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All My Relations: The Journey of Discovering My Ecological Identity

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Abstract

Everyone has a story to tell; a story about their journey, about their struggles, about discovering themselves, and about how they became who they are as a person. A person's journey may help explain how one forms their identity and perceives themselves. That journey may include: values, beliefs, attitudes, hobbies, spiritual paths, or profound inspirations that have helped shape and giving meaning to a person's life. This script is such a story. It is a story about how I became a more confident, complete person dedicated to protecting and preserving the natural world. This occurred while seeking inspiration and solace from the beauty of wildlife and wild places. This script includes profound inspirational people, encounters, and events that have helped shape my character, giving me a sense of identity, and enabling a view of the human species as a part of the biotic community upon the earth. A part where we serve an equal and important role, just as other species serve and fulfill. This script is rooted in the philosophy of deep ecology and how through considering the idea of deep ecology, one may discover their true ecological identity.

Keywords: environmental education, storytelling, ecological identity

It is an honor and pleasure to be here with all of you today. I would like to first extend my thanks and gratitude to the North Cascades Institute and the National Park Service for providing this space and opportunity. Secondly, I would like to extend my gratitude and thanks by acknowledging the Upper Skagit people who have inhabited this land in the upper Skagit for thousands of year's prior to European settlement. This presentation is about the journey of my life and what brought me to be right here, right now. It includes significant places in my life where I have lived. And with that being said, I feel I should acknowledge all of the indigenous peoples of whose sacred lands I have lived upon throughout my life. I would like to extend my most sincere gratitude to the Ojibwa of Wisconsin and Minnesota; the Yuhaviatam of the San Bernadino Mountains of Southern California; the Ahwahneechee of Yosemite; the Nisqually coast Salish; the Crow, Flathead and Kiowa of Yellowstone; and of course the Lakota of whom I had the pleasure of studying with and whom you will hear about in this presentation

Standing atop of Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the contiguous United States, I looked back upon my life up to that point. It was 8:22am on August 22nd, my 27th birthday, and I had just walked 250 miles through the one of the country's wildest regions and highest mountain ranges. The past year had been one of the

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a stylized, cursive font.

roughest of my life and this journey had been a walk to rediscover who I had been, who I was, and who I might become. A past that had included: parties, drugs, ignorance, apathy, deceitfulness, and other similar characteristics were all now in my rear view mirror as a new and hopeful future lay ahead. I had spent the month of August walking all that off, but the real walk was just beginning. On the journey to the top of this mountain I reached a turning point in my life that set me on the path toward a life dedicated to the natural world and the environment. But let me start at the beginning.

I grew up in a small town in Central Wisconsin. As a young boy I played in the woods behind my parent's house making forts, climbing trees, and exploring in the summertime. In the fall I would rake leaves into huge piles, climb into the first branches of the trees and plunge in; and in the winter I would make tunnels and forts in the snow banks waiting to ambush my younger brother with snowballs. Unfortunately, I could not stay young forever (as I was not truly Peter Pan), and the boy that was once so filled with awe and wonder was seduced by American pop culture.

As the marvel and innocence of the outdoors started to fade away into thoughts of being a star athlete and dating popular girls, I no longer cared about what I could discover in the woods or the simple thrill of jumping into a pile of leaves; but instead what materials I could acquire, and what I could accomplish on the football field.

When I was a sophomore in high school I had all the coolest clothes, I was a three-sport athlete, and I took a very popular girl to the homecoming dance. Despite having all these things that I assumed would make me happy, I descended into a spiraling depression that so often plagues teenagers. My grades began to slip, I was getting into more trouble in school, and I started smoking cigarettes and attending drinking parties hosted by the upper classmen. All of the varsity football players drank, so it was only natural that I started to as well. This was Wisconsin by the way; where they pride themselves on the state motto, "out drinking your state since 1848."

I continued on this path throughout high school, always searching but never being able to find what I was looking for, or even knowing what to be looking for. I left for college, where I continued to try to discover my identity and what my purpose in life was. My first year out of high school and away from home was a difficult transition. I was no longer a popular athlete in a small town, I was no longer the life of the party, and I no longer had my circle of close friends. I was thrown into a world of which I had no concept. I felt like I no longer had any sense of self, but was simply a machine with the sole purpose to feed and serve the American industrial economy. Not knowing who I was or what I wanted to do, I simply lived the stereotypical college lifestyle; go to class during the week and party on the weekends. I seemingly had no interests or passions. I no longer played football, and I was no longer popular. I went to keg parties on the weekends where I stood in the corner drinking as much as I possibly could to numb the anxiety and awkwardness I felt. I was brainwashed to believe that this is what people my age did and that it was the normal, expected behavior. I had no idea that alternative hobbies and lifestyles existed, so I continued to try to fit into a world in which I didn't belong. I was missing something but I didn't know what; but instead of

searching, I hid. I hid in the television shows I watched, I hid in the music I listened to, and I hid in the drugs I took and the alcohol I drank; all of which took me farther and farther down and further away from myself. I felt like I had lost any sense of identity. I was 19-years-old but felt like an infant without the innocence or wonder with the world. I had no idea who or what I wanted to be. The only thing I really cared about was music, and the only thing I thought I wanted to be was a hippie, even though I had no idea of what a hippie really was.

I started going to music festivals and dove head first into another world. I tried to convince myself that this is where I truly belonged and where I would be happy. This new world of music and festivals provided some sense of happiness, but it was overwhelming and led to a deeper sense of not belonging and a lack of direction and identity. I wanted to be able to freely express myself and have radical political ideals like the people I was surrounded by. But without a sense of place, identity, or passion to guide me, I once again drank myself into oblivion to reduce my social anxiety. I was missing a sense of purpose, and my longing to make a positive contribution to the world was not being fulfilled.

I had no sense of self, but definitely still had an ego. As the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who will be discussed in greater detail in a few moments points out: “the self extends beyond the ego to that which one identifies with and in that which we place value.” Let me state that again: “the self extends beyond the ego to that which one identifies with and in that which we place value” (Sessions, 1991). Up to that point in life, I hadn’t identified with, or valued anything positive or healthy; so my concept of self was neither positive nor healthy. It was sort of like the age-old saying: *you are what you eat*. This is true of our sense of self as well. In high school, and in my first years of college I was associated with drinking, drugs, and parties, which created a very shallow identity and a very superficial sense of self. I needed something bigger, something healthier, something more positive to classify with, and sometimes that can come when we are not even searching or looking, but comes along exactly when we need it.

In the fall of 2006, I randomly attended a guest speaker who caught my imagination and whose message profoundly inspired me. The speaker was Winona LaDuke, an Ojibwa woman from the Blue Earth Reservation in Western Minnesota. For an hour I sat in my chair captivated by what this insightful person spoke of, which included topics such as: the importance of language, maintaining culture, people’s connection to the earth, and the sacredness of places in the natural world. I had been raised Catholic and never considered nature to be of spiritual significance. Catholicism and Christianity gave the impression to me, through the 12 years of Catholic school I attended, that our lives on earth held little meaning, and that our sole purpose on earth was to gain entry into heaven. I never practiced the faith out of love or belief, but instead out of fear and the Church’s strict position that Catholicism was the one true religion. There appeared to be a great separation between nature and what the church taught, and in my view a great contradiction of what the church said and what Jesus actually taught. I always felt that throughout high school and in learning about the Catholic faith that the church

took what Jesus said and formed their own interpretation of it to hold power and control over people. At the time I saw LaDuke speak I had long since left the Catholic faith, leaving a spiritual void in my life and an animosity toward religion. But the way Winona LaDuke spoke with such a fervent passion about the sacredness of land and interconnectedness of all life was contagious, and it resonated with me for the rest of the year. This was the first time I had been exposed to an alternate spirituality, and it was not only intriguing, but also made a lot of sense to me.

Inspired by LaDuke's speech the prior year and realizing that I couldn't sit in an office for 10 hours a day for 6 days a week, I decided to make a drastic change in life. I was 21 years old and already three years into a mass communications major when I changed my major to recreation and tourism. It was in the halls of the recreation department I found a flyer advertising a travel study program to study with the Lakota people (known to most European Americans as the Sioux) in South Dakota to learn of their traditions and culture. Remembering LaDuke's speech from the previous year, I thought this would be a great opportunity to expand my new interest in native cultures and the idea of sacredness and spirituality within the natural world. I quickly signed up and went through with my first year in a new department.

As I waited for the summer and my travel study program to arrive, I unexpectedly spiraled into a deep depression and considered dropping out of college. My abrupt immersion into a new department and a small program where everyone already knew each other was excessively overwhelming. My best friend had dropped out of school and moved away, I had quit my job, and was left feeling alone in yet another new world of which I had no concept. As summer arrived I was at a point where I was struggling to leave my house. During the winter semester I dropped all of my classes but one, and received a letter from the university informing me that I had been put on academic probation. I had reached a low point in my life. I no longer wanted to go through with my trip to South Dakota, but with some encouragement from my family, I reluctantly agreed.

It was a challenge to get myself out of bed and go to that first class in June, 2008. But as I sat down that first day, I was introduced to a small group of people unlike any I had ever met, and slowly my anxiety began to wane. The first two weeks of the course were at the university where we learned of Lakota history and culture. We were exposed to traditional stories and songs, we blessed every gathering by smudging with sage, and before each meal we said a blessing and offering to the Great Spirit. We learned camping skills, knot tying, and the significance of setting up camp in accordance to the four directions. Everything we did had meaning and significance. I felt with all my heart that there was something greater at work here; something I didn't understand, but felt with all my spirit. We capped off our two weeks of university prep with a practice camp out and sweat lodge at our professor's house in the bluffs of Southeastern Minnesota.

Still being very introverted, shy, and anxious, the day of our departure arrived. Still nervous about leaving the confines of my house, I loaded my new camping gear and

piled into the backseat of one of two 15-passenger vans with a bunch of strangers and began traveling west.

For the next two weeks these 20 people I was traveling with became my friends, my peers, my emotional support, and my family. I had never been involved within a social circle where everyone held an equal and important role. There was no hierarchy where cool kids controlled the behavior of the group. We were simply a community, dependant upon one another. We were emulating the Lakota way of life. Everything, as I stated, was done with meaning and reverence. From setting up camp to doing the dishes, everyone chipped in and was happy in whatever task was being performed. There was great attention, mindfulness, and detail to every chore we undertook. We would gather each morning to greet the day, and each evening would end with a journal share and open discussion. This was the first safe space I ever had to share my feelings amongst people other than my family, and the amazing thing was that they were people I had only met two weeks prior. There was something about the way we were living that appealed to me; close to the land, depending upon one another, open to sharing how we felt and expressing how the experience was shaping us. I began to feel more comfortable with these people, and with myself.

Our journey took us to Pipestone and Devils Tower National Monuments; Fort Robinson Nebraska; and Wounded Knee Creek, where hundreds of innocent Cheyenne and Lakota people were brutally slaughtered by the U.S. Military. We also went to Badlands National Park, my first National Park ever (a number which now exceeds 20). We spent a good chunk of time on the Pine Ridge Reservation where the extreme poverty and alcohol abuse was so apparent that many of us broke down in tears and felt ashamed of our European ancestors. Along the way we participated in several sweat lodges, potlucks, classes, hikes, and ceremonies. Each place we visited and every host that welcomed us held a deeply profound power, energy, and history that resonated within our group.

It was apparent that tradition and culture were still very strong in parts of the Lakota land, and only a strong and proud people could endure and persist through such hatred, betrayal, and violence brought upon them through greed and arrogance of European Settlers, Christianity, and the U.S. government in the claims of Manifest Destiny. It was a mystery to me at first as to how these people kept their faith, kept their culture, kept their traditions, and kept their identity and spirituality in the face of such resistance. And what I realized was that their identity remained because their land was still there, and so was their community, even though it was occupied and controlled by trespassers and vandals.

These people's identity was ingrained in their traditions passed down from generation to generation, and in the land that provided them with life. All this is rooted in the earth and the interconnectedness of all beings. Toward the end of our journey I began to realize that I was not alone in my struggles in life, and that what I had been depressed about was miniscule compared to what these people had gone through at the hands of my European ancestors. I saw myself as a member of this community of

people I had been living with for the past two weeks, and we were members of a much larger community, the community of the earth.

On our final evening as we camped along the banks of the Missouri River I told stories and expressed my gratitude for the people that I was surrounded by. A transformation within me had occurred and in two weeks an anxious, shy, introverted 22-year-old had taken small steps along a month long journey to emerge more confident, more community oriented, more selfless, and for the first time, with a sense of personal identity that was rooted in caring for the earth and all of its' human and non-human community.

My summer spent with the Lakota people was the first event that set me on my current path. Something inside of me had begun to awaken. My journey to the Great Plains and month long course learning with and about the Lakota history and culture was a transformative experience. While it was in no way a complete awakening, it was my first step toward seeing the interconnectedness of all things and toward forming my ecological identity and immersion into deep ecology.

So I've just mentioned the terms ecological identity and deep ecology. Please allow me to take a moment to explain what deep ecology is and how it can play an important role in the formation of an ecological self or identity. Deep ecology is a current movement that began in the 1970's in opposition to a multitude of ecological destructive practices taking place on the planet which included: the unlimited industrial growth of society, excessive exploitation of resources, the clear cutting of old growth forests, eradication of species and loss of biodiversity, and the anthropocentric view of human domination over the planet (Sessions, 1991). It became a widely popular, as well as criticized movement through the influential writings of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, whom I mentioned earlier in my presentation. Supporters of the deep ecology movement today include writers, activists, and spiritual leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Joanna Macy, and Gary Snyder. Chris Johnstone describes deep ecology as: "a holistic approach to facing world problems that brings together thinking, feeling, spirituality and action. It involves moving beyond the individualism of Western culture towards also seeing ourselves as part of the earth. This leads to a deeper connection with life, where Ecology is not just seen as something 'out there', but something we are part of and have a role to play in" (Johnstone, 2016).

So let me expand upon this definition. In today's society we as humans have become very disconnected from the natural world. For thousands of years the human species lived in harmony upon the land, having minimal impact on the earth's biomes and ecosystems. The earth has always provided us with everything we need to survive; even today we can trace all of our consumer products to their natural origin. From our food and shelter to our inspiration, the earth has given us what we have always needed to survive. As we have developed our society at an alarming rate we have become distanced from our source due to mass production of food and consumer products that has fueled the rise of a materialistic consumer driven society. We no longer have to grow or hunt our food or make our own clothing, but can simply buy everything we

need, want, and desire from superstores and corporations, resulting in taking the planet and its finite resources for granted, which in turn creates a greater disconnection from the earth. We should begin to consider altering our behavior and making some personal sacrifices in order to reconnect with the earth, and we should strongly consider seeing ourselves not as separate from the rest of the natural world, but instead as an equal and important member of the biotic community in which we live. The constant exploitation of the planet has caused it to be thrown out of balance and into a deep sickness. Being a part of the planet we have become sick as well. We have become sick with greed and desire. The current consumer society has a hold of our psyches and we must break this vicious cycle and begin to heal ourselves. When we can begin to heal ourselves we can also begin to heal the earth (Macy, 1991). Looking at the philosophy of deep ecology and how we as a species and also as individuals, are influenced and connected to the planet can bring about a transformative process that can set us on a path of hopefulness and healing. We must first reconnect with the earth and that has to be a personal journey that we as individuals are willing to make. We must begin to look for a path that will lead to an awakening on a personal level and that can begin with small steps that can lead to something much larger than we will ever be as individuals. That first small step for me was the gift of studying with the Lakota people.

Although indigenous education is not the same as deep ecology, it does somewhat encompass the underlying philosophy and provide a grounding foundation for the movement. In connecting deep ecology to our lives as humans, no term sums it up better than the Lakota phrase: *Mitakue Oyasin*, meaning: *all my relations*. To the Lakota people this does not simply mean your mother, father, brother, and sister; but everything on the planet. We are made of natural elements, just as everything else is. It is appropriate that my journey and search for my ecological self began with this phrase. For Westerners who are consumed in our industrial growth society, this is a hard concept to take literally. But when one begins to slowly immerse themselves in nature and approach the idea of deep ecology and the interconnectedness of all living and nonliving aspects of the planet, *Mitakue Oyasin* begins to make more sense. It is a motto by which I like to live my life. If one can see all beings as their relations, a sense of deep empathy can occur resulting in a deeper sense of caring and connection for the planet we live upon. Although I didn't know it that summer, the experience I had been apart of, and the foundation in the meaning of *Mitakue Oyasin* was about to send me on a journey that would help me fully discover myself, reestablish a spiritual path, and give meaning and purpose to a life dedicated to preserving and protecting the planet.

After my return from the Great Plains I approached life with new meaning. I took interest in things related to the environment. I became more engaged in and dedicated to my new major in college. My classes were introducing me to topics such as sustainable development, outdoor education, outdoor adventure, and interesting historical figures such as Aldo Leopold, Sigurd Olson, and John Muir. My classes were largely made up of friends from my summer course, which made it easier for me to participate and share my ideas and thoughts in my classes. As I became fully engaged in my classes my grades significantly improved. I was spending less and less time at the

bars, less and less time watching T.V., and less and less time eating fast food. I was introduced to the co-op in town and began to learn about how local organic food is not only healthier, but also more environmentally friendly, and that through our food we can reconnect to our land and form a sense of place. Life, for the first time since childhood, was enjoyable, and the people I was involved with were interesting, intelligent, and compassionate.

One major gateway into seeing the world as an interconnected system was a fascination I developed for wildlife. While driving back to school one Sunday afternoon, I was crossing through the Black River State Forest in Wisconsin and noticed a large animal cross the road about a quarter of a mile ahead of me. It obviously wasn't a deer, and was too big to be a raccoon, which were the two animals I was most used to seeing cross the country roads in the middle of the Central Wisconsin forest. I had never seen an animal like this before, so as I approached the place where it crossed I slowed down. Maggie, my two-year-old dog, jumped from her seat and began to growl and bark as she peered out the window. Standing at the edge of the forest, about 20 yards from the road, was a large timber wolf. I stood awestruck as this majestic animal gazed back toward me. I connected eyes with the animal and in an instant formed a bond with that wolf. Never had I seen such a beautiful animal. At that point in time I was unaware that wolves had even begun to re-inhabit the woods of Wisconsin. Only in fairy tales and artistic expressions of native cultures had I ever experienced wolves. Seeing this one, alive and in the wild, was exhilarating and stunning, and in this experience something deeply primordial awoke inside me. I wanted to run through the forest, roll on the ground, and howl into the chilly winter air and moonlit nights. I wanted to join that wolf and learn its ways. But unable to join its pack running free and wild I had to settle for learning about wolves in books, nature documentaries, and from my college professors, all of which I did with enthusiastic and passionate fervor.

Seeing that wolf was a pivotal moment in my life. I immediately understood that this animal was a beautiful, sentient being that had its own inherent value. I saw myself in that wolf as I gazed into its deep yellow eyes. As I began to excitedly tell my story I learned that people had a general hatred of wolves in the state of Wisconsin. A fear of being eaten by ravenous, bloodthirsty killers, and of a complete elimination of the deer population were the feelings surrounding the return of wolves to the state. An age old bias and illogical fear was associated with the wolf, which created a great misunderstanding. It seems that whatever we humans don't understand we try to control or eliminate, using God or the economy for our justification. So goes the story of wolves in Wisconsin.

People had declared an all out war on wolves, and here was a calling for me to stand up for something I believed in. I felt the war on wolves was a war on nature itself and as Gary Snyder said, "a war on nature is a war on people themselves."

Seeing this wolf, and how I was somehow connected to it, gave me another cause, gave me another chunk of my budding identity. I seemed to form a spiritual connection with the wolf. I looked at it not as simply a wild animal, but instead as a fellow sentient

being; as a relative. The meaning of *Mitakue Oyasin* was beginning to make more sense to me. The wolf represented within me attributes such as playfulness, loyalty, intuition, and wildness. A need to nurture and feed these attributes grew in me, and as I fed and cultivated these, my knowledge of place and self was cultivated as well. The wolf was a symbol; a symbol of where I had been and where I was going. There is an old Cherokee legend where an elder approaches a young and troubled man. He says to the young man: "Grandson, I was once your age and dealt with your troubles. There is always a dark wolf and a light wolf within us. The dark wolf represents all the anger, greed, lust, hatred, and vengeance within. And the light wolf represents loyalty, compassion, love, respect, honor, and kindness. These two wolves remain in constant battle throughout our lives." The young man then asked the elder, "Grandfather, which wolf will win?" The elder responded, "Whichever one you feed, whichever one you feed."

As my last two years in college came to a close I realized that the wolf I had seen represented the light wolf. I had started to leave the dark wolf behind. While it still lingered and continued to be nurtured through scavenging scraps, I had begun to nurture and feed the light wolf much more.

College classes ended and I wrapped up my undergraduate degree with an internship working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service along the Upper Mississippi Wildlife Refuge on the border of Wisconsin and Minnesota. During this internship I received my first opportunity to participate in ecological studies and gained a greater understanding of the interconnectedness of ecosystems. It also became very apparent to me how much of an impact humans have on the natural world. One day I was biking along the levy when I came to a sudden halt, and ran down to the water. Motionless along the bank of the river was a great egret covered in oil. Its beautiful snow-white body was blackened with tar, its tremendous wings and feathers all but gone, and only its magnificent long neck and head were free of the toxic sludge. A beautiful, majestic bird desecrated and imprisoned by industrial flaws of man. Horrified and not knowing what to do, I sat with the bird in the last few agonizing moments of its life. It was a terrifying moment in my life that I return to again and again whenever I see a clear-cut forest or the image of a coyote with its leg bloodied and broken by a steel jawed trap.

Aside from the pollution in the river and the impact it had on the wildlife, I also became aware of the astounding number of non-native species brought by humans and the havoc they were wreaking on the native species. It seemed ironic to me that people complained about paying taxes for federal wildlife lands and jobs when American industrialism, economic gain, and resource exploitation were the reasons we have these lands and agencies in the first place.

My primary job during my internship was to document recreational activity through observation and surveys during the summer. In doing this I became aware of how little people knew about wildlife and how disrespectfully they treated the environment. I felt a shift away from recreation and tourism and realized that my first and foremost passion and responsibility was to the environment. I wanted to educate people about the wonders of the natural world, and I wanted to show how to view, enjoy, and

respect our natural areas and public lands; not as a commodity, but as part of an interconnected community.

At the conclusion of my internship I began looking for jobs. A fascination from my childhood had re-awoken inside of me. I began to think not of rivers and lakes, but instead of mountains and deserts. The American west was calling my name, so I began applying for jobs in places like California, Utah, Montana, and Oregon.

In November of 2010, as the cold winter Minnesota winds began to howl and the snow began to pile up, I received an email from a place in Southern California called High Trails Outdoor Science School offering me a job as an environmental education instructor. Elated, ecstatic, excited, and exuberant, I accepted the job, and in January 2011 I was living, working, and playing in the San Bernadino Mountains of Southern California. Eleven thousand foot mountains, and two hundred foot tall ponderosa pine and incense cedar trees dominated the snowy northern slopes surrounding me. Juniper, yucca, and live oak spread along the drier southern slopes of the high desert mountains. It was a world of which I had always dreamt. Not only did I get thrown into a landscape that filled me with awe and wonder; I was also involved with people who thought like me and shared my interests and passions. On top of the excitement of a new and exciting life and landscape, I was working at a job I believed in and found the fulfillment of working toward a greater cause that I had been searching to find for so long.

My first season as an environmental educator was exciting and exhilarating. I hiked, I climbed, I camped, I partied, and I was part of a community I fit in to. But after that first season the excitement of the new place began to wear off. Some of my initial friends I had made during that first season began to move on, and I began to worry about what the next step in my life would be. Was this trip to California just a euphoric utopia lasting for a few short months?

As the excitement and adventure of the new place wore off, I began to drink heavily. I was no longer going on hiking and climbing adventures, but rather sitting inside on weekends drinking and watching football games. For some time I had tried to strike an equal balance between the inspiration of the natural world and having a social party life, and during the fall of 2012, that battle within me was raging. Amongst my new friends and community I had gained a reputation as an avid hiker, and wild party animal. During my first year in California it started to become clear to me that my identity was forming around these two images. There were two aspects in battle: the urge to wander in the wilderness seeking wisdom and tranquility from the mountains and the forest, and the urge to be the life of the party. I had to take a long hard look at myself and ask: "did I leave my family and friends in the Midwest to party in California, or did I leave my family and friends in the Midwest to follow my dreams and dedicate my life to a higher calling." During the winter of 2012, at the age of 26, the light and dark wolves were about to come into their final showdown.

After months of turmoil and heavy partying I finally decided to give up drinking to follow my heart and instincts to dedicate my life to enjoying and preserving the natural wonders of our planet. No longer would I seek gratification through beer and booze, but instead in the peace and wonder of mountains, oceans, rivers, forests, and deserts. The light wolf had emerged victorious, but only after the dark wolf nearly destroyed me.

My decision was only the beginning, and the light wolf needed nourishment. So I took the summer of 2012 off to seek some inspiration from the natural world. I went on a self-proclaimed spiritual journey in an attempt to rediscover myself. I traveled to Yellowstone, Grand Teton, and Badlands National Parks. I saw bison, elk, moose, grizzlies and wolves. I spent a month back in Wisconsin with my family and reconnected to the beauty of the upper Midwest, then journeyed to Colorado and spent a week in the Rocky Mountains. And then, in late July, I returned to California to embark on the greatest spiritual journey of my life.

Early in the morning on August 4, 2012, a bear rushed out of the forest, crossed the road, and bounded into the river. The sky was showing the first hints of daylight and soon the sun had begun to illuminate the monolithic American Wall of El Capitan. I was in Yosemite Valley and it was the first morning of my pilgrimage upon the 250-mile John Muir Trail running through the heart of the tallest mountain range in the contiguous United States.

For years I had been intrigued by this trek. For years it had been my number one goal in life, and here I was...finally... following in the footsteps of my hero, John Muir. I wasn't aware of it on the day we embarked upon our trek, but it was to be a pilgrimage where my ecological self and my sense of deep ecology began to fully emerge and take form.

The first few days were challenging but awe inspiring. I was just getting used to backcountry trail life, which was filled with long days, big mileage, steep slopes and lots of elevation gain. This new experience was both mentally and physically demanding, but also spiritually fulfilling. Golden sunsets, powerful thunderstorms, torrential down pours, meandering rivers through quiet meadows, and majestic peaks were everywhere; and I was a part of it. The first three days were spent hiking through Yosemite National Park from the famed valley up into the high country of the Sierra Nevada. As we went over 11,000 foot Donahue pass, exiting Yosemite on day three, the fullness of the journey had begun to set in. That first night outside of the park, camped in the Ansel Adams Wilderness at the base of 13,000 foot Mt. Ritter, I sat watching the golden sunset upon the glaciated peak reading about the famed first ascent of this majestic peak of the central Sierra.

John Muir had set out from Tuolumne Meadows in late October with two artists. On the second day he left his party for some final explorations of the year before snow blanketed the high country making it inaccessible until the following spring. A few days later Muir found himself climbing the shear face of Mt. Ritter where he suddenly

froze clinging with all his might to the granite face of the mountain too frightened to go on and embracing his imminent death. After a moment of fright something deep within his soul awoke, eliminating all fear and allowing him to see more clearly than ever before. With a sudden burst of energy and inspiration, Muir continued climbing to reach the summit by sunset. After Muir returned to camp that evening he recollected the experience in his journal:

After gaining a point about half-way to the top, I was suddenly brought to a dead stop, with arms outstretched clinging close to the face of the rock, unable to move hand or foot either up or down. My doom appeared fixed. I must fall. There would be a moment of bewilderment, and then a lifeless rumble down the one general precipice to the glacier below. When this final danger flashed upon me, I became nerve-shaken for the first time since setting foot on the mountain, and my mind seemed to fill with a stifling smoke. But this terrible eclipse lasted only a moment, when life blazed forth again with prenatural clearness. I seemed suddenly to become possessed of a new sense. The other self—the ghost of by-gone experience, Instinct, of Guardian Angel—call it what you will—came forward and assumed control. Then my trembling muscles became firm again, every rift and flaw in the rock was seen as through a microscope, and my limbs moved with a positiveness and precision with which I seemed to have nothing at all to do. Had I been borne aloft upon wings, my deliverance could not have been more complete... I found a way without effort, and soon stood on top of the topmost crag in the blessed light.

I suppose as I sat at the base of the mountain that evening some of Muir's energy was rechanneled into me. Just months before I too was frozen and scared, about to fall into the abyss, but some sort of natural and spiritual intervention took hold and I was able to carry on and see more clearly than ever before. Never had that been more apparent than in following the footsteps of Muir through the wilderness on the trail named in his honor.

That night as I sat upon a boulder 10,000 feet above sea level in the heart of the Sierra Nevada, the stars shown brighter than I had ever seen them before. I felt the true spirit of the wilderness. Although I was miles away from modern luxuries and comforts, I felt safer, more comfortable, more connected, and more welcomed than I ever had before. For the next three weeks I felt the energy of the storms; I heard the quiet of the forest; I experienced the tranquility of the meadows; I was elevated to the grandeur of the highest peaks; and I shined golden as the sun as it radiated off the mountains in the early morning alpenglow. I had received the fullness of the wilderness, and something in me that had lain dormant for many years, but was slowly awakening piece by piece had now fully emerged in the heart of the Sierra Nevada. My egotistical self (the dark wolf) had been put to rest, and my ecological self (the light wolf) had been born; and the journey to nurturing and growth of that ecological self was about to begin.

As I stood on top of the highest Mountain in the United States on my 27th birthday, with Sequoia National Park to the West, Death Valley to the East, and the world before

me, the lyrics to a John Denver song came to mind: “He was born in the summer of his 27th year coming home to a place he’d never been before. He left yesterday behind him you might say he was born again; you might say he found the key to every door.”

In a few moments my presentation will end and we are going to participate in a short activity. As my presentation ends I would like this activity to run smooth and silent so I am going to give instructions right now. At the conclusion of my speech there will be a quote. That will be the cue for us to stand up, silently put on our shoes, and walk to the shelter near the library. When we all gather we will go on a short, silent walk along the creek. When you see the person in front of you cross the bridge you may begin to walk. While you walk, I would like everybody to contemplate the meaning of the last line of my presentation. We will rejoin in silence at the shelter along the trail where I will commence with a few final words.

So why have I told you all this very personal account from my life? Because it was my journey toward awakening; toward discovering myself through the humbling experience of being a part of a greater whole; of something bigger and greater than myself. This is a story about discovering who I really was, what I believe in, and where my attitudes and values lie. Through events in nature and involvement in a healthy community, I formed a sense of self that I am proud of. My identity is not my ego and does not only belong to me. In Buddhist tradition there is the concept of “*No Self*” (Rahula, 1978). This does not mean that an individual human is devoid of having a soul or sense of identity, but rather that we should see ourselves in the interconnectedness of all things upon the earth. There is no self because we are connected to everything. It holds that the earth and all of its parts, including humans, all function together as one system, or a large organism. It is this view of the earth as a whole system made up of its parts that is the foundation of deep ecology.

We should be able to see ourselves in nature and we should be able to use the various landscapes of the earth as metaphors for our lives. It is in the vastness of the earth’s deserts where we can confront our emptiness and transform our lives; it is in the depths and mystery of the forests where we awaken to a deeper sense of self; it is in water where we learn to go with the natural flow, which in turn gives our lives direction; and it is in mountains where we find the courage and strength to reach for new heights (Thompson, 2014). We should identify with the animals, and take note of their characteristics and how their wisdom can be applied in our own lives. In noticing these things we can begin to see how the earth is interconnected, how everything is related. The earth is one giant living organism, or system if you may, and we are a part of that system. As a species we fulfill the role of a vital organ in the earth's system and we must begin to see ourselves as such. We all have an ecological identity and if we look deep enough and know how to begin the journey of discovery, our ecological selves will begin to take form.

My ecological identity is deeply rooted in my habits, hobbies, values, and spiritual practices. As I grow older and continue to learn and mature, so will my identity. Our identities are never fully formed, but continue to take shape throughout our lives. They

are molded by our experiences, and realized in our wisdom of recognition. Our places we inhabit, and our connection to the earth are our ultimate ecological identity; for it is within the earth to which we must look to find ourselves.

Where then, do deep ecology and our ecological selves begin? That is a personal question for the individual who is embarking upon the journey. For me it was through the most basic connection one can have to the earth; through walking. It was in fact, along a 250-mile walk where my full awakening occurred. Walking mindfully is where I gain my greatest connection to the earth. It was through walking in Wilderness areas where I began to discover my ecological self and formed my connection to place. In *The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder states: "Walking is the great adventure, the first meditation, a practice of heartiness and soul primary to humankind. Walking is the exact balance of spirit and humility" (Snyder, 1990).

My mother told me that when I was a baby, as soon as I stood up, I began running and never slowed down. I was in a hurry to go through life and arrive somewhere as quickly as possible. All throughout my childhood I ran, but never new what I was running to. As I went through high school and college I continued to run, and as I got to California I realized I was running away from my past. I was in a hurry to experience a change, even though I didn't know what change I was expecting or hoping to experience. As my sense of awe and wonder returned I began to slow down and enjoy the present more. I began to perceive more, my senses were heightened, and I became more fully aware of the moment at hand. So many times when we set out for a hike in the woods our minds are still wrapped up in our industrial lives, or we are so engaged in conversation that we fail to connect with the surrounding environment; thus keeping that anthropocentric view, which results in the inability for us to truly experience nature in a holistic manner. In his essay *Walking*, Thoreau states: "what business have I got in the woods if my thoughts are outside of the woods" (Thoreau, 1993). In reading the works of Thoreau I became fascinated with the word *saunter*. So many times when we walk or hike it is to get from point A to point B. In doing this we miss the journey along the way, and the journey is where we experience self-discovery. Muir, who was greatly influenced by Thoreau, disliked the word *hiking*. Both of these great naturalists discussed the spiritual nature of sauntering through the forest and discussed the origins of the word in their works as a spiritual pilgrimage to the holy land. During my 250-mile trek through the Sierra Nevada, I enjoyed every step; never wishing to be any where but the present. This is how I continue to walk to this day. There are times when setting out afoot in nature where we must be swift and other times when we must saunter. It is always the steps in between our starting point and our destination where we see the most beauty, experience the adventure, confront our fears, and learn about our selves. Muir sums this up beautifully when he said: "in every walk with nature we receive far more than we seek."

A Navajo Prayer

In beauty may I walk

All day long may I walk

Through the returning seasons may I walk

Beautifully will I possess again

Beautifully birds,

Beautifully joyful birds

On the trail marked with pollen may I walk

With grasshoppers about my feet may I walk

With dew about my feet may I walk

With beauty may I walk

With beauty before me may I walk

With beauty behind me may I walk

With beauty above me may I walk

With beauty all around me may I walk

In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk

In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk

It is finished in beauty.

It is finished in beauty.

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, stylized font, enclosed within a light blue, semi-transparent rectangular box.

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