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## Nature as an Impermanent Canvas: An Intergenerational Nature-Based Art Community Engagement Project

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Nature as an Impermanent Canvas:

An Intergenerational Nature-Based Art Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Mental Health Counseling & Expressive Arts Therapy with a Specialization in Art Therapy

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## Abstract

The longing for permanence, including an attachment to objects, is a perpetual desire in human beings. In the artistic world, the longing for permanence is reflected in the desire to conserve artworks forever. This has left humans in an existential dilemma of interpersonal and transpersonal conflicts with the world beyond them. A one-day community workshop in nature-based expressive arts was offered to explore the idea of transience and impermanence through creative existential and transpersonal notions. The workshop involved time indoors and outdoors, and activities included self-check-ins and checkouts, a sensory awareness and mindful walking exercise as mover and witness, and locating a resonating space and visually contemplating it. The experience culminated in the creation of a nature-based art installation that evolved out of the participants' understanding of existence and their experience of the workshop. This community-based project was completed by a multiethnic and multigenerational group including one Caucasian woman, one Latin American woman, and one Middle Eastern man. Participants took part in a three-hour immersive experience where they created an ephemeral art installation in nature, and consequently an impermanent collective art piece. Results indicated that nature-based art therapy is a viable means for exploring existential and transpersonal concepts in a community environment, and that intergenerational presence and connections are valuable and beneficial within this process. More research needs to be done on the benefits of existential and transpersonal expressive-based experiences in nature.

*Keywords:* impermanence, nature-based art therapy, mindfulness, existential meaning, transpersonal meaning, intergenerational community program.

### Nature as an Impermanent Canvas:

#### An Intergenerational Nature-Based Art Community Engagement Project

Life can be defined as the natural unfolding of events, and this notion can be witnessed by humans during their presence in nature through its organic changes. This parallel between humanity and other beings can be inherently identified by humans when they are attuned to their natural environment. Through spending time in nature, humans are able to witness nature's unfolding by: watching seasonal changes, observing and contemplating their surroundings, and creating impermanent art from its elements in response to these changes. When humans connect with nature, they learn to recognize this inherent experience beyond themselves.

Nature offers individuals the space to be vulnerable, while at the same time allowing them to feel a sense of expanded self and unison with the environment around them. Art and nature-based methods combined can help individuals achieve life-altering experiences. This paper describes a nature-based intergenerational community project for adults ranging from late 20s to early 60s entitled "Earthful Being" to portray the above-mentioned benefits. This workshop was conducted to explore existential and transpersonal themes through art. The purpose of this project was to facilitate an expansive embodied understanding of the interconnection between human beings and nature through an elaborate multilayered experience.

Insights into participants' mental health can be dynamically explored through open-ended therapeutic existential and transpersonal approaches. These frameworks tend to be more inclusive of participants' experiences in order for them to gain insights and introspection. They do not conform to a clinical definition of health; rather, they allow the client to be their own healers and observe their unfolding concerns. The concepts of existence and transience are

clearly present within a natural environment; therefore, nature was selected as the ideal platform for an exploration of this sort.

Expressive arts therapy practitioners have been gradually integrating nature-based therapy principles and approaches into their practice (Kopytin & Rugh, 2017). This therapeutic approach incorporates nature and the arts to foster healing benefits for all beings of the world. An extensive body of research portrays the restorative benefits of nature on human beings, which in turn leads to more sustainable living choices and environmental awareness (Davis, 2011). Nature helps individuals crystallize their understanding of themselves, in order to understand their place in the environment, through their creative process. On a more fundamental level, nature can help individuals better attune to the world around them, by restoring their lost connection with the environment. This process can culminate in self-expression, which in turn fosters a more extensive creative dialogue.

This project proposes that nature-based art therapy can be a valuable therapeutic process for individuals and communities to foster an expanded sense of self, develop a deeper connection with nature, and explore the meaning of life through transient artistic expression. The first section of this paper includes a literature review regarding elemental terms and theories that support the premise of the suggested intervention. The second section outlines the methodology and delineates material pertaining to data collection and analysis. Reflections will be included to portray my culminating understanding of the experience. This includes limitations and challenges encountered to help the reader comprehend the scope of the art project.

### **Review of Literature**

This section explores the different theoretical perspectives and therapeutic underpinnings that will be applied within this study, including how these frameworks can be cohesively

integrated to reflect the nature of the project. These therapeutic frameworks consist of existential art therapy, transpersonal art therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, arts-based ecopsychology, and environmental expressive therapies.

### **Existential Therapy and Existential Art Therapy**

Existential therapy is an all-embracing way of thinking, as opposed to a set of determined methods to follow (Harris, 2013). This therapeutic framework implements a set of “guiding principles [including]: finding meaning in life... discovering what is most meaningful to an individual [which, in turn fosters] change, and confronting death and accepting its inevitability” (2013, p. 354). These guiding principles allow for a more open and exploratory therapeutic framework, where the client feels as though the psychological unease is part of their personal life journey. Within this framework, psychological malaise is not perceived as pathology; rather, it is examined in the context of freedom and responsibility. A therapist does not apply “therapist-directed interventions” (p. 354), but instead simply accompanies the client on their journey of self-discovery. With this non-directive, yet supportive approach, the client is able to take ownership of the therapeutic process and gain further insight into their own situation. This framework is similar to the act of observing nature, accompanying it, and allowing it to unfold.

The existential framework combined with art can be extensively beneficial to clients’ growth, as it provides them with a creative outlook. Moon (2009) defines existential art therapy as “a dynamic approach to the therapeutic use of art processes and imagery that focuses attention on the ultimate concerns of human existence” (p. xviii). Through the art process, clients are able to creatively explore existential themes and gain further insight into them. Metaphor and storytelling are modes of thought communication in existential work, as opposed to a more rational thought process. Existential art therapy offers the space for individuals “to willingly

embrace multiple possibilities and meanings in life [and to engage with the creative process] with a sense of wonder and awe to establish a respectful creative dialogue, create stories, and figuratively invite artworks to teach them what they know” (Moon, 2009, pp. xix-xx). This sense of curiosity allows the client to intentionally foster an artistic conversation with the creative process, by allowing the moment to moment process to unfold and a sense of flow to occur, while they listen to their creation. When this artistic dialogue takes place in nature, it allows the environment to also be part of the conversation and for answers to be revealed from it.

**Meaning-making in existential art therapy.** Through abstract modes of communication, “meaning becomes a self-transcendent phenomenon,” beyond verbal and linear communication (Moon, 2009, p. xviii). By creating a bridge between art therapy and existentialism, the imaginative and metaphoric realms are expressed through the artwork, and with this relationship, meaning-making in life can be fostered through the creative process. This existentially explorative work transcends the self and allows individuals to contemplate “the collective human struggle for people to understand themselves as well as their relationship with the universe” (2009, p. xiii). The process also contains a transpersonal aspect to it and allows a client to access hidden realms, fostering a deeper understanding of self in relation to the outside world. Meaning-making can also be enhanced through the creative process within a natural environment.

**Imagination in existential art therapy.** Accessing one’s imagination and creatively engaging with it is the essence of the therapeutic process. The art process is considered a healing remedy that emerges through “creation and contemplation” (Moon, 2009, p. xix). In other words, the art process involves creating the artwork and consequently reflecting on the expression that arose through imagination, free association, and metaphor. Given that life is ever-evolving, the

meaning of the artwork can constantly change as well, reflecting life's transient nature and nature's unfolding form.

### **Transpersonal Therapy and Transpersonal Art Therapy**

A transpersonal experience extends beyond one's perceived sense of self and allows the individual to feel connected to a greater reality. The term "transpersonal" is defined as "beyond (or through) the personal" (Daniels, 2019, para. 2). Transpersonal psychology also refers to transcendence as a main characteristic of this approach (Kossak, 2009). Through a transpersonal experience, individuals can achieve a transcendent state of embodied attunement with their environment (Battista, Scotton, & Allan, 1996; Kossak, 2009). Transpersonal psychologists John Battista, Scotton, and Allan (1996) developed a model of "eight levels of consciousness" (cited by Kossak, 2009, p. 15). These levels portray the process of transpersonal transcendence:

Level one involves pure physical interaction, level two involves perception through sensory data, and the third level includes affects which function as conscious drives. In the fourth level, ... emotions are embodied. Reflective awareness or cognition is a fifth level of consciousness and the sixth level is self-awareness where cognition can be operated on the imagination. The seventh level refers to information about self-awareness or the awareness of being aware and the eighth level involves the universe as a whole or a transcendent consciousness (p. 15).

During an experience in nature involving existential concepts and explorations beyond the self, individuals are bound to gradually experience the above-mentioned intuitive process and attain a more embodied and attuned state of consciousness; consequently, individuals develop an embodied transpersonal understanding of themselves and their connection with the world beyond



them. Therefore, a richer experience can be fostered through an incorporation of the creative process within the natural environment.

Transpersonal art therapy is a developing contemplative discipline and therapeutic practice that “embrace[s] the imaginal elements of the creative process as a rich healing opportunity” (Franklin, 2019, para. 2). It is a person-centered and holistic approach that allows clients to explore multiple aspects of their lives and gain deeper insight into them through the art process. Intentionality, empathy, and compassion, both for self and others, are implemented characteristics within this therapeutic framework (Franklin, 2019). An art therapist implementing this therapeutic framework strives to work with the individual on different existential levels: “personal, cultural, institutional, and spiritual” (para. 2). These levels allow clients to experience a more wholistic, intersectional, and absorptive transformation. Therapists will therefore work with their clients in multi-behavioral and multi-layered manners within this framework, which extend beyond the self. Through the intentional choice of specific materials, an art piece is created and is considered a “living image” (para, 2). This image takes on a life of its own by reflecting clients’ thoughts and emotions back to them, and visually teaching them what they need to know about themselves regarding a specific situation.

Transpersonal art therapy is a gateway for individuals to search inwards for healing and strengthening characteristics. Implementing a creative process within this approach allows for a more immersive experience to take place. During this process, clients use imagination and metaphor as meaning-making tools. Throughout the process and journey of self-understanding and self-unfolding, feelings of disconnect and self-judgement can arise; therefore, it is important for clients to work with whatever emerges and embrace all aspects of themselves in order to have a more authentic, whole, and transformative experience. This transformative experience can be

enhanced within a community setting in nature. The interactions with others can allow validation from them, and the natural environment reflects the concept of unfolding reality and everything taking its organic course. Acceptance and commitment therapy is a framework that helps clients foster this attitude of non-judgment.

### **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a therapeutic practice that emerged as part of the third wave of cognitive-behavioral therapies. Empirical evidence suggests ACT's efficiency with several challenges among individual clients, couples, and groups (Harris, 2013). ACT promotes humanistic characteristics, such as "compassion, empathy, acceptance, and respect" (2013, p. 356). These characteristics are considered fundamental qualities that therapists need to cultivate to build a solid rapport with clients. It is a forgiving practice in that it considers the clients and therapists as "imperfect human beings" who are navigating this experience together (p. 356). This humanistic therapeutic mindset allows for a stronger sense of trust to be established between client and therapist. Similar to existential therapy, ACT is based on a few guiding principles: "not pathologizing human experiences, acceptance, living in accordance with one's values, recognizing the self as context, cognitive diffusion, and mindfulness" (p. 356). Therapists who apply ACT within their practice help clients accept inevitable and unpleasant experiences without judgment. Depression and anxiety are considered a part of life and the human experience, as opposed to simply being mental health conditions. Validating clients' unpleasant thoughts and emotions is beneficial in order for them to learn to honor all parts of themselves, and learn how to live with these parts. This process of accepting nature's unfolding form without judgment, by honoring all its seasons and allowing it to take its

course, allows clients to create an expression with whatever they have around them, with embracing acceptance.

Within ACT, the principle of cognitive diffusion provides the space for clients to healthily acknowledge suffering as part of existence, through relational frame theory (RFT). RFT practitioners consider language to be “at the root of suffering” (Harris, 2013, p. 357). They consider that language extends beyond words, such as “symbols, images, and gestures” (p. 357). According to RFT practitioners, the mind and language are interconnected, and this connection is at the core of psychological distress (2013). Through cognitive diffusion, clients learn how to detach from language by “observing thoughts intentionally without judgment” (p. 357). Allowing cognitions to unfold without judgment helps clients acquire insight and a broader perception regarding these thoughts. This process allows individuals to distinguish themselves from their thought process. More specifically, through the process of cognitive diffusion, clients understand that thoughts are words about the reality they are experiencing; therefore, they can shift in nature. An art process incorporated during cognitive diffusion can help reinforce the concept of allowing thoughts to unfold without judgement. This reinforcement can further crystallize clients’ understanding of their experience and allow a sense of flow to emerge in their artistic process within the natural environment.

### **Similarities Between Existential Therapy, Transpersonal Therapy, and ACT**

All three approaches have a contemplative aspect to them that extends beyond the self and allows a person to experience a sense of internal flow. Within these therapeutic frameworks, emotional transformation takes place, and a more heightened awareness is fostered within an individual. All three concepts also avoid pathologizing, lessening, and ridding symptoms; rather, they encourage practitioners to work with clients’ experiences.

Existential therapy and ACT mutually focus on three characteristics, which are “freedom, acceptance, and values” (Harris, 2013, p. 358). These characteristics can be considered treatment goals that are addressed through a flexible and minimally structured framework. The flexible approach creates space for clients to work with their struggles in order to attain further insight; consequently, symptoms are gradually alleviated. Both existential therapy and ACT consider *attaining freedom* to be an important objective. While ACT portrays this notion by “freedom from the constraints of language hijacking our experience of reality [by subjugating] language in favor of direct experience,” existential therapy portrays freedom as a characteristic to attain liberation from limitations (Harris, 2013, p. 358). When a person is able to master language to represent their experience of life, susceptibility decreases, and reaction patterns lessen; flexibility is also gained, which leads to freedom from self-destructive habits. The dialectical framework towards attaining freedom within existential therapy is similar to the ACT-based process of attaining greater flexibility for greater freedom (2013). Additionally, the mastering of language can be explored through non-verbal means within an art therapy framework, as art can transcend the power of verbal expression, through artistic creation. This framework provides clients with a richer and more diverse repertoire of self-expression, leading to more freedom. Consequently, this repertoire can be expanded within nature, as it also provides individuals with an added repertoire of sensory-based elemental expressions, such as: the sounds of birds, the feeling of the wind blowing, the crackling of leaves, the smell of the damp earth and flowers blooming, and the sound and smoothness of water.

With a greater sense of freedom, flow, and insight, the above-mentioned frameworks consider that an individual can genuinely identify what is important to them in life, and what values are significant to them while expanding beyond the notion of self. Once clients identify

and apply these values on a daily basis, symptoms of suffering will be accepted and gradually alleviated, leading to more effective change. Therefore, all approaches appear to be compatible with each other within one therapeutic framework.

### **Existential and Transpersonal Arts-Based Ecopsychology**

Ecopsychology considers that the answer to existential questions and dilemmas lies within nature, and it is important for individuals to foster a deeper connection with their natural environment in order for them to find the answers. Theodore Roszak (1992) first coined the term “ecopsychology” in his book, *The Voice of the Earth*. Ecopsychology is a “philosophical, evolutionary-based” framework that considers “the human psyche [to be] an integral part of the web of nature [,] holding that awareness of the interrelatedness of all systems of life on earth, [and serving] as a necessary aspect of good psychological health” (Naor, 2017, p. 205). This perception is founded on the principle that many psychological distresses, disorders, and environmental predicaments emanate from humans’ disconnect with their natural environment (Davis, 2017). When individuals are in-tune with their surroundings, they are “internally aligned- and [their] physical and emotional well-being is enhanced” (2017, p. 64). This form of attunement allows individuals to feel a sense of embodied wellbeing and transpersonal connection. From an existential standpoint, ecopsychology also considers that “the deep and enduring psychological [and philosophical] questions- who we are as human beings, how we grow, why we suffer, how we heal” are interrelated to individuals’ degree of rapport with nature (Davis, 2011, p. 138). Through cultivating this deeper rapport, meaning, purpose, and quality of life will be dramatically enhanced, and individuals’ lives will consequently feel more balanced.

A program took children living in an urban environment into the wilderness for about a week. After undergoing the experience, participants reported “a growing sense of wonder [,] and

a complex awareness of spiritual meanings as individuals feel at one with nature, yet they are aware of the transience of individual concerns when seen against the background of enduring natural rhythms” (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983, in Davis, 2011, p. 138). Individuals gain deeper insight about themselves, form a better understanding of their surroundings, experience an increased sense of presence and entrainment with nature’s rhythms, and cultivate an understanding that things are constantly evolving in nature. Subsequently, with the integration of art, a more wholistic understanding of existence emerges and clients start relating this concept to their own life concerns.

**Nonduality.** Acknowledging this oneness and vital bond between nature and humanity is termed nonduality, and this realization will allow individuals to have healthier relationships with themselves and the world around them, as they are replanting their roots and reconnecting to the natural rhythms of life. This deeper connection reflects a transpersonal existence with one’s environment, beyond the self; therefore, similarities between transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology can be observed. John V. Davis (2011) explores these two frameworks which have nonduality as one of their fundamental concepts. Davis explains that “nonduality refers to the locus, structure, and nature of self-identity, encompassing those states of Being and consciousness in which the sense of separate individuality and autonomy has been metabolized or dissolved into the flow of experience” (2011, p.140). The concept of self-identity merges into a more heightened state of consciousness, through which the sense of self is still present but not separate from others.

Through this cosmic, unitive, and extended perspective between the self, the creative expression, the world, and the universe, individuals gain inner-harmony, wisdom, awareness, patience, presence, and inner-flow. Throughout the journey, they access dimensions of self that

they had never known before. Davis elaborated on A.H. Almaas's "five boundless and non-dual dimensions," each containing a "sense of freedom, clarity, and authenticity which transcends ordinary identity without denying or rejecting a sense of individual consciousness" (in Davis, 2011, p. 140). These dimensions speak to the concept of nonduality while the individual maintains a sense of self. The first dimension allows individuals to realize that "the world is experienced as a flowing, dynamic unfoldment in each moment (2011, p. 140). During this dimension, individuals realize that the world is experiencing rebirth during every moment that unfolds. This forgiving notion also allows individuals to reconsider their life choices as they understand that they are being reborn during every moment. The second dimension involves recognizing the "richness and beauty of existence and the origin of the limitless aesthetic qualities of the world" (p. 140). When individuals experience this level of beauty, nonduality and presence are further manifested (2011). At this dimension, individuals recognize that "there is one existence, as opposed to two or many. It is merely an infinite presence that possessed a pattern" (p. 142). The aforementioned pattern is how individuals experience the world through their senses, including beings and objects around them (2011). With this heightened awareness and all-encompassing understanding, "one can embrace both nature and humans as manifestations of Being" (p. 140). The human condition and the notion of existence reflect the concept that life is always shifting, and change is the only constant. Change is the only constant that is perceived in mother nature as well, and when individuals venture out into nature, they can clearly observe this constant unfolding and feel at one with nature as they follow its rhythms. Nonduality is also reflected during the state of flow that is experienced through the creative process. Artists enter a different realm when creating and become one with their artwork. Therefore, one's sense of "Being" is a manifestation of the process of life, and with the

understanding of non-duality with the environment, while incorporating a creative process, individuals are better able to navigate life's challenges.

### **Environmental Expressive Therapies**

Environmental expressive therapies is a developing theoretical framework within the field and includes nature-based interventions from each expressive modality in an attempt to enhance clients' therapeutic experience. Alexander Kopytin and Madeline Rugh (2017) highlight the importance of environmental expressive therapies in their book *Environmental Expressive Therapies* by portraying the work of international expressive therapists who integrate nature as a creative source and co-therapist, within their therapeutic practice.

**Embracing human wholeness through environmental expressive therapies.** Similar to the perspectives of existential therapy, transpersonal therapy, ACT, and ecopsychology the notion of "human wholeness" embraces all aspects of self, including human 'ailment' (Naor, 2017, p. 204). This concept considers that human suffering and mental illness are caused by "the fragmented, unfulfilled self, expressed by human yearning for wholeness" (Naor, 2017, p. 204). To foster a sense of wholeness, individuals must foster a deeper relationship with themselves and with the environment around them. Naor also articulated that "deep unsettling yearnings- even when painful and dismantling among healthy humans- are an inner calling to live a fuller life" (2017, p. 205). Through therapy, these yearnings can become a motivation for individuals to cultivate deeper connections with fellow humans and beings beyond the human world; as a result of these formed connections, a sense of wholeness is fostered within these receptive and open individuals. Through the creative process, "these significant ideas can be manifested in a concrete form" (p. 206).



**Deep ecology, eco-centrism, eco-identity, and creative environmentalism.** Deep ecology is a framework that enables individuals to expand their sense of self by intensely experiencing and relating to the natural world around them by focusing on their innate longing to connect with nature (Courtney, 2017). This inherent aspect of the self that is emphasized on through deep ecology is termed the “ecological self.” This term was coined by Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess during the 1970s (Courtney, 2017, p. 101).

Spending time in nature and creating expressions of life from it while being in a sense of community, allows individuals to adopt an eco-centric mindset and honor all life forms while taking care of their environment (Kopytin & Rugh, 2017). Shaun McNiff (2017), a pioneer in the field, also emphasizes the importance of adopting an eco-centric approach to life, which involves a mindset where all living beings are equal, as opposed to humans being at the top of the chain. Expressive therapies are a concrete tool to embody this philosophical concept in order to embrace human wholeness and be able to live in harmony with nature.

A similar term that can be used is eco-identity, and it is considered related to a creative identity as an artist is able to perceive and experience the beauty of nature and biodiversity. This perception leads to the experience of “biophilia” (Kellert and Wilson, 1993; Wilson, 1984, in Kopytin, 2017, p. 44). A biophile forms a sense of inner and outer compassion towards nature and all forms of life, and this can be considered an art form as much as it is considered a way of life. Eco-identity is also the process of co-creating with other living beings, and humans act as both participants and witnesses to the creative process, regarded as a “community of subjects” (p. 44). This time spent in nature is a form of “environmental action” during which individuals learn from their surrounding environment, learn to co-habitate with it and attune to it in order to foster a sense of adaptability and stronger coping skills within their own lives (2017). This form of

environmental action is also called “creative environmentalism” (p. 44). Through creative environmentalism, individuals regard green spaces as a source of inspiration, a hub for health and wellness for humans and other beings. Instinctively, humans will inherently form a desire to protect these spaces through creative environmental advocacy, which can be witnessed in their nature-based creative pieces, whether indoors or outdoors.

**Environmental conception of the creative process.** Art is an expressive interpretation of life and a mere reflection of the source of creation, found in nature. The process of creation is similar to the process of natural growth in the environment, and both processes also reflect individual growth and existence. Shaun McNiff explains that if individuals conceived art as “a basic human function, like breathing” and treating their creative expression as a “force of nature,” creativity becomes second nature (in Kopytin & Rugh, 2017, Foreword, p. xii). One can nurture this existential and transpersonal concept by being present in the moment to moment experience, and opening up to different possibilities. McNiff also believes that this framework “offers a more realistic and life affirming vision of how to create with all aspects of nature and become more resourceful partners” (2017, p. xi). With this partnership, individuals are connecting with the natural world around them, and connecting with an untapped part of themselves through the materials they create with from their surroundings.

**Mindful walking as a source of creative sensory-based inspiration.** Individuals exist through touching and defining the parameters of their body. Touch is the source for the rest of the senses, and it is through it that beings shape their conception of reality. Greek philosopher, Aristotle, considered that “the absence [of touch] spells doom to man and all animals” (Weber 1991; Courtney, 2017, p. 105). Without the sense of touch, it is evident that beings cease to exist, as it is the interface between the body and the external world. This notion leads to both

existential and transpersonal conceptions of being. A'Court (2017) mentions that “all the defining parameters of perception and cognition, including psychotherapeutic concepts, are inseparable from our embodied existence” (p. 123). This is evident as the mind and body are part of one entity of being, and what individuals perceive is experienced through both the bodily senses and the mind. Therefore, both these systems of being are interrelated and constitute an individual's perception of life.

Art is a somatic-based process that is created with the body, and physical qualities of the process are extensively valued and acknowledged within the field of art therapy, compared to other forms of psychotherapy that value cognition over perception. Therefore, a body-based directive is a valuable process to include in a nature-based art workshop. This allows participants to explore the open-space, ground themselves, contemplate, introspect, gain inspiration, and use their body as a tool for creative expression.

Walking has shown to quiet down the mind by slowing down individuals' conceptual and racing thoughts, and allowing them to be more attuned to embodied reality. Mindful walking also allows the mind to expand its horizon of inventiveness by allowing it to wander into creative realms of imagination and inspiration. Walking is a “living symbol for taking initiative” as it comprises the characteristics of “direction and agency” and entails a disposition for transformation (Ford, 2011; A'Court, 2017, p. 134). These characteristics are substantive within a therapeutic framework, and there is a stronger mind-body connection that forms when their interconnected presence allows individuals to overcome different challenges. This embodied process implies that “just as ‘each moment arises anew’ (Germer et al., 2013, p. 71), mindful walking, with each step, yields a new view, and creates and reveals new dynamic relationships with surrounding life” (A'Court, 2017, p. 137). This process provides an individual with an

unfolding and ever-evolving understanding of one's construction of reality. When mindful walking is combined with nature, art, and a therapist's attuned and embodied presence, insight is manifested in clients through a "sensory-based attunement" within their surrounding environment (Malchiodi, 2016; A'Court, 2017, p. 125). This heightened attunement incites a new outlook on matters in the client through both elusive, corporeal, and thought-based shifts.

**Working with natural elements to create ephemeral art and to explore transience.**

Creating art in nature can be a way for individuals of embodying the natural world around them and symbolically portraying the experience they are physically and emotionally undergoing within the present moment (Kopytin, 2017). Many nature-based creative activities are a means of "develop[ing] somatic awareness and an embodied sense of self in one's relation to the environment" (2017, p. 33). This heightened awareness can be witnessed after individuals have undergone mindfulness-based creative activities that involve mindful walks followed by creating art, such as nature-based installations and formations (Kopytin, 2017). It is therefore important that participants' choice of elements, objects, and materials be based on their draw to them, in order for the experience to be meaningful and introspective.

In an art therapy context, therapists are observing how clients experience nature and the environment around them through the creative process. They "observe how clients interact with the art materials, how medium, moves, marks and meaning interpenetrate, and how they, and we as therapists move and behave spatially in relationship within the field" (A' Court, 2017, p. 124). Natural materials inform artists about life concepts in ways that man-made elements cannot, as the web of innate interconnection in the natural world is engrained in their being.

Transient art can be a challenging process as it can evoke many controversial philosophical and psychological notions. However, ephemeral art can also be the gateway to

exploring these challenging themes in a creative manner. Mary O'Neill (2016) explores how ephemeral art, with its transient nature, has a raw and interactive way of communicating with the artist and viewers. The author moves beyond the mere idea that "longing for permanence in art [symbolizes] the desire for immortality" (p. 151). O'Neill takes the topic to a different level, and suggests that ephemeral art represents subjects that extend beyond one's own mortality.

Storytelling is emphasized as a form of ephemeral expression, and "like ephemeral art, stories exist in the moment of telling, and require an engagement from the viewer/listener to come fully into being" (2016, p. 150). O'Neill portrays the complexity of storytelling by depicting it through various lenses: the artwork itself, the artists, and the audience. O'Neill also argues that ephemeral works take on a life of their own and challenge the individual engaging with them to reconsider their values regarding attempting to maintain permanence in life. The above-mentioned frameworks, integrated with an ephemeral art process, allow individuals to further engage in these creative and philosophical dialogues in nature.

### **Mindfulness-Based Existential and Environmental Expressive Therapies**

Mindfulness is an intentional practice that has been practiced in Buddhism for over 2,500 years. Nevertheless, mindfulness can be considered an independent practice as it can be practiced by any individual on a daily basis. A definition of mindfulness that relates to the nature of this study is "an enquiry into human existence [that] focuses on enquiring into our experience of the present moment, and being receptive to what arises" (Nanda, 2009, p. 148). Mindfulness is cultivated by being attentive and receptively present in the moment to moment experience of life.

Mindfulness is authentically cultivated and practiced through the following characteristics: "present centeredness, intentionality, and non-judgment" (Harris, 2013, p. 351). By cultivating present centeredness, individuals learn how to experience the flow of the moment

in an embodied manner; by tapping into the moment, further attunement to oneself and insight are acquired. By embracing intentionality, individuals witness their thought content through purposeful and continual awareness. By cultivating non-judgment, individuals allow their thoughts to arise without any form of suppression or judgement, through simply perceiving the thoughts within the moment. This process allows individuals to separate themselves from their thoughts and to perceive them as perpetually changing, which can translate into the moment to moment unfolding of experience in life.

**Mindfulness-based existential art therapy.** Mindfulness-based existential therapy combined with art therapy, provide therapists with a richer and more diverse repertoire of therapeutic practices. By helping the client identify what they would like to focus on, whether it is specific characteristics or general distress, therapists can merge traditional interventions with third-wave cognitive-behavioral therapies like ACT to meet different clients' needs (Harris, 2013). When individuals apply “a receptive, curious, and attentive stance to the arising of [their] moment to moment experience, [they] begin to recognize that all phenomenal experience which arises...has a beginning and an end to it, and is in a state of flux” (Nanda, 2009, p. 150). This mindset speaks to the idea that transience is the nature of existence, and that with this embodied understanding, humans are able to better accept the impermanent reality of material items, situations, and life.

This truth is a life altering understanding, and with acquired therapeutic flexibility, it is a beneficial outlook for clients in that it allows them to navigate life and its challenges with the knowledge that continuity and change are ever-present, and that everything has a beginning and an end; consequently, acceptance is cultivated within their life perception.

**Mindfulness-based environmental expressive therapies.** Mindfulness-based art therapy practices can be incorporated into experiences through “body-mind-environment focused activities” (Kopytin, 2017, p. 34). These activities can help in attaining the goals of environmental expressive therapies through mindfully connecting with the environment and acquiring presence through attunement and embodiment. The practice of earth-based art therapy incorporates “spontaneous, expressive art-making with variations on ancient and modern mindfulness practices, bringing ourselves into close compassionate witnessing observation of the ‘ground’ of our being and its constantly shape-shifting nature; connecting in awareness” (A’ Court, 2017, p. 124). This process involves noticing physical sensations in relation to one’s state of mind, including thoughts and emotions in relation to nature (Kopytin, 2017). With more heightened mindful focusing, more enhanced healing can occur through the environment’s restorative nature. During this experience, “participants can immerse in ‘quiet fascination’” through mindful presence (Kaplan, 1995; Kopytin, 2017, p. 34).

Mindfulness-based environmental expressive arts therapies programs include an introduction to mindfulness while focusing on the importance of presence and attention to physical and mental wellbeing. Introductory activities before the artmaking process can include: breathwork, mindful walking, and relaxation to promote a deeper experience and introspection. Following the introductory activities, the following sequence of steps could be carried out. Journaling could be integrated for further reflections in order to consequently “translat[e] insights from journaling into artwork” whereby participants spontaneously select items that resonate with them without putting much thought into the process (Taylor, 2016, p. 16). The process also allows for further investigation and exploration of the words. The third step involves “collecting and sorting the materials” (Talyor, 2016, p. 16). This selective process involves

playing around with the materials and elements to create an artistic expression. The fourth step involves moving away from and towards the artwork while being mindful and present in order to foster a state of flow. This process allows individuals to see links in their artwork and to make meaning out of their expression. Engaging with the reflections that emerge through contemplation and meditation on them leads individuals to experience a holistic multi-sensory experience. The last step involves “exiting the process” (p. 18). By having practiced mindfulness to experience creativity and flow, individuals are able to let go of their creative expression, and in turn apply this process to their own lives.

### **Nature-Based Art Therapy Intergenerational Community Programs**

Community-based intergenerational programs provide participants with a more profound and collective experience. Research has shown that arts-based “intergenerational programs on cross-age attitudes, cross age interactions” have beneficial effects for all generations (Belgrave, 2012, p. 2). Participants form bonds, learn from each other, and find similarities in each other’s creative expressions and life experiences. The purpose of forming intergenerational programs is to “increase community connections through [the arts] by fostering cross-age relationships between ... generations that [do not often interact] (2012, p. 2). It is a therapeutic and interactive way to bring individuals from different generations, cultures, and lived experiences, together.

The concept of “intergenerativity” is a “theoretical and practical framework” that is defined as:

The meaningful fusion of ideas and emotions that emerge from conversations and experiences shared between the generations and inspires actions that benefit individuals’ minds, social lives, and the natural world that sustains and connects persons of all



generations, past, present, and future. (George, Whitehouse, & Whitehouse, 2011, pp. 389-391)

Within a therapeutic context, by having participants communicate to each other and learn from each other's lived experiences and strengths, age no longer acts as a barrier across generations as displayed in modern society, but rather allows for a cross-generational collective experience to emerge. Nature also reflects an intergenerational communal space in which different plants, trees, and animals have different lifespans and live together in harmony. Two main characteristics that intergenerativity can foster among multi-age programs are "collective wisdom" and "informed action" (George, Whitehouse, & Whitehouse, 2011, p. 391). These characteristics may allow individual and communal-based collective healing to take place through shared and informed intergenerational support systems and creative expressions within a natural setting.

### **Method**

To explore the above-mentioned concepts, a one-day intergenerational community workshop was offered that included: several brief meditation sessions, mindful walking, one nature-based individual art installation session, one nature-based collective art piece, and two ceremonial rituals. The aforementioned therapeutic frameworks were used to create an engaging intergenerational art project for community engagement. By facilitating an experience of shared creative embodiment with nature, the workshop became a form of personal, communal, and environmental exploration where participants fostered a more attuned and interconnected sense of self, a stronger bond with individuals around them, and the world around them.

### **Researcher/Facilitator and Community Description**

The workshop took place in mid-February of 2019 at the Mass Audubon Nature Center and was entitled “Earthful Being: A Mindful Nature-Based Creative Exploration.” The intended objectives of this workshop included forming community-based intergenerational connections within nature, fostering the exploration of existential and transpersonal themes, and creating ephemeral nature-based art installations to contemplate impermanence. The Nature Center is a “community-based urban sanctuary,” located in Mattapan, Boston, MA that holds a living collection of trees, plants, and different species of wildlife (Mass Audubon, 2019, p. 1). I contacted the Nature Center, met with a staff member, and was granted permission to host the event in their space. Mass Audubon Nature Center provided me with an indoor space where the group could gather. I initially created a nature-based piece (see Appendix A) to represent the scope of the workshop being proposed. The workshop was advertised through the center’s website and programs section (see Appendix A), and once people signed up, I got access to emails and sent an introduction letter to the participants, providing them with background information about what inspired the idea (see Appendix A). An orientation letter (see Appendix A) was sent via email to all participants by the staff member at the center. The letter included information about what to bring, guidelines for participating in the workshop (see Appendix A), and policies regarding the Nature Center. These guidelines were sent out to introduce the general nature of the workshop and what kind of environment it would be.

### **Participants**

Participants signed up for the workshop in advance. Although four people signed up for the workshop, only three subjects showed up including two women and a man, ranging in age from late 20s to late 60s. One woman was Caucasian, one woman was Latin American, and the man was Middle Eastern.

## Materials

Participants brought with them a journal and a pen, and were encouraged to bring art materials for further reflection and processing. The art materials used during the workshop were elements from nature, and participants brought a journal and pen with them for reflections.

## Protocol

**Part 1.** The first portion of this four part workshop included participants signing in, signing a consent form to allow me to take pictures, creating a nametag, and gathering in a circle. The workshop started with introductions and participants explaining what brought them to the experience. Participants were then guided through a brief presence meditation (see Appendix B) to settle into the space, during which they were encouraged to allow themselves these three hours to solely focus on themselves. Participants were subsequently guided through a self-check-in (see Appendix B) while seated, during which they were instructed to notice what thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations were present, without judgment. Participants were then encouraged to write down what they took notice of.

**Part 2.** The second part of this workshop involved a mindful walk and a sense meditation. Participants were guided through a mindful walk and were encouraged to pay attention to the different sensations they experienced throughout the walk. Participants were also encouraged to touch trees and use all their senses for this experience. Silent contemplation was also suggested in order for them to focus on themselves and to take in the experience.

**Part 3.** Once the group arrived at the intended destination, I performed an opening ceremony by recognizing that we were on the territory of the Neponset tribe of the Massachusetts confederation of Native Americans, and guided participants to ground themselves in the space through breathing and experiencing the space through the senses. I then read a quote

(see Appendix B), which described our innate and undivided connection to nature, and subsequently distributed a reflection quote (see Appendix B) to participants about existence. Participants were then asked to check in with themselves and notice what direction calls to their attention in order for them to locate a resonant space where they wanted to work. Afterwards, I asked them to spend time in it, contemplate it, and then prompted them to create artwork by gathering natural elements around them to create their installations. Before participants ventured out, I distributed a small contemplative fill-in the blanks poem (see Appendix B) for further reflections, giving them between thirty and forty-five minutes for this process. I repeated the guidelines and made sure everyone understood the procedure; participants were incited to come find me if they needed guidance or had any questions. The goal of this process was to allow participants to focus, be in touch with themselves, notice their immediate environment through mindfulness and creativity, and contemplate the unfolding of life through their transient expression. Many expressive therapists highlight the significant role that the art process plays in allowing individuals to connect to their environment (Kopytin & Rugh, 2017).

Around forty five minutes later, the group retreated to the opening-nature-based circle, and from there, each participant guided the rest of the group to their art piece. Participants were encouraged to discuss their piece, what insights they developed, what reflections and understandings were offered by nature, and how their piece was related to the quote about existence. The rest of the group was encouraged to ask the artist questions without making any interpretations or judgements. When visiting each person's piece, following the discussion, each artist was instructed to alter an aspect of their artwork and hold on to one piece of nature, to reflect the concept of impermanence. After visiting the last person's artwork, I located a space where everyone, including myself, created a collective art installation with the elements they

individually held onto. Once the collective art piece was completed, a few thoughts and reflections were shared about it. I then conducted a self-checkout (see Appendix B), which was completed while standing and had similar instructions to the self-check-in done earlier. I then performed a parting/ending ceremony for the group to withdraw from the outdoor space and close the group. This closing involved a breath meditation and a movement-based expression to conclude the workshop (see Appendix B).

**Part 4.** This part involved a walk back to the indoor space by retracing our steps. One participant pointed at a pine tree that contained edible leaves; she had acquired this knowledge from her previous visit to the center. Once we were settled in the indoor space, a feedback form was distributed for participants to fill out. A discussion followed the feedback form, during which participants shared their impressions and thoughts about the experience.

### **Information Gathering**

During the workshop, I gathered information through note taking, photography, and the feedback form. While contemplating this project, I kept track of their thoughts and reflections with a journal. I wrote down as much as I could recall of what was said by both the participants and myself, and what they felt and observed, including behaviors and reactions. I documented participants' reactions, including areas of contentment and areas of discomfort. To organize the results, I generated a list of themes that stood out to them during the participants' discussions about their art pieces. A few days later, I created my own reflection pieces in order to undergo the experience myself and embody it.

### **Results**

Four individuals were originally signed up for this workshop, including a man and three women, but only three participants, one Caucasian woman, one Latin American woman, and one

Middle Eastern man, showed up on the day of the workshop. One participant arrived fifteen minutes late, and all three stayed throughout the entire workshop. The place was significantly compatible with the nature of the project. The indoor space, where the workshop started, was located in the nature center and was a spacious yet cozy room with abundant natural light. The day's weather was warm for mid-February with a high of 63°F and sunny. The ground was mostly snow-free but there were icy areas, and the ground was moist.

### **Observations**

**Part 1.** All participants signed the consent form (see Appendix B), engaged in the different aspects of the first part, and shared their reason for attending the workshop. The three participants all mentioned that they were interested in nature, and some worked in a field that involved nature. The opening meditation appeared to ground participants and bring them into the space. The self-check-in allowed individuals to locate areas of discomfort in their bodies, notice where they were at, and learn how to allow these expressions to unfold without judgment. Following the self-check-in, which included a body and mind scan, some participants started directly writing what they noticed while others spent more time on meditative reflections. This part allowed participants to mindfully disconnect from their outer environment and focus on themselves, in order to be fully present throughout the experience.

**Part 2.** Participants were receptive to the idea of mindfully walking outdoors. Everyone was silent throughout the walk and was walking slowly while contemplating the scenery around them. Participants were engaged in the process, and certain participants were touching trees, walking on the ice, and exploring the environment. As previously mentioned, one participant had been to the space before and even tasted some plants that she knew were edible, and others followed. Participants used all their senses throughout the experience, and while the tasting sense

was unexpected, it created a more immersive experience for them. This part reflected the mindful walking process mentioned earlier. As A'Court articulates “walking implies and involves space, the walk, the walker and the space walked constitute a unified field of phenomena in which characteristics of the place and its life forms have potential significance for the therapeutic journey” (2017, p. 125). The mindful walking aspect set the tone for the nature of the workshop and allowed participants to ground themselves in the space while noticing their walking rhythm, stance, posture, and overall physical sensations.

**Part 3.** The idea of creating art from elements in nature was well received by the participants. One participant wanted to make sure she understood the process and asked me about certain words, so the procedure was re-explained to clarify any confusing instructions. Each participant ventured out in a different direction, spent time in their resonant space, and generated a creative piece. All three art pieces were installations and displayed a variety of styles. The colors of the elements in the art pieces naturally reflected the environment and felt like an extension of the space. When visiting each person's piece, I encouraged participants to respond to the artist's piece verbally if they wanted to. All participants complied and excluded interpretive, judgmental, or projective verbiage, which created a safe space for everyone to share their thoughts and feel connected to each other. Participants did not ascribe meaning to others' artwork but were able to relate to each other through the pieces they were witnessing and the themes that emerged. When the collective art piece was created, participants were very respectful and mindful of not altering other people's element while managing to connect all the pieces together to create a whole. Participants commented on the sense of deeper connection manifested through the collective art piece. It was powerful to witness the unfolding development of connections from the beginning of the experience to the end, even though the group felt cohesive

and connected from the beginning. During the parting ceremony, movement-based expressions were performed, as opposed to verbal conceptualizations. Participants found this process impactful, as the non-verbal process mirrored the concept of being in nature and merging with it.

**Part 4.** It was also interesting to notice that participants chose to keep the elements from the collective art piece with them. It allowed certain participants to recognize that it is quite valuable to surround themselves with nature as doing so can remind them of their connection with it. The discussion that followed the workshop allowed participants to share their thoughts about the experience as a whole. They found that there was a clear outline of what to expect throughout the experience. Participants also found that there was a thoughtful flow of activities and smooth transitions between one aspect and the others. The instructions were clear, and participants felt prompted but not restricted. They also felt comfortable asking me to clarify matters if they did not understand certain aspects. All participants felt held by both the group and myself, and they felt a sense of connection and community-building. The feedback form and discussion allowed for a cumulative reflection of the entire experience.

### **Creative Reflections and Personal Experience**

I took written notes throughout the workshop but mainly relied on visual processing. A reflective nature-based art piece was created for the experience as a whole, including elements representing each participant. When engaged in each art piece, the words and behaviors of each participant surfaced. These visual reflections and written notes determined the list of themes that were mentioned in the results section. These reflections served as a parallel, embodying, and integrative experience. Through this process of personal reflective experience, I more deeply understood and became more attuned to the effort and bravery that participants displayed. This



process required extensive contemplation, and I acknowledged that I had more time to consider this topic.

The creative responses may be viewed in Appendix C. Figure 2 represents the experience of holding a group in a natural space and acting as a container within this expansive place. I gravitated towards the tree bark with moss as it provided them with a sense of enchantment, and I resonated with the fact that it had a space in the middle. The tree bark is holding the rest of the elements while at the same time being open and providing them with the space they need. The expression that I created in the tree bark represented each participant as well as the group as a whole. I wanted to include myself within the expression and perceive the experience from a distance, as a third person. The depiction of self in the art acted as a mirror for me to more objectively process the experience and interactions with clients.

Figure 3 (see Appendix C) is a close-up of the creative reflection I created in response to individual participants' experience of the process, their response to existence as an unfolding reality, and the group's experience as a whole. While I was creating this expression, it started snowing, which naturally altered the artwork and was covering certain aspects. This alteration reflected the idea of impermanence and transience within the moment. I included the pine tree because it is an evergreen tree, and it symbolizes the longing for permanence and preserving memories in this context. When it came to altering an aspect of the artwork, I asked myself what I would alter in my piece. I visually separated the evergreen piece from the rest of the installation, as it was also an element that the group consumed in the form of a tea during the discussion aspect of the workshop. This was the symbol of both an altered art piece and the acceptance of transience. The evergreen was no longer as integrated with the rest of the pieces,

symbolizing that the longing for permanence was not as omnipresent for participants as it was before, and the process of accepting this reality had taken place.

Figure 4 (see Appendix C) represents the piece I held onto. This piece contained many details, which reminded me of the intricate stories that participants shared and the thoughtful reasons they chose to hold on to a specific piece. This piece also reminded them of palm reading and how lines define certain aspects of a person's life, but these stories are not definitive and can change overtime.

I wrote the poem after having reflected on my own artistic responses and the experience as a whole. The poem reflected my embodiment of the collective understanding of the experience. The poem is self-explanatory and allows the reader to understand the scope of the experience. It contains aspects of existentialism, transpersonalism, acknowledgement, acceptance, flow, and unfolding.

### **Discussion**

The immersive experience of Earthful Being was offered with the following goals: allowing participants to foster a creative and restorative connection with nature, develop a more insightful and expansive sense of self, contemplate the concept of transience, and form a stronger connection with others. These goals were met within a multi-layered experience, through nature-based art therapy practices. Identifying and noticing what was surfacing while allowing the thoughts, sensations, and feelings to unfold is a form of mindful acceptance that was practiced throughout the workshop. Acceptance, in this context, was an active process whereby participants were encouraged to apply this mindset throughout their experience. This process allowed them to work with whatever emerged in a manner that aligned with their personal values and worldviews, instead of perpetually avoiding some unwanted aspects of themselves (Harris,

2013). Nature acted as a container, a therapist, and a space for participants to express their thoughts and emotions. According to Kopytin (2017):

While the main parties in th[e] relational system in most therapies are client and therapist, nature assumes the role of the third party in ecotherapy and the fourth party in expressive... arts therapies in which the arts are considered to be the third party. (p. 38)

Nature acted as a co-therapist and was also a repertoire of natural elements and materials for the creative process (Courtney, 2017 as cited in Davis, 2017). It is the space that held clients and it was also the provider of elements with which clients worked during the creative process. This process mirrored the idea that nature provides human beings, animals, and various ecosystems with the nourishment needed to survive.

### **Emergent Themes**

Emergent and major themes surfaced throughout the process and included: a) cultivating a sense of connectedness to the environment, b) developing personal awareness and forming deeper insights, and c) experiencing an increased sense of belonging and intergenerational connection.

**Cultivating a sense of connection with the environment.** Starting by noticing what physical sensations they were experiencing allowed participants to mindfully connect to the present moment within the environment. Connecting to the present moment implies present-centeredness that can be found in both mindfulness and the existential framework (Harris, 2013). The workshop also intended to reflect the concept of cognitive diffusion mentioned earlier, and encouraged participants to contemplate their thoughts without judgement, as practiced within the ACT framework (Harris 2013).

Walking enabled participants to “connect [participants] physically, emotionally and spiritually to the vast field of [their] connections” (A’Court, 2017, p. 125). The process allowed them to connect to the space they were in through previously untapped realms and experience heightened awareness within the vastness of the space, while feeling a sense of security. Through mindfully walking in nature, touching it, and interacting with it, a deeper connection with the environment emerged.

Creating an expression from and within nature was an insightful and revelatory process for individuals, no matter what shape it took. Peter London (2004) believes that “making art is a perfect vehicle for recovering our lost sense of unity with nature. When we draw closer to nature through art, we simultaneously draw closer to our Selves and thereby enjoy a richer, more authentic creativity and deeper, fuller life” (Kopytin, 2017, p. 24). The idea of creating from the environment had an existential aspect to it, as participants had to sit with their surroundings and contemplate their existence. That allowed them to mindfully choose what elements they wanted to include and what messages to convey in their artwork. The transpersonal aspect of the experience entailed forming a deeper connection with elements beyond themselves.

From a transpersonal perspective, a stronger understanding of the complexity of interpersonal connections was manifested, and this understanding unfolded through touching nature and creating from its elements. The five boundless and non-dual dimensions were experienced throughout the process, and with this understanding, transpersonal “nondual consciousness” was also experienced by participants as they were able to embrace “a fullness of presence” and were able to embody the notion that “both nature and human [are] manifestations of Being” (Davis, 2011, p. 144). Participants were able to understand the concept that nothing is separate and that everything is interconnected. The embodiment aspect of the environment was

manifested through the process of mindfully searching for and collecting nature-based elements and objects, followed by creating an installation out of these objects.

**Developing personal awareness and forming deeper insights.** Through this workshop, it was evident that “the natural environment, far removed from the personal and social stimuli encountered in daily life, [offered participants] time and privacy to relax, contemplate and reflect on [themselves] and life (Naor, 2017, p. 208). Disconnecting from the stressors and responsibilities of modern society by being in nature allowed participants to contemplate and reflect on what is truly essential to them. They also developed further insights and personal awareness about themselves that they were not able to otherwise form when they were experiencing their day to day life.

Through the creative process, participants were able to bridge the gap between themselves and the outside world that they are part of through the artwork they created. Elinor Ulman, another pioneer in the field of art therapy, believed that “art is a means to discover both the self and the world and to establish a relation between the two” (p.24). Art is the bridge between the self and the outside world. It is a creative vehicle that people can utilize to understand themselves more deeply and their relationship to the world around them.

Through this process, participants were also able to “begin to explore the reflections that nature [offered] them in making meaning and understanding [their] own lives and relationships” (Thompson & Thompson, 2017, p. 90). Participants were all able to relate this process to their own existence, while at the same time fostering a deeper awareness of the importance and value of nature. It was observed that in an attuned state of mind with nature, individuals can “experience the entire natural world [within] a single leaf blade, as a portal to connection [with nature], a source of support and artistic creative inspiration, subjectively experiencing the

abundant, creative generativity of nature reflected in our own little ‘garden,’ our mind-body” (A’Court, 2017, p. 127). Ephemeral art made from natural elements, in a natural setting, allowed the participants to experience the raw unfolding of natural transience. Impermanence and transience manifested throughout the process: when wind blew, ice melted from the sun’s heat, when participants had to alter an aspect of their artwork, and when they parted with their artwork by leaving it behind, where it will naturally shift (O’Neill, 2016). Through a transpersonal experience, participants were able to travel inward in search of meaning and answers, and extend beyond the self to access a higher state of consciousness. This was accomplished by having accessed the subconscious and allowing the content to surface into the conscious through artistic expression (Franklin, 2019). This embodied existential and transpersonal conception of nature allowed individuals to form a deeper connection with their surroundings as natural beings, and to co-exist and inter-exist in an attuned manner with their surroundings, while embracing the unfolding process of life. Through all these concepts, the “wisdom of the whole [which entails] guiding one’s actions in a way that is optimal for the whole [through nonduality]” was experienced by participants (Davis, 2011, p. 144). The act of touching nature and creating from and within it a piece of ephemeral expression allowed participants to examine life and existence in a new manner, as they were able to experience the notion of transience through contemplation and creativity.

The existential and transpersonal perspectives were evident throughout the workshop. A sense of ecological self was also formed during the process, as participants were inspired to undergo a creative process “in and with” nature (Kopytin, 2017, p. 44). By creating art in and with nature, individuals learned how to better connect to and understand their environment by attuning to it. This process also allowed them to better understand themselves and where they

stood in the world through their creative expression, allowing them to be able to navigate their lives in harmony with their surroundings. This understanding can also be translated beyond their immediate environment, as they were able to embody the innate connection they had with all living things. These creative pursuits echoed the art of biophilia and a great willingness to attend to nature and all life forms reflected in some participants' art, as some created shelters to be later used by animals (Kopytin, 2017).

**Experiencing an increased sense of belonging and intergenerational connection.**

Through this immersive process, participants appeared to experience a sense of belonging and involvement with the environment, as they expressed that they were able to identify with the elements around them on both physical and metaphysical levels. The benefits of intergenerational and multicultural connections were also evident, as participants were eagerly asking questions to each other, and learning from each other's experiences. The nature and arts-based intergenerational interactions appeared to benefit participants across the generations. In addition to the intergenerational benefits, participants from multiple generations and cultures were able to not only notice similarities across generations, but were also able to notice cross-cultural similarities as well (Belgrave, 2012).

Human wholeness was also fostered during this workshop, as participants were able to experience themselves as "an intrinsic part of the 'web of life'" (Naor, 2017, p. 205). From an existential perspective, this state of existence allowed participants to foster awareness that their existence is meaningful as they felt a deeper sense of belonging.

**Summary of themes.** From an existential perspective, meaning making was fostered through being in nature, connecting with it, creating from it, and connecting with others in this experience (Moon, 2009). Imagination was particularly expressed throughout the creative

process by placing the selected natural elements together to form a meaningful whole through metaphor and personal narrative (Moon, 2009).

From the existential and transpersonal perspectives, the expressive art forms that manifested and were expressed throughout the workshop were “means by which various aspects of self [were] creatively expressed and worked with in the therapeutic process” (Naor, 2017, p. 206). Participants were able to encounter parts of themselves that they had not previously known through the creative nature of the workshop. Having incorporated this workshop within a natural setting allowed nature to act as a “therapeutic partner, physical setting, [and] as an actual partner offering abundant concrete and embodied situations by which one can experience human wholeness” (2017, p. 206). Through noticing what was around them and selecting elements from their surroundings, participants allowed these natural materials to inform them, their creative process, and their creative expression in ways that man-made materials could not. The process as a whole allowed the experience to be transformed into “an expansive dialogue, experience, and connection with all that exists” (p. 206). This transformation fostered a more harmonious and richer experience.

Ephemeral art was a creative portrayal of impermanence in all its forms, and offered participants, creating and interacting with it, an opportunity to engage with the concept and further process it (O’Neill, 2009). Ephemeral art also enabled participants to tackle the topic of mortality and discussions of untold narratives to unfold, through its eliciting and impermanent nature.

### **Challenges Encountered**

In the process of organizing the workshop, a number of issues arose. Locating a place that provided both indoor and outdoor spaces was challenging. Both the indoor and outdoor



spaces had to be secluded enough for a deeper experience to emerge and for healing work to occur, free from loud city distractions, and extensive foot traffic. In the end, both indoor and outdoor spaces worked well. The room indoors was spacious with many windows, yet private enough, and the outdoor space was visually stimulating with all the varied kinds of vegetation.

Challenges in designing and facilitating this workshop included: finding a way to transition from one aspect to another, conveying the complex message of transience in a way that was accessible, and providing participants with the opportunity to experience this unfolding reality within the present moment in nature. Defining group expectations and laying out the sequence of the workshop was challenging, without creating unnecessary predictability throughout the experience. Finding a convenient timeframe that allowed enough time for the different aspects of the workshop was also challenging.

Nonetheless, the richness and diversity of this project allowed for a multi-layered experience, during which participants enthusiastically engaged in the process, reflected, formed insights, played, explored, connected, and communicated in various ways. The different sections and practices throughout the workshop helped achieve the intended goals to varying degrees, and everything fell into place and flowed smoothly during the workshop.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this project included the small sample size of three participants; more participants would have been beneficial for gathering data. I could not take note of everyone's process at all times as participants were scattered. During the discussion period following the workshop, there was a celebration in the center, so there was loud music, which was slightly disruptive to the group. Although the weather was not cold, it would have been a more comfortable experience if the weather were warmer. With a project based on natural elements,

other seasons may create a richer and more stimulating experience in terms of colors and the variety in vegetation. A longer workshop of four hours instead of three could allow a slower pace and less restricted time. This workshop may not be compatible with a community that has experienced a natural disaster as it might act as a trigger. It would also be informative to work with a group that is more resistant to the idea of being in nature and see how the process unfolds. More groups need to be run in the future in order for more data to be collected.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

From this experience, it can be noted that there is value in being with nature, listening to it, touching it, tasting it, and creating from it. The therapeutic frameworks that were selected cohesively blended and allowed for a richer experience to take place. In retrospect, despite it being the winter season and there not being much vegetation, it was still an engaging and enriching experience. Participants became immersed in nature through both the mindful walking process and the process of creating an art installation in nature. Through both processes, participants were able to further attune to nature's rhythms and practice mindfully navigating their surrounding environment. This was accomplished by noticing what was around them, listening to each other's stories, asking each other questions, and simply being present with each other. Participants connected with one another and engaged with each other in different ways through verbal and non-verbal interactions, such as the collective art piece, the mindful walking exercise, and the opening and closing circles. These interactions led them to experience a deeper sense of belonging and form a small intergenerational and multicultural community.

Each season offers new insights and experiences, so it would be ideal to run the workshop seasonally. This process emphasized certain environmental implications and provided participants with environmental literacy through a deeper connection with their surroundings.

More research regarding the benefits of nature-based expressive therapy programs needs to be conducted, and an interdisciplinary experience could potentially be fostered with other fields in the future.

I intend for this research to provide practitioners in the field with a preliminary and theoretical framework to further initiate discussion and development of the eventual proposed intervention. From the limited data collected, this process proved to resonate with participants from different cultures, as nature, art, and philosophy are part of all cultures and social constructs in varying ways. Further investigations certainly need to be completed regarding how to mindfully adapt this project to different natural settings and the practices of each culture. The proposed intervention proved to be accessible, low cost, enriching and immersive for participants, and an opportunity to interact with the environment in a creative way that extends beyond human connection. Therefore, I intend for the intervention to generate additional knowledge and advance current environmental expressive therapies practices regarding existential and transpersonal themes through creatively and mindfully navigating impermanence within a nature-based expressive therapy framework.

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## Appendix A

### Pre-Workshop Information

#### Creative Process prior to facilitating the workshop:



Figure 1. Elements in Nature- “An Ever changing Whole” February 2019

#### **Advertising Text:**

Do you enjoy creating art? Have you ever wanted to express yourself through art in a natural setting, but never had the space to try it?

Do you find that creating art and/or being in nature helps you process your feelings? This experience is for you! In this experience, you will connect with a natural landscape through sensory activities and create a piece of art from and in this landscape. Not only will this experience give you time to be free with no obligations, it will also provide a safe space for you to explore, play, and creatively express yourself. By using nature as your impermanent canvas, you may notice that after this experience you will be more relaxed, have an increase in vigor and mood, have an increase in positive thoughts, and have a better understanding of yourself. You will get to connect with nature and yourself through different ways of being and expression including:

- mindful walking
- artmaking
- journaling
- contemplating

All you need are warm clothes and a curious mindset.

#### **Introduction Email:**

Hi Everyone,

Thank you for your interest in this nature-based arts experience. I wanted to reach out and give you a bit more details about what inspired me to create this workshop.

I am studying to become an art therapist and I am in my last year of graduate school, working on my thesis. For my thesis, I have decided to explore nature as an impermanent canvas, where creativity can flourish from the beauty around. From this concept, I was inspired to create this workshop and open it to the public as a community engagement project. You and I will be exploring and discovering this journey together, and I am eager to see how this experience unfolds; I hope you are too!

Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions and I look forward to meeting you all. Also, please let me know if any accommodations need to be made, so we can make this a comfortable experience for everyone.

If for any reason, you are unable to make it, it would be great if you could notify me by email or phone.

### **Guidelines/ Welcome Information :**

Dear Participants,

Welcome and thank you for joining us on this journey. We hope that you will enjoy this experience and gain further insight. Here are a few guidelines that we hope everyone agrees to, to make this workshop a pleasant and safe experience for everyone.

During this experience, each voice has something of value to contribute. Please take care to respect different thoughts, value systems, and beliefs shared by participants and the facilitator involved in this workshop. We commit to honoring diversity, and welcome individuals of all backgrounds, citizenships, disability, sex, education, ethnicities, family statuses, genders, gender identities, sexual orientations, socioeconomic statuses and work experiences.

As a participant, you have the right to confidentiality and privacy as a shared responsibility by the group facilitator and participants. As such, confidentiality with the group setting is based on mutual trust and respect.

The following guidelines are part of the Center's guidelines and apply to every visitor:

- Picking or destroying plant material is strictly prohibited.
- Climbing trees is not allowed nor is walking in plant beds or mulched areas.

### **Consent Form**

I \_\_\_\_\_ give permission to, \_\_\_\_\_, to take a picture of my artistic work created by me within a professional setting for educational purposes concerning the therapeutic use of the arts. It is my understanding that my identity will not be revealed in any presentation or display of my artistic work. This consent to allow the facilitator to take some pictures may be revoked by me at any time except to the extent that actions have been taken in reliance thereon.

---

Participant's signature

Date



## **Appendix B**

### Meditations and Quotes During the Earthful Being Workshop

#### **Presence Meditation and Self-check-in Prompt:**

Close your eyes (if that feels comfortable) and allow yourselves to settle into the space.... Breathing in... and breathing out.... Give yourselves permission to connect to the present moment and leave any worries behind, outside of this experience. Gifting yourselves these three hours of simply being and personal exploration... If at any point during this experience, you feel a sense of disconnect, do not fight this feeling, simply allow it to unfold without any judgment, and allow the breath to guide you back into the experience....

Now check in with yourselves by doing a self-scan.... noticing the thoughts and sensations unfolding in this moment, in this space, without judgment... Take notice of all these different self-expressions that are manifesting in this moment... what are they trying to tell you? What is their purpose?...

Taking a few breaths in and out..... moving your head from side to side... moving your bodies as you like... moving your fingers and toes... and when you feel ready. Come back to the space.

#### **Nature Quote:**

As nature unfolds around us, we understand that we exist in a cosmically connected ecological universe. By contemplating the landscapes we are, in and noticing how we respond to them and interact with them, we come to understand that the boundaries between inner and outer landscapes flowingly dissolve. Our lived experience transforms, as we embody the notion that the whole is part of nature and is not separate from it.

Breathing in... and saying to yourself: this place is part of myself. Breathing out... and letting go of the notion that you are separate from this place.

#### **Reflective Quote:**

"Existence [i]s a single unfolding reality, in constant renewal and originality, flowing and undivided"- John V. Davis (Davis, 2011, p. 142).

#### **Contemplative Fill in the Blanks Poem:**

I wander...

I notice...

I wonder...

I am...

#### **Self-Checkout Prompt**

I now ask you to check in with yourselves by doing a self-scan, as we did in the beginning.... noticing the thoughts and sensations unfolding in this moment, in this space, without judgment... Take notice of all these different self-expressions that are manifesting in this moment... what are they trying to tell you? What is their purpose?...Having sensations and expressions shifted from the beginning of the experience to the end?

**Appendix C**

Creative Responses to Experience of Earthful Being Workshop After the Workshop



Figure 2. “An All Embracing Presence,” February 2019



Figure 3. “BeYond the Self” February 2019



Figure 4. “Intricate Connection” February 2019

Reflection Poem.

*I wander into an unfolding realm where everything is in perpetual change,  
where silence is heard and stillness is in motion.*

*I notice my heart beating to the rhythm of stillness,  
and my thoughts flowing into a stream of untouchable fluidity.*

*I wonder how to summon the nature in me into every moment of my existence,  
as I navigate my own story and allow its wisdom to empower me.*

*I am part of the web of life that everything springs from,  
and am connected to all that is.*

*With this understanding, I tend to every being on this earth with love,  
and care for the earth I live in with all my being.*

**THESIS APPROVAL FORM**

**Lesley University  
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences  
Expressive Therapies Division  
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA**

**Student's Name:** \_\_\_\_Joy Geha\_\_\_\_\_

**Type of Project: Thesis**

**Title:** \_\_\_\_\_ Nature as an Impermanent Canvas: An Intergenerational Nature-Based Art Community Engagement Project

**Date of Graduation:** \_\_\_\_\_May, 2019\_\_\_\_\_

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:**\_\_\_\_ \_Raquel Stephenson\_\_\_\_\_