

THE HEALING TOUCH OF NATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF PASTORAL THERAPY

by

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“I believe in God like I believe in the sunrise. Not because I can see it, but because I can see all that it touches.”

- C S Lewis

“We are drawn to newborn life-forms – babies, puppies, kittens, lambs.... They are fragile, delicate, not yet firmly established in materiality. An innocence, a sweetness and beauty that are not of this world still shine through them.”

- Eckhart Tolle (2005)

“What matters is that we open our inner eyes, and see the beauty of the risen One in every heart and every leaf.”

- M Williamson (1994)

“The best remedy, for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature, and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow...”

- Anne Frank

DECLARATION

I, Annezka Alida Magalhães declare that “The healing touch of Nature in the context of pastoral therapy” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

.....
A. A. MAGALHÃES

.....
DATE

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Thank you Jesus for being with me on this journey. Shalom.

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SUMMARY

The research on “The healing touch of Nature in the context of pastoral therapy” illustrated the role of Nature in bringing healing to individual people in an urban context in South Africa. The role Nature plays in connecting the participants with God and how this positively affects their daily lives, has been central in the research. Through their interaction with Nature, the participants lead richer, more meaningful lives and experience a greater sense of well-being. Nature stimulates and elicits response as the digital world is set against the calm energy and “warmth of the earth”. Through connection with God in Nature, the participants translate the healing metaphor into more tangible “language” – the “beautifying effect” of Nature. It is not the words that captivate, but the thoughts which the words carry. Mostly the research tells the story of the experiential knowledge of living in the intimate presence of God and the healing power of God’s presence. This narrative is about a kind of knowing that can only come through Nature. The research offers a way of seeing Nature that could influence pastoral care today.

Key terms: Nature, healing, wholeness, silence, connectedness, ecology, God-in-Nature, Cosmic Christ, narrative analysis, pastoral care.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS**Nature**

Nature in this research refers to the natural world around us, what is not created by human beings. “Nature” refers to the innate creative and regulative physical power, which is conceived as operating in the physical world and as the immediate cause of all its phenomena. Nature in this research is written with a capital letter to emphasise that it refers to the totality of what there is in the natural world; including the spiritual in Nature. Nature is viewed as an autonomous presence.

Veld

Veld is a South African term describing wilderness areas.

Well-being

Well-being is an overarching concept, which includes the “physical, spiritual and mental health of communities, groups of people, organizations, churches and individuals” (Theron 2008:24).

CHAPTER 1

The peace of wild things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives
may be.

I go and lie down where the wood drake rests
in his beauty on the water, and the great
heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief.

I come into the presence of still water
and I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting
with their light.

For a time I rest in the grace of the world,
and am free.

Wendell Berry (<http://www.gratefulness.org>)

1.1. Introduction

A number of people have described to me their experiences in Nature as healing. This has made me curious, for in today's world people seem to experience a sense of insecurity, confusion and a need to be healed from "brokenness". I remember the times in my life when I have turned to Nature. I have often gone for a walk in a wild open place, or sat by a tree in the garden. Such times have given me an opportunity to reflect on situations, beliefs and emotions. Although it is difficult to describe these experiences, it seemed important to attempt to find language for the balance and harmony that Nature can restore – the healing capacity of Nature.

1.2. Research curiosity

When I have sat in my garden, or gone for a walk in the wild, I became aware of my own confines living in an urban environment. This has led me to wonder about the particularity of an urban context and the role that Nature might play in bringing healing to people. In this research I explore some of the effects of living in an urban environment, an environment largely driven by a consumer oriented society with a focus on the individual (Nolan 2006:4 – 5). In the age of Modernity, human beings have also attempted to take "control" over the environment, and in doing so have largely forgotten how to "listen" to the natural world. Within an urban context, one of the challenges of this research was to explore the return of balance and spirituality. I have often

wondered how Nature can help us create a more integrated identity, which is not based on the individual pursuit of happiness or success. I had hoped that the study would help indicate how Nature can be utilised in healing approaches to pastoral therapy. These thoughts led me to my research question.

1.3. **Research question**

This may be stated as follows: In what ways might eco-theology contribute to people's experience of healing within a Christian tradition?

1.3.1. **The aims of the research**

The overall aim of the research was to explore what role Nature might play in spiritual healing to move people beyond "brokenness" towards wholeness. I looked at the spiritual and religious aspect of the person-Nature connection in Christianity, by exploring four aims:

Firstly, I aimed to discover what role Nature might have played in bringing healing to individual people in an urban context in South Africa. This was based on the assumption that within an urban South African context, people experience a sense of disconnection from God, self and others.

Secondly, I aimed to find rich or "thick"¹ descriptions of the healing through a connection with Nature.

Thirdly, I was interested in discovering some of the more mystical or "magical" effects that Nature has on people, which I describe as a healing power. I undertook this on the assumption that nearness to God in Nature has a healing effect.

¹ Denzin (as cited in Mouton, 2001) describes this term as follows: "A 'thick description' does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings are heard."

Fourthly, I aimed to explore the role Nature plays in connecting people with God, with others and with themselves. I did this on the assumption that people move from brokenness towards wholeness.

1.4. **Background and rationale**

The context of industrialisation and urbanisation has left in its wake certain challenges in today's urban society. One of the challenges has been the increasing isolation of the individual person, as disconnected from both others and Nature. Burns and Street (2003), for example, attribute the growing levels of dissatisfaction and unhappiness in Western society to the growing disconnection from Nature. Others suggest that Nature helps us to stand against the dehumanising aspect of technology and development, as economic progress increasingly takes over our lives today (Lorimer 2003). There is also the perception that many have a longing for God (Nolan 2006). Nature as a living means, by which we can experience a sense of belonging and meaning in a rapidly changing world, seems crucial to our well-being.

Within the Christian Scriptures, there are many stories and parables that Jesus told of Nature in relation to the people with whom He spoke. Stories in African folklore also involve Nature and metaphors that include narratives of animals and plants communing with God (Courlander 1996). The richness of many of the Biblical texts revolves around how Nature "speaks", for example, the seeds falling on fertile ground. Over time, Nature has seemingly grown increasingly irrelevant as people began to populate urban areas, and with industrialisation, no longer lived close to Nature. Today Nature appears to have been pushed further and further towards the margins of life in the city.

On the other hand, it is also true that people have not forgotten about the positive impact of Nature. For example, game lodges, safaris and wilderness trails have become popular, particularly among the European and white population in South Africa. What has happened, however, is that Nature and day to day living have become separated. Research has shown that patients in hospitals who have a view of Nature from their hospital beds heal more quickly, experience less pain and are discharged sooner (Burns & Street 2003:195). This has also sparked renewed focus on the benefits of Nature. Even imagining being in Nature can be beneficial to one's well-being (Rowshan 1997:54). From these examples it appears that as human beings we can intuitively draw

on Nature to trigger our innate healing ability. Many also believe that silence, peace and stillness are the keys to healing and wellness (Lorimer 2003, Kabat-Zinn 1994, 2005).

Whilst many (Burns & Street 2003, Lorimer 2003, Rowshan 1997) write about the benefits of Nature, we have witnessed increased devastation of the natural world in the last century, more than in any other time in history. For example, a forest is measured in monetary terms, sanctioning its destruction, without heeding the value of its role in providing clean air. In this study, ecological concerns were not addressed directly. However, the underlying thought, that as the natural world is destroyed, Nature loses its ability to nurture and heal people, lingers in the background. Nature as our natural home is emphasised by theologians and psychologists alike (Burns 1998, Conradie 2005).

Culture, particularly since the industrial revolution and the advent of “modern man”, has greatly affected our thinking about God, ourselves and the natural world. I began this research with an assumption that in the Christian Church in South Africa (here I am referring more to churches with European roots), God is generally seen as the God out there. Specifically, God is seen as Someone beyond Nature. Tolle (2005:15) suggests that we “create” God “in the image of man”. Modernity has often left people, particularly within a Western context, with an “extraverted life orientation” (Hartman 2007:2) and separation from the God of our ancestors. Nature therefore seems of great importance, if we are going to find ways of re-imagining God, not as some power that is separate from Nature, but as a voice that speaks within Nature.

The pastoral questions that I have addressed in this research were those relating to personal alienation from God, as well as collective alienation from ourselves, others, and Nature. Many are writing on the need to address the “consumer society” and the aftermath of loneliness, narcissism, peer pressure, low self-worth, and more (Nolan 2006, Hartman 2007, Clinebell 1994, Brueggemann 1993, Hallman 1994). One of the pastoral challenges that faces the church is a need to move beyond individual therapies towards more ecologically sustainable healing practices (Clinebell 1994:34), yet limited attention has been given to utilising Nature as a “mediator” in pastoral therapy. The role that Nature can play in healing people of traumatic experiences, isolation, loneliness, self-centredness, materialism, and lack of compassion, warrants further research. Nature is within reach of most people and it is hoped that the research might bring new awareness of the healing available through Nature in pastoral care.

In literature, I have come across authors who have verbally expressed much of my own experience of Nature as playing an integral role in who I felt myself to be, and where I have experienced God as located close to my being (McCallum 2005, Cumes 1999, Burns 1998). This way of writing and attempting to put into words something of God in Nature is not new in history. Authors speak in poetry, philosophy, medicine, religion, and other fields of the healing found in Nature (McCallum 2005, Mabey 2005, Fiennes 2002, Cumes 1999, Stevenson 1996). Depending on a writer's perspective, Nature within these texts also holds multiple meanings. It is also true that many African churches have maintained a close link with Nature; however, this is beyond the scope of this research.

1.5. **Theoretical framework**

This study has followed a **narrative** approach on the understanding that we make sense of our world through the stories we tell, because we create meaning through them. Theologically, this also assumes that we make sense of the Bible narrative through the stories woven through the texts.

Through **social construction** theory, which proposes that identities are constructed through daily social interaction (Burr 2003:13), this research examined and questioned some of modernism's pursuit of the individual self as being separate from creation, and foregrounded ideas around relationship with creation. In this study, I explored how participants, for example, construct God-in-the-world, and Nature-as-healer. The notion that creation is "out there", objectively definable, leads to the world and nature of the world being experienced as "pre-given and fixed" (Burr 2003:13). Looking at the world not as something "out there", but as something that people are intimately engaged with on a micro level, links with a post-modern perspective that espouses the "oral, local, particular, and timely" (Brueggemann 1989:6). Thus **post-modernism** moves away from the idea that the world can be understood in terms of grand theories and meta-narratives, towards "the co-existence of a multiplicity and variety of situation-dependent ways of life" (Burr 2003:12).

In light of the shift from modernity to post-modernity, from rationalism towards connectivity with the environment, thinking shifts from taken-for-granted truths towards the small, the intricate, the personal, relationships and stories. This opens the door to "wisdom" rather than "truth", and

invites one to re-visit ancient wisdom to “re-discover” concepts that can illuminate life today. For example, the “individual self” construct is challenged in **Post-modern Theology**. The way we understand ourselves and our environment has implications for how we relate: to God, ourselves and others. If, for example, we are largely defined by reductionist theories and meta-narratives – other equally legitimate ways of knowing God, healing and the world are left unattended. The multiplicity that post-modernism also embraces opens space for Nature, people and God to merge.

This shift comes with an enormous challenge in theology, namely how we begin to care for, as well as “with”, the environment in mutually sustainable ways. The study moves beyond this, towards how the environment cares for us. This perspective brings about a significant change in thinking of persons, not as those who “control” the earth, but as an earth that also speaks to humankind. With this comes a link with **Feminist Theology** as regards nurturing and healing aspects.

This study was based on **Ecological Theology**, since it focuses on the multi-faced interrelationship of three fundamental areas of theological reflection: God, humankind, and the earth. I am suggesting that this is particularly contextual in the current times in which we live. The earth is considered as the material-vital aspect of God’s creation, which includes humanity. Although humanity occupies a unique position on earth (Brinkman 1998:209), there is a shift away from the individual to the collective. Ecological Theology is prominent in contextual theology today. It is considered together with liberation theology and feminist theology as a theology which can respond to the challenges of our time (Conradie 2005:1). These observations served as the groundwork for the research based on relatedness, emphasised by the post-modern paradigm, following a narrative approach working with social construction theory.

1.6. **Overview of the literature**

Theology in the last two centuries has, as has been indicated above, tended to exclude the cosmos from the way in which it interpreted its understanding of God. Within a Western paradigm, we are used to talking about God as “up there” and us “down here”, regarding God as separate from the earth. Along with this “heavenly/earthly” dualism, Nature has been regarded as something to be dominated and controlled, hence “matter/spirit”. Since the Enlightenment, people have tended to see themselves as being separate from Nature.

Today, a number of theologians have explored how this came about as well as the challenges left by such a worldview. For example, the individualistic approach in modernism is currently described as people being “one-dimensional human beings” (Boff 1996:34). Some regard the evolution of the Western mind as founded on the repression of the feminine. It includes the repression of “undifferentiated unitary consciousness”, the “participation mystique with Nature”; “progressive denial of the Anima Mundi” (the spirit/soul of the world); of “the community of being, of the all-pervading, of mystery and ambiguity, of imagination, instinct, body, Nature, woman – all of which the masculine has projectively identified as ‘other’” (Tarnas in Lorimer 2003:27). Brueggemann (1993:4) also links anthropocentrism with “masculine power”, saying that it connects with a modern perspective of knowledge as rational and objective. Similarly Gergen (1991:17) also describes rationalism as being one-sided, emphasising “the outer, the quantifiable and the measurable”, and neglecting the higher dimension of life.

In view of the above and current environmental concerns, Christian theological responses are surfacing as a concern in literature. In analysing the human-nonhuman relationship, Christian theologians are re-thinking traditions regarding creation, and the Western conception of the identity of self, where humans are characterised as distinct from, and masters over, the natural world (Scharper 1998:16). Conradie (2005:25) argues that “the dualistic viewpoint of the modern era has led to disastrous consequences since it has been used to sanction various forms of exploitation”. It is believed that the pre-modern organic view of Nature as “alive, sensitive and responsive to human action” had, throughout history, been a safeguard over environmental exploitation (Lorimer 2003:29). Literature reveals a shift away from anthropocentrism to a focus on the more inclusive context of cosmology (Conradie 2005, Lowes 2001, Nash 1996, Gebara 1999, Ruether 1996, Hallman 1994, Field 2002, Santmire 2000).

Many of the theological writers suggest that we shift our focus from the individual towards an idea of God and ourselves as merged with the cosmos (Schaefer 2003, Pugh 2003, Barbour 1996, Schroeder 1997, Polkinghorne 1995, Pannenberg 1993). This points towards a need to shift the focus away from the individual. For example, Conradie (2005:25) opines that for too long people have thought of themselves as “somehow separate from Nature”. The shift has happened: from seeing man as being in control of his environment towards man becoming a part of the environment.

Owing to this shift, people are now experiencing “an alteration of collective consciousness, centered not in science or religion, centered nowhere; because it is present, potentially, everywhere – a reassertion of God in the consciousness of modern man”, writes Williamson (1994:xvii). However, theological evolutionary perspectives have viewed God’s Spirit as being intrinsically part of creation as the intrinsic potentiality for renewal, transformation, and growth in the natural world. Moltmann (in Scharper 1998:42) asserts “[u]ltimately, the Spirit represents the principle of intentionality, in which all created beings in the Spirit are directed toward their potentialities...”. I wondered how “the present experience of God”, which is “[t]he ultimate horizon of hope”, according to Ford (in Conradie 2000:214), could play a role in restoring and freeing us as we encounter the living God in Nature.

From the literature reviewed, it appears that modernism and rationality have screened out the magical, the mysterious and other ways of knowing, in favour of the verifiable. It seems that modernism has somehow attempted to close our minds and hearts to the God found within Nature. In spite of this, Teilhard de Chardin early in the 20th century as a Jesuit priest and scientist, like St Francis, had understood God within Nature and found hope and comfort in God’s nearness. De Chardin (1966:36) expresses his view:

For me, my God, all joy and all achievement, the very purpose of my being and all my love of life, all depend on this one basic vision of the union between [Y]ourself and the universe. Let others, fulfilling a function more august than mine, proclaim your splendours as pure Spirit; as for me, dominated as I am by a vocation which springs from the inmost fibres of my being, I have no desire, I have no ability, to proclaim anything except the innumerable prolongations of your incarnate Being in the world of matter; I can preach only the mystery of [Y]our flesh, [Y]ou the Soul shining forth through all that surround us.

Seeing God in all life connects with the concept of the “Cosmic Christ”, which is not a new notion. For example, Fox (1988) described the Cosmic Christ, but this Christ somehow lay forgotten. Today this Christ is beginning to resurface in the light of Ecological Theology. Conradie (2006:11) avers that many people experience a longing, a deep yearning for “an earthly form of spirituality” based on a belief that we can get to know God “only in and through that which is earthly”. In this, Conradie is connecting a carnate God with humanity rather than an incarnate God who reigns separately from creation.

The post-modern age is regarded as a world of enormous potential, where both/and replaces the either/or, and allows us to enter “a new reality, the reality of relationship” where the “concrete

entity of self” gives way to the “reconstruction of self as relationship” (Gergen 1991:17,140). This study was particularly interested in the self that is connected to the soul, rather than the cognitive self as separated from the soul. Quests to connect with our inner being, or soul, often involve journeys in Nature (Clinebell 1996, Burns 1998). It seems that when people are away from the city, their senses are heightened by the stimulation of Nature around them (Clinebell 1996:239). Thus, Nature helps us connect with selves that are generally beyond our awareness. Nature seems to draw one inwardly (Burns 1998:126).

The shift in consciousness involves a new understanding of the self and our relationship with Nature. It entails a move from an individual to a more collective mindset; and is described by Johanna Macy (<http://www.parallax.org>) as “the greening of the self”. Alan Watts (<http://www.parallax.org>) refers to the “skin-encapsulated ego” being replaced by “wider constructs of identity and self-interest”; from “ego-self” to “eco-self”. This position accords a greater collective position to the self. Boff (1996: 10 -11) also relates interrelationship with ecology and wholeness. Whilst Gergen (1991:19) views our sense of belonging as intimately related to the earth. Sallie McFague (1990:213) uses the analogy of the earth as “God’s body”. Clinebell (1996:2), the first to have called for an ecological dimension to pastoral care, writes about people’s basic rootedness in Nature. Berry (in Clinebell 1996:2) describes our sense of alienation from Nature as “soul loss”, while Cumes (1999:162) points out that we cannot isolate our well-being from the wholeness of everything around us. Burns (1998:9) likewise reminds us that well-being has long been perceived in traditional healing and other religions as an interactive process between the person and the environment.

Traditional South African discourses on well-being are being aligned in Practical Theology today to include social, psychological, and environmental dimensions; in addition, Christian churches are embracing a more holistic view of wellness (Herholdt 2008:184). Individual well-being now includes communal and societal well-being (Dreyer 2008:3 - 13). A shift towards more kinship with Others, in this study, is viewed as a healing process in the modern, individualistic, consumer world of the city. Brueggemann (1993:49) describes such a self in the post-modern climate: “Imagine a self rooted in the inscrutable miracle of God’s love, a self no longer consigned to the rat race, but one ordained to full communion with God – which is its true destiny and rightful home”. De Chardin (1966:65) describes it from another aspect of deep wellbeing and oneness with creation:

Son of man, bathe yourself in the ocean of matter; plunge into it where it is deepest and most violent; struggle in its currents and drink of its waters. For it cradled you long ago in your preconscious existence; and it is that ocean that will raise you up to God.

1.7. **Delimitation of study area and assumptions**

The study acknowledges experience such as described by De Chardin above as being part of our lives with Nature, but focused more on experiences in Nature that can be viewed as resulting in a healing impact. It refers to living *with* Nature as “a way of being in the world”. We are encouraged in practical theology to practice a “hermeneutics of suspicion”, meaning we need to question our beliefs and assumptions (Cochrane, de Gruchy & Petersen 1991:22 - 23). This is done by “critically examining the message to uncover any distortion from the original by tradition, before it is reworked and restated in our context” (Cochrane, de Gruchy & Petersen 1991:22 - 23). In this regard, my own belief and interest in Nature-as-healer has blinded me in many ways to being suspicious of my own assumptions. In order to take this into consideration and to open the topic up to greater curiosity, in this research I asked: Who has knowledge about God in Nature? I was curious with regards to the experiences of people in Nature, in an urban context, in today’s world.

1.8. **Research methodology**

The research followed a qualitative approach using narratives viewed through a filter of social constructionist and post-structuralist theory in a post-modern paradigm. The field work in this research comprised five individual in-depth interviews, followed by two focus group interviews. The individual interviews were centralised, whilst the groups served “as a source of validation” (Mouton 2001:198) in a complementary relationship. The data collection consisted of transcribed texts of the interviews in order to explore the participant’s experiences in Nature. The term “participant”, as used in this research, is based on Seidman’s (1991:8) argument that “...in-depth interviewing encourages people to reconstruct their experience actively within the context of their lives”. It captures both a sense of active involvement and equity, built into the interviewing relationship (Seidman 1991:8). The focus was not on empowering people, but reflecting with people on their experiences. The narrative analysis of the coded text was based on grounded theory and post-structuralist theory. Post-structuralism holds that experience is only given meaning through language.

1.9. Outline of the chapters

1.9.1. Chapter 2: Literature review and theoretical framework

Chapter 2 contains a discussion of the literature under relevant themes. In this chapter, I looked closely at ecological theology, epistemology (nature and origins of knowledge), social construction (constructed self and other), and pastoral care (transformation). The research explored a post-modern relational view of healing, where healing moves away from the self towards relationship. The boundaries of the literature review and the key concepts of the research are defined in this chapter.

1.9.2. Chapter 3: Conversations to explore healing through Nature

The body of the chapter contains the voices of the participants. The themes evolved as the research moved along and are discussed in this chapter, from the perspectives of the participants.

1.9.3. Chapter 4: Presentation and discussion of findings

Chapter 4 contains a discussion and integration of the findings from the captured data and the literature study (Chapter 2). The results were analysed in terms of the categories and concepts outlined in the previous chapters. The analysis centres on the aims of the research and the research question. I discuss the main trends, patterns, similarities, and differences that have emerged. Finally, the chapter furnishes a summary of the main results.

1.9.4. Chapter 5: Conclusions

The concluding chapter constitutes a reflection on the study and includes contradictions, surprise findings, deviations and possible reasons for these occurrences. The chapter addresses the aims of the research and the main response to it. Limitations and gaps in the research as well as possible outcomes of the research for the practice of pastoral therapy are also discussed.

1.10. **Chapter summary**

The chapter has furnished an outline of the research with respect to exploring a renewed understanding of God and human interaction with Nature. The concepts outlined in the chapter have informed my thought and encouraged me to consider the phenomena of Nature as a mediator of healing in particular ways. In view of the more open, more imaginative way of looking at the post-modern world, these words by Pugh (2003:5) stayed foremost in my mind:

All through the history of our struggle with the mystery of God, those who most clearly see understand that God does not exist in any way we can adequately capture or conceive. So, if nothing else, this tells us that the images of God we speak of ought to be held lightly...

CHAPTER 2

Literature review and theoretical framework

Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself. We are created along with one another and directed to a life with one another...to look away from the world, or to stare at it, does not help a man to reach God; but he who sees the world in Him, stays in His presence...

Martin Buber (Buber 2002:60)

2.1. Introduction

In line with the question asked in this research: *In what ways might eco-theology contribute to people's experience of healing within a Christian tradition?* this chapter focuses on the healing role of Nature in our lives in greater detail. Ideas, suggested in the first chapter, that modernism has left the individual separated and alienated, resulting in a sense of rootlessness, are further developed. In this chapter I explore, in more depth, the role of Nature in healing alienation and self-centeredness, and its contribution to a person's overall well-being. Literature has revealed that we need connection to experience a sense of belonging and meaning. We need relationship with God, self and other people, as well as all that share our environment. This signifies a shift away from the one-dimensional human being to the more inclusive context of cosmology.

2.2. Theoretical framework and epistemological positioning

Epistemology is the means by which we find explanations for what we explore and a framework within which to place these explanations. Kotzé (2002:11) explains the term epistemology as the question of *how* a person thinks, observes and concludes and *what* he or she thinks, observes and concludes. In my exploration of this material, I sought to understand the role of Nature (natural environment) in "whole-making"; through connection with God as an expression in creation (the *what*). The research focused on experiences of God in Nature and the healing that might come from such experience (the *how*). This understanding extends to self/other connectedness. A person-Nature connection (Burns) suggests a sense of intimacy; something we might have lost in the individualized world where dichotomous categories for living abound. The framework in this research has been informed by contributions of post-modernism, feminism, narrative, and social construction in order to explore ecology (Nature) and theology (God). The research stands in relation to what has gone before as both a response to some of the assumptions that the world has made and the challenges which the future world presents to us.

2.3. A post-modern theological epistemology

The shift from modern to post-modern thinking (Burr 2003, Scharper 1998, Primavesi 2000, Conradie 2006, Boff 1996, Gergen 1991, Brueggemann 1993) came about as a result of a growing realization that modern rationality and its social, physical, and economic engineering of society, has created human alienation, and the destruction of the natural and social environment. People no longer felt part of the earth and felt estranged from God (Par 1.6). According to Weil (in Clinebell 1996:41), “[t]o be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul”. A secular worldview, to which the church is not immune, has resulted in a focus falling on individual rights and personal gratification, “guaranteed by autonomous freedom” (Heroldt 1998:216) and individual self-reliance. Perhaps people in a secular world feel mostly lost, with no anchors, each one for him/herself.

Heroldt (1998:218) explains post-modernism as “a rediscovery of the value of human participation, a quest for wholeness and meaning, and a perspective on the continuity between all levels of a multi-leveled reality”. The emphasis has moved from rational thought, which was considered to be neutral or value free, towards intuitive knowledge, which operates more with the concept that truth is relational and dependent upon the lens one uses. Thus, the idea of “absolute truth” falls away in favour of truth as being context dependent. Post-modernism possesses a broader rationality – a rationality that considers not only empirical evidence but also the values and meaning of subjective experience. Within this epistemology resides greater space for culture, ideology and beliefs. Post-modernism, in other words, embraces plurality. Heroldt (1998:219 - 220) observes that in post-modern theology the dualism between the external world and subjective life disappears. Thus in theological consciousness, the movement away from rationalism, towards connectivity to the environment, shifts thinking to a search for meaning, rather than truth: from taken-for-granted truths towards the personal, relationships and stories; where our understanding of God is open to re-interpretation.

2.3.1. Signs of our times

With the disillusionment of modernity and reductive rationalism, along with its pursuit of “truth”, there has been a move towards finding new religious expression and forms of spirituality in the

face of today's challenges, or the "signs of our times" (Nolan 2006:1)². The increased attention to spirituality, what Nolan (2006:3) refers to as a "hunger for spirituality", in today's consumer oriented world, is partly due to many people realizing that economic progress, along with the ecological destruction of the earth, does not deliver contentment and peace. Along with this, traditional church attendance is said to have dropped (McClung 2008:38) as people search more for religious experience and "spirituality" in more holistic ways than religious dogma (Nolan 2006:10). Nolan (2006:10) suggests a link between meaninglessness and consumerism and the overall rise in drug and alcohol abuse in societies at large, as well as suicidal tendencies; which is indicative of people's incapacity to cope with "the hard realities of our times".

Fromm (in Hartman 2007:2 - 3) refers to an "extraverted life orientation" (Par 1.6) as the "having" mode, where "external material possessions and abuse of power ...based on greed, narcissism, envy and aggressiveness" takes precedence over connectivity and meaning held within community. The "being mode", on the other hand "manifests itself in shared experience, joint ventures which are rooted within, in love and the ascendancy of human over external values" (Fromm in Hartman 2007:3). These ideas resonate with the more inclusive context of cosmology, and interconnectedness, inclusivity, and collectivity (Scharper 1998, Conradie 2005, Lowes 2001, Nash 1996, Gebara 1999, Ruether 1996, Hallman 1994, Field 2002, Santmire 2000).

The hunger for spirituality is for some simply a longing for God, says Nolan (2006:8). "There is also a sense of being wounded, hurt, broken, and in need of healing" (Nolan 2006:8). The re-discovery of mysticism within Christianity and in the Western world is the most powerful development of spirituality today, according to Nolan (2006:9). It is the result of people feeling "cut off and isolated from other people and from nature", and a longing for "connection and harmony" (Nolan 2006:8). People are increasingly searching for connections with Nature and as church attendance declines, people are re-interpreting spirituality outside the formal church network. Kabat-Zinn (www.mindfuleducation.org) also writes about a strong inward longing in our society for well-being, meaning and connection, and suggests that "the power of this should not be underestimated". Many believe that as we re-discover our interrelatedness to others and the natural environment, compassion may be able to "heal" the world. Nature may be instrumental in transforming the way we see all that is around us as being part of God's creation and part of God. The exploration into mindfulness stems from a Western discontent: churches world-wide,

² The term "signs of the times" is pre-Nolan, but I have been unable to find who coined the phrase.

including different church groups in Africa, are affected by this discontent. In many African Christian Churches, Christ is experienced and proclaimed as the Healer, and the focus falls more on a God who provides healing and rescues people from oppression (Mbiti 1998:154). Although this research is aware of this general trend, the study has focused more on a Western perspective and experience in the face of Western history; which the participants have reflected.

2.3.2. Theology in a post-modern culture

Theology in a post-modern culture allows one the freedom to let go of ideas and certainties about God, at the same time recognising the limitations of the person thinking about God. Nolan (2006:147) asserts: “We cannot make sense of a mystery or of *the* mystery”, which links with Pugh (Par 1.10) with regards to the images we create of God. However, the move from ideas and thoughts to experience, from intellectual knowledge to “felt knowledge” in post-modernism, allows us to grasp something of the unknowable (Nolan 2006:10). It also invites us to explore God as the great mystery of the here and now (Nolan 2006:143). The impact of this is that dogmatic, orthodox prescriptions of how the Divine can be experienced fall away.

Post-modern theology emphasizes subjective participation – personal experience – as being essential to understanding. Furthermore, reality is viewed as a multi-layered process and continuity between all things. Thus, objects are interrelated and complementary aspects of one holistically integrated reality (plurality). The emphasis is placed on a non-linear, more cyclical inter-connectedness (Herholdt 1998:217 – 228). The implication of this is that we can regard our experiences of God in any place or time as being meaningful and relevant to us personally. People are increasingly being challenged to re-think the way they think about planet earth. The move from anthropocentrism towards a living cosmology, from a mechanistic parts-mentality towards wholeness rather than individualness, and from rationalism towards mysticism, also involves a shift from personal salvation toward communal healing and compassion as salvation; from theism (God outside us) to panentheism (God in us and us in God); from fall-redemption religion to creation-centred spirituality; and from the ascetic toward the aesthetic (Fox 1983:316). Fox (1999:172) further writes of an “all-embracing life” where “[t]he individual is resituated within the totality of being...brought into harmony with his own mystery and thus with the totality of his own soul...”. As Christians we are encouraged to re-think the way we think about God and

ourselves as part of the world whilst being reminded that “it is our way of seeing that creates and maintains separation” (Kabat-Zinn 1994:215).

New science, with its focus falling on the unexplainable, has further contributed to a return to mystery and imagination. It opens space for considering a God who is with us, part of creation, of which we are also part, and brings new meaning to the idea of God “closer than your own breath”. The idea of belonging in the universe, as part of an evolving universe, part of Nature, with God as the ground of our being (Eckhart in Nolan 2006:144), stands in stark contrast to the idea of the autonomous individual, where ego gratification, immediacy and material acquisition are based on self-centred tendencies, and where individuals tend to see themselves as standing apart, superior to, others. Within every era people have attempted to integrate God into Nature. The desert fathers, for example, lived in the Egyptian desert in the early centuries AD and sought God in simply “being” (Deist 1987:43). This and Jesus’ example of spending time alone in the wilderness offer examples of how people have experienced a need for silence and solitude and allowed Nature to speak to them, in ways that comfort. This research was particularly concerned about the role of Nature in this experience of God.

Post-modern ideas in many ways invite us to move beyond the individual paradigm which has become increasingly limiting as a methodology of knowing God when we attempt to make meaning of the world around us (Burns & Street 2003, Lorimer 2003, Conradie 1996, 2005, Gergen 1991, Scharper 1998, Boff 1996, Burns 1998, McFague 1990, Brueggemann 1993, Clinebell 1996, Cumes 1999). Nolan (2006:172) observes that by discovering our interconnectedness we have “...an unprecedented opportunity for deepening our experience of oneness with the universe and through that our oneness with God”. This is made possible through deepening our appreciation of the glory of God “manifesting itself in the grandeur and the immensity of this mysteriously unfolding universe”, he adds (2006:172). Our understanding can be further enhanced when we consider Jesus as the revelation of oneness (Nolan 2006:176). Nolan (2006:176) describes this oneness of everybody and everything, including oneness with God, as one “seamless” whole; and “inseparable” connectedness.

An integrated understanding of reality as holistic, ecological, systemic, and dynamic in nature, resonates with the idea that we construct our lives as we go along, with God as creative participant in our lives. It is linked with Herholdt’s (1998:218) idea of theology in a post-modern

perspective as “a process of knowing”. A holistic approach to the Bible also brings the text into the context of life today where God can be known in ways other than divine revelation or as some reductive analysis of a pre-determined text. By bringing our subjective, lived experience in relation to the text we are able to interpret God’s influence in our lives. We live in “the here and now of our unfolding universe – which is the only place where God can be found” (Nolan 2006:99). With the emphasis shifting away from dogma and exact understanding, meaning is derived from language and through the use of metaphors (Herholdt 1998:217 – 228). A post-modern use of language makes it possible to conceptualize God anew.

2.4. Social construction

Theories of social construction suggest that language is integral in the way we understand the world, when people talk together and agree together upon reality within any given context. Through talking and listening we therefore make sense of experience. When we talk about “God-within-Nature” (Par 1.6), for example, it sounds strange at first, until we describe our experiences. Burr (2003:4) explains: “our common ways of understanding” the world, “are not derived from the nature of the world as it really is” but “that people construct it between them”. The way we think and the categories and concepts that provide a framework of meaning, are provided by the language we use (Burr 2003:8). This highlights the role that culture plays in our belief systems. Hence meaning/knowledge is derived from looking at the world from a specific perspective.

Meta/grand-narratives represent “general truths about a basic, underlying reality that we all share” (Freedman & Combs 1996:20). Conradie (2006:142) comments that “within the socially constructed living-space, created by the social milieu, we find security and thus the world becomes livable for a specific community”. Social construction theory challenges the “taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world, including ourselves” by de-constructing these discourses (Burr 2003:2 – 3). For example, modernism viewed self-actualization as becoming “the self one fully is” (Gergen 1991:41). Post-modernism, on the other hand, views the self as being more of “an integral part of a close-knit harmony of organic parts united to the cosmos and society” (Lorimer 2003:29). The “individual self”, still part of our way of life today, is being redefined in post-modern culture in the light of the interconnectedness of self and other. This research therefore aimed to look at how creation might play a role in interacting with us to form our selves in the light of our interconnectedness as co-constructors with creation rather than as

spectators. The shift from individualism toward integration in post-modern social constructionist thought may create space to find new meanings of what it means to be a part of a “whole”. I have attempted to find new language for how we can be in the world (Monk et al 1997:34), based on the idea that language is an indication of that.

2.5. Ecological theology

Many claim that God is separate from Nature: for example, the biocentric model (Nature exists for its own sake and has its own intrinsic value; humans exist for Nature’s sake and purposes); the physiocentric perspective (minimizes the uniqueness and privileged status of humans); and the theocentric model (God as the divine authority and sovereign over all) (Van den Brom 1998:447 - 449). The traditional modernist approach of Christianity emphasized an anthropocentric viewpoint, which regarded humans as the highest form of creation and Nature as created purely to fulfill the needs of humans (Van den Brom 1998:441 – 447). These approaches that have threaded their way through a thousand years of European history have placed emphasis on the separateness between people and God. In this research I have focused on God Who is much more part of us.

How we see God and the world, is relevant to this study. Cox (in Rossouw 1993:894) maintains that theology is the “activity by which human beings relate their faith in God (theos) to the patterns of meaning that prevail in any historical period or culture (logos)”. The patterns of meaning in today’s world are forming themselves differently to that which has gone before, moving away from seeing God as fully omnipotent and transcendent or the human being as transcendent, towards a pattern of becoming less omnipotent over Nature. In this, one realises the significance and power that Nature exercises in our lives and often how little we are able to control it, as in for example the sun rising and setting... Ancient wisdom knew of this God in Nature, as did the desert fathers mentioned earlier. The accent in our post-modern era is moving towards re-connecting with this “wisdom” tradition as opposed to “truth” traditions. Ecological theology is relevant to the challenges of our time and offers Christianity “an opportunity for renewal and reformation”, as the place of humanity in creation is being rediscovered (Conradie 2005:1).

The eco-theologian Leonardo Boff (1996:7), following on from this idea, suggests: “Ecology has to do with the relations, interaction, and dialogue of all living creatures...among themselves and

with all that exists”. This includes not only Nature, but culture and society. From an ecological viewpoint, everything that exists, co-exists, and “nothing exists outside relationships” (Boff 1996:7). Ecology re-affirms the interdependence of all things. As Christians we say that everything stems from God and returns to God (Boff 1996:7). Recent ecumenical discussion has replaced the paradigm of mastery over the earth with “[m]odels that stress the ‘community of life’ and look to the restoration of political, economic and ecological relationships...” (Brinkman 1998:207). The relationship of the Holy Spirit to creation is at the forefront of much Christian reflection. According to Brinkman (1998:206 – 207) “[t]he Holy Spirit manifests God’s energy for life present in all things and reminds us, of the total dependence of all things on God”. He further declares that “[t]his divine presence of the Spirit in creation binds us as humans together with all created life and underlines our accountability before God, in and to the community of life” (Brinkman 1998:206).

Capra (in Lorimer 2003:33) regards failing to realise our oneness with God and creation, as an “impoverishment of our self-understanding”. When reading Colossians 1:16 – 17 (Amplified Bible 1987:1390): “For it was in Him that all things were created, in heaven and on earth... all things were created *and* exist through Him [by His service, intervention] and in *and* for Him. And He Himself existed before all things, and in Him all things consist (cohere, are held together)”, within the dominant discourse – the human being as the centre – the passage has a different meaning from when ecology is given the greater voice. According to Lorimer (2003:33), ecological awareness is spiritual/religious awareness. Either way, one cannot separate Nature from God. Ecological Theology has provided the grounds for this research with regards to the role of Nature in our spiritual lives. These perspectives relate to the relatedness of all creation, and God’s intimate connection with His creation. I look at a brief history of science and religion next, with the emphasis falling on how science affects the way in which we view God and Nature.

2.5.1. Science and religion

Since the appearance of modern science around 1600, there has been an ongoing debate concerning the relationship between science and religion (Schaefer 2006:8). The focus of these theological and scholarly debates was mainly that of science/faith and evolution/creation (Schaefer 2006:203). Science and religion seemed incompatible. At the height of modernism it was said that “science has disproved God” (Schaefer 2006:8), while some have argued that

science and theology are simply different ways of looking at the world. Although science has dominated modern society, it became increasingly “evident” that Christianity and science relate to one another (Schaefer 2006:7). With the development of quantum physics, scientists today agree that science and theology are compatible as scientific phenomena move beyond rational explanation. For example, scientists started agreeing that “the intelligibility of the universe points to a sovereign creator God” (Schaefer 2006:11 - 13), away from “indifferent” evolution toward a “fine-tuning of the universe” (Schaefer 2006:31), bringing cosmology and theology together (Schaefer 2006:47). Schrödinger (in Schaefer 2006:8) writes that “...the scientific picture of the real world is very different. It gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart; that really matters to us”.

Certain scientists today openly declare that they are Christians. Many claim they believe in God because of their study of science, and describe moments of “profound discovery about God” (Pugh 2003:5). Science offers rich resources of “images” of God, according to Pugh (2003:5), who maintains that scientists understand that images “...can never capture the totality of the One who stands at the boundaries of thought” (Pugh 2003:6). Schaefer (2006:61) confirms this view as he writes that “[t]o claim to know God comprehensively is beyond the capability of any human being”. However, we need both faith and science, otherwise “we miss much about the world”, says Pugh (2003:xii). The idea that human thinking about God is somewhat “lacking” is a thread that weaves itself throughout this research. However, experiencing something of God’s healing presence in Nature is what this research has explored.

2.5.2. **God-in-the-world**

De Chardin (1966:26 - 27) writes that “...I worship a God who can be touched; and I do indeed touch [H]im – this God – over the whole surface and in the depths of that world of matter which confines me”. God is described as being intimately close. Most theologians, when speaking about God, refer to God as both transcendent and immanent. “God’s transcendence refers to the way in which God transcends or goes beyond the universe. God’s immanence refers to the way in which God is within the universe” says Nolan (2006:177). Here, God’s oneness with the universe is highlighted. In similar vein, Moltmann (in Conradie 2005:14) writes: “All created beings ... find

in nearness to [H]im the inexhaustible wellspring of their life, and for their part find home and rest in God". This opens space for the multiple readings of experience described earlier.

Along with a search for wisdom, rather than "truth", there is a theological shift away from focusing on the incarnate God toward the carnate God. Peacocke for example (in Du Toit 1996:5) says "...if God's own self has given the world the kind of being and becoming it has, then it must in some respects be revelatory of God's nature and purposes". As Christians we say that God is a Trinity, "the eternal relationship of the three divine Persons, the infinite communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*perichoresis*). According to Thomas Berry (in Fox 1983:38), "Nature itself is 'the primary scripture'" since creation came before Scripture. The entire universe emanates from th[e] divine relational interplay and is made in the image and likeness of the Trinity" (Boff 1996:11); which links with the Godly potentiality in creation described by Moltmann (Par 1.6). The God found within Nature therefore becomes a carnate God connected with humanity and Nature, rather than an incarnate God who reigns separately from creation (Conradie 2006:11). Fox (1983:38) suggests that the "creative energy of God" (creation) has been replaced by "The Word of God" (Scriptures).

Despite God's immanence many think of God as being far away (Nolan 2006:175). It is therefore relevant to understand the role of Nature in healing in this research, via the idea that we have never been separated from Nature or God, but only perceive ourselves as separate through the social constructions generated in a modern Western world. Perhaps we have excluded God from our minds and hearts and therefore have little awareness of Him. The purpose of this research was to suggest a different understanding of the nature of self-other boundaries – not as fixed, not as clearly drawn, but as permeable and changing; where researcher and co-researchers include Nature as self/other. Heshusius (1995:121) writes "the self and other are not, by definition, separate and distinct". Herholdt (1998:227) reminds us that the role of Christ as Saviour includes "the role that Christ plays in the renewal of the world". Herholdt (1998:227) firmly states that "Jesus *is* the Cosmic Christ", renewing the world in the here and now. Abundant life can be interpreted as having life in the fullness available through Christ Jesus, not only in the hereafter, but also in this life. For example, Nolan (2006:145) maintains that "[p]ost-modern thinking can further help us enjoy a fullness of unity with all creation and with God as the universal Self of the evolving universe". Fox (1983:26) suggests a re-embrace of the "original blessing" which God bestowed on creation and a move away from a focus on fallenness/sin. God's original

blessing affirms the primary goodness of creation, whereas fallenness is more recent in earth's history. For Conradie (2005:193), "original blessing remains the true nature of all things". Thus the "indwelling of God in creation" (Conradie 2005:14) enables one to talk about God in Nature, which opens new possibilities of connecting relationally with God in Nature. The research attempted to find words for the effect of God's presence with us, all the while remembering that "...God does not exist in any way we can adequately capture or conceive" (Pugh 2003:5). However, seeking God's nearness we are encouraged daily to look for experiences of God's presence in the world, within and around us.

2.5.2.1. **The sacredness of Nature and others**

Christians do not generally refer to creation as being sacred. This research has challenged my thinking in this regard. Deane-Drummond (1996:162), for example, refers to creation as "the substance of the incarnation of God's Son". Thus in creation, Nature is regarded as expressions of God, as Fox (1983:172) asserts, "Through [h]im God, the underground river, bursts above ground into human lives and human history". He further (1983:176) opines that "...our lives as works of art spiral beauty back into the world". This links with a "rekindling of the divine spark or seed or image in each of us" (Fox 1983:187). Within this context, Jesus' words: "...in so far as you did it for one of the least [in the estimation of men] of these My brethren, you did it for Me" (Matthew 26:40, Amplified Bible 1987:1113) become alive and take on new meaning. Conradie (2005:217) also describes Nature as being "God-infused" and calls it sacred. Thus the boundaries between self and other blur and all things are seen as being one with God. "Reality becomes translucent with divine presence" says Conradie (2005:217). Lindbergh (1974:75) refers to this divine presence as "the ever-recurrent miracle of life and growth". With this realisation comes a sense of justice against any form of violation of what belongs to God.

Conradie (2000:216) regards the presence of God in the world as something that fosters and nurtures relationships. It also connects us with "do unto others...". This results in special consequences for us in our relations with other/s in that we are made aware of their worth in God's eyes, and that we are "treading on holy ground". As we see others through God's eyes, we can look with "soft" eyes. Lorimer (2003:237) relates this concept to healing and comments, "a rediscovery of an integrated view of the sacred can have important implications for healing". Furthermore, "a rediscovery of the sense of the sacred" could address "[t]he crisis in our self-

image and the relativism of our value systems”, and could culminate in “a restoration of the spirit” (Lorimer 2003:252). St Thomas (in Clinebell 1996:219) also brings this notion into relation with holism, when he writes that “[t]he entire universe participates in and manifests the divine more than any single being”. From these perspectives, it appears that to recover a sense of the sacred, we have to appreciate the world beyond ourselves and consider our role in creation from within this context. According to Deane-Drummond (1996:54), a concern for mutuality and reciprocity in relationships is characteristic of a feminist approach and therefore we look at eco-feminism next.

2.6. Eco-feminism

So far, I have argued for a deeply contextual theology that goes beyond the traditional idea of the poor and marginalized, towards embracing creation as a deep relational expression of the divine. Feminist theologians have contributed to the challenge afforded by boundaries, particularly hierarchical social categories. For example, Deane-Drummond (1996:54) asserts that patriarchal and hierarchical structures are “unhelpful, both in themselves, and as a context in which to think about God”. In re-imagining God we need to think about God other than in specific categories, such as male ones. Many feminist writers stress the female nature of God in order to compensate for an overemphasis on male images in the past (Deane-Drummond 1996:54). According to De Oliviera (in Landman 1998:139) “theologies of relationships” replace “hierarchical relationships based on dependence” with “relationships of mutuality”. Oduyoye (1998:364) highlights the nurturing aspects of eco-feminist approaches (Par 1.6) in the “motherhood agenda”, which is about making space for life, caring for it and ensuring that others also respect, honour and care for life. Oduyoye (1998:36) writes about a vision of life in all its fullness: “Women demonstrate that they have taken up fully the responsibility to live fully their vocation to be human”. There is a strong emphasis on stewardship in Oduyoye’s (1998:366 – 367) words:

We see doing theology as living conscious of the energy that makes us human and binds us together to inhabit the earth, holding firm to and affirming its integrity” and “to respect our mutual dependence.

Furthermore, she expresses the impetus in feminist theology when she writes, “the theological task is incomplete until its effects are seen in lives that glorify God because persons side with God who is just and compassionate” (Oduyoye 1998:369). Women, through their traditional roles in society as care-givers and nurturers, tend to seek a holistic approach to life, having realized that

therein lie our survival and our wholeness. Theological reflection on what “full” humanity means connects with the concept of “ubuntu” – we are what we are because of others. Fullness may also be linked with an end to dualistic thinking, allowing space for the heart and right brain to join the mind and left brain, so much more part of the human way of thinking (Fox 1983:22). He avers, “The right brain’s contribution of feeling and connection-making, of mysticism and cosmic delight, of darkness and sensuousness needs to be taught and appreciated” (Fox 1983:24). Spiritual transformation together with the recognition of the intrinsic value of “others” is an expression of the healing explored in this research. The research was informed by feminist theology and eco-feminism as it creates an element of freedom to develop new ways of relating to one another, to the world, and to God.

2.7. An ecological contextual approach to practical theology

From the viewpoints discussed, individualism has largely contributed to the loss of wholeness, manifested as alienation and loss of connection and meaning in life today (Burns & Street 2003, Heshusius 1995 – Par 2.5.2, Boff 1996 – Par 1.7). There is also the sense that this further leads to loss of responsibility to others. Practical theology today is embracing a more ecological contextual approach (Theron Par 1.7, Dreyer Par 1.7, Herholdt Par 1.7). Relational aspects are being highlighted and healing and well-being viewed from a different perspective than previously. Well-being is no longer viewed from a personal perspective, but is based in the “integration, balance and harmony of all aspects of existence” (Herholdt 2008:183). In this light, one could say that practical theology seeks to help people to encounter God in “life on earth” (Herholdt 2008:186) and to live in fellowship with God and others. Thiessen (2008:128) writes that the focus in healing practices in practical theology in the past has fallen mainly on the individual, excluding “more socially-minded ethics”. “[W]e can no longer live as communally detached individual[s]” Thiessen (2008:127 - 132) therefore asserts “inner healing” needs to be turned “outward”.

Herholdt (2008:188) describes this broader ecological approach as “post-modernism coming to fruition”. A church that emphasises wholeness and interconnectedness is a “post-modern church”, according to Herholdt (2008:198). This resonates with Boff’s (1996:35) understanding of human wholeness as “mental ecology”, which “tries to recover the original state of maimed human intimacy” with Nature. “Mental ecology” can also be likened to Macy’s term, the “greening of the

self” (Par 1.6), which emphasises the awareness of self-other appropriately. For the church to be relevant in the lives of people today, practical theology is increasingly focusing on interconnectedness as an aspect of wholeness, and healing practices have taken a new direction away from the individual towards community.

2.7.1. **Healing**

The message that the world needs healing seems to pervade the literature. Nolan (2006:11), for example, regards the way in which the hunger for spirituality finds expression in the world today as “the desperate need felt by so many people for healing”. The widespread unhappiness in the world may be because of the alienation many feel, and the resulting loneliness many experience (Par 1.4). Berry (Par 1.6) also sees the loss of spirituality as “the foundation for many of the maladies we see in our modern world”. In a world in which self-focus is promoted, recognising the other is not something that comes naturally – it has to be consciously pursued. For example, Bellah (in Macy <http://www.parallax.org>) observes, “[w]e have to treat others as part of who we are, rather than as a 'them' with who we are in constant competition”. Steinem (in Estés 1998:5) suggests that in a modern world where wisdom is limited to “facts”, we get cut off from our intuitive nature, which understands intuitively and remembers our kinship with all living beings. Perhaps, as Estés (1998:5) remarks, our souls are merely asleep, “dusty from neglect”. This notion supports Nolan (Par 1.4) and Berry’s (Par 1.6) idea that people have lost a sense of spirituality. She suggests that remembering “what substance we are really from, and where our true home is” assists the inner healing process (Estés 1998:5). Conradie (2005:13-14) avers that we think of the earth as our “true” home, as “God’s house (oikos) in which we may dwell as we participate in the earth community”. When we perceive others as full participants in “the community of life” and a part of God’s creation, it emphasises the unique role of each part of creation, and becomes relevant for theology and healing.

Lorimer (2003:18) writes about healing as the re-orientation of “the damaged psyche” resulting from “stress, trauma and ...frenetic lifestyles”. Someone recently described herself as being on auto-pilot, going through the motions of what seems to have become a matter of survival. Perhaps people have been out of touch with the self, others and the natural world, on “automatic pilot” in a disconnected state. Kabat-Zinn (1994:xv) defines this “automatic” state as mindlessness – going through life without the awareness of life unfolding around one each moment, as if we were

“asleep”. In today’s urban context it may just be easier to lose touch, because our lives revolve less and less around the natural world and there are more and more distractions. People in a Western context today also seem to have little time for others outside their immediate nuclear families.

It has been mentioned that a shift in our thinking needs to take place, and has already started taking place, regarding how one sees oneself, to restore a sense of wholeness. Making the shift will have a direct effect on how one relates to the rest of the world (Kabat-Zinn www.mindfuleducation.org). It is a shift from self-centred greed and selfishness, and a move from alienation and isolation towards connection, sharing and a sense of belonging. So far words such as lost, cut-off, broken, severed, etcetera, have woven a thread through these pages, giving rise to “brokenness”. As we become “subsumed by the culture, or by the intellect or the ego”, opines Estés (1998:8), we sever ourselves from Nature, and in the process, from our own wholeness. Al Gore (in Lorimer 2003: 53-54) writes:

Believing ourselves to be separate from the earth means having no idea how we fit into the natural cycle of life and no understanding of the natural processes of change that affect us and that we in turn are affecting. No wonder we are lost and confused. No wonder so many people feel their lives are wasted. Our species used to flourish within the intricate and interdependent web of life, but we have chosen to leave the garden.

Kabat-Zinn (www.mindfuleducation.org) contends that “a direct, personal recognition of interconnectedness as the fundamental ground of being”, is needed to make this shift. The research placed emphasis on the exploration of healing in the context of what it would mean for individuals to construct others as part of themselves, and how this perspective could contribute to a new understanding, and ultimately healing to individual persons. Nolan (2006:90) asserts that “the only way ahead is together, healing one another”, and yet “the place to start is with ourselves”. Healing in this research was viewed as being relational in that our wholeness lies within relationship with Other/s. Thus healing is removed from its locus in the self and placed in relationship. A post-modern relational view of healing views connection making not as a product of the individual mind, but the outcome of interchange between the self and other. Considering that ego-centrism, fragmentation, suffering, and compassion in my own understanding play a substantial role in brokenness/wholeness, I will briefly look at each one.

2.7.1.1. **Fragmentation**

So far, in this chapter, I have argued for a deeper engagement with Nature as one pathway towards a more meaningful life and connectedness in what is perceived by many as loss of wholeness. We seem to live in a “fragmented” world where constant demands perhaps draw us away from what we might deem more important in our lives. Society today constitutes more “multiplicity” than simplicity, which often leads more to fragmentation than unification, opines Lindbergh (1974:26 - 27). She calls this “zerrissenheit – torn-to-pieces-hood (William James) and says we “cannot live perpetually in ‘zerrissenheit’, for we “will be shattered into a thousand pieces” (Lindbergh 1974:56); an apt description of the brokenness described earlier (Par 2.7.1).

Not knowing how to “feed” the spirit, we try to muffle its demands in distractions. “Instead of stilling the center...we add more centrifugal activities to our lives – which tend to throw us off balance”! (Lindbergh 1974:52). Many who suffer from depression, anxiety and insomnia might be able to identify with this. Distractions also cause us to forget our stories of restoration with Nature. We fail to remember that Nature can afford us “a quiet contemplative drawing together of the self” as we consciously pursue that “which oppose the centrifugal forces of today” (Lindbergh 1974:54 - 56). Within this multiplicity of being, both as a social construction in the community as well as inward within the self, a richness is added to some of the aforementioned concepts on social construction and the self. The answer lies in finding a balance or “an alternating rhythm between... two extremes: total renunciation of the world... and total acceptance of it” (Lindbergh 1974:30). Here again, it is very much an individual focus but perhaps as Nolan (Par 2.7.1) considers, we have to begin with our own healing as individuals before we can give to others. Lindbergh (1974:58) also points us towards spirituality as she urges us to become “inwardly attentive” and asks: “Can it be that [Western] man [sic] is beginning to realize that the kingdom of heaven is within?”

2.7.1.2. **Egocentrism**

The need to “overcome” the ego in order to heal and embrace life in its entirety, including God and others, is a view supported by many who write on spirituality (Nolan 2006:106 – 110). Egocentrism is a preoccupation with the self, and like individualism, relates everything to the individual person. Cumes (1999:104) relates it to alienation in that a “lack of connection results in

absorption in self, because of the overwhelming influences of our ‘sophisticated’ civilization”. Consumerism, materialism, and technology feed the ego, leading to separation from the soul/spirit. This resonates with Cumes’ (1999:104) observation that “egocentricity leads to selfishness and desirous attachment, factors that hinder our spiritual development”. When we ignore the preoccupation with self, we pay a spiritual and psychological price, as Cumes (1999:104) explains:

Ego makes us judge others and believe we are better than they, reinforcing itself... Our Western predicament is a result of our culture’s need to reinforce ego to maintain the continuation of our consumer society. The media tries to connect us with an ego-driven want, by dishonestly masquerading it in language representing self.

Alliance with self-other may be the key to wholeness. The awareness that we are not single individuals, but part of a global system, which needs to exist in harmony and balance, could demolish the barriers of a limited, inflated ego and give a more proportioned view of our own lives.

2.7.1.3. **Suffering**

Nature as healer encompasses many aspects. For example, Brinkman (1998:204) avers that “death is inherent in all life” and “strife and suffering belong to nature”. He asserts that the realisation that there is no exemption from hardship on earth “brings about a realization that we need to care about human suffering; because God cares” (Brinkman 1998:204). Lorimer (2003:175) observes that one of the main causes of depression and anxiety is a lack of acceptance of suffering. We live in a society which focuses on immediate gratification. Furthermore, Christians in the Western world “have tended to unwittingly embrace a ‘prosperity gospel’ that views ‘health and wealth’ as normal and ‘hardship and suffering’ as unusual” (Lorimer 2003:175). When we understand “the true nature of our existence”, says Lorimer (2003:177), growth and healing are seen as natural processes. How we perceive suffering, for example as our school for growth, seems to hinge on whether we believe in an alternate reality that transcends the one we know, says Brinkman (1998:204). This resonates with De Chardin (1966:69) who writes: “Without you, without your onslaughts, without your uprooting of us, we should remain all our lives inert, stagnant, puerile, ignorant both of ourselves and of God”.

Distress in life might also result from a lack of inner resources and spiritual development, which enable us to see that there is meaning beyond ourselves. This associates suffering with the ego.

Perhaps, once we awaken to our place in the world as part of creation, we shall find that we can become more accepting and compassionate towards self and others. Lorimer (2003:175) opines that “the most urgent need for Western man [sic] is to discover that divine element in his [sic] being, without which there can never be any possible hope or meaning to our existence in this earthly realm”. He declares that one can “witness a true transformation in people when they discover within themselves that transfiguring dimension we define as God” (Lorimer 2003:174). Thus Nature as healer includes suffering. However, suffering is not central to this research and did not surface from the text.

2.7.1.4. **Compassion**

Compassion for others appears to be central to many major religious traditions. Boff’s (1996:32) “internal ecology” speaks of compassion for all living things. This comes about when we acknowledge our and others’ vulnerability, and thus the need of love and understanding. Gilbert (2005:1) describes compassion as being “open to the suffering of self and others in a non-defensive and non-judgemental way”. He links compassion with the wider shift from the individual towards the community when he avers that “[i]n societies that focus on relationships, the way of seeing the world is in terms of patterns and the *interconnected* nature of things” (Gilbert 2005:2). In Buddhist approaches, the practice of “loving-kindness” as compassion is regarded as a healing process (Gilbert 2005:2). Compassion can further be linked to healing in the sense that when we become more accommodating of others, we become more open and receptive. For example, Wang (2005:100) notes that “[i]t is the awareness of the other’s humanity, as well as our own that allows us to maintain an inclusive sense of ‘I’ as opposed to ‘a separate sense of I’”. Lack of acceptance and feelings of unworthiness play a critical role in the aetiology of depression, according to Allen and Knight (2005:240). This relates healing in this context to love of others and self. Cumes (1999:126) observes that lack of acceptance and feelings of unworthiness also bear a negative effect on our spiritual development. Furthermore, neglecting our spirituality can result in being “stuck” in problems (Cumes 1999:126) because guilt feelings and lack of compassion often prevent our healing. Accepting the situation “allows for the development of less self-focus and greater empathy towards others” and can be “the key to helping people change, recover and develop ways of living that increase well-being” (Allen & Knight 2005:250). Nature’s role in healing and well-being is highlighted by Lindbergh (1974:54): “[i]n Nature we are able to give ourselves completely; and feel completely accepted”. When our capacities for

compassion are turned on (Cumes 1999:126) we can confidently engage in the world; and this has healing effects.

2.8. Pastoral care

The practice of pastoral care in South Africa has focused on a number of issues, both on the individual as well as on social consciousness within the liberation movement and marginalised communities. Pastoral care in this research is concerned with the marginalisation of nature as a co-worker with us to bring a healing voice of personal freedom. Kotzé and Kotzé (2001:7) emphasise care and solidarity in pastoral care and the movement away from “caring for” towards “caring with” in a self/other relationship where pastoral care happens in “action”. The “self-other” relationship “requires an attitude of openness and receptivity, to create greater wholeness”, suggest Kotzé and Kotzé (2001:3). To link pastoral care with the signs of the times is to address some of the signs that are manifest within the language and actions of society. Anxiety, stress, and a sense of rootlessness, as already mentioned (Par 1.5), are regarded as signs of our times. Clinebell (1994:46) refers to this as “inner deadness”, which he says, flows from “alienations and idolatries” that prevent “people from celebrating the wonderful gift of God – the gift of being alive and aware”. This resonates with Hiltner’s (in Louw 1998:22) view of healing as the “restoration of functional wholeness that has been impaired”; and implies working with interrelatedness and our situatedness in our environment. According to Clinebell (1994:46), healing involves opening oneself to the energy of the living presence of a loving God available in every here-and-now moment, including experiences of nurturing bonding with God’s continuing creation. Clinebell’s pastoral work foregrounds bonding experiences with the earth (see Par 2.7.1).

Louw (1998:23) regards the functions of pastoral care as being healing, guiding, sustaining and reconciling, but asserts that “the main focus is to mediate God’s faithfulness, loving care and grace”. “Our dignity is derived from the fact that God still cares for us. It has little to do with human nature but everything with God’s grace” (Conradie 2005:195). This research on pastoral care explores the Divine Presence in what surrounds us, which in itself, implies infinite possibility. Ackermann and Bons-Storm (1998:131) regard the function of sustaining as “empathizing with people in such a way that they can start relying on a source of power within their own abilities”. They see awakening people to new possibility as “the key to all pastoral therapy” (Ackermann & Bons-Storm 1998:131). Providing hope within the signs of our times consequently becomes an

integral part of the pastoral care and counselling process. Conradie (2000:215) supports this perspective: he maintains that “the starting point for hope must ...be found within the present reality” and that “we look toward a God who is present in the world as the source of hope”. Peacocke (in Conradie 2000:215-216) also brings personal hope into relation with creation: “God is uniquely present to the world as a whole and to each of its individual components. The brokenness of the world does not imply that God is absent....God says His grace is enough for us.” According to Peacocke (in Conradie 2000:215), “in experiencing the world as trustworthy and as viable we are encountering God as generator and basis for hope”. We do not always experience the world, the natural environment, as orderly, which forms a part of the anxiety of not knowing or being able to control our environment. However, hope prevails in that God is Himself present in the world as unity within diversity. As pastoral counsellors we do not aspire to “fix brokenness”, but to help those we care about, to connect with hope. Pastoral care aims to help people develop, not only their feelings and attitudes, but also constructive behaviours and thinking, which becomes possible when hope is manifested. In this research hope is manifested in God “present in the world”.

Anderson (1995:23) regards working in a connected way as contextual, because “the therapist does not remain unaffected by the environment” in which she works. According to Anderson (1995:21), “connectedness enables one to experience and use more of oneself” in working with others. This was explored further in this study, and required that the work focus on how we perceive ourselves, before we can focus on the self in relation to others. In this research the solidarity was concerned with Nature and how we act and interact with our environment in life-giving and healing ways. I investigated how Nature cares with us; and for us. This is significant because it becomes a mind-shift away from person caring for person towards Nature as the Cosmic Christ caring with/for us. This links pastoral care and counselling with ecological, spiritual and ethical dimensions.

2.8.1. **Nature-as-Healer**

The role of Nature in human wellness and change is being widely acknowledged. For example, Burns and Street (2003:192) observe that connecting with Nature “can create more happiness in us all” for when we encounter beauty in Nature “our eyes light up, our bodies relax and our hearts open”. Lindbergh (1974:64 – 66) also supports Nature’s role as facilitator in transformation and

change and remarks that Nature is “pure, simple and unencumbered”. Nature can teach us that “transformation is natural and part of the process of life and its evolution“(Lindbergh 1974:64 – 66). Witnessing natural processes in Nature, can prepare us to more readily accept change.

Howard Clinebell (1979:19), known for his growth counselling model in pastoral therapy, identified six interdependent dimensions in which growth occurs: mind, body, relations with other people/biosphere (micro-level), relations with groups/institutions (macro-level), and in the spiritual dimensions of life. Literature indicates that Howard Clinebell was one of the first theologians to incorporate the natural environment in pastoral care. According to Clinebell (1996:19), healing is enhanced when it incorporates the more-than-human world: he regards pastoral care as incomplete without an earth dimension. He asserts that “it is imperative that pastoral theologians and pastoral psychologists recognize that pastoral care of the earth is an essential dimension of care of persons” (Clinebell 1996:35).

2.8.1.1. Eco-therapy according to Howard Clinebell

Clinebell (1996:24) based his model of eco-therapy – a grounded model of human development and healing – on humans’ paradoxical condition of being in Nature and yet also set apart from Nature. For Clinebell (1996:24) a necessary starting point is discovering, befriending and intentionally developing one’s profound rootedness in the life-giving biosphere because this process produces what he called “eco-bonding”. “Eco-bonding involves claiming and enjoying one’s nurturing, energizing, life-enhancing connectedness with nature” (Clinebell 1996:24). This emphasises the spiritual side of our emotional bond with the earth. Clinebell (1994:52) regards healing and enhancing relationships with the natural, as well as the human environment, as an essential goal in pastoral care. Since pastoral care takes place at the interface between the six components of person, family, society, culture, Nature and God (Clinebell 1996:108), he believes that because of our interconnectedness, the fulfilment of one benefits all (Clinebell 1996:36). He further explains that the living earth benefits from every person’s human fulfillment and “therapy cannot ignore the social and environmental contexts of people’s lives”. Pastoral care in this context involves deepening our relationship with the natural world, appreciating the sacredness of our planetary world and taking responsibility for what happens to our earth.

In a therapeutic context, the therapist can also be regarded as a steward and is accountable in his/her role in the service of God. In pastoral care, it is important that we do not overlook the in-working of the Holy Spirit, by minimising the role of God in healing. As part of the body of Christ, we believe that we do not work alone – Jesus says “...I came that they may have *and* enjoy life, and have it in abundance (to the full, till it overflows)” (John 10:10, Amplified Bible 1987:1227). The concept of abundant life and what it entails for life today, from a Christian perspective, has been explored extensively by the theologian Sallie McFague (1990); and includes Nature.

2.8.2. Conradie’s perspective on Nature as a way to connect with God

Conradie’s perspective on Nature as a way to connect with God, was significant for this study. Up to this point, I have argued that God is revealed to us in the Scriptures and in Nature. For Conradie (2006:13) “the idea that one can find something of God’s presence in nature, speaks to many people”. He suggests that Christians traditionally understood that God reveals Himself through Nature (Conradie 2006:13). One experiences God’s presence in the natural environment in the glory and wonder that leave scientists beyond understanding and explanation, according to Conradie (2006:18). It seems that our experiences in Nature not only make us more aware of our physical connection to the earth, but also of God’s infinite presence in the world around us.

2.8.3. Christian environmental ethos and praxis

A Christian environmental ethos involves all elements of life, and bears implications for personal and social ethics. Albert Schweitzer developed the concept of “reverence for life”, used as the basis for ethics, according to Van der Brom (1998:444), who writes that “Schweitzer’s philosophy starts from the consciousness that the individual life form is involved in a web of life and through life united to the source of life”. It links with “community of life” (Brinkman Par 2.5) and culminates in respect for Other/s, including Nature. This is a move away from regarding Nature as a resource to be managed for human interests, thus ascribing instrumental value to Nature, which is anthropocentric (Deane-Drummond 1996:70-73). If we regard Nature as having value in and of itself, it possesses inherent value; and if we regard Nature as having intrinsic value, it is independent of humans (Deane-Drummond 1996:70-73). The research emphasises how we give value to the natural world, and regards Nature as having inherent and intrinsic value. This is a

kind of “levelling the playing ground” as mutuality is foregrounded. From a postmodern perspective one can also say that in this context boundaries between us and Nature and us and others are removed. The researcher specifically looked at how Nature can impact on perceived barriers between us and God.

2.9. Qualitative research

The study followed a qualitative approach. It focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals, and understands events/phenomena within the concrete, natural context in which they occur (Mouton 2001:272). Thus qualitative research provides insights in a holistic fashion. The understanding of a person’s experience is captured by describing what they experience and the meaning they attach to their experience, on the assumption that words have no meaning on their own. Schurink (2001:240) describes the qualitative research process as “a voyage of discovery, rather than one of verification” where knowledge is “constructed” rather than “discovered by the mind” and “findings are literally created through the process of interaction between the researcher and the [participants]”. Johnson (2000:82) contends that sharing stories about experiences in Nature contributes to shaping an environmental imagination, but not by “wrap[ping] the world around [one]self and us[ing] it as a means of self-knowledge”, as this would take us back to the inward perspective of self-centered individualism. In this way we also carry our awareness with us into the world, and continually add to our awareness of how we live in the world.

2.9.1. Narrative analysis and deconstruction

The researcher worked with a narrative deconstructive analysis that utilised the ideas developed in these chapters. Many stories and multiple meanings exist within any narrative and yet it holds and is influenced by dominant discourses. The manner in which we have been taught to think about ourselves and God, throughout our lives, by our culture and Christian church, prescribes the way we “can be in the world” (Monk et al. 1997:35). For example, Monk et al, (1997:35) affirm that “[n]o person has total control over the meanings in his/her life”. However, certainty and “knowing” is a positioning stance promoted by modernist approaches (Monk et al. 1997:35). Through working with less certainty and more risk in this research, I sought to find some of the multiple interpretations around Nature that afford a richness of text, rather than a reduction thereof. In this way, creation opens up deconstructive space to alternate readings of narratives

within a more communal meaning of what it might mean to become a part of creation, rather than separate from it. The research explored some of the dominant discourses along with some of the alternate meanings that allow for a theology of inclusion to develop.

2.9.2. Research design and methodology

Since qualitative research tends to evolve throughout the research process, the research design was tentative to begin with. Rubin and Rubin (in Mouton 2001:195) state: “You cannot plan the entire design for a qualitative project in advance, because the design changes as you learn from the interviewing”. To begin with, this study can be characterised as an idiographic study, which “seeks the particular in the form” and is “concerned with the unique, immanently defined content of the real event” (Babbie & Mouton 2001:272). As much as it is seen as the “real”, this research does not see reality as something out there that we can grasp, but as the meaning we attach to experience. The research is emic in that it views events/phenomena “from the perspective of the participants” (Babbie & Mouton 2001:270). The narrative language of narrative research also represents the participants’ voices. The research into the ways that Nature might add to the experience of God and how this might contribute to the healing of people constituted a non-therapeutic study. The data collection methods and procedures are described next.

2.9.3. Data collection techniques

The study utilised qualitative interviewing for data collection. McCracken (1988:9) highlights the fact that qualitative interviewing “gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves”. This also emphasises “the relativism of culture, the active participation of the interviewer, and the importance of giving the interviewee a voice” (Rubin & Rubin in Mouton 2001:196). Seidman (1991:3) points out that “[t]he purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to ‘evaluate’ as the term is normally used”. Thus the interviews (Par 1.8) were conversational, but with a sense of control by the interviewer. Silverman (2006:112-113) describes this as “making sense together”, linking it to social construction and narrative research. The unstructured interviews were conducted along the lines of “subtle, indirect and circular processes of interviewing” rather than “direct, linear processes” (Waldegrave in Freedman & Combs 1996:32). These involve identifying the participant’s beliefs and values that underlie how they relate to the

natural world. By noting repeated words, the participants' orientation could be reflected in the analysis (Burr 2003:159).

In my own reflection, the questions that guided my thinking were, firstly

- What are some of the significant experiences the participant has had in Nature?
- What role does Nature play in his/her life and that of their family?
- Where did s/he learn about Nature?
- What are the stories told in their family, that have connected them with Nature?
- When Nature speaks to them, what do they hear it saying?
- If they are feeling depressed, or ill, or experiencing a sense of loss, where would be the first place they would think of going? What would be their first thought?

Secondly, questions I asked myself to challenge my own assumptions and beliefs (Par 2.8) about "the knowledges we participate in and that shape our lives" (Kotzé 2002:8, 32):

- How has the person's experiential reality (Freedman & Combs 1996:40) been socially constructed?
- Am I focusing on meaning instead of facts?
- Who is silenced or marginalized in the stories I am hearing?
- Am I evaluating the person (Freedman & Combs 1996:40 - 41) or encouraging her/him to evaluate things?
- Am I getting caught up in normative thinking? (Freedman & Combs 1996:41)

The narrative techniques used in the interviews were aided by questions in the form of a question sheet, which was used as the basis of the categories and relationships that the interviews needed to explore (McCracken 1988:32). Such questions were helpful to develop an understanding of the meanings conveyed by participants, as well as the life experience expressed in the participant's own words. Words do not mean the same in different contexts because through socialization, we absorb and assimilate the values, norms, traditions and language of our culture/society. For the focus group interviews, I refined the interview questions in the form of guidelines. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim into text, and the transcripts analysed. The narrative analysis and interpretation of the texts centred on the in-depth interviews. Patterns and

contradictions in the text allowed for themes to emerge, which were utilised to address the research objectives. What I found particularly interesting was a sense of experiencing beyond the ego self. This resulted in one of the texts becoming more centralised in my own understanding. It was helpful to keep in mind that the study was exploratory and descriptive, not explanatory or evaluative.

2.9.4. **Data analysis**

The data was analysed according to a multi-perspectival approach, which involves an inductive (tentative) form of reasoning – develop concepts, insights and understanding from patterns in the data; capture meaning as the researcher becomes immersed in the data; concepts in the form of themes and categories; seek understanding of phenomena; observation/s determined by information richness of settings, and types of observation/s modified to enrich understanding; data presented in the form of quotes from transcripts; data analysed by extracting themes; holistic units of analysis, concentrating on the relationships between elements/contexts; and the whole always being more than the sum (Denzin & Lincoln in Schurink 2001:242 - 243).

In-depth interviewing generates a large amount of text, and the data was reduced to what was regarded as important within this particular research in relation to narratives that are influenced by dominant discourses and alternate narratives that embrace holism, the Cosmic Christ, connectivity, rootedness, healing and well-being. This helped me to stay in touch with the detail of the research, although there were times when I became “bogged down” in the detail and volume of the text. A more detailed description of the research process, including the coding of the captured data, is attached (Appendix).

2.10. **Pilot study**

An interview with Bridgid (my supervisor) served as a pilot study for the research. The narrative centred around an experience when she encountered a kingfisher in Nature. She said that in a zoo one knows what to expect; in Nature, one doesn't know what to expect. For her this represented the unpredictability of life. When asked what meaning this held for her, she said it was the surprise element. She regarded the glorious beauty of the bird there for her to enjoy as a special, unexpected moment when she was “right there to see”. What this experience meant to her was the

realization that “we think we can control life. We are taught to control everything in our lives to be successful”. “The surprise signifies hope”, she said. “The idea of the unexpected brought the realization that we cannot control life. We can’t know, and it is okay not to know, was what it meant to me”. From this interview, I learned that an exploration of our experiences in and with Nature is meaningful.

2.11. Chapter summary

The research on the healing aspect of Nature in the context of pastoral therapy questioned whether ecology can make a difference to how people relate to God, themselves, the world and others. Literature indicates that it could make a difference to the way in which we live our lives as we consciously seek contact with Nature. It further showed that an ecological worldview might change one’s perspectives on lifestyle, hope, love, social justice and culture as it is a delusion to think that people can flourish apart from the rest of the living world. Being alienated from God and others in life often causes great distress, so that restoring our connectedness can be instrumental in healing. The task of post-modern theology is to provide an account of faith in order to increase meaning in our lives. One method through which one could make more sense of religious experience in today’s world is by re-imagining God. The practice of pastoral care today emphasises inclusive practices. Writing and talking with others about their lives and experiences may both help us to clarify for ourselves what Nature can teach us about living. In conversation with Nature, people may evolve a more joyous, alive and simplistic way of living – a rhythm with more pauses in it (Lindbergh Par 2.7.1.1) – and more fulfilling relationships. The literature has helped me to increase my awareness, understanding and experience of Nature. Conversations with others in this research would become more than our individual stories, because the sharing of experiences stimulates new understandings about relationships with Nature, God and others.

CHAPTER 3

The ways Nature speaks to the participants in this study

Seeing beauty in a flower could awaken humans, however briefly, to the beauty that is an essential part of their own innermost being, their “true” nature. The first recognition of beauty was one of the most significant events in the evolution of human consciousness. The feelings of joy and love are intrinsically connected to that recognition. Without fully realizing it, flowers would become for us an expression in form of that which is most high, most sacred, and ultimately formless within ourselves.

Eckhart Tolle (2005:2)

3.1. Introduction

My primary concern in the foregoing chapters was to construct a framework for the research. Working through the participants’ text, certain themes representing new voices came to the fore. These form the building blocks for the remainder of the structure. My concern in this chapter will be to allow the new voices to speak.

In this chapter, I will expand the themes by recording short paragraphs of the participants’ words to foreground some of their key ideas. I will include some of the key words used by each participant from which the reader will be able to see in what ways Nature speaks to the participants in this study. This chapter will focus firstly on a brief description of how the participants became part of the research, followed by an introduction to each of them. The brief personal profile and background highlights some of their unique experiences in Nature. The narrative analysis of the key words will be left to the discussion in Chapter 4. Thus this chapter will introduce the participants, whilst chapter four will expand their texts. Traditionally, the same texts are commented on throughout; however, I will be introducing expanded texts in chapter four that fit with the analysis as described in chapter two. These texts will be analysed as the analysis delves deeper and expands the themes.

3.1.1. Making contact

The participants came from a traditional Methodist church community within a middle class suburb. I chose an urban environment and elected to interview participants whom I did not know personally. I wanted to explore how people experienced God in Nature and therefore chose believers within a Christian faith community. Limitations in the research by using participants

from one Christian faith community will be discussed in greater detail in the concluding chapter. Initially, I placed a notice in the Church Bulletin, inviting people to participate. Within a week I received a call from Henk, verbalising his interest in the project. He told me about his publication “Wandering Thoughts”³ and wondered if I would like a copy of it. I arranged a preliminary meeting with him in order to collect a copy of his book and invited him to participate in the research. No one else showed interest, except Peter, who let me know that he was available if I needed participants. I contacted the church office and arranged to give a brief talk about the research project in the upcoming two Sunday morning services to invite participants in the research. On the first day, eight participants came forward followed by a further two the following week. Where I had originally intended to interview four or five participants, there were now twelve.

3.1.2. Description of participants

The participants came from different walks of life. Some worked full-time, others part-time, and three were retired. Of the remaining nine participants - two showed no further interest and one withdrew later - six were women and three men. The women’s ages ranged from 35 – 65, and those of the men from 50 – 70 years. The participants were all Christian, either English or Afrikaans speaking, from a middle class background living in the east of Pretoria, in Gauteng Province. The research process, from preparing for the interviews to working with emerging themes, is described in the Appendix. What emerged from that is highlighted here.

3.2. The participants

I came to know the experience of the participants through their stories. Whilst focusing on the participant’s life history so as to emphasise the context of their lives, details of the unique experiences of each participant and a reflection on the meaning, are also discussed. Their experiences have informed and influenced the ways in which they engage with the world. Some of the narratives cover a shorter story; others give a more extensive description. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with Henk, Trish, Helena, Trudi, and Thandi. Two men formed Group 1, and two women, Group 2. I will now introduce the reader to the participants, who signed

³ Leerink, H. 1991. *Wandering Thoughts: A compendium of the solemn, sincere and serene rambling thoughts and experiences of a committed Christian witness*. A private publication: Pretoria.

consent forms for release of information. One indicated that she would prefer to use a pseudonym in the research report and in any publication.

3.2.1. **Trish**

Trish grew up in a Christian home and her parents instilled a love of Nature in her as a small child. One of her earliest memories is a beautiful garden. She has had several unique life experiences of connecting with God in Nature. Significantly, she became aware of Jesus for the first time, in a natural landscape in Massachusetts when she was eighteen years old. Trish has a deep and enduring love for God and the natural world. As a pastor's wife and school teacher, Trish has guided the church community through contemplative prayer – dedicated time with God in silence. Her love of flowers plays an important role in her life and links with the theme *Rootedness in Nature*. In her own words

My home may not be without flowers. Something in me craves colour, flowers, texture. A garden to me is a place where I create. Even just a single slip of a flower has to be picked every week. I have to have flowers. It is a sign of something deep within.

Trish says that she cannot be without Nature around her. Her deep sense of appreciation for Nature is offset by her strong sense of responsibility to care for the environment. For example “I cannot bear to see flowers die. He [God] delights to see us protect Nature”. Whilst talking about the “magical” effect that Nature has on people during the interview, Trish said, “I would say the ‘beautifying effect’”, which links with the theme *Nature's role in well-being*. She explained:

I had been going through a bad time about ten years ago. I had an operation and we went away on holiday to the coast after I was a little better. On the way back, I went via my mother, whom I hadn't seen for about six months. She said, ‘you've had a very good rest - it is as if the beach has got into your soul!’ And I thought, well, my mother knows me well enough to know what the magic of that beach holiday was. It was sunshine, seagulls, saltwater, spray, rock...

At school during a break, Trish often sits in Nature whilst she drinks her tea. She says

I know that when I am stressed or pressured I need to take a five minute break in Nature. That brings me close [to God] so it's my therapy.

Trish is talking about busyness and lack of calmness here. What happens during those five minutes in Nature? And how do her learners experience her after five minutes in Nature? Trish says that Nature “beautifies” her. I imagine she returns to her class a gentler, more tolerant teacher. Perhaps she radiates Nature like St Thomas and De Chardin, where she also saw God in

everything, including her pupils. Perhaps it is more Nature within and around, than Nature “out there”? More us than you and I; separate. Trish conveys something of this shift from me to we; more a collective consciousness, away from the individual self. For example, she says:

I became aware it is God’s creation, of which I feel part.
and
The more man [sic] draws to Nature, the closer he comes to God.

This text alludes to (as she doesn’t mention the word) the Cosmic Christ. Key words for Trish are beauty, see, and flowers. She mentions the word “sees” repeatedly in her text. She also mentions “eyes opened”; however this seems to be more than seeing with the mind’s eye. It is seeing with the heart. Something about Trish speaks of openness, acceptance, gentleness, and giving, and joy. She responds:

God created flowers to connect us to Nature - to draw us, to engage us, to give us joy, pleasure and beauty, and I must have flowers, that connection. There is a wholeness that is absorbed.

This links the text to *The role of Nature towards person-God connectedness*, which is one of the themes in this research. These themes are not explained here, and the reader is referred to the discussion in Par 4.2. Trish did not talk about connecting with people in Nature, at this stage. I mention this because a great deal of the literature is about interconnectedness with people.

3.2.2. **Henk**

Henk enjoys a close affinity with the natural world and has had many experiences of connecting with God in Nature. For example, he says that “Nature improves my being”. His love of Nature was sparked at a young age when as a boy he was drawn to the veld; it was here that he sensed God’s voice the first time. Henk has experienced Nature’s healing benefit throughout his life, but there are two experiences that stand out. As a young boy Henk contracted diphtheria, a serious illness which resulted in him suffering from asthma. The climate in East London did not suit his medical condition and he had to be sent to boarding school in Graaff-Reinet. He was obliged to contend with bullies in the school and hostel and found that “people frustrated him”. He “escaped” to Nature where he could be “at peace”. Nature also meant solitude, which he came to prefer, as he says he feels “more comfortable in Nature” than in crowds of people. Henk’s texts speak of lack of calmness. The role that Nature played in his childhood, when he often spent more time outdoors than indoors, is significant, and has afforded him the rich blessing he is able to

enjoy from Nature. He regards the physical healing that he experienced moving to the Karoo as a child, and while on retirement when stress had a detrimental effect on his health, when he again turned to Nature for healing — unique life experiences of the healing benefits of Nature. He regards the healing as being spiritual, psychological, emotional and physical.

Henk has always preferred an outdoor life, working close to Nature. His early interests were farming and missionary work. He is especially fond of the Karoo where he worked for many years as a traffic officer, although he became a magistrate in later life. Henk brings the natural environment into context with our world today, observing, “people take Nature for granted”. Mostly people “don’t take the time” to be in Nature. Henk is worried that “children today do not know Nature”.

I somehow feel as if I experienced many conversations with Henk, one-on-one conversations and through his writing. Henk undertook numerous travels to enjoy the beauty and vastness of Nature and wrote articles about his experiences (Par 3.1.1) describing the “special effect” of Nature in his life. Nature plays a prominent role in his life, all the more so as a writer and a Christian. Henk says:

It’s in the quiet, without frustrating thoughts stirring up the mind that I’m able to relax. It’s at times like this that I appreciate the harmony and beauty of God’s creation and am able to experience the Holy Spirit stirring me on. Silence, beauty and freshness are the elements in which thoughts and creative ideas fashion themselves.

The text connects up with the theme *The role of Nature towards person-God connectedness*. However, Henk says:

If a person doesn’t know God, you won’t find Him in Nature or connect with Him in Nature. The whole creation may declare God’s majesty, yet not reveal His heart. If you’re fortunate to find the heart of God in a garden, it’s because you’ve met Him first in the revelation of Jesus Christ. If God is already real to you, you would easily experience His presence in Nature around you.

Henk has described Nature’s healing benefits throughout his life. In his words, “Nature gave me my life back”. It is interesting however that he is speaking as if God is “out there” rather than within and among us. The literature points to a shift from a God out there to a more integrated idea of God within. Further examples of language from Henk’s text that speak of balance and wholeness and link with the category *Nature’s role in well-being* are: “able to enjoy being alive”,

“live more fully”, and “Nature calms me”. The following text connects with the category *Rootedness in Nature*

As a child I spent a lot of time outdoors. I felt happy and healthy in Nature. I didn't need more than that.

Regardless of Henk's deep connection with Nature, he says that “Christ is the centre; all other connections are secondary”. Again it is as if Christ is placed outside of Nature.

3.2.3. **Helena**

The beauty and interesting textures found in the natural world inspires Helena's art of flower arranging, which she taught at the Technikon in earlier years. Helena regards her flower arranging as a means to glorify God. She enjoys working with natural material, discovering the potential and usefulness of the material. Living in the country, where “there is time for everything”, has “opened her eyes” and ears to Nature and it is there that she got to know Nature's own orchestra; and to hear Nature's silence. Her text, “the concrete jungle robs one of the benefits of Nature”, speaks of busyness and lack of calmness, characteristic of today's lifestyles. She says that we can learn simplicity from Nature. Helena uses expressions such as “burnt trees with ‘bandages’ of new leaves”, and “He [God] speaks silently like a breeze”. Helena hears God's voice in Nature:

God speaks to me through my feelings. God doesn't have to speak like you and I. He has ways of getting through to us. God can use anything He created to connect [with us]. I hear God in the silence... the breeze playing with tree branches and tree leaves, reeds next to the dam, frogs and crickets making music. Nature's got its own orchestra. One must be ‘tuned-in’. The Holy Spirit ‘speaks’ in many forms and different ways.

Helena says: “close to His handiwork, I feel close to God”. Further examples that Helena mentioned are: “Nature just penetrates your soul” and “Nature can heal the spirit”. Also, Nature is “a reminder of God's provision”. These texts link with the theme *The role of Nature towards person-God connectedness*. Helena is moving from a God out there to God within creation – more integrated than alienated from God – which resonates powerfully with the literature review. The following text is associated with the category *Nature's role in well-being*, and highlights the restorative role that Nature has played in Helena's life:

If you're burdened with something, go and sit in your garden, and relax, and let Nature speak to you. You don't have to take medicine; somehow, the calm just penetrates your soul. I need that personal touch with Nature. That is how I get my strength back.

Helena describes her connectedness to Nature, which highlights *Rootedness in Nature*, as follows:

We become “out of tune” with ourselves and God when we move away from God, and move away from Nature. I say this not because I am a Christian, but because I believe in a God that creates.

3.2.4. **Trudi**

In our conversation we did not talk about Trudi’s childhood or what role Nature had played in her life until the present. For a long time after her husband passed away, Trudi did not notice Nature. Then one day, in a moment, Nature just suddenly became alive for her. She says

I just noticed that the sun was shining. My depression started lifting after this.

This text links with *Nature’s role in well-being*. Whilst recuperating from a neck operation, Trudi experienced for the first time an overwhelming feeling of God’s presence by observing a solitary cloud in the sky. She describes it “much like the Israelites in the desert”. Her experience was that God assured her that He would take care of her, and that He was with her. Trudi describes experiences of the assurance of God’s nearness and grace (Conradie Par 2.8) in the same way today, as if God is communicating with her by means of clouds. For Trudi, this is a way of never taking her eyes off God. In her own words:

Just move away [from the chaos in the office] for a few minutes and just look outside the window. There are always birds... In spite of what is going on, like Peter, when he took his eyes off Jesus he started sinking and if you can just keep your eye on God, whether it is on God through Nature – just noticing something going on outside that is beautiful. I often look out of the window and I just look at the clouds and then I go back and I feel at peace....

It is as if Trudi is interchanging God for Nature, which links with the theme of *Rootedness in Nature as God*, as found in literature; for example, De Chardin (Par 1.6, Par 2.5.1, Par 3.8.2) speaks of God immersing Himself in the material world. Furthermore, Trudi says that “Nature makes God real to me. With Nature you are just so aware of God” because “Nature speaks of God, the Creator”. These texts speak of *The role of Nature towards person-God connectedness*. The above text expresses busyness and lack of calmness and the Cosmic Christ restoring calmness. Trudi’s words, “Nature has always been a big part of my life”, again indicates *Rootedness in Nature*.

3.2.5. Thandi

The strong connection that Thandi has with Nature was ingrained as a child living in a rural area. She grew up in Namaqualand, which left an indelible impression on her with regards to the significance of Nature, because “it was dry and there was not always water”. As a child she witnessed animals and people sometimes dying in a very dry season. The difference that rain made on the surrounding area left such an impression on her that her love of rain is as pronounced today as in her childhood. Thunderstorms meant “thunder and lightning and big rain drops which went ‘plomp’ in the sand...” The family moved to Cape Town when she was twelve years old. It was here that her love for mountains and sea developed. Thandi says that she is “somebody who is very aware of Nature, because of where I come from”. This links with *Rootedness in Nature*. For example,

I feel at home in Nature. Nature takes me back to what is real.

Thandi talks about being in touch with Nature and is forever encouraging parents of young children to remove their children’s shoes and to let them feel the grass or soil under their bare feet. “People need to be made more aware of Nature”, for usually people “only take notice of Nature when it [Nature] damages”. Thandi “needs to feel the soil” and is a keen gardener. Thandi’s text speaks of *Nature’s role in well-being*. For example “Nature gives peace and inner balance”, and

Nature restores calmness into my soul. I know that I stop when I feel really bad or sad, or hurried. It’s always important for me to stop and just reconnect with Nature. That gives me my breath back.

The text describes busyness and lack of calmness, so much part of our urban lives today. The following text illustrates *The role of Nature towards person-God connectedness* in Thandi’s life and *Rootedness in Nature*. Thandi is swapping Nature for God; therefore the modernistic divide and dualism is erased.

Nature helps me to stay connected, “in touch” with God. Some days when you feel far away from God, you suddenly see or hear Nature around you, and you know there’s only one God who has given us all of this. For example there was no grass five days ago and suddenly you see grass all around you.

3.3. Focus groups

It turned out that the role of the groups in the research was more of a supporting voice, backing up what the individuals had said. In addition the groups represented an element of the “hermeneutic

of suspicion” (Par 2.9.3) that questioned the assumptions that were being taken for granted in this research. My own belief that Nature always plays a healing role is the overriding assumption in this work. What challenged me was the idea that Nature “may”, rather than “does”, heal. As such, the groups played both the role of back-up as well as challenging my beliefs that had been taken for granted. The ideas that emanated from the groups will be discussed next.

3.3.1. Focus group 1

The group resonated with the discourse Nature-as-healer, as the following text illustrates

The beauty, calm and serenity of the natural world, acts like a banner against all the ugliness that is going on in the world.

This text also links with the language of busyness and lack of calmness that murmurs in the background of this narrative about healing, while it speaks clearly about *Nature’s role in well-being*. However, the contribution of Group 1 lay mainly in the alternative ways that the healing benefit/s through Nature can be accessed. For example, through visualisation:

I worked with the effect of stress on my body at one time and part of the treatment was relaxing through visualisation. My visualisation involved going through a door that would normally lead me to a closed garden with a pond in the middle. Just that sense of placidness in that garden, where I could just sit quietly and visualise in my mind Nature around me... I found you don’t actually have to be *in* Nature. Even visualizing a place of beauty and serenity in Nature, can offer an experience of God’s nearness and peace.

Thus the healing benefits of Nature can be accessed outside of Nature. It makes Nature somehow “portable”, something not anticipated in this research⁴. Another way of seeing differently was brought to the foreground by this group, namely God being beyond us, even as we embrace the idea of the Cosmic Christ. For example,

During thunderstorms you experience something of the power of God, but it is something totally beyond you.

Besides safety, Nature also offers us uncertainty, even fear, and we can experience God in that also, for example,

God created that [Nature], so Nature adds to the experience of God, in the storm and around you.

⁴ Whilst positive effects can be experienced in this way, the authentic experience is preferable as the beneficial effect/s would be more intense and the experience more enjoyable. The individual person would also have to have enjoyed actual experiences in Nature to experience this “extended” benefit.

The group also contributed the idea that Nature affects us, whether we are aware of it or not:

Nature can have different effects on you, but seldom leave you untouched.

A further contribution by the group was that people may be spiritually healed without Nature as the following text illustrates:

The door to the garden was locked, and everything on the inside was dead. The once beautiful garden withered when it was closed up. All that the garden needed, which the robin, who was trying to lure the children in, knew, was laughter from children and birds singing. Once this happened, everything started growing again.⁵ Nature can heal us spiritually, but it may not be the experience of all people. People may get their spiritual healing from something other than Nature.

These texts are related to *Nature towards person-God connectedness*, and also suggest that there may be other ways. Group 2 also speaks of alternative ways.

3.3.2. Focus group 2

Group 2 brought an altogether new perspective to the study. Nature “can” play a significant role in our well-being, Nature can enhance the experience of God; and Nature can be instrumental in healing, but it might not happen. Nature can be *a* means; it is not *the* means. For example,

Nature can heal, but it is not something one can take for granted.

The group said the following about busyness and lack of calmness, which is associated with *Nature towards person-God connectedness*:

Nature is a reminder of God’s love and goodness, which we can easily forget today as we surround ourselves by man-made things.

This also links with the Cosmic Christ and “original blessing” (Fox Par 2.5.2). The following phrase stood out:

People in earlier days were perhaps more God-fearing because they lived closer to the natural world and were constantly reminded of God’s splendour and wonder seen in Nature.

⁵ From *The secret garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett written in 1909 (<http://www.friendsoffirch.com/garden/index.html>). There is a similar theme of a closed-up garden coming to life again once it is opened up in “The Selfish Giant” by Oscar Wilde (<http://www.online-literature.com/poe/180/>).

The group emphasised that God created the world as a whole, and humankind cannot be isolated from Nature. It links to *Nature's role in well-being*. For example,

We are not separate islands of creation. You can't isolate the one from the other. This integrated system can break you or it can make you. It can encourage you, it can discourage you; it can make you happy and it can make you sad. It is a living part of what we are.

However

Healing for me lies in that you realise who you are and what you are; and understand truly that God who created everything, loves you. To have that assurance, that would be for me, spiritual wellness. I do not equate the spiritual realm with Nature.

The text phrase that follows associates to the above and also demonstrates the possibility of healing through Nature, but highlights the “can” aspect described at the beginning of this paragraph. It links with both *The role of Nature towards person-God connectedness*, and *Nature's role in well-being*; as well as *Rootedness in Nature*:

One can have that knowledge [knowing that you are “right with God”] without Nature, but Nature makes it stronger for me. Can you think of being part of a church service on a Sunday without flowers? His [God's] love overwhelms me. It just hits me in the face, everyday.

3.4. Chapter summary

With the aim of foregrounding people's experiences in Nature and finding language for these experiences, I listened for where God's voice in Nature could be distinguished in the text. I listened for what the participants had to say about busyness and needing calmness. In this chapter, the participants' voices were foregrounded, giving a rich description of the themes that have textually emerged, namely, the role of Nature towards person-God connectedness, Rootedness in Nature, and Nature's role in well-being. These themes were analysed from the transcripts. The workings behind this analysis can be seen in the Appendix. These interpretative categories are discussed along with the text, in terms of the theoretical framework constructed in Chapter 2, in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion and interpretation

God's garden

The Lord God planted a garden
In the first white days of the world,
And He set there an angel warden
In a garment of light enfurled.

So near to the peace of Heaven,
That the hawk might nest with the wren,
For there in the cool of the even
God walked with the first of men.

And I dream that these garden closes
With their shade and their sun-flecked sod
And their lilies and bowers of roses,
Were laid by the hand of God.

The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the birds for mirth, -
One is nearer God's heart in a garden
Than anywhere else on earth.

For He broke it for us in a garden
Under the olive-trees
Where the angel of strength was the warden
And the soul of the world found ease.

Dorothy Frances Gurney (<http://www.all-creatures.org>)

4.1. Introduction

To be nearer God's heart in a garden is a thread that weaves its way through this work. As a researcher, I have sought out those who have perhaps experienced this nearness, thus excluding other experiences of God in Nature. This study has also been conducted within a particular context and discourse of the Christian tradition. "Moments-of-healing" experiences can occur within a context that opens space for healing experience and through a discourse from which healing language can emerge. As the research will demonstrate, spontaneous "moments-of-healing", through Nature, are not excluded in this research; working within a Christian context and in relation to Nature as pastoral therapy.

4.2. Overview as background to the discussion

The question I posed at the beginning of this research was, “In what ways might eco-theology contribute to people’s experience of healing within a Christian tradition?” With the objective of exploring what role Nature might play in spiritual healing, to move people beyond “brokenness” towards wholeness, I examined the spiritual and religious aspect of the person-Nature connection in Christianity, by exploring four aims.

Firstly, I hoped to discover what role Nature might have played in bringing healing to individual people in an urban context in South Africa. This was based on the assumption that within an urban South African context, people experience a sense of disconnection from God, self and others.

Secondly, I aimed to uncover rich or “thick” descriptions of the healing through a connection with Nature.

Thirdly, I was interested in discovering some of the more mystical or “magical” effects of Nature on people, which I describe as a healing power. I undertook this on the assumption that nearness to God in Nature has a healing effect.

Fourthly, I aimed to explore the role Nature plays in connecting people with God, with others and with themselves. My assumption was that people move from brokenness towards wholeness.

Within this research it has been assumed that healing language has been somewhat overlooked within dominant theological discourses in relation to and with Nature. This inter-connection between Nature and human beings has been centred within Ecological Theology. This study, working within a social constructionist frame and a post-structural understanding of language, looked to discover language regarding the question of how Nature plays a part in spiritual restoration, on the understanding that there is a role within this paradigm to find richer language for this experience. Vast tracts of experience that might elude the written word, are invariably left out when working with a post-structural epistemology, which is grounded in the multiple meanings of language, whilst being restricted to language. One of the potential complications and

contradictions in these texts is the danger within a post-structural reading of the texts of foregrounding a Christian faith at the expense and exclusion of other faiths.

The healing power of Nature gradually evolved in this research to link Nature to a broader vision of wellness. Well-being is viewed holistically as balance and harmony amongst the social, psychological, environmental, and spiritual elements that represent the integration of all of our relationships and includes our bodies, minds, spirits and communities (Herholdt Par 1.7, Theron Par 1.7, Dreyer Par 1.7). In order to impart some structure to the meanings that the participants attach to their experiences, I have ordered them according to three distinct themes. These themes are: *The role of Nature towards person-God connectedness*, *Rootedness in Nature*, and *Nature's role in well-being*. The healing benefit in Nature is linked to all three themes. In order to distill these themes, I performed a narrative analysis of the text.

The two outsider groups enriched the analysis by offering ways of seeing differently. Group 1 contributed alternative ways of accessing the healing effect through Nature by describing Nature that is held within memory. Group 2 contributed the possibility that Nature can play a significant role in our well-being, but that Nature might not always play the role that we assume it could in spiritual healing. The chapter closes with a discussion of the contribution of the groups. This chapter will focus firstly on the three themes in dialogue with the participants as they relate to the literature in the research.

4.3. The role of Nature towards person-God connectedness

I began this research by enquiring who possesses knowledge about God in Nature. I was curious about the experiences people have in Nature, in the world we live in today. I found examples from the text which indicated that the participants experience God's nearness in Nature.

4.3.1. Nearness to God in Nature

The text describes either drawing nearer to Nature, or being drawn to Nature. The words that participants use to describe this nearness to God talk of intimacy with God. For example,

Trish: The more man draws to Nature, the closer he comes to God. As the gap between man and Nature closes, it pushes man higher into the hierarchy of God. Nature is pivotal.

It is interesting that Trish would use the word “hierarchy”. Hierarchy assumes something of a separateness between God and humankind. There is also a sense that we move along a direct linear scale towards God.

Helena: Nature is God’s handiwork and He uses Nature to draw our attention, as God longs to connect with us.

Helena describes the experience of Nature as being more of a connection, which seems to be measured on a different scale. Rather than hierarchy, she uses the idea of connection to indicate connecting relationally with God. Also, she is using more intimate language, such as “us”, which is significant.

Henk: I sense God’s intimate presence [in Nature] and feel in union with Him, which leaves me feeling content and with unspeakable inward joy - a feeling of exultation.

Henk is using the words intimate presence and union which move towards what Nolan (Par 2.3.2) refers to as inseparable connectedness; and the ecstatic described by Burns (Par 3.8.2). It is interesting that Henk refers to God as male.

Trudi: If you look at the sunset, if you look at the sunrise, if you look at the birds - in spite of the concrete jungle and everything going on here, the birds are around us and they don’t care. So, I see Him in everything like that, in Nature.

Trudi is shifting her ideas even further towards a connection that is not hierarchical. She is describing more what post-structuralists refer to as multiple readings and multiple dimensions of God that go beyond the idea of “fixing” towards another paradigm of freedom, found within the “concrete” reality of the world as we know it.

Thandi: Nature and God are intertwined.

By saying that Nature and God are “intertwined”, Thandi is shifting her ideas away from God and human beings as being separate. A post-modern context in this research accords stronger language to what Thandi and Trudi describe as the boundaries between man and God becoming dismantled in Nature. The boundaries around God are more open so that God can be viewed as carnate, and cosmic. The “indwelling of God in creation” (Conradie Par 2.5.1) enables one to talk about God in Nature, and opens new possibilities of connecting relationally with God, beyond what Henk, Trish and Helena describe as greater movement along a more linear scale from not connected, to

being connected. Henk interestingly uses multiple descriptions of God as both male and separate but also intimately inseparable. This contradiction is reminiscent of social constructionist theories that we live in a multi-storied world. For example, Henk says: “I sense God’s intimate presence and feel in union with Him”. This resonates with Nolan (Par 2.3.2) when remarking, “the mystical experience of oneness with God seems to have always included an experience of oneness with Nature and the universe”. Trish, however, within her text remains on a linear road moving in time towards God. This is similar to Eckhart’s idea, of an evolutionary process. It also moves in a more circular manner, in the way Eckhart shifts the focus away from a God “up there” towards a God of the earth. This in itself brings a rich contradiction to dominant texts which understand God as being above humankind. It connects with Trish’s remark, “the more man draws to Nature, the closer he comes to God”. When these texts are read in relation to what Eckhart (Par 2.3.2) describes as being part of an evolving universe, with God as the ground of our being, this highlights not only our connectedness to the material world, but also to God’s presence in creation.

Henk describes this nearness as a “divine experience” that leaves him filled with joy. When this text is read in relation to what Conradie (Par 2.5.1.1) describes: as “reality [that] becomes translucent with divine presence”, there is a relationship with Thandi and Trudi’s shifting of the boundaries. Trudi’s words, “I see Him in everything”, connect with “translucent with divine presence”, as do Thandi’s words, “Nature and God are intertwined”, which speak of oneness. Owing to the shifting of boundaries where the separateness between us and God is no longer felt, rather our experience of nearness to God, the participants describe positive emotional feelings. For example, Henk is filled with joy, and “feelings of exultation”. Helena experiences good feelings as God “long[ing]” to have intimacy with her, uses Nature to draw her closer. Trudi talks about the birds chirping joyfully, not being confounded by cares. These texts speak of elation and are reminiscent of Burns (Par 3.8.2), suggesting that Nature elevates desirable feelings.

Lindbergh (Par 2.5.1.1), on the other hand, describes the divine presence in Nature as “the ever-recurrent miracle of life and growth”. There is a link between Conradie (Par 2.8.2) who talks about “God’s imprint in creation” and Helena, an artist, who “recognises” God in creation, as one would recognise an artist by his work. McFague (Par 2.5.1) describes it as sensing something of God through the “world of matter” that “confines” us. Conradie (Par 2.5.1.1) suggests that experiencing the presence of “what is beyond us”, even as we are confined by our bodies, moves us towards a relation with God that is both above our understanding yet close to God in what

Conradie (Par 2.5.1) describes as “other than a relationship in consciousness”. This moves beyond the senses to where the soul can experience a deep sense of well-being and peace. Henk reports that on one occasion he found “to my surprise that I was singing softly”. However, we perceive firstly through the senses, as Trish says, “Nature is pivotal”. Could it be that when we go back to Nature, we go back to a world where what we can see, and touch makes sense? One cannot feel the emotion without “seeing” the beauty first, as in this context. As humans, the senses, followed by the emotive, are our initial point of connection.

Helena says that God “uses Nature to draw our attention, as God longs to connect with us”. Thus, God desires intimacy with us. Henk talks of “God’s *intimate* presence”. Peacocke (Par 2.5.1) describes this form of intimacy as “God’s own self” giving the world “the kind of being and becoming it has” which is “revelatory of God’s nature and purposes”. Could this mean that God uses beauty to draw us to God, to what is beyond us? Many see Nature as a revelation of God’s power, and grandeur (Nolan Par 2.3.2, Conradie Par 2.8.2, McFague Par 2.5.1). Apart from Nature, everything is measured on a human scale. Nature, however, speaks of harmony, of coherence: since Nature is so much bigger than man, it can help us realise who God is, and how small we are. From what Eckhart (Par 2.5.1) says, Christ’s indwelling [in everything] “touches” us and is the culmination of divine intention. Could this be the drawing towards Nature that Helena described?

This research tried to discover language for experiences that have perhaps previously not been foregrounded. This means moving away from socially constructed boundaries between God and humankind, towards a different kind of fluid order which appears to give us greater accessibility to God’s nearness. In these texts, God is language as being both out there, above and below, both linear, hierarchical and yet circular. It is as if language itself limits our ability to define this healing experience of Nature. This also does indicate that healing does not necessarily fit into the broken human being context and that it can happen spontaneously beyond many of our pastoral care models.

4.3.2. **Connecting with hope**

I suggested early in this research (Par 2.11) that the task of post-modern theology is to provide an account of faith in order to increase meaning in our lives. In the previous paragraphs the

participants describe God's nearness in Nature and their uplifting experiences as a result of God's nearness. I wanted to find whether hope could be manifested through experiences of God being "present in the world". Could Nature be perceived as a symbol of hope?

Conradie (Par 2.8) believes that hope is found "in God who is present in the world as the source of hope". Peacocke (Par 2.8) also relates hope to creation as he describes God being "uniquely present to the world as a whole and to each of its individual components". Within the signs of our times, providing hope seems an integral part of healing and pastoral care. I have personally viewed pastoral care as helping people to connect with hope. The participants did not use the word "hope", but I found traces of hope in the text. For example,

Trudi: If you open your eyes and you look at Nature around you, then that helps you to carry on. Nature reminds you that He [God] is there. I know He looks after me as I feel his presence through Nature. The Lord speaks to me through Nature. That makes me feel close to God and is all I need to give me comfort and strength.

Trudi is shifting her ideas away from connectedness back towards connection that is hierarchical as she describes God within the discourse of The Good Shepherd. Perhaps within dominant belief systems we look for certain explanations of God. Trudi describes God as a man. She says "open your eyes and look", certain of what she will see. This indicates that she is looking through a particular lens. The metaphors we use are closely connected to our culture. In this context, her view does not go beyond the idea of "fixing", but in that, the hope is found. For example,

Thandi: Nature helps me to stay connected, "in touch" with God. Some days when you feel far away from God, you suddenly see or hear Nature around you, and you know there's only one God who has given us all of this.

Thandi's discourse of "only one God who gives", is associated with Trudi's in the sense that one is aware of a distance between people and God. She talks about "suddenly" seeing, becoming aware of God's presence, which led me to question whether this goes beyond to a different order from the individual linear progression of awareness. Could this mean that healing or connectedness sometimes happens not on some linear upward scale of growth but rather unexpectedly? I was also wondering what it is about Nature that is grounded in presence. Thandi comments that "you know there's only one God, who has given us all of this". Helena expresses this somewhat differently.

Helena: You see everything clothed perfectly and each creature and each plant has its purpose.

The use of the word “perfectly” links with other expressions in Helena’s text such as “pure”, where Helena describes the purity of Nature. If Helena sees Nature as sufficient unto itself, that Nature does not need us; it moves the focus away from harmony and continuity. Yet “everything clothed perfectly” and “each creature and each plant has its purpose”, speak of harmony. Since our personal lens determines what we see, and the aesthetic is important to Helena, being an artist, she would look differently. And since different eyes perceive differently, Helena might see beauty in purposefulness. Does hope lie in the knowledge that the Creator does not make mistakes? Trish connects hope with beauty:

Trish: My home may not be without flowers. Something in me craves colour, flowers, texture. A garden to me is a place where I create. Even just a single slip of a flower has to be picked every week. I have to have flowers. It is a sign of something deep within.

Trish talks about “a sign of something deep within”. When this text is read in relation to what Tolle (Chapter 3) describes as “seeing beauty in a flower could awaken humans... to the beauty that is an essential part of their own innermost being, their ‘true’ nature”; a particular perspective or lens becomes visible, that of looking and seeing beauty. We are reminded that words have no meaning on their own, only those meanings that are attached through the discourses within which we live. Could it be that to keep hope alive Trish stays connected to beauty? For example, “my home may not be without flowers”, “something in me craves”, “I have to have”. Flowers are symbolic of “that which is most high, most sacred” (Tolle Chapter 3). This is also reminiscent of (Conradie Par 1.7) seeing “the present experience of God” as that which gives us hope.

Henk: Nature can help one get closer to God.

Henk says that “Nature can help one get closer to God”. Trudi also describes how Nature helps her “feel close to God” as she is assured of God’s presence through the order in Nature which speaks of balance and continuity. Trudi’s hope lies within this certainty, this continuity. Thandi’s words, “there is only one God”, also speak of certainty, and she can stay “in touch” with this continuity through Nature. Thandi remarks that “Nature has not given rise to my belief in God, or my emotions about God, but Nature strengthens the belief that God is there”. This is similar to Brinkman (Par 2.5) describing our dependence on God as our source of hope. When these texts are read in relation to what Peacocke (Par 2.8) observes, when we encounter God “as generator and basis for hope” we experience the world as “trustworthy and as viable”. We do not always

experience the world, Nature, as orderly and cannot control Nature. We find hope in that God is Himself present in the world as unity within diversity.

When one considers the word “can” in Henk’s text, it moves away from certainty towards possibility. “Can” opens multiple options and there is almost a sense of freedom involved. It proceeds in a more circular way, blurring the boundaries between a God “up there” towards a God of the earth and part of an evolving universe (Eckhart Par 2.3.2). This brings about a rich contradiction to earlier texts of understanding God and Nature as somehow being “certain”. When these texts are read in relation to what Waldegrave (Par 2.9.4) describes as “subtle, indirect and circular processes”, rather than “direct, linear processes”; the focus is shifted from Eckhart’s idea of an evolutionary process, towards balance that speaks of multiple stories where one is not excluded at the expense of another.

Connectedness or healing sometimes happens not on some linear upward scale of growth, but unexpectedly. For example, Thandi used the word “suddenly”. In my pilot study (Par 2.10) I heard a similar language of hope through the words “the surprise signifies hope”. When Thandi’s text is read in relation to Tolle’s (Chapter 3) remark that “[t]he first recognition of beauty was one of the most significant events in the evolution of human consciousness” one notices a link to the self which this research explored (Par 1.6), namely the self that is connected to the soul, the divine within. In other words, the spiritual side of the human being that relates to God. This self can identify with the way Tolle (Chapter 3) relates Nature to hope in arguing that “[t]he feelings of joy and love are intrinsically connected to that recognition” of beauty. Lorimer (Par 2.7.2.3), referring to the spiritual side of humankind, says there is no hope or meaning to our lives unless we connect with the “divine element in our being”. Lorimer (Par 2.7.2.3) relates God to hope when he asserts that one can see a change in people “when they discover within themselves that transfiguring dimension we define as God”.

This study asked questions about the healing effect of Nature and has looked at different ways in which healing can be interpreted. It also looked at the role of Nature in connectedness to God and how nearness to God can lead to well-being. Working within a narrative paradigm means that we understand our lives through the stories we tell about ourselves. One of these stories is that God is near, and in this we find our hope. Working with post-modernism and both/and perspectives, we

say that God is both transcendent (incarnate) and active within (carnate) our story (Par 1.7); and that we are co-creators of our lives with God. The story that God is with us, is what gives us hope.

4.3.3. Coming to know God through Nature

So far this chapter has investigated connecting with God through Nature and the hope we find in this nearness of God. In analyzing the texts, I found phrases wherein participants expressed their first encounters with God through Nature. This form of theology, however, offers a particular viewpoint and is only partial because other theologies concerning relationship with God have been excluded. For example, in our conversations none of the participants described views that can be interpreted as fundamentalistic or rationalistic. The analysis itself, filtered through the lens of my interpretation, could therefore be seen as biased. However, from the outset, the research has moved from beyond considering any form of comparison with other theologies towards finding richer language for this experience. For example,

Trish: I became aware that God was very *real*, as a result of seeing a beautiful sunset.

This research within a post-modern approach does not see reality as something out there that we can grasp, but as the meaning we attach to experience. Thus the world is understood only in terms of the personal construction of reality. The subjective is what counts for truth and depending on the lens one uses, multiple readings are available. The focus falls on the meaning it has for Trish personally, which is that “God is real”. When this is read in relation to what Burr (Par 2.4) says, “the way a person thinks, the categories and concepts that provide a framework of meaning for them are provided by the language that they use”, there is a link with Trish seeing God in beauty. The analysis of this text, working with post-structuralism and social construction theories, where words have no meaning on their own, but only the meanings that are attached through the discourses within which we live, indicates that Trish sees God in all beauty, for example flowers, and hence the “beautifying effect”. The metaphors we use are also closely associated with our culture. Beautiful could in this sense be connected to white culture – the luxury of Nature as kind and gentle. To another culture it could mean that there might be no rain and to them thunder clouds would be beautiful. Trudi also connects God with beauty. For example,

Trudi: If you look at anything in Nature, the ocean, the plants, the beautiful flowers, the sunset, the sunrise, and you look at the animals, the mountains. How can you not believe that there is a God?

Trudi's description of "certainty" is reminiscent of modernism's tendency to see the world as a series of "truths" that can somehow be proved (Monk et al Par 2.9.2). In a culture of post-modernity and multiplicity, the need for either/or ways of looking makes space for both/and ways of being. The text does not proceed beyond the view of God as "out there". This understanding of God as above human beings links with Henk's remark:

Henk: If a person doesn't know God, you won't find Him in Nature or connect with Him in Nature. The whole creation may declare God's majesty, yet not reveal His heart. If you're fortunate to find the heart of God in a garden, it's because you've met Him first in the revelation of Jesus Christ. If God is already real to you, you would easily experience His presence in Nature around you.

Henk interestingly moves between modernity and post-modernity, from rationalism towards connectivity to Nature, where his thinking shifts from "truths" towards personal experience and relationships. In post-structuralism and social construction theories, as mentioned, words on their own convey no meaning but are influenced by the dominant belief structures held within any given society. Henk's comment that "if you're fortunate to find the heart of God in a garden, it's because you've met Him first in the revelation of Jesus Christ", is an example of this concept. Henk, within his context of Christian scripture, turns it into an absolute truth, which is part of modernism's pursuit of certainty (Monk et al. Par 2.9.2). It moves us towards a relationship with God that is understood from the Word; hence we can feel close to God only through this understanding. It proceeds away from what Conradie (Par 2.5.1) describes as being "other than a relationship in consciousness". Yet there are traces of the "inseparable connectedness" to which Nolan (Par 2.3.2) refers, as the text also progresses in a more circular way shifting the focus away from a God "up there" towards a God of the earth. This reminds one of post-modernism which rejects the idea that the world can be understood in terms of "truths" (grand theories and meta-narratives) and "emphasises the co-existence of a multiplicity and variety of situation-dependent ways of life" (Burr Par 1.5). Henk's cultural background of Reformed Western theology, of a male God who can be "known", links up with this. Thandi on the other hand stems from an African cultural background where people have been more dependent on God as not being defined or known so quantifiably.

Thandi: There was no grass five days ago and suddenly you see grass all around you.

Thandi's text talks about God's presence in creation. It is reminiscent of Eckhart's (Par 2.3.2) description of an evolving universe, with God as the ground of being that highlights God's

presence in creation. This in itself brings about a rich contradiction of previous texts which understand God as being separate from creation. It interestingly also connects with Trudi saying: “If you look at Nature, how can you not believe that there is a God?” This again emphasises the co-existence of multiple meanings made possible by working with post-modernism and social construction theory. It also contradicts what Henk says about only seeing Nature if you already “know” God. Thandi is inverting this text. Henk’s idea of Christian scripture being the only way to God and Nature is interesting in this research. The influence of the dominant discourses in South Africa speaks through both Henk and Trudi’s texts.

Trish’s description of a life-changing transition as she became aware that “God was *very* real” looking at a beautiful sunset says something different. It is interesting how Conradie’s (Par 2.5.1) descriptions find academic language for something that Trish might want to say: “We can get to know God only in and through that which is earthly”: in other words, that which we can understand through our senses. As human beings we are limited by them. De Chardin (Par 3.8.4), who writes about his own revelation in Nature, proceeds beyond this as he asserts that matter “dissolves” our “narrow” view of God; opening space for other ways of experience. Yet he adds (Par 2.5.1) that “matter confines me as much as I can soar in spirit with the little understanding I have. I see in part, but see in the beauty around me”.

Conradie (Par 2.8.2) also describes Nature as “a way to connect with God”, but says that God is revealed to us in *both* Scripture *and* Nature. Through language we easily become trapped into either/or positions. For example, Buber (Par 3.8.4) describes creation as the road to God. However, Henk who comes from a different discourse in the Christian tradition, argues that pre-knowledge of God, from the Christian Bible, is a prerequisite for connecting with God in Nature. Henk asserts we have to “study His Word because His grace and peace is only ours in abundance through our knowledge of Him”. He is saying that Scripture is the *only* way to God. We first “find” God in Scripture and then we are able to “recognise” Him in Nature. Henk believes that “our perception through our intellect or our senses is received by revelation from Jesus Christ”. We take our faith (or certainty) with us into Nature. Excluding this, we will not *find* Him *there*. As much as Henk moves outside some normative boundaries, he is also constrained by them in terms of this exclusive access to God. What is implied is also that people from other faiths cannot see God’s fullness in Nature.

These texts are rich in contradiction as they move between levels of certainty (Monk et al Par 2.9.2) and openness to new ways of looking at the world. For example, Trudi's words express something of both as she describes Nature making God very real to her, and adds that through Nature God becomes alive and accessible to her. Thandi supports knowing God, or of God, before one can experience God in Nature. Though she regards coming to know God as a process, she avers that it can also be an "aha" moment where one sees what one does not normally see, for example, "grass where five days ago there was no grass". There are various paths in this journey of exploring ways of connecting with God. In this study, we were exploring the road through Nature and the benefits in connecting with God in this way. However, there are also different possibilities in this respect. One example is hearing God's voice in Nature.

4.3.4. **Hearing God's voice in Nature**

Lorimer (Par 1.4) describes "silence, peace and stillness" as important elements in healing. He refers to it as "perhaps the greatest of the natural healing forces". Although mindfulness featured quite prominently in the literature study, the idea of silence was not explored. Although silence relates to mindfulness, in the literature, I did not mention the reluctance in the dominant Christian theologies in South Africa, reformed as well as liberation, to give silence a prominent place. Silence and solitude are universally recognised spiritual practices. However, in giving prominence to the voices of the participants in this research, I include silence in this discussion. In analysing the texts of the participants, I found phrases that within a narrative analysis expose some of the sentiments expressed by the participants concerning the role of silence in connecting with God. For example ,

Thandi: Nature *gives* me silence.

Could Thandi be referring to rest as silence here? By using the word give, Thandi could mean that Nature gives her peace, which reminds one of Conradie's (Par 1.6) description of how in Nature we can transcend our earthly circumstances and find rest with God. The silence that Thandi is talking about could be what Berry refers to in his poem (Chapter 1) "The peace of wild things" where he says that "I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water and I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free". It is interesting

that we relate Nature to silence, because Nature is not silent – birds chatter, trees whistle, wind blows and rain patters... For example,

Henk: God's creation gives the favourable environment for me to hear the voice of the Spirit and God speaks in an accent that we can relate to. It excites my senses and has been the centre and inspiration of all the great moments of my life and has given meaning and purpose to it. Silence opens my heart to the consciousness of God's indwelling presence. Our rugged mountains, graceful valleys, stunning deserts and lonely shores are monotonous only to those who have remained uninitiated and unenlightened.

Henk also uses the word *give*, which could be the same rest that Thandi talks about. It is interesting that he employs the phrase "silence *opens* my heart". This resonates with Berry (Chapter 1) who says that "For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free". However, whilst talking about freedom, Henk is moving back along the scale to the certainty (Monk et al. Par 2.9.2) of modernity because he becomes judgmental of those who are not initiated and not in his "reality", which seems to be "the" truth. For example "If God is already real to you, you would easily experience His presence in Nature around you" (Par 3.2.2). The text links with *person-God connectedness*, and the quietening of the mind that Kabat-Zinn relates to mindfulness (Par 4.3.5). Helena describes hearing silence:

Helena: I hear the silence... the breeze playing with tree branches and tree leaves, reeds next to the dam, frogs and crickets making music. Nature's got its own orchestra. One must be "tuned-in". The Holy Spirit "speaks" in many forms and different ways.

Helena is saying that there is silence in the noisiness. Perhaps she means it is a different noise to that which one experiences in an urban environment. She might also be referring to artificial noise, or noise created by human beings, that affects us differently. Burns (Par 2.7.1) describes a "biological-fit" between us and Nature. When we think of the more natural sounds in Nature they somehow seem to be less of an intrusion than the kind of noise that one would describe as disturbing, which has more to do with busyness and industry. The word "orchestra" also implies harmony. Natural sounds seem to be "softer" on the ear than man-made sounds, and may impact differently on us. Thus Helena can refer to these as silence. Helena's text, rich in metaphors, describes her perception just as she experienced it without any evaluation. She makes no judgement of any kind, so that any assumptions simply fade into the background as a picture is painted in the listener/reader's mind. It highlights the "magic" of language but also reminds us of the limitations of language and of the senses. Both the senses and language are in a way limited by the mind and there is the sense that some things can easily be passed by. Freedman and Combs

(Par 2.4) aver that there are limits to the way in which we can describe things. Thus, language limits us as much as we are limited by our senses when “noise” intrudes on the focus of our attention.

Freedman and Combs (Par 2.9.2) maintain that the realities we inhabit are brought forth in the language we use, and are kept alive and passed along in the stories we live and tell. By using the words “Holy Spirit”, Helena is, for an instant, back in the safe domain of certainty as she moves between the paradigms of post-modernism and modernism – where it is possible to “know” (Monk et al Par 2.9.2). We understand that within any narrative are many stories and multiple meanings; yet, it holds and is influenced by dominant discourses of how we have been taught to think about God by our culture and the Christian church, for example Helena saying, “The Holy Spirit ‘speaks’... in different ways”. Could it be that when in silence we are afforded an opportunity to get in touch with ourselves and our souls can communicate with our brains? Our souls contain a rich world which we can access when the body sets the soul free. It is as if one opens oneself to a greater energy when one experiences stillness of thought. On the other hand, it was the task of this research to place emphasis on how stories around Nature are told without assuming that there is any one meaning attached to the participants’ experiences of Nature. For example, for Trish language possesses a different sound.

Trish: If I’m in the mountains, it’s the whisper of silence I hear. A whisper is a love language. If I’m at the beach, I hear ‘how great is God’. Nature is saying how God has made all things bright and beautiful. It is the language of infinite care, of variety, of intricate variety, absolute variety. It is a language that speaks of more; and I long to see more. I look at the stars at night and I see more light. The more I stare into a star the more I see. So, it is a silent language. It is the language of a Creator God and He speaks different languages, depending on whether you’re at the beach or in the mountains; or in a park; or if you’re looking at spring or autumn or winter. In wintertime, a language of forlornness – of sorrow, of loss, as one sees leaves falling off trees. Autumn, the warmth and the glow... Spring, the bright, fresh beauty... Summer has fullness... So, the seasons speak differently.

It is interesting that Trish talks about “a silent language”. This talks of a language of the soul that perhaps has no actual words. When we consider this text in relation to Freedman and Combs’ (Par 2.4) observation that “[p]ost-modernists believe that there are limits on the ability of human beings to measure and describe the universe in any precise, absolute, and universally applicable way”; we understand that “truth” is relational but we could also say that sometimes we sense something, which simply does not require words. In this research, I tried to find new language for how we can be in the world (Monk et al Par 2.4), but wonder if, inasmuch as we need language, the soul can perhaps get by without language. Thinking about what I have written, I realise that I

too have reverted back to modernism where dualisms such as mind/spirit are part of the culture. Could the shift from individualism toward integration in post-modern social constructionist thought – where we “make” meaning through language – create space to find new meanings concerning what it means to be part of a “whole” that is not limited by language? Speaking of limits, this text is a very romantic notion of Nature as healer and we tend to sometimes forget that Nature is also incredibly violent. It seems that many people struggle to make sense of this. Thandi touches on something of our inability to fully understand, as she says:

Thandi: It is a different experience; an experience of there's somebody bigger behind it. In that moment you see, feel, experience the Hand, the power of God.

It would appear as if Thandi is transported to a place where she can “be still and know that I am God” as she remarks “in that moment you see, feel, experience the Hand, the power of God”. This would assume that within the city context in which she lives, peace does not exist and there is a lack of meaning. I have argued in this research for a deeper engagement with Nature as one pathway towards a more meaningful life and connectedness in what is perceived by many as a fragmented world (Lindbergh Par 2.7.2.1, McFague Par 2.5.1, Lorimer Par 1.5, Nolan Par 3.8.4). Lindbergh (Par 2.7.2.1) describes the need to access silence in the world in which we live today.

Referring to a lack of inner silence, Lindbergh (Par 2.7.2.1) warns against being “shattered into a thousand pieces” by neglecting to “still the center”. This links with the notion of brokenness moving towards wholeness. She suggests that Nature as healer could facilitate “a quiet contemplative drawing together of the self” (Lindbergh Par 2.7.2.1) because we find at times that we can become still in Nature. For example, Henk refers to getting “meaning and purpose” as silence “opens his heart”. When the silence that is described by the participants is read in relation to Lindbergh’s (Par 2.7.2.1) description of “torn-to-pieces-hood” (William James), it connotes a lack of peace and meaning and points to the hyper individualism and fragmentation of Western society. This relates to the busyness that we associate with increasing demands on our time and attention in today’s world coupled with anxiety and stress, and lack of meaning in life and to Nolan’s (Par 3.8.4) defining busyness as “the supreme distraction from self-awareness, awareness of the real world, and awareness of God”.

In terms of the accent on language in this research, Helena describes “hearing the silence” as in a pleasing melody, because God perhaps speaks to her in a way to which she can relate from her

discourse as an artist. Trish, coming from a different discourse within a teaching culture where language plays an important role, hears God communicating in a “love language” that “speaks of more than we can perceive with our senses. Trish says that “we perceive it with our spirit”. Henk describes God speaking “in an accent that we can relate to”. Some of the theological challenges that face the world of today are that we do not hear the voice of God above the noise of the world, thus contributing to a sense of loss (Par 4.3.3) and meaninglessness. For example, Moltmann (Par 2.5.1) remarks that “in nearness” to God we find “the inexhaustible wellspring” of our lives. McFague (Par 2.5.1) regards Nature as “our source and empowerment” through “the breath that enlivens and energizes all”. Trish observes that “God has given me a soul to ‘absorb’ Him; and I ‘absorb’ Him best in Nature”.

Brinkman (Par 2.7.2.3) describes it somewhat differently as “God is beyond our understanding, but in Nature we can experience something of [the peace of] God, which transcends all understanding”. He relates silence to a sense of acceptance, a “letting go”, where we just “rest” in God. As Pugh (Par 2.5.1) comments, we cannot fathom God, and images “... can never capture the totality of the One who stands at the boundaries of thought”. Schaefer (Par 2.5.1) also asserts that “[t]o claim to know God comprehensively is beyond the capability of any human being”. When Lindbergh (Par 2.7.2.1) suggests “total renunciation of the world” on the one hand and “total acceptance of it”, on the other, I associate that with detachment and acceptance, both valuable steps in one’s spiritual path. Lindbergh (Par 2.7.2.1) connects spiritual development to healing and suggests that “the kingdom of heaven is within”. Within the multiple meanings attached to the assumptions and lived experiences of silence, the role of silence in healing in the context of this research, becomes clearer.

4.3.5. **Finding rest in God**

Conradie (Par 1.6) draws our attention to this rest in God that is more than a physical respite. From Jesus’ promise: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden and overburdened and I will cause you to rest [I will ease and relieve and refresh your souls]” (Matthew 11:28, Amplified Bible 1987:1089), we hear about “complete” rest. Working with post-structuralism and social constructionism, where words only convey the meanings that are attached through the discourses within which we live, we now proceed to deal with the wider meaning of this concept of rest in this research.

For example, Conradie (Par 1.6) suggests that “[w]e cannot find rest, before we have come to rest with God”. It means transcending our earthly circumstances (Conradie Par 1.6). Nolan (Par 1.5) describes the world of today as a place where people long for this rest in God. Moltmann (2.5.1) says the following about finding rest in God: We “...find in nearness to [H]im the inexhaustible wellspring” of our lives and we “find home and rest in God”. The analysis has touched on ideas of becoming still and turning inward, hearing God’s “voice”, and becoming more whole by embracing oneness. In a post-modern environment we are aware that rest in God could hold different meanings. For example ,

Thandi: When one is able to leave all the things that usually get one’s attention behind, and sit quietly, one can really connect with oneself.

Thandi says that she is able to connect with her inner self once she quietens her mind. Her words resonate with Kabat-Zinn’s (Par 2.3.1, Par 2.5.1 and Par 3.8.4) description of mindfulness. Could this mean that through practising mindfulness we are able to access the rest available in nearness to God?

Henk: Away from the noise of everyday life in the quiet of Nature, my mind is quiet. It is like “celestial” silence.

Like Thandi, Henk finds that away from the noise of urban life in the quiet of Nature, when his mind is quiet, he can hear God’s voice. The words “celestial silence” imply that “rest-in-God” in the context of this research refers to healing and wellness on so many levels.

Trudi: It is like going back to basics.

Trudi is perhaps saying that the beginning (alpha) is God and that she is able to connect with God in the context of the natural world. This reminds one of Burns (Par 3.8.2) saying that one “feels different in that context, more peaceful, more rested, less anxious, happier, more at one”. Could this be what Trudi describes as “going back to basics”, where her spirit is fed?

Helena: If you’re burdened with something, go and sit in your garden, and relax, and let Nature speak to you. You don’t have to take medicine; somehow, the calm just penetrates your soul.

According to Burns (Par 3.8.2), in the restful context of Nature, “information processing is enhanced” because we are more focused and less effort is required. These texts tell the story of Nature as a mediator of silence, calm and peace, talking about Nature as a positive environment

with healing benefits, but actually conveying the message of finding rest in God. This could be a helpful tool in pastoral counselling.

4.4. **Rootedness in Nature**

Literature has increasingly emphasised Nature as a resource for nurturing and this research explored the ability of Nature in this regard. Clinebell (Par 2.8.1), for example, talks about the importance of bonding with the natural world, which he describes as “claiming and enjoying one’s nurturing, energizing, life-enhancing connectedness with nature”. McFague (Par 1.6) goes as far as using the analogy of the earth as “God’s body”; and holds that “we have lost the sense of belonging in our world and to the God who creates, nurtures, and redeems this world” and also the sense “that we are part of a living, changing, dynamic cosmos that has its being in and through God”. Many associate nurturing with being rooted in the natural world. From the text, I now select phrases that, within a narrative analysis, expose some of the sentiments expressed by the participants relating to being rooted in Nature.

Helena: We become “out of tune” with ourselves and God when we move away from God, and move away from Nature. I say this not because I am a Christian, but because I believe in a God that creates.

Helena’s description of being “out of tune” speaks about belonging and being part of Nature as if engaged in an ongoing dance with creation and the Creator and hearing harmony. Her using the words “a God that creates” is like a momentary flashback as we return to the beginning of time and discourses of a separate God...

Trish: I see God who created all this intricacy, but I see more of Him the more I travel with Him. The closer you get in your spiritual walk, the more you see of His created path.

Trish’s text speaks of God as both carnate and incarnate. It also speaks of God’s intimate presence and enlivens the awareness of how language has innate power to constitute our world. It is reminiscent of Gergen (Par 1.6) who suggests that the post-modern climate enables us to emphasise the “unseen, forces that give life and relationships their significance”.

Thandi: Nature keeps me grounded. I have always been aware of Nature and it played a big part in my life. Maybe it has to do with coming from a place where Nature was so important. In Namaqualand, you could see when it was a very dry season. As a child I heard stories about people and animals dying from drought. As the eldest child of four children, I was sent by my mother to buy milk from the farmers during winter. I was often sent home empty handed,

after waiting a long time, because there was no milk over after delivery to the white people. I was very aware of Nature because those types of things happened whilst I was quite small. Sometimes there would be no water and you didn't see anything green. When it rained, there would be green again.

Thandi describes her rootedness somewhat differently. Nature represented natural beauty and the harsh reality of hardship caused by Nature. For example she mentions the reality of drought causing starvation, even death. Similarly Boff (Par 2.5) describes ecology as having “to do with the relations, interaction, and dialogue of all living creatures...among themselves and with all that exists”. Thandi grew up in a rural area and formed a close connection with Nature in her childhood. Due to this bonding, she has lived close to Nature most of her life. The very act of verbalising that Nature “keeps her grounded” might remind her of her dependence on Nature. This speaks of a deep rootedness in Nature.

Henk: As a child I spent a lot of time outdoors. I felt happy and healthy in Nature. I didn't need more than that.

Henk says that he does not need more than Nature, which chimes with Thandi's expressing the view that she needs Nature to keep her grounded. Henk also formed a strong connection with Nature in childhood and spends time in Nature whenever he can, which indicates a strong bond with it. The bond that the participants enjoy with Nature is something that has developed over time. For both Thandi and Henk this was internalised from a young age so that it became part of them. None of the participants can relate to alienation from Nature. On the other hand, they all seem to be consciously involved with Nature, which sustains their connection. Helena for example spoke of having to consciously make Nature part of one's life. Likewise Clinebell (Par 2.8.1) maintains that only by developing our rootedness in Nature can we develop a bond with it; and only then can nurturing through Nature take place.

Throughout the text participants use language that is positive when speaking about Nature. For example, words like soothing, calming, energising, invigorating, and so forth, which suggest, as Clinebell (Par 2.8.1) remarks, an emotional bond with Nature. Contributing to this is the way we use language and the fact that we use it according to how we have been socialised throughout our lives. Focusing on positive experiences in Nature allows one to perceive the world as an expression of God's goodness. As alluded to earlier (Par 1.7), the participants in this research are mostly in a position where the negative side of Nature is not experienced on a daily basis. Thus, in the participants' lives, Nature has become an environment where positive nurturing can take place.

4.4.1. Nurturing through Nature

In this analysis, the emphasis is placed on the personal experiences of the participants, and as the researcher, I tell the story as it was told to me. However, the story is filtered through my own lens which constitutes both the lenses of post-modernism and social construction as well as my own experiences in the context of Nature. The text is also filtered through the literature that forms the background of the research and helps to accord meaning to lived experience. Having said that the participants' knowledge is foregrounded, and in the light of the previous section, where some text indicated that the participants have the benefit of a nurturing relationship with Nature, I now present text that speaks of nurturing through Nature. For example,

Thandi: Little children need to feel grass under their feet. It is only by knowing what impact Nature has on one personally, that one can consciously access the nurturing.

Thandi, who comes from a discourse within an African culture closely connected with Nature, mentioned something interesting. When one is aware of the impact of Nature one will consciously access the healing nurturing aspect in Nature. Vann (Par 1.5) similarly speaks about being on the "right wave-length". The phrase, "little children need to feel grass under their feet", describes Nature as instrumental in deepening our connection with ourselves and Others, thereby transforming our habitual responses to life.

Trudi: God gives us a beautiful sunset every single day of our lives and I just wonder how many people notice it. People take Nature for granted. They tend to be so wrapped up in themselves, and in their lives that they forget about Nature. I don't think Nature needs humans; it can go on, on its own. But we need Nature. I cannot imagine my life without trees, flowers, or plants.

Modernism privileges certain ways of knowing, which is perhaps demonstrated by the text "people forget about Nature" or "people take Nature for granted". These phrases remind us of dichotomous ways of thinking that something is either right or wrong. Her saying that we forget about Nature also means that we had to know it, to begin with. In the same vein Hartman (Par 1.5) describes an "extraverted life orientation", which leaves us "poorer in spirit". Trudi asserts that "we need Nature" to be whole, which chimes with Helena's view.

Helena: We all have gardens, no matter how small, to remind us of Nature "out there". We need Nature because of its peace and calmness. Nature still abides in God's Word. Every season comes as it ought to, plants come as they ought to, rain comes and plants grow. The season carries on, sometimes late; sometimes early. Sometimes there is hunger, because there's no rain, but it carries on.

Helena finds that Nature fills her with calmness if she spends time in Nature. She says we need Nature “to remind us” of God and that there is more to life than that which an urban built up environment represents. Human-made phenomena cannot satisfy us in the same way as natural ones. Henk is also drawn away from city life when he has to “get away from it all”.

Henk: When I become world-weary, frustrated, and craving to get away from it all, Nature offers me what I need to feel restored. I find there’s nothing more exhilarating than an aimless walk in the veld. I am very fond of the Karoo and the best time in the Karoo, which has the most calming effect on me, is the mornings and the evenings, during the cool of the day.

Henk’s childhood experiences laid the foundation for his present ability to draw immense pleasure from Nature. To get the most out of the time we spend in Nature, it helps if we are fully present in the moment, which is of a piece with Thandi observing that one consciously accesses the nurturing. Nolan (Par 2.3.2) describes something similar: the only place where God can be found is in the here and now “of our unfolding universe”.

Trish: The most important thing for me is *handle* Nature, be in it and handle it. Touch it, caress it, smell it, use all your senses; and do that on a daily basis. My soul is filled with the beauty of Nature, if I spend time in it. You can’t just say I am aware of Nature if you never walk in it, if you never sit in it; pick a flower and smell it. Your senses have got to be fine *tuned* if you’re going to have a soul filled love of life.

Trish’s description highlights purposeful involvement with Nature. De Chardin likewise (Par 1.7) expresses his view that “...to understand the world, knowledge is not enough, you must see it, touch it, live in its presence and drink the vital heat of existence in the very heart of reality”. Both these texts demonstrate a deep appreciation of Nature, and an ability to be nurtured by Nature. It is interesting that Trish describes her absorbedness in Nature as her senses being finely “tuned” in. Like Thandi, this also speaks of being mindful, and the inner attentiveness to which Cumes (Par 1.6 and Par 2.7.2) refers. Henk describes an interesting experience that conveys something similar.

Henk: I yielded myself completely to the enjoyment of the scene, defying time and all its demands. I felt more conscious of being alive; of being able to enjoy God’s loving tenderness... It was one of the most pleasant moments of my life. I had never known anything like it. I will never forget just how He lifted me. I face the future as the peace of God continues to abide within my heart. I know that I will never walk in darkness.

The ability to be nurtured by Nature seems inaccessible when there is a lack of connection with the natural world; and also when someone is self-absorbed. Cumes (Par 2.7.2.2) refers to this as “egocentricity”. Nolan (Par 2.3.2) holds the view that by discovering our interconnectedness we deepen our experience of oneness with all around us and “through that our oneness with God”. He

further explains that we do so by deepening our appreciation of Nature (Par 2.3.2). Clinebell (Par 2.8.1) not only views our relationship with the natural world as being part of our health and wholeness, but also regards our relationship with Nature alongside our relationships with other people as forming part of pastoral care.

4.5. Nature's role in well-being

A thread that has woven its way through this research is that our well-being is linked to Nature. For example, Kabat-Zinn (Par 2.7.1) emphasises our relatedness to the rest of creation as the “fundamental ground” of our being. In the context of Ecological Theology well-being relates to connection with the world around us. In analyzing the many texts and voices of the participants, I now select certain phrases that within a narrative analysis expose some of the sentiments expressed by the participants concerning the role of Nature in wellness. For example:

Henk: Nature gave me my life back.

Henk speaks of wholeness, connection, and a sense of belonging. Conradie (2005) defines wholeness as belonging, for example, being “at home on the earth”. Al Gore (Par 2.7.1), on the other hand, speaks of feeling disconnected from Nature, resulting in feelings of loss and confusion. In the context of today's world, not belonging to a community, alienation from Nature, and a sense of rootlessness are regarded as endemic to the post-modern era, which is viewed as one of uncertainty and fragmentation (Par 1.5). Against the background that stories shape and construct people's reality (social construction) we now listen to other voices in the text; remembering that the texts do not reflect the whole lived experience of the participants.

Thandi: Nature restores calmness into my soul. I know that I stop when I feel really bad or sad, or hurried or whatever. It's always important for me to stop and just reconnect with Nature. That gives me my breath back.

Helena: Nature can help you to find yourself, which makes you more whole; connecting your spirit with God.

Trish: I just need a bit of Nature thrown into my day.

Trudi: Whilst I was struggling with depression I started noticing God's presence in Nature in the form of a solitary cloud in the sky. It gave me inner peace and acceptance to know that God is here and He is looking out for me. That was a “moment-of-healing” because it took away those anxious feelings.

These narratives talk about the role of Nature in well-being from the perspective of the participant's unique experiences. Thandi describes it as "Nature restor[ing] calmness into my soul". This could result from the fact that she stems from a different discourse within an African culture, which may be less disconnected from Nature, exposing the somewhat Eurocentric nature of Al Gore's assumptions in his writings. Thandi's remark, "Nature takes me back to what is real" (Par 3.2.5), also reflects what is described in the literature as a longing away from the illusion of materialism. Trish's description is similar to that of Herholdt (Par 2.5.1) as he describes the renewal available through Christ and through creation as "extensions of" God's "body and soul", and our source of life through grace. Helena, on the other hand, comes from a South African English tradition and her words express something of what Burns (Par 2.7.1) describes as a "biological-fit"; this research has mentioned the possible significance of this fit for pastoral care (Par 1.5), specifically regarding Nature's role towards person-God connectedness. Helena moves from a God out there to God within creation – much more integrated into it and linking strongly with the literature review (Par 3.2.3).

It is interesting that all the participants talk about Nature bringing calmness. This indicates that their lives within an urban context, within which this research was conducted, implies that they live dominantly with "un-calmness". For example, Trish talks about "restoring", which indicates that there is something with her dominantly experienced discourse that needs restoring. Henk describes it as "giving back life". Again he is speaking as if God is "out there", rather than within and among us, which points away from the shift to a more integrated idea of God within found in the literature (Par 3.2.2). Also the idea that God is only found in Jesus Christ excludes other cultures. Thandi has to stop and reconnect to get her "breath back". These phrases imply a sense of lostness or taking back something that has been lost. Helena goes so far as to use the metaphor "brokenness" or being "out of tune", which implies a great sense of loss within a modern city that has been informed by the individual isolated self which is challenged by post-modernism (Par 2.3.2, Boff Par 1.7, Heroldt Par 2.3). Trudi goes so far as to describe this disconnection as a form of "depression" with which she has struggled:

Trudi: When you are disconnected from everything and even from Nature, it causes you to get feelings of depression, anxiousness and stress.

Many of the theological challenges that face the world in which we find ourselves are speaking into this sense of loss. This disconnection is experienced in pastoral encounters as restoring

wholeness. Conradie (Par 2.4) so aptly points out that, concerning people who come for help within a church context, “within the socially constructed living-space, created by the social milieu, we find security and thus the world becomes livable for a specific community”. The nearness of God in this instance becomes what Freedman and Combs (Par 2.4) describe as “a basic, underlying reality that we share”. The implication of this is that we can regard our experiences of the nearness of God as meaningful and relevant for us personally. This study is not arguing that Nature heals; rather, that it is God who does. In other words, the story of this research is about God-in-Nature as Healer. The participants are continually transformed as they move closer to living “in” God in His world, designed by God to offer all that humans need to flourish. This is associated with “original blessing” (Fox Par 2.5.2) and resonates with the theme that evolved contextually during the research, that Nature can convey a “beautifying effect” as part of its healing benefits.

4.5.1. “Beautifying effect”

Since this study has been carried out within a social construction framework, based on the idea that we constitute ourselves through language, it was important to find language for experiences in Nature that have a healing effect. We not only construct our world through the language that we use, but we also maintain it in narrative through language (Burr Par 2.4). In other words, the way we talk about Nature is significant. Trish’s experience of “beautifying” through Nature (Par 3.8.2) caused some of the language that this research sought to become visible. For example, the “magical” effect that Nature exerts on people has found expression in the phrase, “beautifying effect”, which relates to a broader discourse on spiritual healing. It also speaks of something lingering over time and of well-being. Below are examples from the text.

- Trish: Nature gets into your soul. It has a spirituality of its own and breathes wholeness, wellness, health, restoration. It’s got the colours, the blue of the sea the green of the trees. That’s the magic. It’s not by chance. God had meant for Nature to have that effect and for us to live in harmony with Nature. Nature releases something healthy in us.
- Trudi: My spirit comes alive. Nature brings me in touch with my soul, enabling my spirit to flow.
- Henk: I am grateful that I had known that morning. I never felt more conscious of being alive; of being able to enjoy the fact of living. I could not have lived a day more fully than I had then.
- Thandi: I don’t think I can be whole without Nature as much as I have to have my different relationships with people.

Trish's description of "releasing something healthy in us" connects with Trudi who says that her spirit "comes alive and in flow". This speaks about life and moves away from what Clinebell (Par 2.8) refers to as "inner deadness" and what Berry (Par 2.7.1) terms "soul loss". It shifts away from a sense of brokenness and loss, discussed earlier (Par 4.3.3) in this chapter, as it heads towards restoration and healing. "Beautifying" in this context links with Clinebell's (Par 2.8) description of "celebrating the wonderful gift of God of being alive and aware". Burns and Street (Par 3.8.4) suggest that we easily overlook the "depth of what such experiences may encompass". Henk mentions "being fully alive". It seems that both Henk and Trish can relate to Conradie's view (Par 2.5.1.1) of Nature as "God-infused" and reality becoming "translucent with divine presence". One of the participants in Group 1 made the remark:

You know with Nature, the colours don't clash. With God everything goes. All colours unite, they don't clash.

This is a reminder that everything has its place and purpose; and that it is reassuringly beyond us. The above text brings to light that Nature even on its own, points beyond itself, in ways that direct us in turn to religious interpretation. When this text is read in relation to Saint Thomas (Par 2.5.1.1) who asserts that "the entire universe is participating in and manifesting the divine more than any single being", it resonates with Conradie's (Par 2.5.1.1) description of God's presence in the world that nurtures us and our relationships with Nature or other people. Thandi, for example, regards her relationship with Nature as being on the same level as with people, which contributes to her wholeness and well-being. This is in line with Gergen's (Par 2.4) description of a "closed-off self", which he argues has no meaning, for we live in relationship with others.

The idea of alienation and a search for meaning has run throughout the literature that informed this research (Par 2.7.1). When people do not feel happy or whole, it is experienced as something missing in their lives. People are constructed in and by their culture, and as Christians we think of this emptiness inside as being without God, and the Spirit in us. Monk et al. (Par 2.9.2) maintain that we do not have control over the meanings in our lives as we are products of our history. By embracing the certainty and "truth" of a Christian discourse, we marginalise other voices. However, it offers certainty in the confusing world of post-modernism where there is much uncertainty. For example:

Trudi: In spite of what is going on, if you can just keep your eye on God, whether it's on God through Nature; just noticing something going on outside that is beautiful, you can go on.

Trudi's words "in spite of what is going on" remind one of Lindbergh (Par 2.8) who describes Nature as a facilitator of transformation and healing, through the natural processes of life. In Trish's words:

Trish: In winter a tree is without beauty. It is just stark, grey, and brown. At times we look like that, but I can love myself despite the scars I have. I can start to see myself as being beautiful when I see spring green and blossoms appear. Self love comes from self-worth. You can't live without human affirmation, but maybe if you sat and studied the pain of Nature... You've actually got to claim who you are - God's child. I am loved by God. I have self-worth because God thinks I am worthy. One can rise victoriously because you have within you the potential to be loved and beautiful.

Trish uses a tree as a metaphor to describe how witnessing natural processes in Nature can prepare us to more readily accept change and teach us about self-love and self-acceptance, despite hardship.

Thandi: I feel at home in Nature. Nature takes me back to what is real.

Thandi's comment, "taking me back to what is real", resonates with Brueggeman's (Par 1.7) description of God as our "rightful home", which links with both Estés (Par 2.7.2) and Conradie (Par 2.7.2) who describe earth as our "true home" where we feel at home in the earth community. This can be associated with how Nature can help us to connect with our spirituality/being, and speaks of wholeness (van der Brom Par 2.8.3). When we make this connection, we come to rest with God, "the source of life" (van der Brom Par 2.8.3). Many metaphors describe this rest as "coming home", for example, Conradie (Par 2.7.2) who refers to the earth as our natural "home". This "coming home" and finding rest chimes with the notion of well-being. For example,

Trish: Nature restores my sanity and my peace.

The way in which Trudi, Thandi and Trish describe Nature as restorer, whole-maker and rest-giver echoes the notion of "coming home" and implies a sense of "safety". In this, we access what God perhaps ultimately envisioned for us - living in community with Him and others, including Nature. For instance, Helena describes how Nature guides us to "live our best lives".

Helena: We are here to please God, not ourselves. To please God, we have to stay with God's way. We tend to go out of His will and form our own way of life; and that's when things go wrong. Part of the role of Nature is to keep us within His margin

Helena touches on the narrow, self-centred view that has almost become a legacy of the modernism to which Johnson (Par 2.9.1), Lorimer (Par 2.4), Gergen (Par 2.4), Cumes (Par 2.7.2.2)

and Nolan (Par 2.7.2.2) allude. Heshusius (2.9.4) refers to overcoming the focus on self as “a more complete mode of attending”. Fromm (Par 2.3.1) describes it as the “alternative way”, while Nolan (Par 2.3.2) considers this as a “more evolved sense of self”. Nolan (Par 2.3.2) defines our “natural desire for unity, community, oneness, and love” as an “innate longing”, which resonates with “living our best lives”. Boff (Par 2.7), on the other hand, perceives "human wholeness" as a form of “mental ecology” where we need to try and recover the “original state of maimed human intimacy” with Nature. Macy (Par 1.7) metaphorically views this self-other awareness as the “greening of the self”. From the context of this research, we regard feeling interconnected with all life as a means by which we can experience a sense of belonging and meaning within a rapidly changing world.

In terms of social construction, we say that what we experience depends on our interpretation of the experience: in other words, the meaning we ascribe to it. When we find new meaning in our inter-connectedness, this forms part of “beautifying” as the self becomes less pronounced and selfish. Self-focus is replaced with love and compassion for self and Others. At the beginning of this research I envisaged that compassion might be one of the themes this research would explore, but found that it receded into the background. I will address this more broadly in Chapter 5. As explained earlier, the participants in this research brought a different perspective to the study, shifting the focus from individual brokenness to a broader discourse on wellness that involves relationship.

From an ecological viewpoint, we understand that nothing exists outside of relationships (Boff Par 2.5) and in this research, the nearness of God, found in relationship, is experienced as having a positive effect. Looking at it from a community of life (Brinkman Par 2.5) viewpoint, we associate this with Jesus, Who is “life” and “the wellspring of all that is good”. Healing through Nature is based on the benefit we gain from our relation with the living world that is infused with God’s Spirit. If we talk about God as carnate, we are saying that God is with us, and are we not also saying where God is, there is God’s grace in abundance? This makes it possible to speak of Nature as a positive healing force surrounding us. Something of the beautifying effect described in this research is captured by Burns (Par 3.8.4) where he mentions being fully present in the moment and how that leaves something positive behind, providing that it was a positive experience. When such experiences also involve the majority of our senses, the impact tends to be bigger and more intense. For example,

Trish: All my senses come alive when I garden. There is a wholesomeness that is absorbed from Nature, a feeling of harmony between God who loves to create, and I who have the pleasure of creating a beauty spot or a quiet place. I think God enjoys watching me as the beauty of Nature delights me and as I nurture my garden, and look after Nature. I think God is delighted when we protect Nature. I think I can only understand how God sees His world, by understanding how I love it when I see it.

Thandi: I just get happy when I walk in the bush. I am reminded of childhood moments, when I was at my happiest.

Trish feels that Nature imparts feelings of harmony, peace and connection, even delight. She describes how a sense of wholesomeness and nurturing is exchanged with Nature whilst gardening while it also leads to communication with God. This view echoes Burns (Par 3.8.2) who maintains that one cannot have a positive and negative experience at the same time; for example, feeling anxious and content simultaneously. He further avers that by creating a positive experience, we prevent the occurrence of a negative one. Thus contact with Nature helps to reduce undesirable emotions, whilst more desirable feelings are elevated, such as elation and pleasure (Burns Par 3.8.2), which reminds one of Thandi's feeling of carefree childhood simplicity. It is as if Thandi hears God's voice assuring her that "all is alright, no matter what is going on". What both Trish and Thandi describe is the "beautifying effect" of Nature. However, the "beautifying effect" of this research is something that leaves more of a lasting effect. In this sense we think of "beautifying" as language of spiritual transformation. The focus falls on the inner transformation of our consciousness. In the context of this research, Nature is perceived as a trigger of this transformation by providing the silence and calm to deepen our connection with ourselves and God, thereby transforming our habitual responses to life. This is reminiscent of Nolan's (Par 2.3.2) discussion of how, in post-modernism, the focus falls on experience or "felt knowledge", rather than on intellectual knowledge, thus allowing us to grasp something of the unknowable. The "beautifying effect" touches on a deeper/higher level of connecting with God. Almost, as if "touched" by God, which is part of "beautifying" and implies a change in our approach to life. For example,

Helena: Nature taught me to see beauty, which helps to look at people with God's eyes, and see the beauty in them.

According to Helena God uses the beauty of Nature to reveal Godself, God's heart, to us, which teaches us to look with "soft" eyes at others. As De Chardin put it (Par 2.5.1) God can be "touched" in the world of matter. This also connects up with Peacocke's (Par 2.5.1) comment: "God's own self giving the world the kind of being and becoming it has, revealing God's nature

and purposes”. This does not articulate a separate God, but a God present with us (Conradie Par 2.5.1). A phrase that repeatedly came up in the text is “eyes opened”. For example,

Trish: There was a time when perhaps God was distant, but that was because I hadn’t had my eyes opened to Jesus. That spiritual encounter with Jesus, the Son of God, [in Nature] meant the beginning of an awesome love relationship, and that means that one is looking for the signs of His love. Eyes that are opened to God become more and more and more in tune with the beauty of the intricacy of Nature.

Trish mentioned “opened eyes” on numerous occasions. In this research, the reference to “eyes that have been opened” is viewed as a healing experience, because we are drawn closer to God. For Henk, such an experience signifies being “reawakened to a newness of life, and finding fresh inspiration to honour God”. Henk says that Nature has this effect because “in Nature we are surrounded by beauty, and the themes of silence and peace, come up repeatedly”. Whilst living on a farm, Nature opened a whole new world to Helena. “Eyes opened” also links with “being awake”, the opposite of the state of mindlessness that Kabat-Zinn (Par 2.7.2) refers to as being asleep; where people go through life without the awareness of life unfolding around them, each moment. This metaphor of having our eyes opened, as used by Trish and Helena, offers another example of finding language in this research. “Eyes opened” connotes becoming very aware of God’s presence in all around you, and waking up to the nearness of God. Trish’s saying that “Jesus enhances my ultimate understanding of beauty, and sacredness, of life and of Nature” (Par 4.3.1), may be associated with spiritual illumination where beauty appears more enhanced as if the core of God’s love and grace has become “visible”. The said metaphor thus altered the experience of God and brought the participants into an intimate relationship with God. Henk describes an experience with God.

Henk: I was filled with joy unspeakable that can only come from such an encounter with God.

Henk’s description of “joy unspeakable”, echoes Burns and Street’s (Par 2.8) observation that when joy is experienced through Nature, and we encounter beauty in Nature, “our eyes light up, our bodies relax and our hearts open”. It might also be associated with what Tolle (Par 3.8.4) describes as experiences of “beauty that are not of this world”, the “indescribable and unexplainable which can only be of God”. God also urges us to look at Nature – look at the lilies of the valley; look at the birds... According to one of the participants in Group 1:

If you have a love walk with Jesus, He will open your eyes for beauty.

These examples emphasise the “beautifying effect” of Nature, language that contextually evolved in this research. Beautifying is the transcendence we are able to achieve through the kinds of connection/s with God and Nature described in this chapter. The healing lies in each person finding their own connection with God, and through that, living their own unique life. For example,

Trudi: Once you start noticing Nature again, then you will be on your way to healing.

Trudi describes how re-connecting with Nature was for her “a first step towards healing” after her husband died. Connecting with God and Nature is not a once-off occurrence so that re-connecting is ongoing. Transformation is an on-going process; even as it never reaches a point of saturation. When we talk about well-being, we refer to an all-encompassing and long-term sense of wellness, rather than brief moments of joy. The healing benefit through Nature requires that we go back again and again to experience the “beautifying effect” of Nature, which chimes with De Chardin’s (Par 3.8.2) description of how God’s presence in Nature “beautifies” everything it touches.

When we think of the power of language, we heed what Monk et al. (Par 2.4) say: “the language we use and the way we speak, determines how we can be in the world”. To say Nature facilitates healing depends on how we construct our experiences through language, focusing on the meaning we attach to our experience. Healing is not directly observable and the “beautifying effect”, introduced by Trish (Par 3.2.1), describes the varied, yet similar experiences of the participants: that Nature beautifies their outer world and also their inner world with strength, hope, peace and joy. This also ties in with narrative ideas on looking at the effects of experience, rather than the experience itself, for example, Trish saying that her heart was opened through beauty to something profoundly mysterious about Nature as her own spirit within came alive and connected with God’s Spirit.

Beauty is not just a shimmer on the surface. As followers of the Creator God, for many of us beauty speaks of something very deep about the world; the reality of God’s presence, which when recognised, draws the participants to experience life on a deeper level. The metaphor “eyes opened” in this research signifies an awakening to God’s presence and Spirit in the world. *That* is the healing, the beautifying of the individual soul when it grasps the grace and beauty and love of God; in the here and now. God’s presence in the world as the source of hope has been

foregrounded in this research (Par 4.3.1). The concept moves away from fixing towards linking with hope – hope of sharing a journey with Nature, with Others; hope from knowing that I am only a part of Nature and not carrying the world on my shoulders.

Consequently in this research the participants discovered language, for the way they can be in the world, by deconstructing healing and coming up with beautifying, saying that this is how they experience healing through Nature. In the process, participants become co-constructors of their lives with God, and in this way also healing comes about. On the other hand, the term may still not be sufficient to describe the healing received through Nature. Examples within this research have exposed some aspects of the language void, for example, “there are no words to express God’s beauty and glory” (Helena). Human language is finite and time-bound and cannot speak of the Infinite and Eternal. Literature (Nolan Par 2.3.2) has commented on our inability to make sense of the mystery of God, Who transcends us and Whose infinite reality is veiled from us. Thus, the experiences described are merely encounters with the actually existing nature of the world that prompts our thoughts about God. Inasmuch as God is beyond expression, Chapters 3 and 4 have considered the many ways in which God’s presence “beautifies” the lives of the participants. Specifically, I heard that living with Nature is a way of being with God in the world. In essence the beautifying, “magical” effect of Nature is a sense of God’s presence felt through the participants’ interaction with Nature.

4.6. The groups’ contributions

As indicated in Chapter three (Par 3.3), the contributions of the groups were incorporated in the research as two cumulative voices. The reason for this was that the research analysis could not accommodate four additional individual voices. The two groups were viewed as control groups to support and contribute alternative viewpoints, much like an outside voice saying “what about this?” or “have you given that aspect some consideration?” The contribution of the two voices to this research turned out to be significant.

4.6.1. Group 1: Alternative ways of accessing the healing benefit through Nature

In the overall narrative that evolved in this research about God and Nature, Group 1’s voice emerged as one suggesting alternative ways of accessing the healing benefit through Nature. One

of the women in the group described visualising the relief that Nature gives, as she remembered what it was like to be in Nature. This is significant, because she can access the healing benefits of Nature without physically being in Nature. She said that “visualisation is a kind of connection with your soul, your innermost being”. This echoes Silverman (Par 1.5) who points out that we “cannot get the benefits of experience until we have had the experience”. A person would therefore have experienced the healing peacefulness previously. Consequently one does not need to actually *be in* nature – recalling the experience is enough. This is interesting because, if in social construction we create reality, the prior experience can be sufficient to transport us there. The notion that the mind can re-constitute a prior memory of Nature was thus introduced by this alternative voice.

The concept of God being beyond you – and not trying to access it on some staircase to heaven – goes beyond the idea of Nature and the individual being one. The dissolving of boundaries between the person and Nature and the person and God is possible to some degree, yet remains elusive on another level. For now we can experience something of the power and grandeur of God through what we can access by means of our senses, for example, in experiences of thunder, rain, and sun. It moves beyond Henk’s description of knowing God through the Bible as the door – for we can see in part only. This introduced another theme that the earlier participants did not mention, the idea of God being beyond us.

Up to this point, most of the ideas about Nature had concerned the safety of Nature. Here, however, Group 1 talks about the uncertainty we experience through Nature. Life, generally, is about ambiguity, uncertainty and negative experiences. In this research, the focus has fallen on positive experiences of Nature that bring healing and restoration. Considering the “other side” of Nature is beyond the scope of this research. However, because other “realities” exist is precisely the reason why the positive experience of Nature is so important; and because it is accessible to everyone. This is why we need the safety of Nature. Experiences that speak of safety are for Thandi evident in being “grounded”; for Henk it is the intimacy with God; for Trudi safety lies in the order in Nature; Helena sees the purposefulness of the tiniest creature; and Trish experiences the assurance of God’s love. Focusing on the positive is a choice and does not mean that participants in this research do not acknowledge the negative side of Nature.

As Christians we are perhaps aware that negative experiences can help to develop our spiritual growth. De Chardin (Par 1.7), for example, writes about how Nature can shape us when he encourages us to “bathe... in the ocean of matter; plunge into it where it is deepest and most violent; struggle in its currents and drink of its waters. For it cradled you long ago in your preconscious existence; and it is that ocean that will raise you up to God”. He refers to our situatedness in Nature and our interconnectedness with everything around us, through which we are able to lead lives of fullness and fulfillment. Plunging speaks about not holding back, not hiding in the safety, about embracing life in its totality. And this is where the risk comes in; for to live is also to experience suffering. Is he saying that by embracing Nature, this life, we can experience the nearness of God in the here and now, but God remains beyond us, for now? As I was reflecting on this, another voice interrupted me,

God created that [Nature], so Nature adds to the experience of God, in the storm and around you.

Group 1 describes Nature as “adding to” its members’ experience of God. The group experiences something of the power of God through Nature, which reminds its members of their own insignificance as they realise their dependence on God. When faced with the forces of Nature, one of the participants speaks of being confronted with “something totally beyond you”. In this situation our connection with God, the sense of safety, perhaps feels least tangible. Could it be that our religious sensibility is awakened by fear as much as by beauty as we encounter “the raw material of life” (Thoreau 1996:29). Is God in fear as well as beauty? Thoreau (1996:29) goes on to say “the most alive is the wildest” and adds that what is not “subdued” to man, “refreshes him”. There is a link between saying “God created that”, and referring to that which “is beyond” us. The group describes its connection with God through Nature, yet only in part. Nature is a means of experiencing “something” of God. This suggests God being beyond us. De Chardin (Par 2.5.1) writes of “touching” God, in matter. Group 1 indicates that Nature also “touches” us, for example,

If you just take a bunch of flowers to patients in hospitals, you see how they lighten up.

The word “just” indicates that it does not require more than that, as Nature is sufficient in itself. This also expresses something of God’s sufficiency, which these words explain:

Just throw a packet of seeds in the ground, and see what comes up. Plants are connected to God, as we are.

This is pointing out that God's blueprint is in the tiniest seed. And that it is also in us and speaks of the potential to overcome. It reminds one of De Chardin (Par 1.7) above, and in this context also speaks of the process of growth as the means to be "raised up to God". Another member of the group also talked about taking flowers to someone in hospital but saw it somewhat differently

It is "something alive" in a hospital where everything is dead around you; the walls, the bed – there isn't a living thing.

The assumptions behind these words are that only Nature represents life: they express either/or ideas which we associate with the dualistic language of modernism. This limits us to ideas of contrast and separateness. When we open space for the multiple meanings in any given text our possibilities expand. Nolan (2006:182) suggests that post-modernism brings freedom. Both these texts regard Nature as representing life. It speaks of life, is life-giving and provides a space where we can "touch" something of God; as it also "touches" us. These texts suggest that we can both "touch" God and be "touched" by God through Nature; not only in the actual experience but also in the afterthought, as in visualisation. Rowshan (Par 1.5) opines that an experience can be "internally generated" by picturing a sensation mentally. For example,

If you want to switch off from what is going on, the ugliness, the wars and things like that; you could escape to Nature and find a sense of peace there.

This description of Nature as a trigger for either "switching on or off" is reminiscent of Burns and Street (Par 1.5) when they point out how viewing Nature from a hospital window and imagining being there, can aid recovery. One wonders if Nature helps us to experience peace because it enhances single-mindedness, which can bring quietness to one's body and mind. The freedom Nature offers is that it allows one just to be. However, the living world around us, Nature, will probably only provide a space where we feel closer to God and experience God's peace, if we see a connection between God and Nature. For example,

The door to the garden was locked, and everything on the inside was dead. The once beautiful garden withered when it was closed up. All that the garden needed, which the robin, who was trying to lure the children in, knew; was laughter from children and birds singing. Once this happened, everything started growing again. Nature can heal us spiritually, but it may not be the experience of all people. People may get their spiritual healing from something other than Nature.

This description from the book "The secret garden" (Par 3.3.1) evokes the healing benefit through Nature which this research explored. My first impression on hearing this story about the garden

being closed off was to interpret the story as our hearts being closed to life, as in hearts of “stone”. However, Nature is always healing us, whether we know it or not. Even when we close our doors, Nature will find other ways of nurturing us. This is in line with what the other participants said about nurturing by Nature – that the more we consciously allow Nature to nurture us, the more we will experience the healing benefits of Nature. When we feel interconnected to everything around us, it appears as if a shift takes place inside, which opens us up to something of the “beatifying effect” of Nature. For example,

Nature can have different effects on you, but seldom leaves you untouched.

Nature can be emotionally moving, which also alludes to a theme about which the participants talked. For example, Helena becomes “out of tune”, Trish gets excited as she sees more of God the more she “travels” with God, Henk feels happy in Nature, while for Thandi Nature brings mixed feelings of being left out, having to go without, even fear as people and animals died. Group 1 describes how a particular scene in England moved one of the group participants to tears as an experience “that has affected my mind for a long time” was evoked. This may have been a healing experience that occurred in an unexpected moment. Such “moments of grace” (Gottlieb 1996:12) forever alter how a person thinks and feels about God, Nature and themselves. Thus “mystical encounters” such as these bring about profound moments of connection with God when in grace the soul finds rest in God. The impact of this is “beautifying”, in that Nature not only heals but brings about a deeper, richer, and more meaningful experience of life. It is as if something of the “magic” rubs off... On the other hand, some people may: “get their spiritual healing from something other than Nature”. This remark was an important contribution made by Group 1, although I did not see the connection at first.

Group 1 contributed to and enriched the study by finding a way of describing Nature that is held within memory and the mind. In other words the experience and reality of Nature can be evoked from within us, indicating that Nature is indelibly imprinted on our minds and recreated within the site of our being. This in itself opens up vast possibilities for pastoral care as it interacts with Nature.

4.6.2. Group 2: Reframing the role of Nature in well-being

As I was re-thinking the phenomena I had encountered in the text, I remembered that Group 2 had mentioned the word “can” repeatedly in our conversation, but it was only towards the end that it dawned on me that “can” has real significance in the context of the study. It acknowledges the possibility of healing but points out the conditional aspects involved. The general concept that Nature may offer healing benefits is brought to the foreground as one considers this “contradiction” – Nature *can*. It is not a certainty that Nature will have a healing effect. I realised that there was a possible link between healing and people taking the time to involve themselves with Nature. The “moment-of-reframing” came at the end of the conversation with Group 2. Similarly Seidman (Par 2.9.5) describes what stands out, because it contradicts, has “to be kept in the foreground”. As the researcher, I only understood the significance of the word “can” in face of the other data once I had completed the interviewing process. Although the suggestion that Nature might not consistently have a healing effect was there, I did not immediately realise its significance, due to the convergence of thoughts and ideas, though both groups mentioned it.

The contribution made by Group 2 was the concept that Nature can heal a person spiritually, but that it depended on the individual person. Nature can heal, but one cannot take for granted – a definite, a given fact – that Nature will have this effect on everyone. This of course assumes a certain definition with regards to healing. However, is it possible to “define” the discourse, healing? Would it not be more in line with post-modern thought to talk of a description of healing? These words stood out: “*Can* is the operative word”. This, and other voices in the research, reminded me of Strong (Par 2.9.5) when he describes deviations from mostly consistent text as being “extremely valuable” to illuminate what is different. This suggests that Nature can heal us spiritually, but it might not. “Completely at peace with the world”, on the other hand, indicates that Nature “completely” heals. This could stem from a different discourse within a South African culture, which may be less disconnected from Nature. For example,

His love overwhelms me. It just hits me in the face, everyday

These words describe a deep awareness of God’s grace made visible in creation, through animals, birds, and flowers, through which the person experiences ongoing pleasure and joy in God’s felt presence. This contrasts with Cumes’ (Par 2.7.2.2) observation of many being so overwhelmed

today by the influences of our “sophisticated civilization” that they experience alienation from Nature. The members of this group do not regard themselves as standing apart from Nature. For example,

We are not separate islands of creation. You can't isolate the one from the other. This integrated system can break you or it can make you. It can encourage you, it can discourage you; it can make you happy and it can make you sad. It is a living part of what we are.

This illustrates being part of a global system where everyone needs to co-exist, ideally in harmony and balance. Clinebell's (Par 2.8.1) view of pastoral care is that healing is “enhancing relationships with the natural, as well as the human environment”. Clinebell (Par 2.8.1) suggests that “therapy cannot ignore the social and environmental contexts of people's lives”. Pastoral care in this context involves deepening our relationship with the natural world. It reflects post-modern thought today which encourages a move away from “either/or” towards “both/and” ways of looking. Being stuck in either/or thinking can have the effect that we remain alienated, which resonates with the notion of complementarity. God created each part of creation to complement the other and together we form a whole. What this means in contemporary Christian life is that we cannot exclude the role of Nature from the context of well-being in our lives. However,

Healing for me lies in that you realise who you are and what you are; and understand truly that God who created everything, loves you. To have that assurance, that would be for me, spiritual wellness. I do not equate the spiritual realm with Nature.

It could be that this person is coming from a more traditional modernist discourse within a Christian culture, which may be more disconnected from Nature, exposing the somewhat anthropocentric nature of his belief system/religion. Nature speaks of the “faithfulness of God” and “the richness of God”, wherein his conviction lies in his knowing that he is “right with God”. This accentuates the multiple meanings that can be found in any given text, and how words carry only the meanings we attach to them. The meaning in this instance somewhat removes healing from the context of Nature, linking it again with the Word. The following is interesting:

You realise that this didn't just happen, this was created, by God, for us, to enjoy.

This connects with humankind as stewards (Par 2.6) of God's creation, which is reconcilable with Nature playing a role in healing. In post-modern social constructionist thought, there is space for relational aspects to be developed as discourses are deconstructed and new ways explored. For example,

One can have that knowledge [knowing that you are “right with God”] without Nature, but Nature makes it stronger for me. Can you think of being part of a church service on a Sunday without flowers?

This again emphasises what the natural world contributes to our lives that cannot be found anywhere else. The words, “Nature makes it stronger for me” express something of the dialectical (both/and) and describes the “all-embracing life”, the “totality of being” described by Fox (Par 2.3.2), which indicate a move from anthropocentrism towards a living cosmology. Group 2’s contribution brought an important element to this research, namely that Nature “can” play a significant role in our well-being, but with the understanding that it might not.

4.7. Summary of chapter

This research was based on nature-based experiences of God and the possible healing effects of such experience. In relation to the research question and aims of the research, and the literature that formed the basis of the research, I analysed the texts in terms of three themes: *The role of Nature towards person-God connectedness*, *Rootedness in Nature*, and *Nature’s role in well-being*. These themes contextually emerged from the participants’ text.

The literature as background provided me with a broad view, which helped me in the analysis. The inclusion of the actual text of the many experiences described by the participants in Nature, gives the research a sense of authenticity. Making links in the data helped to build the interpretation in the light of the theory presented in the research. I drew comparisons between the theory and the research, which offered explanations for the participants’ lived experience. Through this, I was able to craft a narrative based on the profiles of the participants and the meaning they attributed to the phenomena being studied. The literature helped to make this more understandable by providing a context for the research. The relationships between the themes and how everything tended to connect up, reminded me of our interconnectedness and interrelatedness as elements of a whole.

The themes, initially articulated from the objectives of the study, evolved as the study progressed by following a flexible approach. The relationships between the themes became more meaningful when I loosened my hold on the data. It was illuminating to see what emerged when I did this. This may have contributed to causing the themes to come more alive, ultimately leading to ideas

of well-being, even joy in the face of what life in God may offer. The themes were viewed as overarching themes because they encompass not only spiritual healing and wholeness, but also incorporate wellness. The rationale is that Nature offers *more* than healing. This overall picture or “gestalt” that emerged drew everything together; the resulting picture is the combined story of how the participants experience God and Nature in their lives. Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, contains the conclusions of the research.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

5.1. Introduction

The role Nature plays in healing has been described in multiple ways in this research investigating participants in an urban context in South Africa. The research started out with the assumption (Par 5.3) that within an urban South African context, people experience a sense of disconnection from God, self and others; along with separated lives lived in isolation. The research questioned modernism's view of the individual self as being separate from Nature, while the concept of healing focused more on the healing of broken relationships as the research moved beyond seeing the individual self within clearly defined boundaries. Within a post-modern context, language is the lens through which we mediate our experience, and the "beautifying effect" of Nature in this research has referred to the way Nature opens space for a reciprocal relationship, not isolation from Nature or differentiation between religious life and secular life. The results speak of experiencing God in the earthly experience without excluding religion. This is associated with well-being through the vitality it adds to the participants' lives. In this way, the participants' lives are constructed around the nearness of God.

In this concluding chapter, I will reflect on the research process, limitations and strengths of the research, and cultural influences. I will also consider the significance of the study, my own personal growth as researcher, possible outcomes of the research, and suggestions for future research. Our conversation will move back and forth, considering the way everything tends to link with everything else as illustrated in the previous chapters.

5.2. Overview of the conclusions

According to the research, the perceived division between people and Nature exists more in the minds and language of the people interviewed than in their experience. In other words, this study was successful in that the researcher worked at discovering language for the experience of God that lies outside of duality. One phrase that was helpful was the "beautifying effect" of Nature, which refers to how one participant experienced Nature's "healing" effect. "Beautifying" also links with the sacred, that of seeing God's presence in the world, and God's relationship with

God's creation. God's felt presence elicits a deep reverence for Nature from the participants, which foregrounds Christianity as being ecologically responsible. For me this signified the "greening" of religion because I heard about loving and respecting God's creation in this project. The participants all viewed Nature as linked to God, a link that has been neglected in much theology. For example, Nature has God's imprint (Trish), while it is without evil, is pure and speaks of God (Helena). However, as in any finding, there will also be its contradiction. For example, "the spirit dwells in us, not in the creation" (Henk). In keeping with the spirit of post-modernism the participants did not define God in any static way, but described God more as being "in-motion". This was a "larger" image than that which the literature projected, which is more in line with the Triune God present in everything Who reflects relationally in the research; it goes against the notion of separation of the world and God. In this context, spirituality and Nature become truly meaningful in everyday life.

5.3. Cultural assumptions

Any study is limited by the lens through which it is perceived. This study was carried out within a cultural discourse in urban South Africa through the voices of mainly white middle class people, who have been raised in a modernistic, reformed tradition of individualism and the idea of a "God out there" (Par 1.4). This indicates that the larger discourses in South Africa that have focused on a theology of personal faith within a reformed and conservative theology (Par 1.6, Par 2.3.1, Par 2.5.2, Par 2.7.1.3) have deeply influenced the participants' understanding of God as someone separate from Nature.

The literature which informed the research emphasised the discourse around modern human beings as alienated from Nature and the challenges that this brings. Some of these emerged quite prominently within the research through the manner in which participants described their own ways of surviving the city. My own dualistic assumption that Nature is separate from the city was challenged when participants expressed the idea of God and Nature living within them. However, there were also contradictions within the individual texts. For example, Henk's description of God being both "out there" as well as intimate may well have limited him from seeing the powerfully constitutive effects of the hidden discourses forming his culture and theology.

What appears to be a major shift towards a focus on Nature rather than on God and people, has not appeared to be conflictual for the participants. In general, it appears that Nature has bridged a gap and helped the participants come to know God more intimately as God speaks to them personally through Nature. However, most of the participants described their connection with Nature as starting with the Word of God; believing God (personal faith), and then feeling God's care and love as they experience Him in Nature, again emphasising the bringing together of religious and everyday life. The only participant who was from a different race group added to her description of this by saying that Nature keeps her "in touch" with God (Par 3.2.5). This is interesting in that it indicates an ability to connect with the healing power of Nature beyond the divisions of culture, race and theological background. The notion gathered from the literature that people are basically materialistic in today's world stems from the concept that they are still embedded in modernism, where dualism's entrenched separation and individualism occupied the forefront. The research has emphasised the role that Christian spirituality might play in looking away from consumerism towards seeking meaning in Christ.

As the researcher, I came to this study with the assumption that in this age of the individual, connecting with Nature would also involve connecting with other people. I assumed that human connectedness and the outflow of compassion would play a major role, but found in this research that Nature does not really play a role in connecting people with others. The emphasis was more on God's nearness through God's intimate relationship with God's creation. Thus, in the context of this research, belonging to God's world means that the participants construct themselves as part of Nature and God. The notion of Others, as part of the self, was not emphasised. This presented a contradiction as the research started out with much emphasis on interconnectedness.

Finding language for the experience of God's nearness through Nature has overshadowed much of this study. The overall positive effects of connection with life (Nature) and Life (God), as illustrated throughout this work, have found expression in the "beautifying effect" of Nature. This language alone perhaps draws imagery from Nature that might not be found within other pastoral care models. Beautifying indicates something that is beyond the idea of "fixing" the individual which depends on human communication models or relationships that are formed exclusively among humans. The cultural situatedness of the word "beautifying" also cannot be overlooked. In a different context this word would be quite foreign to some who may have experienced Nature's harshness; even God as other than loving and caring.

In the social constructionist context of this research “beautifying” actively constructs the participants’ psychological/spiritual realities. Since words would be no more than a means of interaction without emotion and sincerity, “beautifying” appeals to the researcher because of the connotations that accompany it. The magnitude of “beautifying” is enhanced because the word is often uttered in relation to God; for example, “the beauty of God”. In this sense, “beautifying” captures shared cultural understandings and moves a fixed noun to a verb, opening space for it to describe many things. Words, as a point of departure, also leave much unsaid, and “beautifying” implies knowing God and enjoying real conversations with The Living God. This strengthens and reconstitutes the participants’ identity in God. Thus the research speaks of Christians whose knowledge of God has broken the boundaries of religion so that God has become experiential knowledge.

Emphasis on wellness rather than healing stood out as another significant contradiction. This moved the focus almost from the beginning away from individual brokenness to wholeness and healing; but even more so, to well-being. Thus the participants challenged the researcher to move away from an “illness model” towards positive wellness. Furthermore, the research highlighted the possibility that Nature might not always heal and yield the expected positive outcome. The contradiction was that a person *can* be healed through interacting with Nature, but that this might not necessarily happen. It was also emphasised that Nature *can* play a role to help a person feel more connected to God, and the inner self, but this also may not be taken for granted. Through these contradictions, I realised that the notion that Nature *will* heal as opposed to *can* heal was a blind spot for me. It took the outside voice of the group to help me see how conditioning influenced what I was able to see. Likewise, not all people will experience Nature as healing and restoring. Other unexpected results in this research were that, if someone is indifferent to Nature, that person may not experience healing through Nature. Whilst this seems appropriate, the participants pointed out that Nature influences a person whether s/he wills it or not. A person may not be aware of it and healing is not always consciously experienced.

5.4. **Limitations of the research**

There were five main limitations in this study. Firstly, my own assumptions concerning Nature as healer limited this research to the positive aspects of Nature. As the study is a dissertation of limited scope, this is not a problem in itself, but rather a limitation. However, it would be

interesting to conduct future research in which Nature is understood as both creative and destructive, holding more ambiguity, as with for example the Hindu concept of Shiva as a god of both creation and destruction.

Secondly, the participants were all passionate about God and Nature. This not only blinds them from other ways of knowing God, but might also result in the study being regarded as biased. Although the research was not concerned with proving a point, throughout the study I struggled with my own passion around this topic and searched for evidence for healing through Nature. In fact, the invitation to participate in the research journey to some extent became a self selecting of people who have experienced healing in Nature.

Thirdly, selecting participants from one faith community did not yield a representative sample.

Fourthly, the research has not led to an understanding of community. The research, instead, concentrated on the individual. The focus groups, surprisingly, functioned more as individual participants than groups with a dynamic group synergy. The researcher's inexperience as a novice researcher resulted in her not really knowing how to work with focus groups and she neglected to explain the distinct purpose of groups beforehand. With a co-researcher, this may have turned out differently.

Finally, the focus on ecological and cosmic theology meant that there are vast tracts of theology that were not explored, for example, African theology where Nature has been more integrated into spirituality, as well as Eastern and Native American spirituality in which Nature plays a much more prominent role.

5.5. Problems encountered in the research

The size and complexity of any study depends on the number of participants and the number of concepts analysed. The biggest challenge encountered in this research journey was too much text and too many voices with which to work. As pointed out in Par 5.4, the groups did not emerge as a collective and were recorded as individuals. In order to make the data more manageable, the individual voices were moved to the foreground and the group voices to the background as cumulative voices.

This researcher was particularly interested in the discourse around modern human beings and individualism (Par 5.3) and its role in pastoral care and healing. The interconnectedness of people with one another as well as Nature has constituted a theme of this work. However, this never emerged in the research. The participants talked more about Nature and the individual, rather than the collective. At first it looked as if compassion (Par 5.3) was ill-fitted in this research, but on reflection, the researcher concluded that each participant had focused primarily on his/her own experiences during the limited time of the interview. The idea of compassion for others was introduced during the interview, but only towards the end. Although the participants responded that seeing oneself as part of Nature would lead to more compassion, the focus moved away from humans re-connecting together, to relationship with God. Thus Nature caring for humans became more prominent as the researcher worked more with connectedness from an individual viewpoint and proceeded to explore a more evolved sense of self. The outcome of the research emphasised that life is meaningless outside of Others and relationship, as post-modernism along with social constructionism illustrated. In this manner, the researcher not only looked at what it means to be connected, but also at what the lack of connectedness involves. Healing in a connected context moves away from the self standing in isolation with a narrow self-focus. It was also emphasised that wholeness can only be seen in relation with Others, including God, as healing comes through caring “with” (Kotzé & Kotzé Par 2.8). Nature, as the collective, highlighted the incongruence in this study even more obviously and not all the participants identified with the feeling of “oneness” described in the literature.

5.6. Strengths of the research

There were three main strengths in this study. Firstly, the research was conducted at a time when popular opinion holds that humans are destroying Nature. This has stimulated interest in how people experience Nature, in the researcher’s thinking, and probably that of the participants as well. The overall objective of the research was to investigate what Nature might mean to people today, in this current climate. In that sense, this study may be regarded as being current, even as important, for pastoral care at present. It moves away from the idea of people as the “fixer” of Nature, to Nature itself being the subject and people its object.

Secondly, in a more practical sense the research was grounded in the text and can therefore be considered to have internal validity. With regard to reliability, the research was presented in the

participants' words, giving the research an element of authenticity. The lived experience of the participants was described as fully as possible, allowing the personal to emerge.

Thirdly, the phenomenon that was studied is not normally available. Nature has not generally been viewed as a component of pastoral care or a healing mechanism in pastoral care in more traditional reformed churches in South Africa. A study on healing through Nature in the context of pastoral care has, as far as the researcher is aware, not been conducted in South Africa. Qualitative research also made it possible to achieve a degree of depth and complexity.

5.7. Reflecting on the aims of the study

The research has demonstrated how the participants construct their world according to their beliefs, whilst the world also constructs them because their images, expectations and interpretations affect what they are able to experience. Thus the world never speaks directly to us, and what we hear is mediated by where we place our focus. The narrative presented here is a combination of a deeper understanding and appreciation of the intricacies and coherence of the participants in their stories in this study.

5.7.1. The role of Nature in healing

To describe the concept of healing in theological terms in this study was a difficult task. As researcher, I understood healing holistically, without a distinction between physical, psychological, or spiritual healing, which speaks of a more complete sense of restoration and wholeness; away from dualistic thinking. The many-layered healing experiences described by the participants in this research, reverberate with this total wellness made possible by God's Spirit in the world, the Cosmic Christ, as the key healing factor.

5.7.2. Descriptions of healing through a connection with Nature

Descriptions of healing through a connection with Nature emphasised human beings and Nature in a reciprocal relationship. The focus is not placed on them fixing Nature, or Nature fixing people, but on a mutually beneficial relationship (Par 5.1); this paradigm shift could be explored in more depth in another study. In this research, participants described Nature as moving beyond

the world of “doing” towards “being”. What appears to be the power of humankind makes way for God’s power and this brought greater clarity of thought as regards their lives, along with an opening of their hearts and minds.

Thus, part of Nature’s “beautifying effect” or healing is that it encourages the participants’ own creativity as a way of being part of the continued unfolding of God’s creation and plan. Nature does not “speak” of failure. Nature overcomes and moves forward, in harmony with the ever-creating, constructive, upholding power and strength of life through God. The participants become part of this through Nature’s “beautifying effect” as their inner nature instinctively responds to the outer Nature. The participants’ relation to God gives substance to the way in which they interpret their experiences as described through multiple examples in Chapter four.

Healing and well-being as a process have been foregrounded in this research as Nature becomes more and more part of the participants’ lives. Through the “rest” Nature offers, the participants are filled with His Spirit again and again and “brokenness” is restored by connecting with wholeness (Trish). Hence healing in the context of Nature is an interactive process between person and environment, emphasising the role of God’s creation in the relational experience of God. The basis for a postmodern relational view of healing is through an interchange between self and Other, and there are many examples in the research where healing is removed from the self and placed in relationship with the Other. This again may be associated with the reciprocal relationship mentioned earlier (Par 5.1). The literature has emphasised that people today seek experiences of God (relationship) more than knowledge of God (doctrine). Healing lies in this intimate connection and the research speaks of faith as “living”. The grandeur, power, resourcefulness and beauty of God are intensified by the faith which beholds it, for example, Thandi’s words that “this is bigger than us”.

5.7.3. The mystical/“magical” effect of Nature

The “magical” quality and effect of Nature explored in this research no longer remain elusive. Tolle (2005) aptly refers to “a sweetness and beauty... not of this world shining through”, which speaks of the Indescribable and Unexplainable of creation and the “beneficence of Nature” (Thoreau 1996) and God. Participants in this research have described this “quality” as God’s presence, a revelation of God. For example, Henk described an experience in a wood one morning, as the sun came up with streams of light, when the magnificence and beauty “took his breath

away”. I heard that Nature uplifts the human spirit and through Nature God draws people to Him. For example, Helena and Trish stand in awe in the presence of Nature’s splendour and meticulous order. The participants sense “something of God” on encountering the forms and colours of the world that no human hand can ever “copy” (Group 1). The mystical/“magical” of Nature also lies in the awareness of the life-serving intention (Pugh 2003) within creation, of which people may not always be consciously aware, but that filters through to the subconscious mind as Nature personifies new growth, life in all its manifestations and fullness. This mystical quality moves beyond language: inasmuch as this research discovered language describing Nature’s effect, the experience is also at the same time beyond language.

5.7.4. **The connecting role of Nature**

The role of Nature in satisfying some of the deepest longings of the soul (Par 5.7.2), such as rest in God, beauty, wholeness and peace, has been explored. However, the research did not speak about needing other human beings as an integral part of Nature. The focus in this research fell rather on personal transformation (Nolan Par 2.7.1), and demonstrated that Nature also plays a prominent role in connecting people with the self. It appeared that once the participants have connected at a physical level through their senses, they are able to connect at an emotional and spiritual level, as Nature helps to open space for God where they no longer suppress the inner part of themselves, as one tends to do in everyday life. For example, “there is a relationship between God and the world that is more deeply grasped, the deeper we move into both of them” (Trish Par 4.3.1). As Trish sees more of God, she is transformed through the experience.

Although this research speaks of a God without boundaries, the participants in this research saw themselves more as co-constructors with God than co-constructors with Nature, which again connotes separation. Each person has to bridge that gap by making a shift towards seeing the world in its totality and the self as part of the whole; the researcher has written about this. The participants may be in different phases of a transition in thinking in terms of both/and, where the individual focus has made way for more collective thinking. The participants did not mention “oneness” in the context of the study, perhaps because this is more an Eastern way of describing this kind of connection, which is consistent with the cultural influences discussed earlier (Par 5.4). According to this study, connecting with God in Nature is not an unconventional spiritual path. Throughout the millennia people have made contact with God through Nature before religion was

structured and Nature became a word full of prejudice. From the literature and the study, the researcher heard that Christians who lived spiritual lives have never stopped doing this.

5.8. The significance of the study

The research foregrounds Nature as a healing mechanism in pastoral care in a period when the modern Western way of being in the world is increasingly taking people away from Nature. Technology is increasingly transforming the way people relate to the world and it takes a conscious effort to resist this move away from Nature. Through the research the participants explored experiences they might otherwise not have reflected on and by telling their stories may have gained valuable insights for themselves that enriched their lives and brought them even closer to God; while others could also benefit from this. Although nothing original is said in this research, what it says is relevant for today as people often feel deprived of God.

5.9. Personal growth of the researcher

As researcher, I have been immersed within a Reformed theological background which perhaps prevented me from being more curious concerning the participants' ability to bridge what appears to be a large gap between Reformed theology and creation based theology. It would have been interesting to have selected more deliberate samples which would have included people who did not adhere to this position and therefore would have challenged the researcher. However, the study enabled me to escape from the constrictions of a too narrow, precise, and limited construct of God fashioned according to my own cultural tradition of Reformed theology. I came into this research with a hidden assumption that God was something or someone separate from creation. Through reading about the Cosmic Christ (Fox 1988), my assumptions were questioned, but the awareness of God as part of creation was not embedded within the questions I asked, implying that my own awareness grew along with the research process. As I write this, I am reconstructing my identity as pastoral therapist as I reflect on these experiences and what I now sense is important about these events. The experience has stretched me to a more flexible "posture" and inner freedom to love and accept all as it is. With this came a gradual process of detachment from

that I had previously thought was so important. This research experience has produced in me an “otherness” of the self⁶ (www.facebook.com/pages/Harold-Bloom) and a new identity in God.

5.10. Possible outcomes of the research

From this research, it appears that a part of the pastoral challenge of today is to find connectivity between Nature, relationship, and the world. Children living in built-up areas with little exposure to Nature might need to be taught to interact with Nature in order to experience the healing benefits. Openness to meeting the ever-present God in new ways may go a long way in pastoral care today: for example, utilising visualisation to access the healing touch of Nature for people who are home or hospital bound. This research is not suggesting that religious experience be confined to unusual experiences, for that would be to confine God to special moments.

5.11. Suggestions for future research

It would be interesting to explore how younger participants view the role of Nature in their lives, since the participants in the research were mature individuals. Other worthwhile areas for research might be: How Christian communities view Nature in the context of the Gospel; How other traditional churches experience Nature and God; and A therapeutic study on the role of Nature in the context of healing working with people suffering with depression or facing life-threatening illness. Working with environmental issues in the context of practical theology today invariably tends to involve issues of social justice, yet this research has not dealt with such issues or with the connection between the domination of Nature and the oppression of social groups, as emphasised by eco-feminist approaches. Future generations may find that issues of justice become more pressing as financial demands increase. The role of Nature in the context of African, Eastern and Native American theology where Nature plays a much more prominent role, would also be intriguing to explore in the future.

⁶ "The marvelous comes to us, when it comes, in very different forms: ideally in another person, but sometimes by an otherness in self" -Harold Bloom.

5.12. **Conclusion**

This qualitative study explored the healing touch of Nature in the context of pastoral care. Its aim was to find healing language for people's experiences of Nature. The study showed how Nature's healing touch is experienced within a Reformed theological tradition within city life. It was in the finding of language within this research for that which is experienced but seldom talked about, that the research holds particular value. The study endorsed a post-structural understanding of language, viewing language as a powerful means of constituting one's world in the presence of God.

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Suggestions for further reading

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Crick, Francis	The RNA World
Dillard, Annie	Pilgrim at Tinker Creek
Ellis, George (UCT)	Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature
Gelwick, Richard	The Way of Discovery (1976)
Gresham, Machen J.	The Origin of Paul's Religion
Gresham, Machen J.	Christianity and Liberalism
Hefner, P.	The Evolution of the Created Co-creator
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Hutchinson, J. E.	Pandemonium Tremendum: Chaos and Mystery in the Life of God. (2001)
Jammer, Max	Einstein and Religion (1999)
Lawlis, Frank	Mending the Broken Bond
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McTaggart, Lynne	The Field
Minns, O. P.	Irenaeus (2001)
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Morrison, Frank	Who Moved the Stone?
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Pannenberg, Wolfhart	Jesus – God and Man
Pannenberg, Wolfhart	Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith (1993)
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Peters, T.	God – The World’s Future
Pittenger, N.	The Lure of Divine Love: Human Experiences and Christian Faith (197
Polanyi,,Michael	Personal Knowledge (1958)
Raymo, Chet	Skeptics and True Believers: The Exhilarating Connection between Science and Religion (1998)
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Ross, Hugh	The Creator and the Cosmos
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Schaeffer, Francis	Escape from Reason
Schaeffer, Francis	He is There and He is not Silent
Smoot, George	Wrinkles in Time
Toulmin, S.	The Return to Cosmology: Postmodern Science and the Theology of Nature (1982)
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Wright, N. T.	The Resurrection of the Son of God

The research process

The research on “The healing touch of Nature in the context of pastoral therapy” was based on the methodology outlined in Chapter 2. What follows is a summary of the actual research process.

1. Preparation for the field work

To accommodate all twelve (12) volunteers I decided to hold one-on-one interviews with the first five (5) participants and group discussions with the remaining seven (7) participants. In determining methods of working with participants in this way, the research became more flexible. I prepared information sheets and consent forms for the participants. A list of core questions was utilised as a guideline during the interviews. The questions provided a framework for the research and were based on my research question and research aims.

2. Doing individual interviews

Since the method I chose for data collection was that of unstructured audio-taped interviews, I wondered in the beginning whether data based solely on audio recordings could perhaps be regarded as incomplete. I was reassured when I read what Denzin and Lincoln (2003:355) wrote: “...the idea of ‘completeness’ may itself be an illusion”. Research in general tends to evolve as one progresses and qualitative research in itself tends to be unpredictable. With this in mind, I endeavored to keep the proceedings informal and relaxed.

Apart from one preliminary interview with Henk, I did not carry out any other preliminary interviews. I made appointments for one-on-one interviews at the participant’s homes, since I did not want to inconvenience them with travelling. Although my interviews were unstructured, the questions I had prepared as a guideline, helped to conduct a purposeful interview where I was able to obtain relevant data. The interviews were spread over approximately one month; in-between the interviews, I did the transcribing.

3. **Doing group discussions**

Individual interviews to collect data were followed by group sessions. I initially planned to present the preliminary findings to the whole group for discussion and comment, hoping that the interviewees would attend the group discussion. In planning the group session, I approached the church, asking whether I could make use of a venue there, since it would be more convenient for the participants.

The group discussion evolved into two separate group sessions; participants from the early interviews did not attend the group sessions. The two group sessions were scheduled for the same day. The early afternoon group was attended by three women and the late afternoon group, to accommodate people who worked full-time, comprised two men.

During the group sessions participants contributed to the discussions, some more than others. Not all participants might have shared everybody's views, but all listened and responded in an accommodating manner. The participants were generally sensitive to others in the group – an important aspect to the success of the discussions. By probing from time to time, I was able to keep the discussion centred on what I thought was relevant.

It was interesting that the early session was attended by women only and the late group by men only. This was unplanned. On reflecting how the group discussion might have been different if it had been a mixed group, Ros, one of the group participants, and I concluded that, given the topic, it would not have made a significant difference. What I found interesting was that the men's group had a more practical approach in the way they interacted with the ideas under discussion. On completion of the group sessions, the data collection was concluded.

Immediately after the group discussions, one person from Group 1 withdrew as a participant. She informed me over the telephone and wrote a letter explaining her decision, saying that she did not feel comfortable with the topic. She enquired about Nature written with a capital letter in the research. I explained that the reason Nature had been written with a capital letter, was to embrace the totality of Nature and all it represents. I assured her that, as the information letter that she received at the beginning of her participation stated, she was welcome to withdraw if she wanted to.

4. **Transcribing interview tapes**

What remained of the field work was transcribing the tapes. Whilst I was busy transcribing, I did not undertake any reading of the data. Transcription of the audio recordings was somewhat problematic with the groups, as the words were sometimes inaudible. The individual sessions on the other hand were not difficult. I made use of a professional editor to help with the transcribing, although I carried out the bulk of the work myself.

Once completed, I shared drafts of the transcriptions with the participants for comments and feedback. I included release forms wherein participants gave me permission to use the data in the research report. Some of the participants added comments, which I added to the transcriptions. This helped to fill in some missing content.

5. **Studying and reducing the text**

The development of the major themes was undertaken whilst interviewing and systematically comparing the data while recording, coding, and analyzing. By writing down key issues, I was able to identify the following preliminary themes: Experiencing God in Nature (EGiN), Discourse around modern man (M), Healing (H), and Connection (Co).

To make sense of the transcripts of text, I coded the data. The codes had to be visible so I used different colours for the themes I was working with. The codes either labelled or described something. The codes that grouped under one theme were written either in the same colour, or theme, e. g. code - hyphen - interpretive code. I did not want to use numbers as I thought that would be confusing. I only coded what was relevant, identifying text in the form of words, sentences, phrases, or paragraphs that stood out and represented a particular concept. This helped to identify similar phrases, relationships between phenomena, to identify patterns that emerged, and identify sub-codes and sequences. I designed a coding scheme of different interpretive codes as I worked through the text. I revised, added on and eliminated codes as the analysis developed. The coding list was linked with the preliminary themes. As the analysis sheets became too complicated, I decided to break the categories down further into sub-categories to highlight differences and specifics, hoping to maintain a holistic view.

5.1 The coding list eventually looked like this:

No	Code		Concept	Definition
	Category	Sub-category		
1	<u>EGiN</u>		Experiencing God in Nature	Awareness of the presence of God
		EGiN - NB	experiencing God in Nature/as a non-believer	Becoming aware of the reality of God
	<u>Man</u>		discourse around modern man	Seeing oneself as separate from Nature
	<u>H</u>		healing	Person experienced healing
		H-R	Healing/restoring	Person experienced restoration
	<u>W</u>		what	That which the person experienced
		W-P	What/peace	Person experienced a sense of peace
		W-W	What/wonder, awe	Person experienced a sense of wonder, awe
		W-O	What/order	Person experienced a sense of order. Natural flow of things, built in processes, blueprint
		W-A	What/authenticity	Person experienced a sense of authenticity
		W-B	What/beauty, glory	Person experienced a sense of beauty, glory of God. Pleasing, that quality or combination of qualities which affords keen pleasure to the senses, especially that of sight, or which charms the intellectual or moral faculties
		W-Po	What/power	Awareness of God's sovereignty, superiority
		W-Sac	What/sacredness	By association with God, entitled to respect, reverence for, "not of the world", integrity, consecrated to God's purposes
		W-MM	What/mystery, magical	Where the mystery, magical came through
		W-CG	What/Creator God	Awareness of God's creative power, the unexplainable
	<u>ULE</u>		unique life experience	Life experiences having no like or equal, superior to or different from all others
	<u>FC</u>		from childhood	Since a young age
	<u>DG</u>		distant God	As opposed to God's presence/nearness
	<u>S</u>		senses: see, feel, taste, hear, smell	What we experience through our physical bodies, faculties of physical perception, to perceive/become aware of

	T		time	Physical time [minutes/hours] spent in the natural environment
	Look		look for	That which people aspire to gain or need from Nature
	Sep		separate	Seeing oneself as separate/apart from the natural world
	IR		relatedness, interconnectedness	Seeing oneself as part of the natural world
	II		important influences	Events/people that shaped the life or impacted on the life of the person
	Self		Self/identity	The self, how the person views him/herself
		S - bel	Self/beliefs	Personal beliefs of the person
		S - reflect	Self/reflection	What the person thinks
	LoveN		love of nature	A feeling for Nature
			compassion	A feeling for other people, and self
	Cope		coping strategies	What the person does to feel better
	Resp		responsibility	Stewardship of the earth
	HoL		history of life	Narratives of the person's life story
	B		brokenness	Inner hurt, wounded heart, spiritual deadness/coldness, feeling isolated, unloved, unappreciated
	W		wholeness	Holistic, well-being, feeling of completeness, content
	HF		hope, faith	Strengthening of one's faith, giving hope
	Bal		balance	Equilibrium, feeling of well-being physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. Opposite of out of balance when aspects of one's being is neglected
	Har		harmony	In rhythm, in sync, feeling of contentment, everything is as it should be, at peace, being "in tune"
	MoH		moment of healing	The awareness that a positive change took place, that something shifted
	Teach		Teaching, learning	The awareness that one can learn from the natural environment, something that is bigger than oneself
	BE		beautifying effect	By association you become whole, beautiful... When one accepts that "it is, what it is" – that

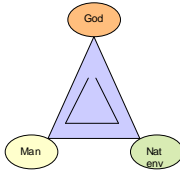
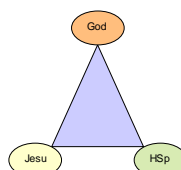
				everything is as it should be, that everything was created by God, has a purpose, and is cared for by God It has something to do with humanity being created in God's image... nature complements man, nature makes us aware of the unexplainable, the wonder, un-fathomness of God, God has a purpose with all creation, what God created is good, through God's eyes everything is perfect
	S		sick	Being unwell, diseased, physically/mentally unhealthy
	NTO		need time out	Feeling pressurised, stressed, overwhelmed by worldly demands
	So		soul	Inner being, spiritual aspect of a person, higher being [mind/body/ soul]
	SL		self love	Love and compassion for oneself
	SA		self acceptance	Acceptance of oneself. Without feelings of unworthiness
	PG		personal growth	Spiritual advancement, maturity
	CoGod		connect with God	Experiencing God's presence, communicating with God
	SI-G		special interests - gardening	That which the person is particularly drawn to
	Aware		awareness	Being consciously aware of something
	ER		existing relationship with God	Person knows God (already)

By applying the codes and writing reflective remarks in the margin on the printed text, I could highlight what stood out as interesting and insightful. This helped to make sense of the data. I used coding cards to make a summary of the conversation with each participant, allowing me to gain an overview of what was in the text and to make the data retrieval easier. The data I was working with was mostly descriptive data, where one asks "what" happens. The coding cards were a preliminary ordering of the material and I made five for each participant, covering the four themes and a card with personal data. I wrote the codes that applied to the data with a reference to the page number, as well as noted parts of text and underlined words that were repeated. I also noted words with the same meaning. I re-read the data to confirm the major themes that had developed so far.

I had nine (9) participants (five (5) in-depth interviews and two (2) groups both with two (2) participants - two (2) people did not arrive for the group sessions and one (1) withdrew) and had covered lots of pages, and now needed to see what was going on – to get “into the participants’ worlds” (McCracken 1988:9).

5.2 The coding cards for the participants looked like this:

Trish

<p>EGiN</p> <p>What-God’s love p9. Closest to God when in N. N goodness p4. That brings me close. Nearness. S-reflect “I enjoyed watching you!” God enjoys her! P4 W- beauty p5 silence W-CG God’s creative power p10 What completeness, The triune God p10 What seed of God’s love and care p10 Aware it is God’s creation p10. Cry of N p10 God does not like it. , sense of awareness of God. To exp God you must be aware? Look – signs of God’s love Sac N demonstrates potential \$p7 ULE Eyes opened Aware S – see [mentioned 20x] feel [6x] taste [2x] hear [5x] smell [6x]. Be sensitive. Senses fine tuned p6+ AC Near God. O. P T time in Nature.</p>	<p>Aware The more man draws to N, the closer he comes to God p10 As the gap betw man & N closes, it pushes you higher into the hierarchy of God p10. N is pivotal p10 Q if you don’t have N, you are not “pushed up” to God? Can’t reach God? What about man in prison? He reaches God! N makes it easierp10 Finding God in the Bible p10</p>   <p>What Tri-une God p10</p>
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Trish 2

<p>Man (discourse around modern man)</p> <p>Teach: N taught SL/SA</p> <p>S-resp hydrangea, I can't bear to see flowers die p8 He delights to see us protect N p4**</p> <p>Sep: enough unto ourselves, effect selfishness, lack of care, destroy, separates us from God? brokenness vs wholeness</p> <p>IR oneness</p> <p>Self/identity part of God's creation – steward. What man brings destroys, N brings opposite</p>	<p>Healing</p> <p>H-R Soul is filled p6</p> <p>W p7</p> <p>B sent to N for healing</p> <p>H Times of refreshing p9</p> <p>B brokenness (fragmented) draw B in people to wholeness in N. Sit with something that is healthy. I don't think there is anything finer than N's "medication" p7*</p> <p>Q role of N? with N you can exp God intensely?</p> <p>W noise, de-stress, calmness, peace. There is a wholeness that is absorbed p4 o</p> <p>B bal. H harm. W-O. Teach N teaches us.</p> <p>S tired. Intention p5 * NTO sanity</p> <p>HF. BE to beautify, personifies grace. To render, grow. Part of my therapy p5</p> <p>Most imp to handle N p9 PG</p> <p>ER Jesus is the ultimate Healer.</p> <p>Q just being in N is healing, even if not Aware? Q Must your eyes be opened? Is it subconscious also?</p>
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Trish 3

<p>Connect</p> <p>FC internalised/integrated N</p> <p>Q What effect does it have when connect with Other? BE beautifying effect! P7 daffodil, tree. SA. SL. See yourself naked, must look deeper p7. Daffodil... "a sign of something deep within" enhanced what was already instilled. PG..CoGod "in tune" making you aware of God in your So p7</p> <p>He has given me a soul to absorb Him, and I absorb Him best in N p6. soul filled love of life p6. God created flowers to connect us to N! to draw us, to engage us, to give us joy, pleasure, beauty. The most imp thing to me is handle N, be in it, touch it, caress it, smell it, use all your senses, and do it on a daily basis – connect. Aware</p> <p>Q to connect you must be aware? You must be aware of others, of God.</p> <p>Note:</p> <p>We ascribe beauty to that which is simple; which has no superfluous parts; which exactly answers its end. Emerson</p> <p>NTO</p>	<p>HoL Person Trish</p> <p>SI-G Love Jesus, love Nature</p> <p>Surrounded by natural things</p> <p>parents, American mom</p> <p>ULE realised I did not know Jesus when in N</p> <p>N draws me, I crave N, must have flowers -"that" connection</p> <p>SI-G</p> <p>ER</p> <p>Words:</p> <p>Beauty! Garden (a place where I create) eyes opened! colour 5x, texture 2x, secret, created, breathes, releases, absorb 4x [sunshine], love of God, harmony, sense of order, flowers 4x, Aware N, of God, of God in your soul.</p> <p>Ps 48:2 Fair and beauty in elevation is the joy of all the earth – Mount Zion</p>
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Henk 1

<p>EGiN EGiN depends on the individual p11. sensitivity, open to God. ER p11. guarding? P11. Unique Nature Experience p4, p10. W-Sac p18, p19. W-CG: p16, p18. W-W Look p1, p13 LoveN p1</p>	<p>Man IR: Stewardship p15. Resp. Man: don't allow N to speak, don't listen, don't take the time. People do not want to be alone. Don't want silence p8. radio p9. Man: Cannot experience blessing p12. Take N for granted p11. Man: monetary gain p11. Don't care p11. Man: priorities – having a good time p12. Sep: from N p11. Seeing selves as sep from N – effect: selfishness, lack of care, destroy, sep from God, B. DG p12 - too busy. Do not see p13. Self p13 – self-centered p15 Man made p14 children today do not know N p15. Bal: imbalance p17.</p>
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Henk 2

<p>Healing H-R calms me p1. S: mornings, evenings in Karoo H-R refreshing. W: clears mind p5. H soothing sounds p5. MoH p3 child Sick: physically ill – different climate. Psychological effect. MoH p10. Sick: tensions workplace affected health – turned to N. Self: different person p1, p2. MoH p10. express thoughts, feelings p10. W-P p10. Il p2. Sick: Karoo as child p3. S-bel T: spent in N p3. Felt happy & healthy. Cope. Bal p3 Har: N improved my being p3. W effect of N on me p4.</p>	<p>Connect ULE p6. CoGod heard God speaking. CoGod p10. FC had connection N p3, p7. CoGod p6. Inner voice p5. IR. What effect does it have to connect with other 'beautifying effect' p7 CoGod p17 Christ centre, all other connections secondary. HF: God – Scriptures – Nature p17. CG p5. T p8.</p> <p>HoL Person Henk HoL p2, p7, p8. Diphtheria, asthma P3. N triggers imagination p5, p7. S-reflect p7. loveN p6.</p>
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Helena 1

<p>CONNECTEDNESS Rootedness in Nature Person - Nature And that is how I get my strength back again p2 I must always have water around me p2 Need personal touch with N, concrete jungle robs one p3 Garden Not alienated p1, p19 Jesus' classroom was N p5 N just penetrates your soul p5</p>	<p>CONNECTEDNESS Knowing God Person-God Beauty not man-made Creator p1 Thorough, nothing by chance p1 Must be tuned-in p5, p11 Message via N p6. <i>It is the spirit within you</i> p8 N <i>abides</i> to God's word p3 To attract attention it has a beautiful flower – appreciate life p16 Stewards p7, p9 Interfere N – hurting ourselves p12 Close to God, His handiwork p1, p19 Listen, trust, reminder God's provision p16 God speaks to me p5 To draw our attention p8 God doesn't have to speak like you and I. he has ways of getting through to you [penetrating you] p5 God speaks to me through my feelings p5 Don't know Him, God can use N p6</p>
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Helena 2

<p>Time in Nature Feed your spirit p16 Living in country, opened my eyes p12 Whilst living on farm, got to know N's own orchestra p4 Hear silence p4 Sit, listen, think p5 In the country there's time for everything p12. We've changed that [artificially] p12 Happens when we move away from God/Nature p12</p>	<p>Beautifying effect (healing) Find yourself, making you whole, in spirit p10. N can heal the spirit p7 God has the power to use anything He created, to connect p10 It calms me. I find peace p2 When burdened, N penetrates your soul – example Jesus p5 Gain spiritual strength near N p3 Teaches of <u>order</u> [everything comes as it ought to] of God, patience, trust p3 Man-made stuff cannot replace p16 Cool off p4. Trust p7. Inspiring p11 God's hands p7. Wholeness p9 Each has purpose p1. Guidance p5, p17 What is real p16. Pureness, no evil p4 Diversity p5. Strengthens faith p1 Look at people <u>with God's eyes</u>, you see the beauty in them p3 Purity p4 Metaphor water = life-giving – God gives life</p>
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Trudi 1

<p>CONNECTEDNESS Rootedness in Nature Person - Nature Birds don't care about concrete jungle, they just are. Kinship p6 Interconnectedness p6, p7, p10 Compassion p11 Spiritual connection p12 Finds her joy, value in N p17</p>	<p>CONNECTEDNESS Knowing God Person-God God's communication is often through clouds p1 Experienced that God was with me p2 There was always a cloud p2 I am here, hang in there p2 Still today p2 I know He is there and I know He looks after me. I can feel His presence often through N P2 [sunset, sunrise, birds] With N you are just so aware p3 N speaks of God. Can come to know /connect with God through N p3 N Connects with God p4 Cannot help notice N if focused on God p7 Reminds of God Creator p6 Presence p10 Inspires p13 God is in N p26 Tuned-in p4, p16 I left Him p28</p>
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Trudi 2

<p>Time in Nature Separation from N causes depression, anxiety p7 Concentrate on N not concrete jungle p7</p>	<p>Beautifying effect (healing) Moment of healing [MoH] p4, p8, p10 Therapeutic p5 Calms me p6 After husband died did not notice N p10, also neck operation 2007 2X healing</p>
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Thandi 1

<p>CONNECTEDNESS Rootedness in Nature Person - Nature Nature person p1 Keeps me grounded p1 Not what you find in shopping mall p3 Children must feel N p8 Do not feel separated p13 Only take notice of N when it damages p25 Connectedness p15, p19 N speaks to my soul, brings me back to reality p3, p12. Person-Nature p14 Connections with past p5 Closer to other people to share experiences in N. Started early 13. Growing up close to N P6 Instilled in her p6. Childhood p4-5, p13. Mountains attract her p4. Likes thunderstorms p22. Sea draws her p5. somebody who is very aware of N because of where she comes from p7, p22. Namaqualand till 12 years p7. n important because no water p7. Dry season, no green. People & animals died. Longs to reconnect with the N she grew up with p22</p>	<p>CONNECTEDNESS Knowing God Person-God N and God intertwined p2 Feels blessed through rain, storms p2 Feels & sees the power of God - the new season p9, p21 Peace p3, God's presence p3, p9, God's power & glory p4, God's presence in my life p5, p9 Self p2, p5, p12. Inner child p6 Connected to God p3, p5 Connect but not find God p9 Thanks God for what she experiences in N God gives her reassurance through experiences in N – peace, wonder, awe.</p>
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Thandi 2

<p>Time in Nature Always important for me to stop – that gives me my breath back p2 Must spend time in N p21 Need to feel the soil p21 Have to sit and feel N p23 People need to be brought to N p17 Always surrounds myself with N p13 Happiest moments in N p4. As a child spent much time in N People take N for granted p23. Believes People need to be made more aware of N.</p>	<p>Beautifying effect (healing) Makes us more human, aware of position p24 If disturb harmony impacts on us p19 Makes me relax p2, wholeness p21 gives peace & inner balance p3, gratitude, appreciation of life p3 makes me happy MoH p5 Relieves stress p10 God and N talk to people in different ways p18 Utilised for healing: bring in elements p11, walking & talking. Sitting under stars p12 Important to share p9 Compassion p20</p>
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Anita 1

<p>CONNECTEDNESS Rootedness in Nature Person - Nature Cycle of life p25 Steward p13 Where person grew up P23. Aware of creation p7. birdsong, planting. Colour. Link with Peter p13</p>	<p>CONNECTEDNESS Knowing God Person-God God opens our eyes p31 Miracle of growth, diversity, seasons – speaks of God's touch p6. Connect God p7 Colours in N never clash p5. Is it because of your relationship with God p14. Plants are connected to God and so are we p7, p12.Connected God when Tsunami p19</p>
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Anita 2

<p>Time in Nature Jesus seeked N p8. Constantly in garden p7.</p>	<p>Beautifying effect (healing) Beauty, calm, serenity. N is a banner against all the ugliness that is going on in the world p9. If you prune something heavily it grows better p13. Silence. When I am upset I go into my garden p4. Just touch of p8. Soothing p8. Calming effect p8. Takes you away p9, find peace p10. Take flowers to patient, see how they lighten up p5. A connection with N. Secret Garden p11. More content p12-13. Environment impacts on me – depressed in England p23. N shows plants, seasons need rest p24. Wholeness p26, p33. Do people who are not N lovers, get their healing somewhere else? p32, p33. Compassion p18, p33.</p>
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Ros 1

<p>CONNECTEDNESS Rootedness in Nature Person - Nature Gardens! N is a living thing p29 Steward p13, p22 responsibility Not estranged p23 Dehumanises people p23</p>	<p>CONNECTEDNESS Knowing God Person-God Gerard Manley Hopkins p6 'Finding' God p27 N adds to the experience of God [storm] p4 I will lift up mine eye to the hills. Spiritual energy that connects with faith. Speaks of God's grandeur p5. N is a connection with God- you know God created that p3. You have to have a sense of God beforehand p7. The connection with something bigger than you p8. Strengthens faith. Innermost being p11. Easier to feel oneness when child p12.</p>
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Ros 2

<p>Time in Nature</p>	<p>Beautifying effect (healing) MoH visualising N p11 N helps to connect with innermost being when we quiet-en our minds p11 Absorb calmness p11, p15. It is the calm p8. N can move you to tears p16. evokes experiences that have affected your mind for long time. Relaxing or moving – different effects possible p17. Wholeness p26 Need continuous refreshment p31. God urges us to look at N p31 Monk in cell gets healing somewhere else p32 Compassion p15. It depends on what you take from N p18. Realise common humanity p19. Return to ground p20.</p>
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Bill 1

<p>CONNECTEDNESS Rootedness in Nature Person - Nature My love for His creation hits me in the face daily. Childhood: loved bush. Knew every tree 6 years. Not from parents p2. Lock me away, I will not last. I need N p5 Created for us to enjoy p1. You separate yourself at your peril p2. If lived closer to N, would have respect for life p14. See Peter p14. Being alienated from N one loses all sense of being human p15. Depends on a person's character p15. Being a N lover does not make you a Christian p15. N nurtured him since a small child – he grew up that way p2. need contact with N p5. We can't live without N p20.</p>	<p>CONNECTEDNESS Knowing God Person-God N makes it stronger for me p4 N is part of God p5 N adds to the experience of God p4 Depends on your outlook & how you grew up p4. Awe, wonder p25 that could bring a person to God. What we see in N can bring us closer to God p25. magical, mystery, fills one with wonder p10. That little flower made him realise there is a God p6. Religious experience – he came down the mountain a Christian p6. God spoke to him through N p6. When we see the magnificence of N we become intensely aware of God's magnificence, power. Beauty of N brings me closer p10. Intensely aware p10. Faith gives him peace. Pray in bush helps p10. N enhances that connection with God p9.</p>
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Bill 2

<p>Time in Nature When we live fast and busy we long for N. It brings even more appreciation for the natural world p16. Being in N – fishing, is relaxing and brings with the world p1. If you haven't grown up with N, it will take a lot from N to really make you understand the link between God and N p9.</p>	<p>Beautifying effect (healing) Nothing more relaxing for me than being out in the open p1. Wholeness/brokenness p18. God is the centre p18. With God's help, one can p19 God's creational love for all His creatures. What it can do for you p23. Can you think of being part of a Church service on a Sunday without flowers? N complements p3.</p>
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Peter 1

<p>CONNECTEDNESS Rootedness in Nature Person - Nature Do not see N as part of the spiritual realm p3. Cannot isolate man from N p1, p2. That is how God created creation p1. Not separate islands of creation p1. The one complements the other p2. For me it is an integrated system. It can make you or break you p20. We are part of an integrated system p20. Being a Christian does not automatically make you an animal lover p16.</p> <p>Some do not mind being alienated from N p18 Eliminate natural things p22</p>	<p>CONNECTEDNESS Knowing God Person-God Knowing that Jesus loves me, that is spiritual wellness p3. N can add to the experience of God p4 N can enhance – depends how you live it p6. N can p10, p11 – operative work is ‘can’. If you let it work in your life p11, p27. Bring a person to God? EgiN-NB: did for the person. Will not always.</p> <p>Man’s inhumanity to man is disconnected from God p9.</p>
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Peter 2

<p>Time in Nature We are robbed of the splendour and wonder of God p23. When people lived closer to N in earlier times- where they more God fearing? P23. We forget God. Focus on other things, not hills, N p23.</p>	<p>Beautifying effect (healing) The therapeutic aspect of our spirituality. N can hurt us p20. Wholeness p24. You realise who you are and what you are. And understand truly that God loves you. He created all of this - that is where the healing is p24 Grace. I have everything in Him. I am whole. All creation needs is the Creator p24.</p>
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6. **Building a network**

By using the coding cards, that contained relevant data only, I was able to put the data into a visual display. I used visual mapping to draw a network to display the data. This conceptual map

consisted of flow diagrams which showed patterns using shapes, lines and directional arrows. I used this diagram to organize ideas, themes, patterns and configurations of interactions, and interrelationships in the data. With this display I was able to obtain a fuller picture of the data and reduce the data considerably. I was also able to draw preliminary conclusions to guide the analysis, whilst adjusting themes and building the interpretation. I reread the data to confirm the preliminary interpretation. This repetitive and inductive technique allows patterns and themes to emerge from the data, which is not imposed prior to data collection. The display that emerged from this systematic process was important as it summarized what I had, and made a representation of the data.

As I was analysing the material I realised that because of the quantity of text I was working with, it would be more helpful to focus on the in-depth interviews in the earlier stage of my analysis and use the focus groups for later “testing” of “emerging generalizations” (Silverman 2006:309). This way “...the research process advances, in its final stages, towards a discussion of broader entities” according to Silverman (2006:309). A deeper and better understanding comes from carrying out depth interviews and group discussions in parallel, according to Robson and Foster (1989:123). Altogether it helps to give a more balanced picture.

7. **Interpreting the data**

The display helped me to describe the data for myself, which assisted with the interpretation. It aided me to sense the way an idea was portrayed, which made the themes clearer. The frequency of themes was significant because it highlighted a network of interlinked data. It emphasised the patterns, or consistencies found in the study between the different cross-case displays. I found that I needed enough “mulling” time, to allow things to start “hanging together” as Hayward (in Robson & Foster 1989:98) suggests. Seidman (1991:85) also emphasises the importance of this: “To take full advantage of what interviewing offers, research interviewers must give themselves ample time to study the material they gather”.

Robson and Foster (1989:99) describe the process as “...you first have to hold on to the data in order to let it go. Then [you] have to loosen [your] hold on that data, so that [you] can reach an insightful and creative interpretation – not one that [you] have plucked out of the air, but which is soundly rooted in the research [grounded research] and yet rises triumphantly from it”.

7.1. Working with the data

As described in Par 2.9.3, the analysis was structured around central text from the individual interviews, and periphery text from the focus group discussions. The central text from the five (5) in-depth interviews was centralised for themes. The two focus groups served as control groups, to bring in outside voices: I imagine almost like a chorus to a group of soloists.

However, the participants who formed the focus groups, talked about their experiences as individuals, and at no time did I look at the way the group members influenced each other; or any other group processes.

The groups brought in the element of “hermeneutic of suspicion” (Cochrane, de Gruchy & Petersen) (Par 1.9) as outside voices questioning and challenging the inside voices. My intention was not to marginalise the outside voices, but to utilise these voices to interject on the inside voices and in this way “create suspicions” or question, which would enhance pattern development and emphasise contradictions. Although the groups were utilised as one voice, no voice was regarded as lesser. The stories fitted together in the formation of the narrative of the concrete experience of the participants in Nature, and the meaning their experience had for them.

Seidman (1991:100) describes what emerges as “a synthesis of what the participant has said and how the researcher has responded”. He terms the process an “intuitive process” but says it is important for researchers to “articulate their criteria” for this process; as it gives the reader “a basis for understanding the process the researcher used...” to make the material more manageable (Seidman 1991:100).

8. Sharing interview data

Miles and Huberman (in Seidman 1991:91) point out that the goal of the researcher is to shape the material into a form in which it can be shared. “We interview in order to come to know the experience of the participants through their stories”, according to Seidman (1991:91). In the analysis I focused on the participants’ life history to emphasise the context of their lives, details of their experience, and a reflection on the meaning.

8.1 **Emphasis on the participant's life history**

To place the participant's experience in context with the research, I utilised what s/he had told me about him/herself in light of the topic up to the present time. Stories about childhood are a way of eliciting details, which "thicken" the story and enrich the text. Early experiences in their families were reconstructed to see how they came to experience Nature as nurturing.

8.2 **Details of their experience**

I reflected on the concrete details of the participant's experience in Nature. What they experienced, upon which their beliefs may have been built, was emphasised. In order to situate their experience within the context of the social setting, I enquired about relationships with others in the wider community, but realised that the focus was more on the individual's personal relationship with God than with others.

9. **Themes**

As I read through the condensed text, I recognised meaningful parts standing out. This reminded me of what Seidman (1991:89) had said: "[w]hat is of essential interest is embedded in each research topic and will arise from each transcript". This prompted me to trust my judgement about what was significant for the research.

Displaying the data enabled me to study the categories for thematic connections within and among them. It was at this point that Seidman's (1991:92) words started to make sense; a narrative is "a way of knowing". New themes started to emerge, not altogether different, but more clarified as I connected the participants' experience to that of others. Themes that seemed promising at the beginning started to fade as new ones appeared. Themes that seemed separate, even distinct, started to fold into each other. In a way, quantity started to interact with quality. The repetition of a particular aspect or experience that was already mentioned in other text, "takes on weight and calls attention to itself", observes Seidman (1991:100). Robson and Foster (1989:89) propose that "[t]he researcher's attention should be drawn more "to the relationships within the data" than "the number of people who expressed a certain viewpoint". Initially the number of times an event or experience was mentioned drew my attention but later I found that relationships

became more prominent. Seidman (1991:101) cautions that the researcher should not “try to force the excerpts into categories”, or the “categories into themes” that you “already ha[ve] in mind”; but to “...let them develop from the experience of the participants as represented in the interviews”. It felt as if the data had a life of its own. I remembered what Seidman (1991:101) had written: “[t]he reason one spends so much time talking to participants is to find out what *their* experience is and the meaning *they* make of it...”.

During this process I found that a theme might be more dominant for one person, whilst not dominant for another of the participants. The coded data that ended up in the biggest pile in my mind’s eye, became the themes I was to work with in my interpretation. I had already drawn a “mind-map” for each participant, but now needed to compare what had surfaced from each participant’s data. I decided to design a combined map to see what more might emerge from the data. This helped me to gain a broader overview of the picture, or narrative, that was emerging. I also needed to look at key words, such as “beautifying”, that somehow resonated with the themes that had emerged. Since starting out with the initial coding process, I have created new codes as new themes were identified from the data that did not quite fit the existing codes. These have been added to the coding list (Par 5).

I realised that for my analysis to be grounded in the data, I had to concentrate on what was emerging from the data. It meant challenging my own constructions and assumptions, knowing that they create vast blind spots. As I worked through the data, the muddy waters slowly became clearer. Yet, somehow the themes remained in flux almost until the end.

9.1 Overview of how the themes evolved

The original themes that emerged in the research were: Discourse around modern man, Experiencing God in Nature, Healing (role of Nature), Connect with soul↔self → God (fragmentation/brokenness, self-love, self-acceptance), Relatedness and interconnectedness (person-nature connection, compassion, love), Well-being (hope → life-giving, wholeness), Christianity, and Sacredness (God’s relationship with creation).

The themes that textually emerged as the research progressed, namely Connectedness/rootedness in Nature, “Beautifying effect”, Knowing God as prerequisite, and Time spent in Nature, were

thereafter distilled to three main themes for the discussion in Chapter four (4), namely: The role of Nature towards person-God connectedness, Rootedness in Nature, and Nature's role in well-being. What these categories represented should be clearer in Chapter three (3) before moving on to the discussion in Chapter 4.

10. **Summary**

The research was conducted in line with comprehensive qualitative methods of interviewing and analysis of the data. This involved gaining trust and rapport with participants and conducting interviews; followed by an examination of the material. I was interested in understanding the participants' unique experiences within their context. I studied the transcripts by marking and labeling them, crafted profiles, and organized categories of excerpts into themes to glean an understanding of participants' experiences in Nature. I have also described the qualitative data analysis methods used and the components of data analysis as it applied to this research and how I arrived at the analysis. I included all the participants in different roles and explained how they were connected. Foregrounding the participants' voices in Chapter 3, gives a rich detailed description of what had emerged thus far.