. As restrictions permitted, during the pandemic, did you take exercise at home or exercise outdoors?
2. How did you spend your time outdoors?
3. Did you spend this time with other people or alone?
3. What kind of natural places did you spend time in?
4. Did you take exercise in or visit areas locally that you had never been to before?
5. Have you continued to spend time outdoors either exercising, gardening or doing other activities?
6. Have you taken up new outdoor activities or any other hobbies during the pandemic?

THE NATURAL WORLD

1. Are you interested in the natural world?
2. Do you think your relationship with the natural world has changed as a result of your experience of lockdowns and the pandemic? Feel free to give details.
3. Is there one particular experience or series of experiences relating to the natural world that stands out for you during this period?
4. Have you ever been involved in with any environmental projects or behaviours no matter how small or large? Feel free to give details.
5. Have you been taking steps to protect the environment and the natural world, either by undertaking group activities or through individual behaviours, since the pandemic?

BELIEFS

1. Do you consider yourself a spiritual or religious person? Please feel free to give details as you wish.
2. Are your beliefs, if any, related to the natural world?
3. Did you have something you might call a spiritual or unusual experience over the last two years?
4. Have your beliefs changed at all as a result of the pandemic?

LOCKED DOWN

1. What things did you miss most during this period?
2. What positive things, if any, did you feel came out of this period of your life?
3. Do you think the experience of the last two years, the pandemic, has changed the way you think about the world?

4. Do you feel that the pandemic and consequent lockdowns were extreme events outside of anything you had experienced before ?

MEMONTO

If you wish, please feel free to attach (include) a photograph, a piece of writing, a quote, a drawing, a poem, or any image that has meaning to you from this time. These images can be of something you have created or found. Thanking you in advance for allowing these images to be used in my research project.

FINAL THOUGHTS

NB: Is there anything related to this subject that you would like to share that isn't covered by the survey questions? Please feel free to add a comment!

Thank you so much for completing my survey and for helping me with my research!

Hopefully, the results of this questionnaire together with further research will be of benefit to the community of Abergavenny and surrounding areas.

APPENDIX 2

Photos provided by Alun.



© Photographer

Photographs of local park regeneration.



