# Aerobic Green Exercise as a Transcendent Experience: Psychotherapeutic Implications for Working with the Unconscious

**by**
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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements**

**for the degree of**

**Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology**

**Pacifica Graduate Institute**

**20 February 2015**





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## Abstract

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The transcendent experience is a phenomenon that has long been studied and explored. First providing analysis of its researched content, triggers, and potential meaning, this thesis presents an alternative approach that examines the extent to which the transcendent experience is actually the invocation of an individual's unconscious. The author presents *aerobic green exercise*, or aerobic exercise within nature and the natural world, as a potential trigger for the transcendent experience, and investigates the concept of the runner's high as an expression of the transcendent experience. Through the author's personal examination, the methods of focusing and active imagination are presented as possible psychotherapeutic tools for clinical application. Using alchemical hermeneutics and heuristic methodologies, this thesis explores how aerobic green exercise might initiate a transcendent experience and also be utilized as a psychotherapeutic intervention.

**Acknowledgments**

I am filled with gratitude for many people outside myself. I am grateful for my mother and father instilling in me a love for the natural world, and illustrating to me at such a young age how physical exercise can be a tool with which to joyfully care for the heart, the body, and the soul. I am grateful for Pacifica Graduate Institute as the place in which I connected to the depths of my soul and the world. I am grateful for the compassionate, challenging, and encouraging guidance of both Jemma Elliot and Allen Koehn, both of whom were figures of strength for me during the thesis process. I am grateful for my editor, Hilary Watts, for her careful eye and supportive words. Lastly, I am grateful for the oceans, trails, mountains, and trees within the counties of Santa Cruz, Maui, Santa Barbara, and San Francisco for being the grounds within which I have continued to cultivate my passion for nature and exercise.

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# Chapter I
# Introduction

## Area of Interest

While running along the tree-lined coast in San Francisco, CA, during the time I had begun opening space for my thesis formation, an energetic call overtook me. My outer experience of exercising while immersed in nature spoke to my soul, and asked for exploration. At the run's end, however, I could not formulate a clear direction with this call and brushed it aside. Over the next several months, this call continued to revisit periodically during various outdoor workouts (specifically, during various runs in the redwoods, hikes in forests and on mountains, and prone-paddling excursions on the ocean), even after I had decided to breathe life into a different area of study.

Then, during the summer of 2014, I felt a pull to revisit the Hawaiian island of Maui, the place I had been when I decided to direct my life path toward graduate education in counseling psychology. I impulsively bought a flight and spent a week on the island. On the morning of my departure, a book on the bookshelf of the guest bedroom where I had spent the night caught my attention. The book was called *The Nature Principle: Reconnecting With Life in a Virtual Age*, by American author Richard Louv (2012). As I read this book on the plane and during my first night on Maui, I felt the tingle from the same call I had heard on each of those previous outdoor exercise experiences. It was on the following morning, during a 6-mile stand-up paddle atop the

crystal blue ocean that swayed along the greenery and cliffs of the island, that the clear call for this research inquiry spoke in a full voice to me.

Growing up, I had held close connections to nature. My parents both have intimate relationships to the natural world, and they had instilled the same in my sisters and me. We had a canyon in our backyard, and we frequently explored its creek bed and neighboring forest in wonder. Our town was a place where the redwoods met the sea, and both became worlds in which I frequently played. Outside of my house, nature felt like my home.

Within this greater home I would play, and my play consisted of various forms of physical exercise. I also grew up in athletics, playing soccer, baseball, basketball, tennis, and volleyball. Playing team sports solidified the belief that exercise is not only good for the body, but it can also be extremely fun. Thus, I found my identity as an athlete who enjoyed training and performing. My relationship to exercise transferred from fun- and competition-filled to deeply spiritual when I began to engage in more individual, endurance-type exercise while in nature—running in the forest, hiking on trails, and swimming, surfing, and paddling in the ocean. My parents are runners, and I feel fortunate to have been exposed to this lifestyle at a young age; indeed, my sisters and I each began running consistently around the ages of 11 and 12. Running feels like a traditional ritual and a cornerstone to life that has been passed down and shared within the collective tribe of my nuclear family. Therefore, my experiences running in the redwoods nearby my childhood home form the birthplace of inspiration for this thesis, and this recognition aligned for me during that paddle excursion in the waters of Maui. Exercise in nature, I find, nourishes the soul.

Since my childhood years, I have often had experiences while exercising in nature that I could previously only describe as spiritual. In such experiences, I felt a breadth and depth of things. I felt I had tapped into another realm of personal knowledge and connection to the collective of living beings. I felt held by a container within which much internal exploration and discovery of sought-after answers took place. I felt an elevation of joy, a feeling of blissfulness, and a simple belief that all in life is as it should be. I felt many things I failed to describe in words, but still knew to be true. Therefore, I wanted to find a way to translate my experiences.

I now recognize my indescribable sensations while exercising in nature as markers of what is called a *transcendent experience* (defined and examined in Chapter II). In reading *The Nature Principle* (Louv, 2012), I uncovered a term for the type of physical activity characterized by one's exposure to nature, and that I sought to examine: *green exercise* (also explored in Chapter II). This term, however, did not fully encompass the activity I engage in that leads to transcendent experiences. In my running, vigorous hiking, and ocean prone-paddling and swimming, the *aerobic* quality of the activity seems to be a key element for inspiring such a shift in my state of being. As such, I believe my indescribably rich experiences result from coupling aerobic exercise with exposure to the natural world. Therefore, I developed the term *aerobic green exercise* (defined and examined in Chapter III) to classify the type of activity and experience I explore in this work.

**Guiding Purpose**

The motivation behind this investigation derives from simple curiosity about a not-so-simple experience: the rich effect that engaging in physical exercise in nature had

on myself, psyche, and, I believe, my soul. I am curious about what it is particularly that inspires such an experience, and what the experience actually is. Furthermore, as a psychotherapist in training, I am curious about how this type of activity and its potential results may be utilized within the therapeutic container for the sake of client growth, healing, and wellness.

The goal of this work is threefold. First, this exploration is personal. I seek to uncover information that I can offer as a framework for understanding the deep and transcendent states that have visited me as a result of exercising in nature. Though I have benefited from my transcendent states even without completely comprehending them, I am inclined to garner more meaning and knowledge from unmasking what may wait under the surface. So, selfishly, this research holds the significant possibility for my own development.

Second, though self-service is part of my quest, this work predominantly seeks to explore an activity and a phenomenon that may bring about positive, meaningful change for those in search of further personal development. Beyond illustrating how being in nature and engaging in physical activity may be correlated with increased mental and physiological health and well-being, this work seeks to suggest ways such practices could extend deeper into matters of the unconscious and soul. From that place, I hope to provide an offering for psychotherapists to consider incorporating aerobic green exercise into their clients' work toward fulfilling their personal, emotional, and spiritual growth.

A final goal of this exploration is to add a new voice to the dialogue about the powerful effects of humans having an intimate relationship to both nature and physical exercise. Throughout my life, I have observed ruptures in this relationship, resulting in

people rejecting nature or physical exercise, or both. This detachment, I believe, is pathological and detrimental at individual and collective levels. Therefore, it is my hope that this work can act as a call for people to repair their connection to nature and engagement with physical exercise.

**Rationale**

This topic is worthy of exploration because, although there is ample research into the general physical and psychological benefits of green exercise, it appears few, if any, have explored its potential as an intentional, integrated psychotherapeutic intervention. This is especially true with regard to exploring a client's unconscious material through the medium of green exercise. Consequently, this research could offer psychotherapists an alternative tool to incorporate into their treatment plans for clients expressing myriad symptoms of suffering. Furthermore, exploring this topic could contribute to the field of depth psychology in particular by illustrating a powerful meeting place between depth, somatic, and eco- psychologies, and exemplifying the power and importance of wholeness coming from the integration of mind, body, soul, and earth.

**Research Methodology**

**Research problem and question.** American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943) theorized that beyond meeting needs for survival and love, human beings have a higher quest for self-actualization, which "refers to the desire for self-fulfillment . . . the tendency for [a person] to become actualized in what he is potentially" (p. 382). In a similar vein lives Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist Carl Jung's theory of individuation. In this theory, Jung presented individuation as the goal of human existence, as the process of a person "becoming himself, whole, indivisible, and distinct

from other people or collective psychology" (Jung, as cited in Samuels, Shorter, & Plaut, 1986, p. 76). Jung and Maslow both resonated with a chord that sang for the individual's need for exploring the full capacity of experiencing. The transcendent experience is one such example of a phenomenon that pushes the boundaries of human experience. Too often, however, people seek to extend beyond the walls of normal human experience by using substances and engaging in unhealthy behavior. Thus, this thesis is a call for a safe and nurturing pathway to the transcendent experience.

Alongside the apparent human tendency to seek self-actualization and individuation is another phenomenon overtaking much of the industrialized world. As mentioned before, through my life's experience and observations in American culture, I have noticed a split in the human relationship to two core aspects of living that may offer psychological, physiological, and even spiritual benefits. First is people's dissociation from intimate, conscious, and compassionate engagement with the natural world, and second is their torn relationship to physical exercise. I believe there is immense detriment in this disconnection, at superficial and deep levels.

People's disengagement from nature and exercise also occurs in the world of psychotherapy. In my experience as a student, client, and practitioner of psychotherapy, it seems traditional psychotherapy (in the majority) falls victim to the collective American experience of disconnection with nature and exercise. Often, the extent to which a client connects with nature and participates in physical exercise is not an aspect of the psychotherapist's work toward increasing the client's awareness to self and access to healing. I strongly feel much is lost of the client's potential for growth when the psychotherapist overlooks these components.

One specific instance of loss resulting from people's separation from nature and exercise is of a certain experience common to people who have access to engage in green exercise: the *runner's high* (defined and examined in chapters II and III). This common phrase among the outdoor running community describes the intangible feeling of elation and flow one might experience during green exercise. I, like my peers, have experienced this alternate state of consciousness numerous times, and detect the presence of something deeper occurring beyond simple euphoria. I am saddened to imagine that some adults have never had this experience.

Such observations lead me to the questions at the crux of this work: How might people's participation in regular and intentional aerobic green exercise lead to their transcendent experiences? Furthermore, how might an aerobic green exercise-inspired transcendent experience invoke the unconscious, and thus be used as a depth-oriented psychotherapeutic intervention to aid individuals on their path toward individuation?

**Methodology.** I developed the foundation and framework of information surrounding the research topic by investigating current literature and previous research found in books and academic journals. The soul of the data, however, came alive through intimate personal experiencing. More specifically, this research is the result of my dual utilization of the alchemical hermeneutic and heuristic research methodologies.

My exploration was first an inspiration birthed from alchemical hermeneutics. In his book, *The Wounded Researcher: Research With Soul in Mind*, depth psychologist Robert Romanyshyn (2007) presented the alchemical hermeneutic experience as emerging out of traditional hermeneutics. He presented that, "Hermeneutics, in general, acknowledges the co-creation of meaning between a research and a text" (p. 350).

Essentially, the hermeneutic methodology is based on the notion that the work created is the result of a researcher's engagement with extensive literature on the topic. However, missing from this work, Romanyshyn observed, was the recognition of the researcher's unconscious psyche. Therefore, he presented the alchemical hermeneutic experience as the phenomenal methodology through which "dreams, symptoms, feelings, and synchronicities in relation to the work" (p. 351) communicate the call for research to the researcher.

My research existed partially within the alchemical hermeneutic framework because this topic chose me and followed a synchronistic path of doing so, as described earlier in the Area of Interest. Furthermore, I consistently drew upon a core technique of alchemical hermeneutics: *transference dialogues*, or ritualistic communication spaces within which the researcher allows the work to communicate through his or her unconscious presence, thus informing the process and the work's formation (Romanyshyn, 2007). Romanyshyn elaborated, "The purpose of these ritual dialogues is for the ego to let go of the work so that the soul of the work may speak" (p. 349). At the beginning of my research and at various stages throughout, when I felt stuck or uncertain, I engaged my unconscious in a transference space to guide the research. I stepped into transference dialogues through silent meditation and while actively participating in aerobic green exercise. Each mode of engagement offered information that brought my life force into my exploration, precipitating the full body of work that took form when I added scholarly research.

Alchemical hermeneutics is rooted in the intangible, and this poses what some may consider its greatest limitation as a research methodology. The data gained cannot be

considered fully objective, since they are birthed out of a subject's personal unconscious. Therefore, in applying traditional standards for validity and reliability of data, alchemical hermeneutics falls short. Speaking to this concern, I do not present my information birthed from the alchemical hermeneutic process as objective or reliable. Rather, I seek to present my results as merely one voice of a single individual's experience and hope it resonates with others.

Because the content of this work is of deep personal interest and lifestyle, something within told me to use my personal experience as the exploratory mechanism. Therefore, heuristic methodology is also employed in this research. Developed by American psychologist Clark Moustakas (1990), heuristic research involves the researcher's investigation of phenomena in his or her personal experience. Specifically, "Heuristic discovery of knowledge is an inward journey, an unconditional commitment to deepening and extending personal knowledge that is embedded in universal meanings. The process is launched by questions and concerns that inspire self-awareness, self-dialogues, and self-explorations" (p. 23). As such, this research utilizes my personal engagement in aerobic green exercise as the platform from which to explore depth-psychological underpinnings, meaning, and healing, and open an avenue for looking at how client engagement in aerobic green exercise may be incorporated into psychotherapy.

A researcher using a heuristic methodology must recognize its limitations. The nature of heuristic research and its utility of the researcher's experience as the subject for the research may promote a high probability of bias. Recognizing this as the most prominent limitation of heuristic methodology, I sought to be aware and mindful of its

presence as I cultivated this work. Another limitation of heuristic research involves its lower potential for generalization. That is, regardless of the lengths and depths the explorer travels, heuristic work is rooted in the researcher's own experience and thus lacks a strong foundation from which to stand and declare the findings applicable to all. For this thesis, I am cognizant of the second limitation, and in no way attempt to create a theory or practice that will have the same—or any—effect on every individual. Rather, I explore the topic through my own experience for the sake of adding to the collective body of research regarding the potential for combined nature and exercise to elicit beneficial and special experiences for humans.

**Ethical concerns.** I am compassionate toward those who may live in urban areas without access to the natural world, and toward those with physical limitations for whom aerobic exercise is not an option. I struggled with the ethics of giving energy to an exploration that cannot be utilized by all individuals. This research, however, was not written with the assumption that it may possess complete applicability. Although the themes, concepts, and general ideas of this thesis can be utilized by many, perhaps only a relatively small population will be able to participate in the aerobic green exercise that is the focus of this work.

**Overview of Thesis**

The next chapter, the Literature Review of this thesis begins by discussing transpersonal psychology as a theoretical framework from which to position the reader before examining the transcendent experience. Then, the majority of the chapter provides insight into the transcendent experience, and defines the current conceptualization of this phenomenon by discussing its origins. Subsequent sections of Chapter II provide basic

knowledge about the neuroscience of the transcendent experience, as well as illustrate how it links to well-being. The chapter concludes with an introduction to the concept of green exercise and its correlation with psychological health, followed by an exploration of the experience of a runner's high.

Chapter III utilizes the review of literature to further explore the transcendent experience through the lens of an alternative approach to psychotherapy, depth psychology. The chapter begins with an anecdote of my personal experience with aerobic green exercise. To follow is an introduction to re-defining the transcendent experience as an experience of the unconscious. Subsequently, Chapter III defines aerobic green exercise and suggests how its practice may serve as an alchemical container within which one's unconscious may be invoked and then utilized for personal growth. Next, the chapter presents the depth-psychological concepts of the self, individuation, the transcendent function, and active imagination to lay a foundation for looking at the relationship between the transcendent experience, the experiencer's unconscious material, and one's potential for self-growth. Finally, Chapter III discusses possible clinical applications of this thesis, and specifically suggests combining the technique of active imagination with one called *focusing* during one's participation in aerobic green exercise to inspire his or her transcendent experience and garner psychotherapeutic meaning. Chapter IV consists of a summary of the previous chapters before offering conclusions, implications of the research findings, and suggestions for further research.

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# Chapter II
# Literature Review

## Introduction

This chapter seeks to provide grounding knowledge of core elements present in the research question: How might aerobic green exercise be a transcendent experience and how might it be utilized as a depth-psychotherapeutic intervention? First, this chapter introduces transpersonal psychology to aid understanding of the transcendent experience. Next is an examination of the phenomenon of transcendent experience, its origins, contemporary conceptualization, related neuroscience, and mental health implications. The final sections of this chapter introduce and define green exercise, present its relationship to human well-being, and explore the ineffable experience of a runner's high.

## Transpersonal Psychology

For some time, there were three agreed upon forces of psychology. The first force was Freudian psychoanalysis and the second force was behaviorism (Grof, 2008). Following these two came the third force of humanistic psychology, led by Maslow and psychologists Anthony Sutich and Stanislav Grof (Grof, 2008). This third force shifted focus to the uniqueness of the individual by honoring the "interest in consciousness and introspection as important complements to the objective approach to research,[and]. . . the capacity of human beings to be internally directed and motivated to achieve self-realization and fulfill their human potential" (Grof, 2008, p. 1). Sutich (1968) and Maslow (1964) later became aware that they had left out an extremely important element

in their humanistic model: the spiritual dimension of the human psyche. Birthed from this realization was the fourth force in the field of psychology, transpersonal psychology (Sutich, 1968).

> Sutich (1968) described transpersonal psychology as being
>
> concerned specifically with the scientific study and responsible implementation of becoming, individual and species-wide meta needs, ultimate values, unitive consciousness, peak experiences, ecstasy, mystical experience, awe, self-actualization, bliss, wonder, ultimate meaning, transcendence of the self, spirit, oneness, individual and species-wide synergy, transcendental phenomena . . . and related concepts, experiences, and activities. (p. 78)

Transpersonal psychology is interested in the ultimate capacities and potentialities of the human experience, including "non-ordinary states of consciousness" (Grof, 2008, p. 5). Grof (2008) argued that mainstream psychiatrists refer to these as " 'altered states,' reflect[ing] their belief that only the everyday state of consciousness is normal and that all departures from it without exception represent pathological distortions of the correct perception of reality and have no positive potential" (p. 5). Transpersonal psychology, however, approaches these extraordinary states of consciousness with curiosity about their "heuristic, healing, transformative and even evolutionary potential" (p. 5). The transcendent experience encompasses much of Sutich's (1968) definition, and thus transpersonal psychology provides a grounding theoretical orientation to aid the process of understanding this superlative human phenomenon.

**The Transcendent Experience**

Across cultures and religions throughout history, many philosophers, researchers, and other notable individuals have contributed to the discussion about an extraordinary and often difficult-to-describe human experience: the transcendent experience. Having several synonyms, including *peak experience* (Maslow, 1964), *optimal experience*

(Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), *mystical experience* (Stace, 1960), *religious experience* (James, 1902), *extraordinary human experience* (White, 1993), *ecstatic experience* (Laski, 1961), or *transpersonal experience* (Grof, 2008), the transcendent experience has perplexed and intrigued both researchers and experiencers of this phenomenon. American psychologist Joan Waldron interviewed individuals who had had a transcendent experience. One of her interviewees described his transcendent experience

> as though conscious mind was suddenly and forcibly shoved aside, now only a passive witness . . . speechless to what was unfolding. My impression was of a complete new reality in which for a time I could "see" the answer to any question in terms of the whole. (Waldron, 1998, p. 111)

Another said, "It was as if my whole consciousness just transcended my ego state. I felt completely filled with peace and love, and just an incredible sense of tranquility" (Waldron, 1998, p. 118).

As these first-hand accounts illustrate, one of the greatest difficulties in the study of the transcendent experience is defining it. The definition of the word *transcendent*—"going beyond ordinary limits" ("Transcendent," 2010, def. 1)—initiates conceptualization, for the transcendent experience "evokes a perception that human reality extends beyond the physical body and its psychosocial boundaries" (Levin & Steele, 2005, p. 89). To grasp more firmly what the transcendent experience is, a look backward at the evolution of this phenomenon is necessary.

**Buddha, enlightenment, and the four jhanas (absorption).** In his thesis, *The True Origins of Psychology and the Influence of Euro-American Ethnocentrism,* former Pacifica Graduate Institute student Robert Espiau (2013) argued that historical emphasis on the Greeks and particularly Socrates having been the founders of psychology is incorrect. Instead, Buddhist teachings foreshadowed the course of psychology throughout

time and actually preceded the ancient Greek philosophers (Espiau, 2013). Furthermore, certain Buddhist teachings, especially those of enlightenment, give an ancient voice to the modern day conceptualization of the transcendent experience.

Theravada Buddhist monks and scholars Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (2001) translated the Majjhima Nikāya, which is the ancient "vast body of scriptures . . . regarded by the Theravada school of Buddhism as the definitive recension [*sic*] of the Buddha-word" (p. 13), into English. The Majjhima Nikāya was first codified in the 3rd or 4th century (Nariman, 1919), and scholars generally view it as the most reliable source for the original teachings of Buddha, including those exploring his enlightenment (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 2001). In their translation, Ñānamoli and Bodhi presented Buddha's recollection of having attained enlightenment after meditating for 6 years beneath the Bodhi tree.

What is this *enlightenment* that Buddha experienced? Theravada Buddhist monk and scholar Piyadassi Thera (2006) explored the answer to this question in his work, *The Seven Factors of Enlightenment*. These factors include mindfulness (*sati*), keen investigation of the dhamma (i.e., mind and body; *dhammavicaya),* energy (*viriya*), rapture or happiness (*piti*), calm (*passaddhi*), concentration (*Samadhi*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). On the night of his enlightenment, Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree and began his daily mediation of practicing the four *jhanas* (in the language of Pali; *dhyanas* in Sanskrit). Western cultures have translated the jhanas as meditative states of *absorption* (Alexander, 1931). This practice consists of four successive states, as described in the following translation of Buddha's words by Ñānamoli and Bodhi (2001).

> Now when I had eaten solid food and regained my strength, then quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and

> abided in the *first jhana*, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain. With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, I entered upon and abided in the *second jhana*. . . . With the fading away as well of rapture [equanimity and joy] I entered upon and abided the *third jhana*. . . . With the abandoning of pleasure and pain . . . I entered upon and abided in the *fourth jhana*. (pp. 340-341)

The four jhanas guided Buddha toward his eventual enlightenment "when [his] concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability" (p. 341).

**Transcendentalism.** Traveling from Buddhist origins to the 1800s, the philosophical and literary movement of transcendentalism arose to aid the evolution of the transcendent experience. American philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson notably led this movement in the first half of the 19th century. Emerson (1992b) defined transcendentalism as the form of idealism present in New England at that time, contrasting with materialism. The German idealists of the early 19th century—who believed human perception of the world is conditioned by the shapes of human consciousness—provided philosophical inspiration for transcendentalism (Emerson, 1992a). By adopting this fundamental perspective, Emerson and other transcendentalists birthed a concept called the *Over-Soul*, their name for transcendent reality. Emerson described the mystical experience, which he termed *revelation*, as the union of an individual human being with the Over-Soul (p. 243):

> We distinguish the announcements of the soul, its manifestations of its own nature, by the term *Revelation*. These are always attended by the emotion of the sublime. For this communication is an influx of the Divine mind into our mind. It is an ebb of the individual rivulet before the flowing surges of the sea of life. Every distinct apprehension of this central commandment agitates men with awe and delight. A thrill passes through all men at the reception of new truth, or at the performance of a great action, which comes out of the heart of nature. In these communications the power to see is not separated from the will to do, but the

> insight proceeds from obedience, and the obedience proceeds from a joyful perception. Every moment when the individual feels himself invaded by it is memorable. By the necessity of our constitution a certain enthusiasm attends the individual's consciousness of that divine presence. The character and duration of this enthusiasm vary with the state of the individual, from an ecstasy and trance and prophetic inspiration—which is its rarer appearance—to the faintest glow of various emotion, in which form it warms like our household fires, all the families and associations of men, and makes society possible. (p. 243)

Emerson also pointed to the ineffability of this anomalous experience: "Of this pure nature every man is at some time sensible. Language cannot paint it with his colors. It is too subtle. It is undefinable, unmeasurable; but we know that it pervades and contains us" (p. 238).

**Cosmic consciousness.** Emerson's (1992a, 1992b) work preceded that of Richard Maurice Bucke (1901), a prominent late 19th century Canadian psychiatrist. Bucke introduced the world to a concept called *cosmic consciousness*. In his 1901 book by the same name, Bucke presented this experience as "a higher form of consciousness than that possessed by ordinary man; a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe" (p. 1). Involved in the cosmic consciousness is "an intellectual enlightenment or illumination" that positions the individual "on a new plane of existence" marked by a "quickening of the moral sense" (p. 2). Furthermore, it is "a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation and joyousness" (p. 2).

**Mysticism.** The study of *mysticism* ran parallel to and integrated with cosmic consciousness. American psychologist William James (1902) gave voice to the mystic in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience.* In these writings, James (1902) acknowledged the mystical experience as a difficult one to describe, thereby foreshadowing the struggle with the transcendent experience. To aid his conceptualization of this phenomenon, James presented four marks to characterize

mysticism. First, mysticism is *ineffable* in that "it defies expression" (p. 366); no adequate words can be given to provide a full, encompassing description of the experience. Second, there exists a *noetic quality*, for these "are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (p. 367). The experience of mysticism is also *transient*, in that it cannot be sustained for any significant length of time. A mystical experience can, however, recur in memory, and "from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance" (p. 367). The final facet of mystical experience is its *passivity*—there is a lack of control on the part of the mystic who "feels as if he were grasped and held by a superior power" (p. 367). These four components of mysticism are the four grounding principles in today's conceptualization of the transcendent experience.

**Contemporary conceptualization.** Leading Australian researcher of transpersonal psychology Karl Hanes (2012) built upon the four marks of mysticism. Hanes proposed an exhaustive definition of the transcendent experience through extensive examination of relevant literature. In addition to possessing James's (1902) marks of ineffability, noesis, transiency, and passivity, Hanes (2012) defined the transcendent experience as also including a loss of ego functioning, alterations in space and time perception, a lack of control over the event, and "the preponderance of feelings of unity and harmonious relationship to existence, nature or the divine" (p. 26). This last characteristic is reminiscent of Bucke's (1901) cosmic consciousness and suggests the relationship between the natural world and transcendent experience potential, which Chapter III of the current study explores. James' (1902) and Hanes's (2012)

characterizations of the transcendent experience act as foundational defining characteristics of this phenomenon.

**Subtypes of the transcendent experience.** As a result of American epidemiologists Jeff Levin's and Lea Steele's (2005) widespread review of literature and research pertaining to the subject, the transcendent experience has been broken down into two main subtypes. Levin and Steele differentiated the experience as being either *green* or *mature.* The green subtype of transcendent experience is "typically characterized as transitory . . . involving a profound experience of pleasure, oftentimes described as ecstatic" (p. 89). This "may occur abruptly, in response to an event or specific physical or spiritual practice" (p. 89). The mature subtype of transcendent experience is more lasting. "It is not so much about transient mystical feelings or phenomena as about entering into a new state of awareness. It is more likely to be experienced as a self-transformational shift in one's consciousness or spiritual perception" (p. 89).

**Triggers.** After delineating a working conceptualization of the transcendent experience and its subtypes, it is important to briefly mention the process of enacting such an occurrence. Typically, some external or internal factor acts as a catalyst propelling an individual into a transcendent experience (Laski, 1961). In her popular book, *Ecstasy: A Study of Some Secular and Religious Experiences*, English journalist and writer Marghanita Laski (1961) explored the "circumstances preceding ecstatic experiences," or "triggers" (p. 16). The following, according to Laski, are typical triggers of the transcendent experience that have remained constant over time: nature, sexual love, childbirth, exercise and movement, religion, art, scientific knowledge, poetic knowledge, creative work, recollection and introspection, and beauty. Further discussion around

recognizing the presence of both nature and exercise as separate individual triggers on this list appears in Chapter III.

**Neuroscience and the transcendent experience.** What happens in the brain during a transcendent experience? Although an in-depth exploration aimed at uncovering an answer to this question is beyond the scope of this work, it is important to briefly mention the debate within the neuroscience community regarding the specific neural processes and areas of the brain involved in the transcendent experience. Distinct research indicates that transcendent experiences can be explained by changes in the functioning of the temporal lobe of the brain (Persinger, 2001), changes in the limbic system and other parts of the temporal lobe (Joseph, 1992), changes in the prefrontal cortex and parietal lobe, and changes in the limbic system and other parts of the temporal lobe (d'Aquili & Newberg, 2000). Such variance within the field of neuroscience highlights the difficulty surrounding the study of the neuroscience of the transcendent experience—isolating such occurrences within a research experiment is very difficult (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000).

Despite this obstacle, American neuroscientist Andrew Newberg and neuropsychologist Eugene d'Aquili constructed a theoretical model of the neuropsychological mechanisms underlying various extraordinary experience states (d'Aquili & Newberg 1993; Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000). In "The Neuropsychology of Religious and Spiritual Experience," Newberg and d'Aquili (2000) focused on illustrating how the autonomic nervous system (ANS) is an integral part of this experience. The ANS is responsible for maintaining baseline body functions; this system keeps an individual alive and "also plays a crucial role in the overall activity of the brain

as well as in the generation of fundamental emotions such as fear" (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000, p. 255). Within the ANS exist the sympathetic/ergotropic system—responsible for the fight-or-flight response—and the parasympathetic/trophotropic system, which is responsible for maintaining homeostasis throughout the body.

Newberg and d'Aquili (2000) set forth five basic categories of ergotropic and/or trophotropic events and their sensorial accompaniments that may occur during extraordinary phases of consciousness. First is the Hypertrophotropic State, which occurs when trophotropic activity is exceptionally high, and "may result in extraordinary states of quiescence" (p. 255). This may take place during normal sleep, deep meditation, prayer, or other related activities. Second is the Hyperergotropic State, which occurs with an exceptionally high amount of ergotropic activity, resulting in heightened alertness and concentration. Third is the Hypertrophotropic State with Ergotropic Eruption, during which "trophotropic activity is so extreme that 'spillover' occurs and the ergotropic system becomes activated" (Gellhorn & Kiely, 1972, as cited in Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000, p. 255). An example of this is how during certain types of meditation, the hypertrophotropic state creates such a sense of bliss that coupled with it comes a tremendous release of energy (the ergotropic eruption). The opposite occurs in the fourth state, the Hypertrophotropic State with Trophotropic Eruption, which "may be associated with the experience of an orgasmic, rapturous, or ecstatic rush, arising from a generalized sense of flow and resulting in a trance-like state" (p. 256). The fifth and final state does not have a proper name but is marked by maximal stimulation of both the ergotropic and trophotropic activity. D'Aquili and Newberg (1993) found this final state, with the dual

stimulation of the fight-or-flight and homeostatic responses, to be likely associated with the most intense forms of extraordinary (transcendent) experiences.

In addition to the maximal stimulation of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, another neurological function that may occur during the transcendent experience involves what are called "cognitive operators" (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000, p. 253). Cognitive operators are processors within the brain that interpret sensory input and thoughts. Amongst other functions, cognitive operators are involved in "the ordering of elements of reality into causal chains giving rise to explanatory models of the external world whether scientific or mythical" (p. 253).

Newberg and d'Aquili (2000) considered two major cognitive operators to be involved in religious and spiritual experiences. First is the causal operator, which "refers to the brain's ability to perform causal ordering of events in reality as experienced by sensory perception" (p. 254). The brain processes involved are likely deriving "from the functioning of the inferior parietal lobule in the left hemisphere, the anterior convexity of the frontal lobes, primarily in the left hemisphere, and their reciprocal neural interconnections" (Luria; Mills & Rollman; Pribram, as cited in Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000, p. 254). The second cognitive operator significant to these experiences is the holistic operator, or "the brain's ability to view reality as a whole . . . allow[ing] for the abstraction from particulars or individuals into a larger contextual framework" (p. 254). The posterior superior parietal lobule and adjacent areas of the brain are the likely locations in which these holistic operations, such as occur in the transcendent experience, reside.

The transcendent experience has a very intangible quality, thus making it difficult to explore neurologically. As with any neurological process, the activation within the brain and body during this particular kind of experience is very complicated and involves a vast multitude of functioning (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000). Again, this section is not a comprehensive or exhaustive examination of the neurological correlation. Rather, it seeks to provide a basic overview to ground the reader in neurological activity that may take place during the transcendent experience.

**Well-being and the transcendent experience.** A significant area of controversy around the transcendent experience is about whether to classify this experience as psychopathological or psychologically beneficial. Those who view it as psychopathological argue that there are similarities between certain elements of schizophrenic and psychotic episodes and some components of the transcendent experience (Waldron, 1998). There is, however, significant research in support of transcendent experiences increasing the psychological health of those who undergo them (Bassi, Steca, Monzani, Greco, & Fave, 2014; Clarke & Haworth, 1994).

For example, English psychologists Sharon Clarke and John Haworth (1994), and Italian psychologists Marta Bassi, Patrizia Steca, Dario Monzani, Andrea Greco, and Antonella Delle Fave (2014), studied the relationship between optimal experience and well-being. The results of these separate studies produced similar results. Findings showed that individuals who have had an optimal experience reported greater satisfaction with life and hedonic balance (Bassi et al., 2014), and greater psychological well-being (Bassi et al., 2014; Clarke & Haworth, 1994) than their peers who had not had such experiences. Interestingly, Bassi et al. (2014) also found that openness to experience is

the sole personality factor predicting the presence of an optimal experience. This is an important consideration addressed in Chapter III.

Looking specifically at the psychological benefits of the transcendent experience is helpful to gain further conclusions about this phenomenon. In his doctoral dissertation, American psychologist Charles Martin (1993) found those who had mystical experiences tended to be less socially anxious and avoidant, have higher ego strength, and were more accepting of themselves than their counterparts. Japanese psychologist Kiyoshi Asakawa (2010) uncovered that autotelic individuals, or those who experience flow more often in their daily lives, are more likely to have high self-esteem, lower anxiety, and use active coping strategies more often than their less autotelic counterparts. Additionally, Asakawa pointed out that these individuals were also more likely to maintain active commitments to college life, pursue future careers, remain engaged in daily activities, experience more Jujitsu-kan (a Japanese sense of fulfillment), and report more of a sense of overall satisfaction.

A perspective that casts doubt on the potential for the transcendent experience to maintain a long-lasting impact on an individual calls into question the psychological benefit of this phenomenon. Waldron's (1998) curiosity about this prompted her to conduct research examining the life-impact of a transcendent experience; findings indicated positive long-term impact on the individual. Predominantly, the noetic quality of a transcendent experience catalyzed most long-term change in participants. Waldron attributed this to the fact that the experience shifted and expanded participants' knowledge of self and perceptions of the world. The continuation of noesis in the participants' lives took shape as "further transcendent-type experience, dreams, inner

guidance, knowledge, or intuition" (p. 126). The transcendent experience may not only be psychologically beneficial in the short-term, it may also lead to a lifetime full of enhanced mental health.

**Summary of the transcendent experience.** The transcendent experience is a dense, mystical human experience with breadth and depth beyond that which is easily explained. For thousands of years people have met this experience with curiosity, celebration, and support of its purpose. For many, a consistent longing for that which transcends the mundane daily life—a call for something greater—pulses through American culture today. Thus, contemporary research seeks to uncover more about the transcendent experience, its causes and effects, and how to inspire its manifestation (Asakawa, 2010; Bassi et. al, 2014; Clarke & Haworth, 1994; d'Aquili & Newberg, 1993, 2000; Hanes, 2012; Laski, 1961; Levin & Steele, 2005; Martin, 1993; Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000; Waldron, 1998). The meaning and insight contained within the transcendent experience, as well as what comes after having such an experience, begs further exploration. Inspired by passionate curiosity around this complex phenomenon, the following chapter suggests how depth psychology can be another lens through which to deepen the exploration, understanding, and utilization of the transcendent experience and its presence in the practice of green exercise.

## Green Exercise

Having reviewed research related to the first core concept (i.e., the transcendent experience) of this thesis, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the notion of *green exercise*, coined as the engagement in "physical activities whilst at the same time being directly exposed to nature" (Pretty, Griffin, Sellens, & Pretty, 2003, p. 31). This can

include participating in any physical activity while outdoors (e.g., in a forest, on a mountain, or near or in a natural body of water). Green exercise is the union of physical activity with the natural world, and research suggests this union may be very good for humans.

**Mental health implications.** Growing from much research around the psychological (Chalquist, 2009; Ingulli & Lindbloom, 2013; Wolsko & Lindberg, 2013) and physiological (Li, 2008; Park, Tsunetsugu, Kasetani, Kagawa, & Miyazaki, 2009) benefits of exposure to nature, and the psychological benefits of exercise (Bhochhibhoya, Branscum, Taylor, & Hofford, 2014; Erdner & Magnusson, 2012; Rangul, Bauman, Holmen, & Midthjell, 2012;), studies have begun looking at the holistic health benefits of combining the two into green exercise. Much of what is known about the effect green exercise has on humans has come out of work done by researchers at the Centre for Environment and Society at the University of Essex, led by Jo Barton and Jules Pretty. In their research, they have found green exercise to significantly improve self-esteem and mood (Barton, Hines, & Pretty, 2009; Barton & Pretty, 2010; Pretty, Peacock, Sellens, & Griffin, 2005; Reed et al., 2013), and dramatically decrease feelings of anger, depression, tension, and confusion (Barton & Pretty, 2010). Additionally, their results suggest that the presence of a natural body of water (i.e., lake, ocean, or river) leads to greater effects with regard to emotional well-being (Barton & Pretty, 2010). Furthermore, they found the greatest changes in both self-esteem and mood occurred after just five minutes of activity, suggesting these psychological benefits are immediately gained from green exercise (Barton & Pretty, 2010).

Barton joined a collaborative team of health, environment, and biology researchers including Jo Thompson Coon, Kate Boddy, Ken Stein, Rebecca Whear, and Michael H. Depledge (2011) to compare emotional well-being influenced by physical activity in an outdoor natural environment versus well-being influenced by indoor physical activity. They sought to address critics of the green exercise movement who may argue that the exercise component is the sole root of the resulting psychological benefit. Results of this and similar research indicate that exercising in natural environments is associated with greater feelings of revitalization and positive engagement, increased energy (Coon et al., 2011), and increased mood (Barton et al., 2009; Pretty et al., 2005). Green exercise inspired significantly greater decreases in tension, confusion, anger, depression (Barton et al., 2009; Coon et al., 2011), and fatigue (Barton et al., 2009) than exercising indoors. Furthermore, participants reported greater enjoyment and satisfaction with outdoor activity and declared a greater intent to repeat the activity (Coon et al., 2011). Therefore, the individual activity of exercise is not the sole propeller toward positive effects found in green exercise—it appears that the totality of the experience inspires these effect gains.

**Runner's high.** *Runner's high* is a common phrase among the outdoor running community to express the intangible feeling of elation and flow that can be experienced in green exercise. Historically the term was limited to describing what can occur while running, and the majority of research on this phenomenon centers specifically on running. Thus, the runner's high is a prominent idea in the psychology of distance running. The shift in consciousness that accompanies the runner's high explains why the field of hypnosis has been the primary research hub for furthering the understanding and

conceptualization of this phenomenon (Callen, 1983; Masters, 1992; Morgan & Pollock, 1977).

American neurologist Kenneth Callen (1983) presented long-distance running as a form of auto-hypnosis, in which individuals' engagement in the activity guides them into a trance-like state. He proposed the repetitive and rhythmic nature of running to catalyze this process. He interviewed 424 runners, ranging from 9 to 73 years old and found that 54 percent of them fell into a state of auto-hypnosis while running. Participants reported a variety of experiences during the runner's high. In addition to the euphoria often connected with this state, all individuals experienced an increase in their awareness of and receptivity to internal events and vivid visual imagery. Beyond this, 74 percent of individuals who had a runner's high felt they became more creative while running and were able to develop unusual solutions to problems without effort.

American aerobic exercise researchers William P. Morgan and Michael L. Pollock (1977) inspired the notion of the runner's high as a form of auto-hypnosis. These gentlemen explored the psychological characterization of distance runners and generated a conceptualization of dissociation and association that are now significant concepts in the investigation of the cognitive processes of long-distance runners. For instance, dissociation in runners results when cognition blocks off sensory feedback they would normally receive from their bodies during a run. Alternatively, runners associate when they have awareness of their bodies and other physical factors related to performance. As such, Morgan and Pollock (1977) suggested the runner's high is a form of dissociative experiencing.

**Summary of Green Exercise and Looking Forward**

Studies suggest the combination of physical exercise and exposure to nature is beneficial for both the mental and physiological health of humans. An additional component within the green exercise experience is the potential for the elation-filled runner's high. As with the transcendent experience, the runner's high is a phenomenon marked by a vast array of experiencing that inspires much curiosity and research. The following chapter seeks to add to this research by exploring this phenomenon and the transcendent experience through an alternate lens as inspired by this author's practice of aerobic green exercise. After such exploration, one may wonder how a psychotherapist might work with this clinically. An answer for this ensues.

# Chapter III
# Findings and Clinical Applications

## My Time

It is morning time. The sun rises as I sip a cup of coffee, gazing outside my window at the colors silhouetting the trees lining the horizon. A purest blue that overtakes the sky as the sun lifts higher into morning washes the oranges and pinks of the sunrise away. I put on my running attire—sheer shorts and a wicking shirt. I pick up my running shoes and step outside onto my front porch where I sit to lace them on. Each time I slip into these shoes, excitement overtakes me in anticipation of what may come along the journey on which they will take me.

I arrive at the entrance of The Forest, the name my family has bestowed upon Nisene Marks Forest State Park. Within The Forest live trails engulfed by majestic redwoods and pine trees that extend for countless miles along a flowing creek and rolling terrain. Each time I begin a run at the The Forest, I step into a sea of memory: a felt sense of familiarity, wonder, and home blissfully overtakes me.

The Forest has a dirt road extending for the first 4 miles, allowing park rangers access. I stray from this road and instead allow the neighboring trails to pull me along. During the first minutes of the run, my muscles and joints begin to awaken. The blood rushing through me begins to warm my skin. My lungs begin to stretch further and further to meet the needs of my pace. I feel so in touch with my body.

Looking around, nature's beauty overwhelms me as I run within it. There is rich brown dirt beneath my feet and lush, green foliage of dark and light hues lining the trail and acting as beds from which massive and breathtaking redwood trees stand tall, extending high above me with crisscrossing branches that seem to protect me from anything above. The visual beauty of The Forest is sensually matched with the smells of freshness and the texture of cool, damp air on my skin. I feel strongly connected with the natural world. I am deep into my run and deep in The Forest. My muscles and lungs are fully activated and moving in automatic unison as I glide through the majestic trees. Now, it begins to happen.

I feel my senses simultaneously heighten while blending together, forming one connected sense. I feel tingles of excitement and bliss take over my belly, sending a smile to my face. An interesting thing happens inside my head—I begin to lose recognition of myself as an individual, and feel as though I am myself *and* all that surrounds me. I feel as though The Forest and my moving body have guided me into a new physical, mental, and emotional place. In this place, the first sensation I recognize is of ecstatic elation; I feel as though I have taken a serum that fills my body with excitement, bliss, hope, awe, giddiness, and wonder. Everything in this moment is safe, fantastic, and as it should be.

Next, I begin to have thoughts and feelings boil up from a birthplace unknown, and like in meditation, I watch them without conscious manipulation. A phrase sticks with me and will be one that I hold onto for nearly a month, for it is one that I need to honor for a particular struggle visiting my life. This is no new experience; numerous times before, during various aerobic activities in nature, I have found content (images, words, sensations, and memories) popping up unbeknownst to and unprovoked by my

consciousness. This run is no different. As I run deeper into The Forest and make my turn to head homeward, I continue to exist within this special state of consciousness and being.

**Introduction**

Exercising in nature has long been my dominant form of self-care. It has inspired much exploration of my internal self, and has been the holding ground for constant healing from daily and existential struggles. Exercising within nature has also brought experiences like those described above: rich, nearly indescribable experiences of the transcendent kind. Chapter II explored such unique human experiences, and how research has examined and conceptualized them thus far. However, missing from research is what I presume is another angle of the transcendent experience that could benefit both the experiencer and the field of psychotherapy. From my perspective, much of what is involved in the transcendent experience takes the form of unconscious material and processes that have vast potential for meaning and growth. Depth psychology offers a lens through which to explore this perspective, and this chapter is rooted in specific concepts the discipline has birthed. Connecting the self, individuation, and the transcendent function with the psychotherapeutic processes of active imagination and focusing inspires the clinical applications suggested at the end of this chapter. A method is offered for psychotherapists to integrate aerobic green exercise into a client's treatment plan for the sake of deriving meaning from transcendent experiencing. To begin, I first re-examine the core concept of this thesis.

**Redefining the Transcendent Experience: Inviting the Unconscious**

Chapter II noted the transcendent experience as described as a *shift in consciousness*. This phrasing speaks to how the normative state of consciousness is no longer present during a transcendent experience: some other realm of consciousness swarms the being. Such a transition in states of being has been labeled as a *shift,* but I feel this definition is insufficient. Therefore, I again present the words from Waldron's (1998) study participant, mentioned near the beginning of Chapter II, who had a transcendent experience. This individual described his transcendent experience "as though conscious mind was suddenly and forcibly shoved aside, now only a passive witness . . . speechless to what was unfolding" (p. 111). My version of transcendent experiencing aligns with his description, suggesting the individual (or more specifically, one's conscious ego) may be a passive witness to that which unfolds from somewhere other than the conscious mind.

The passivity of the experience, in particular, seems to indicate the transcendent experience is not a *shift in consciousness*, as it has been often perceived. Rather, I propose the transcendent experience is the powerful *presence of unconsciousness.* To quickly revisit the conceptualization of a transcendent experience, its attributes include ineffability, a noetic quality, transience, passivity, a loss of ego functioning, alternations in space and time perception, a lack of control over the event, and a harmonious connection to the world and the divine (Hanes, 2012; James, 1902). It is not difficult to see each of these qualities as expressions of unconscious material. Therefore, I feel the unconscious is the single most important factor deserving focus in reference to the transcendent experience.

**Aerobic Green Exercise—The Alchemical Container for the Unconscious**

Prior to further exploring the activation of unconscious material by the transcendent experience must come context for this particular investigation. In her book, *Working it Out: Using Exercise in Psychotherapy,* American Exercise and Sports Psychologist Kate Hays (1999) found consistent conclusions amongst the research community with regard to exercise and its relationship to psychology. One of the most reliable conclusions Hays made was that "certain profound body-mind interactions occur that do not have any name but are nonetheless real. Physiological access to psychological understanding is one such process" (p. xiii). This speaks to the capacity for exercise to elicit powerful psychic experiencing, such as the transcendent experience. I have known this to be true in my relationship with exercise, and I have also known it to be true in my relationship with nature. Together, aerobic exercise and nature form what I refer to as *aerobic green exercise.* This union catalyzed my belief that the initiation of the unconscious is the prominent process that occurs in a transcendent experience.

**Definition.** The previous chapter defined and explored the concept of *green exercise*. Though its definition denotes physical activity occurring within nature, the term is vague in its conceptualization of what constitutes physical activity. For example, only when my physical activity in nature has had an aerobic quality has a transcendent experience taken place. For this reason, I sought to expand the concept of green exercise to one that explicitly indicates reaching a level of aerobic energy output.

Exercise becomes aerobic when the activity takes the form of continuous, rhythmic physical movement that is maintained for at least several minutes and involves the use of large muscle groups (Spencer, 1990). *Aerobic green exercise* describes

continuous, rhythmic physical activity involving large muscle groups, performed while immersed in nature. The aerobic green exercise activities considered in this exploration include running, hiking, swimming, stand-up and prone paddling, and bicycling in natural settings (forests, mountains, beaches, oceans, and lakes). Trail running, as illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, is the primary activity from which I birthed and developed this investigation.

**Redefining the runner's high.** Chapter II explored the concept of the runner's high as an ineffable experience of elation that can occur during the act of endurance running (Masters, 1992). The main beliefs behind the runner's high are that the experience is likely created in some relationship with a) the repetition of movement that comes with an aerobic activity, and b) the mystical experience of being outside (Masters, 1992). I add to this list c) the exertion of the respiratory system, which I suggest relates to the shift in cognition and sensation that accompanies the runner's high. These three facets are not only found in running, but could also be found in kayaking, paddling (stand-up or prone), swimming, hiking, mountain biking, or any other aerobic green exercise activity. Therefore, although the phenomenon of the runner's high has heretofore generally referred only to the act of running, I argue that it can be extended to all forms of aerobic green exercise.

In addition to redefining the context within which the runner's high can occur, another key area of reexamination exists. The runner's high boasts the following qualities as reported by its experiencers: ineffability, elation, flow, felt sense of a shift in consciousness, increase of internal awareness, potential for vivid imagery, and increased sense of creative thought (Callen, 1983; Masters, 1992; Morgan & Pollock, 1977). There

is striking similarity between these qualities and those of the transcendent experience: ineffability, noesis, transiency, passivity, a loss of ego functioning, alterations in space and time perception, feelings of a lack of control over the event, and feelings of a harmonious relationship to nature or the divine (James, 1902; Hanes, 2012). This significant overlap suggests the runner's high is a phrase that has been used to describe what the general public may simply not have recognized as the transcendent experience caused by aerobic green exercise. Furthermore, the runner's high, as a concept, may speak to the conscious recognition of the tangible and detectable felt-sensory components of the experience, whereas the transcendent experience may offer a more holistic conceptualization of both the conscious and unconscious parts of the phenomenon.

**The container.** The access the transcendent experience provides to both the conscious ego and the unconscious illustrates the immense availability for growth such an experience can offer. Aerobic green exercise can act as the vessel—the container—for this phenomenon. Perhaps the ability of aerobic exercise to activate the muscular and respiratory systems unlocks mechanisms that open a corridor to another state, eliciting a cognitive, emotional, and spiritual transfer. Such activation may ease the walls of conscious human cognitive restraint, and allow for the creation of vulnerable space exposing soul and the unconscious. The mystical aspect of nature seems to seep into this opening to combine the soul of the earth with the soul of the individual. This union, I propose, amplifies an individual's unconscious material. From this theoretical framework, I suggest aerobic green exercise may be an alchemical container within which one's unconscious material can be brought into consciousness and processed for the sake of further self-development.

**From the Voice of Depth Psychology**

Talk of the unconscious and consciousness begets talk of depth psychology, a theory that holds these two with reverence. Within the context of this present investigation, I argue that the conscious ego is not the original ground for the transcendent experience, but rather that the transcendent experience is a product of the unconscious. The depth psychological concepts of the self, individuation, the transcendent function, and active imagination support the understanding of the transcendent experience and the capacity for aerobic green exercise to invoke the unconscious.

**The self.** Jung, the father of Jungian psychology, gave life to the *self*. An individual's self in the common conception defines one's being, whereas Jung specified the self as the archetype of wholeness (Singer, 1994). According to Jung (1953/1968), "the Self is not only the centre but also the whole circumference which embraces both conscious and unconscious; it is the centre of this totality, just as the ego is the centre of consciousness" (*CW* 12, para. 44, p. 41). In other words, the self is "a unifying principle within the human psyche occup[ying] the central position of authority in relation to psychological life and, therefore, the destiny of the individual" (Samuels et al., 1986, p. 135). Jung might argue that a goal of human existence is to get closer to the self through the process of individuation.

**Individuation.** Individuation is the route by which a person becomes one's integrated and fulfilled self, separate from the collective (Samuels et al., 1986). It is a process marked by "the synthesis of conscious and unconscious elements," and interweaving the self, ego, and archetype (Samuels et al., 1986, p. 76). Jungian analyst

June Singer (1994) described individuation in its simplest yet most true form: it is "the process of becoming whole" (p. 133).

***From latent to manifest self.*** Jeffrey Raff (2000), another prominent Jungian analyst, utilized the concept of individuation to further differentiate the self by noting the difference between the latent self and the manifest self. These categories "distinguish between the self before and after individuation," respectively (p. 9). In manifestation, "the self gains the position of the dominant spiritual forces within the psyche" (p. 10). Importantly, the process by which the latent self transforms into the manifest self is what Jung referred to as the transcendent function (Raff, 2000). Thus, as individuation begins to unfold, the transcendent function also emerges.

**The transcendent function.** In his book, *The Transcendent Function: Jung's Model of Psychological Growth Through Dialogue With the Unconscious*, psychologist Jeffrey C. Miller (2004) offered a sound definition of this concept:

> The transcendent function has to do with opening a dialogue between the conscious and unconscious to allow a living, third thing to emerge that is neither a combination of nor a rejection of the two. It has a central role in the self-regulating nature of the psyche, individuation, and the Self's drive toward wholeness. (p. 5)

For the transcendent function to successfully operate, the conscious ego and the unconscious "must be differentiated and have sufficient tension between them" (Raff, 2000, p. 18). In such tension, the ego must be able to be completely awake and aware while it interacts with whatever the unconscious presents. Thus, "Every time the ego contacts an image from the unconscious and engages it in meaningful dialogue, it can trigger the transcendent function" (p. 22). In this interaction, the ego and the unconscious

create the amount of tension necessary to evoke the transcendent experience. Such a scenario usually occurs during what Jung called "active imagination" (Miller, 2004, p. 8).

**Active imagination.** Active imagination is a technique Jung developed that engages the unconscious, giving it voice. As a psychotherapeutic method, it has two parts. The first step involves letting the unconscious come up, and the second involves coming to terms with the unconscious (Jung, 1973). Essentially, one opens the door to the unconscious, allowing it to exist authentically, while simultaneously maintaining an active, attentive, and aware perception of the experience that enables the ego to form meaning.

The starting point of active imagination involves one's sinking down into an emotional state that may take shape as a mood, a dream image, a fragment of a fantasy, an inner voice, or any spontaneous visual image. Furthermore, Jung (1948/1969) explained:

> He must make the emotional state the basis or starting point of the procedure. He must make himself as conscious as possible of the mood he is in, sinking himself in it without reserve and noting down on paper all the fantasies and other associations that come up. Fantasy must be allowed the freest possible play, yet not in such a manner that it leaves the orbit of its object, namely the affect . . . The whole procedure is a kind of enrichment and clarification of the affect, whereby the affect and its contents are brought nearer to consciousness, becoming at the same time more impressive and more understandable. (*CW* 8, para. 168, p. 82)

Jungian analyst August Cwik (1991) added, "here the subject willingly and consciously produces an altered state of consciousness" (p. 103).

Jung further stressed that the product of getting to this place must be concretized in some form, and one of the more common forms of active imagination is an internal dialogue (Cwik, 1991). The internal dialogue takes place between two entities: the ego, or conscious part of personality perceived as *I*, and the *other*, that inner figure created by the

unconscious (Cwik, 1991). The final result of active imagination is born from this dialogue, which "embod[ies] the striving of the unconscious for the light and the striving of the conscious for substance" (Jung 1948/1969, *CW* 8, para. 168, p. 83). Then, making concrete the material brought forth from the unconscious in this dialogue begins the conscious confrontation of the unconscious. This confrontation is where psychotherapeutic meaning can be derived for the individual.

**Active imagination in movement.** In his book, *Jung's Map of the Soul*, Jungian analyst Murray Stein (1998) offered a perspective on psychic consciousness that combines with the body. "There are two thresholds: the first separates consciousness from the unconscious, the second separates the psyche (both conscious and unconscious) from the somatic base" (p. 25). Dance/movement therapist and Jungian analyst Joan Chodorow (1988) sought to provide a connecting piece to the second threshold to which Stein referred. In her doctoral dissertation, Chodorow illustrated physical movement as a form of active imagination, arguing that "movement reflects the total personality; it draws from both conscious and unconscious sources" (p. 101). Using her clinical experience, Chodorow noted that in the early stages of the work, the mover (the client) may remember very little about what movements he or she makes and the experience as a whole. Gradually, however, the mover learns to pay attention to what the body is doing while the movement is unfolding (Chodorow, 1988). Eventually, "The mover also develops a more differentiated sense of where the movement comes from, i.e., the inner world of bodily felt sensations and images" (p. 97). In time, active imagination in movement tends to develop within the individual a more "differentiated, balanced relationship to both the sensory and imaginal aspects of [his] emotional life" (p. 97).

***Running with ancestors.*** Chodorow (1988) offered a broad perspective on the origins of movement in the psyche: they can be influenced by the conscious ego, the personal unconscious, the cultural unconscious, the primordial unconscious, or the ego-self axis of identity. Two of these are pertinent to highlight. First, movements that have their source in the cultural unconscious are "expressive actions that can be culturally 'read' [and can] . . . emerge or even erupt spontaneously to the complete surprise of the mover" (p. 108). Second, movements originating in the primordial unconscious obtain "innate affects in a state of primal intensity: Ecstasy, Excitement, Anguish, Terror, Rage, Disgust/Humiliation, Startle" (p. 115). I believe material arising from both the primordial and cultural unconscious becomes enlivened in movement during aerobic green exercise-generated transcendent experiences.

In my transcendent experiences that occurred specifically while running in a forest or on a mountain, I had moments where I felt my body was driven by a source other than my own will. Something in my movement through that natural setting felt as though I had been in existence for all time, and I felt a large sense of connection to a sense of *otherness* outside of me. The phrase, *running with ancestors*, came into my consciousness during such experiences, perhaps to name the phenomenon as it occurred. During such times, I felt most of the primordial affects mentioned above. I was visited, not only by those sensations, but also by images that seemed rooted in the past: on several occasions I stepped into an active imagination of myself as a primitive man traversing through the wilderness, either as an excited hunter, ecstatic explorer, terrified escapist of danger, or devoted tribe member seeking to return home.

Jung might say these experiences were my engagement with the primitive man, a concept he discussed in *The Earth Has a Soul,* a book featuring his writings on nature. Connecting to the primordial and recovering one's instinctual life is what Jung called a goal of individuation (Jung, 2002). He added that in order to do this, there must be a "halt to the fatal dissociation that exists between man's high and lower being; instead, we must unite conscious man with primitive man" (p. 146). In my *running with ancestors*, a similar union of conscious man and primitive man took place, inspiring an indescribable feeling of connectedness.

**The Method**

This chapter began with my reflection of one of the transcendent experiences that overtook me while engaging in aerobic green exercise. That anecdote described an experience I had had prior to understanding the complexities of the transcendent experience; prior to traveling to the understanding that, at its core, the transcendent experience may truly be an experience of accessing both the collective and personal unconscious. As I finished my run that day, leaving behind The Forest and my time in it, my conscious ego began to redirect my point of awareness to the stimuli of my daily life. In doing so, it silenced the noise of my recently amplified unconscious. Yet, what happened within me during that run (and during countless aerobic green exercise activities before) presented an opportunity to get closer to what my unconscious had offered.

When the unconscious is awakened, there may be ample opportunity for one to engage it for the sake of initiating the transcendent function and reaching the self on one's path toward individuation. This is perhaps an active process that must be made with

intentional consciousness. To facilitate such a process, I have found a resonance in joining the method of active imagination with another called *focusing* (Gendlin, 1978). The two bridge together in a way that may be useful for providing a framework within which to experience and explore aerobic green exercise as a depth psychotherapeutic tool for clients who wish to elicit the unconscious and work with it to garner meaning.

**Focusing.** Before illustrating the union of active imagination and focusing, it is necessary to ground in a sense for the method of focusing, a process first developed by American philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene T. Gendlin (1978). In his previous research with Carl Rogers, who founded person-centered psychotherapy, Gendlin found therapy did not work for some people, which both frustrated and inspired him. He believed there existed more than the five human senses, and that those beyond the five senses could not be explained by cognition and emotion alone. Then, he argued that the clients who could access an inner resource of wisdom were those who would be the most successful in psychotherapeutic development. Consequently, he developed his six-step focusing model to enable access to what he referred to as one's *felt sense*. The six steps are 1) *clearing a space*, 2) *connecting to the felt sense*, 3) *finding a handle*, 4) *resonating with the handle*, 5) *asking*, and 6) *receiving* (Gendlin, 1978). These are explored in the pages to follow.

**Focusing and active imagination.** During the months of creating this thesis, I participated in aerobic green exercise two to five times per week. I brought to each activity an awareness of the possibility for tapping into the unconscious. Approaching aerobic green exercise from this intentional space seemed to create a container, into and out of which my unconscious was free to flow. Where focusing primarily concentrates

attention toward getting in touch with the felt sense and somatic quality of the unconscious, active imagination encourages one to work with it in the realm of the creative and imaginal. With an understanding of both focusing and active imagination, I experimented with using them as an integrated method to work with various sensations, images, or words that came up during a transcendent experience. Some experiences were short, lasting less than a minute, whereas others existed beyond 10 or 15 minutes. Regardless of their duration, each experience presented an opportunity to utilize active imagination *and* focusing toward developing a stronger conscious union with what was called from my unconscious.

I began by using the initial steps of focusing and active imagination. Specifically, the first four steps of focusing align with the first part of active imagination: fostering the rise of the unconscious. To initiate the first step of active imagination, Jung emphasized the need for "systematic exercises for eliminating critical attention, thus producing a vacuum in consciousness" (Jung, as cited in Miller, 2004, p. 158). Gendlin's (1978) concept of focusing would call this process clearing a space, during which one intentionally does what is needed to let go of daily stresses and allow room for what remains to be seen. This clearing process can take many forms; for me, it was going for a run, a hike, a paddle, a bike ride, or a swim in the wild. So, to begin the work, I would step outside and begin to move.

Clearing space was very much a conscious and intentional process, as Jung (2002) emphasized is important when one seeks to gain some deeper benefit from being in nature to ignite the unconscious.

> It is quite true that contact with nature makes one more or less unconscious. People nowadays go to the woods and the mountains just in order to become

> unconscious; to identify with nature is a great relief from the strain of consciousness in the life of the city. . . . I have seen several cases where the influence of nature had to be combated, for they were always avoiding issues by going off into nature and forgetting themselves completely; they used it as a sort of drug. (p. 200)

Thus, clearing a space in nature is not a passive process. It is active in the sense that one must bring to it an intention of letting go.

The integrated method continues by following step 2 of focusing, which brings one toward an effort to support developing the body's felt sense by dropping down into the body and waiting to witness what arises (Gendlin, 1978). In active imagination, one strives for this same *sinking down* into the embodied experience. For example, as I began to move my body during aerobic green exercise, I mentally scanned my muscles and joints, noticing any pain or discomfort, as well as comfort. In doing so, I became more conscious of my entire physical being. I believe this step in the method is necessary to support the individual's development of self as the capable container for holding material birthed from the unconscious.

At the body level, the repetition of movement in aerobic activity was a key quality that supported my cognitive clearing of space, and developing the connection to the felt sense within me. This movement propelled my consciousness into a meditative state, further permitting space to be cleared so I could drop down into the felt sense. It was at this point in the focusing and active imagination process that silence from settling down into my body and into the environment really began to manifest, allowing me to hear the voices of my—and perhaps the collective—unconscious. They would take form as images, voices, emotions, or even physical sensations. Focusing calls for the importance of uncovering a choice name for whichever sensation arises, called finding a handle

(Gendlin, 1978). This is the important third step of focusing that involves concentrating on the body's experience and giving its unconscious activity the space to present a label or explication (handle) for itself.

Once the handle arises, it is necessary to allow for communication between the felt sense in the body and the handle to *resonate* with the unconscious material (Gendlin, 1978). The purpose in this fourth step of focusing is to further explore whether the handle given in step 3 authentically encompasses the experience. As with active imagination, the steps of focusing seek to keep one's ego patiently allowing the image, mood, or sensation birthed from the unconscious to exist fully. Ultimately, "Once it has seen, heard, or felt something, the ego then elaborates on the image it perceives of the voice it hears, and expresses it as fully as possible" (Raff, 2000, p. 19).

Once the felt sense expresses the right handle, the ego may then engage with it. The final two steps of focusing speak to this in terms of how they supplement the final part of active imagination: coming to terms with the unconscious. Specifically, asking, the fifth step in focusing, involves the individual seeking to discover what the felt sense wants or needs (Gendlin, 1978). Active imagination, in the form appropriate for the person and unconscious material, can be employed to facilitate this communication with the unconscious. Directly following this step is the final stage of focusing, receiving, during which the individual strives to become grounded in gratitude for and acceptance of whatever is spoken by the unconscious material to be used for personal development. Here, the conscious ego grants space for the unconscious to speak, free from judgment.

The support of psychotherapy may be required to facilitate the conversation between the conscious and unconscious parts of self. In my own personal exploration, I

employed focusing and active imagination after some piece arose from my unconscious during aerobic green exercise. I worked with the material independently while participating in the activity and shortly thereafter. Though I was able to generate meaning that fostered significant personal psychological change, I made additional gains when I transferred the holding of the experience into the hands of a psychotherapist.

**Clinical Applications**

How might psychotherapists incorporate aerobic green exercise into their work with clients? To start, one should begin by assessing for whether this is an appropriate intervention for the client. This would involve assessing the client's past and present relationships with nature and aerobic exercise. The goal of such questioning would be to give the psychotherapist an understanding of the client's perception of and experience with nature and aerobic exercise, and connection to or disconnection from each. The psychotherapist should be mindful that both nature and aerobic exercise can be triggering constructs for some, and that sharing experiences with either can bring up significant material marked by pain and suffering. The psychotherapist should hold space for processing whatever the client presents here—this may be necessary before continuing further with this method.

After the psychotherapist gains an understanding of the client's past and present relationship to nature and aerobic exercise, and has processed with the client any critical material that necessitated attention, the client should be assessed for accessibility and physical ability. Essentially, the goal here is to discover whether aerobic green exercise is an accessible activity for the client and if any external barriers to participation must first be considered.

Examining external barriers to aerobic green exercise is often rather simple; however, the extent to which internal barriers exist for the client may call for more critical exploration. It is therefore necessary to assess for any cognitive or emotional constructs within the client that block feeling comfortable and able to engage in aerobic green exercise. Is fear present, and if so, what is the fear? Is doubt present? In essence, what occurs within the client who opposes aerobic green exercise? This exploration may unmask another area where deep wounds live for the client. Potentially what is exposed in this process will lead to months of psychotherapeutic focus, or perhaps only require a single session. Either way, examining internal barriers and facilitating the client's ability to manage and work through them is an integral part of this method.

If after going through the initial assessment (and any subsequent psychotherapy needed to address what arises in the process) the client is physically and psychologically able and willing to participate, the psychotherapist can begin to initiate aerobic green exercise into the psychotherapy. This introduction does not require the psychotherapist to frame the activity as one that must be made with any specific intention or awareness. The goal here is to simply allow the client to begin developing a routine of experiencing aerobic green exercise consistently each week. The intensity, duration, frequency, and type of aerobic green exercise will each depend on the client's ability, interests, and what is geographically available. It is recommended for the psychotherapist to consult with doctors and athletic trainers to generate awareness about the scale of appropriately recommended aerobic exercise for individuals at varying levels of physical health and ability. Then, as the client begins engaging in aerobic green exercise regularly for about a month, the psychotherapist should work to process the experience each time the client

comes in by asking how the client felt before, during, and after the activity. What was it like during each activity? What has the client noticed? And so forth.

The client may or may not yet independently begin to recognize engagement with the unconscious during aerobic green exercise. Either way, the next phase of this method is to provide psychoeducation around the unconscious and its ability to be a voice of one's own suffering, as well as generate a runner's high, the transcendent experience, and the transcendent function. Thus, the psychotherapist widens the client's scope for possibility within the self, and assists the client in developing the self-awareness needed for unconscious material to arise and become available for active engagement. After providing such knowledge for the client, the psychotherapist should continue to encourage the client to engage in (optimally routine) aerobic green exercise. At this point, the psychotherapist should invite the client to approach the activity with intention.

Whereas the client was previously instructed to simply participate in aerobic green exercise, the next phase of this method is to encourage the client to make note of any thoughts, feelings, or other internal contents that may visit during the activity and seem to *come out of nowhere*. The psychotherapist should invite the client to let those contents continue to stay in consciousness until the next therapy appointment, and each week the psychotherapist should check in with the client about them. Whenever an image, feeling, phrase, or other piece of content arises and resonates for the client, the psychotherapist should instruct that person to follow the steps of focusing and active imagination within the therapy room to engage with the material and hear its message(s).

The final phase of this work involves providing the client with tools to begin doing solitary internal exploration while actively participating in aerobic green exercise.

The psychotherapist should then provide further psychoeducation about focusing and active imagination, and introduce what it may be like for the client to engage in those methods. After teaching the practice of focusing and allowing for space within which the unconscious can arise and be recognized, it may be helpful to have the client begin practicing in the room with the psychotherapist as a witness. Once the client seems prepared, the psychotherapist can encourage utilizing the method the next time some *thing* seems to arise from the unconscious during aerobic green exercise. The ultimate goal of this work is to provide the client with the tools to independently engage in this method whenever faced with experiencing the unconscious for the sake of furthering one's travel on the path toward individuation.

**Summary**

The transcendent experience is an experience of the unconscious. Based in depth psychology, which is grounded in the belief that a person can only reach wholeness by uniting the conscious and unconscious elements within, the transcendent experience presents an opportunity for this to occur. From personal experience validated by other research, aerobic green exercise as a practice may be one way to trigger the transcendent experience and thus trigger unconscious material. The dual employment of focusing and active imagination within the containers of psychotherapy and one's being can allow a person to work with the material of soul spoken from the unconscious to propel the self toward wholeness. Therefore, if appropriate for the client and within the realm of comfort and ability of the psychotherapist, this thesis recommends that psychotherapists consider using this method.

# Chapter IV
# Summary and Conclusions

## Summary

This work explores the transcendent experience and suggests the phenomenon is a way of invoking the unconscious. Aerobic green exercise is presented as a vehicle for propelling the transcendent experience. Chapter I offered the original story of how this topic came to me through my personal experience with aerobic green exercise. I discussed the typical American cultural dissociation from nature and exercise, and humans' desire for increased experiencing and self-actualization. Utilizing both alchemical hermeneutic and heuristic research approaches, I embarked on a journey to explore how combining nature and exercise into aerobic green exercise might elicit a transcendent experience and be a catalyst for unlocking and psychotherapeutically working with one's unconscious material and suffering.

Chapter II primarily examined relevant theory, literature, and research about the transcendent experience. The origins of the phenomenon were explored, beginning with Buddha and his enlightenment (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 2001; Thera, 2006), then transcendentalism (Emerson 1992a, 1992b), the concept of cosmic consciousness (Bucke, 1901), and the study of mysticism (James, 1902). The contemporary definition and understanding of the transcendent experience followed (Hanes, 2012; Levin & Steele, 2005), along with an introduction to the neuroscience explaining the experience (d'Aquili & Newberg, 1993, 2000; Newberg & d'Aquili, 2000), and its link to well-being

(Asakawa, 2010; Bassi et al., 2014; Clarke & Haworth, 1994; Martin, 1993; Waldron, 1998). Chapter II concluded with an introduction to the concept of green exercise (Pretty et al., 2003) and its connection to mental health and wellness (Barton et al., 2009; Barton & Pretty, 2010; Coon et al., 2011; Pretty et al., 2005; Reed et al., 2013), and an introduction to the phenomenon of the runner's high (Callen, 1983; Masters, 1992; Morgan & Pollock, 1977).

Chapter III explored the transcendent experience through the lens of depth psychology. The chapter offered a new way to look at the transcendent experience and suggested it as a way of uncovering unconscious material. The chapter defined and introduced the activity of aerobic green exercise as an initiatory mechanism of the transcendent experience and an alchemical container for the invocation of unconscious material. The Jungian concepts of the self, individuation, and the transcendent function formed a foundation for supporting the importance of bringing the unconscious into consciousness (Samuels et al., 1986; Singer, 1994). Derived from alchemical hermeneutic and heuristic methodologies, the chapter concluded by suggesting the clinical application of combining the processes of active imagination and focusing as an integrated method to work psychotherapeutically with the unconscious for the sake of individuation and the transcendent function.

**Clinical Implications**

Though nature therapy and exercise therapy are both known psychotherapeutic practices, the extent to which a client exercises and has a relationship to the natural world is often overlooked within traditional psychotherapy. In addition to the immense physiological benefit and general psychological well-being that exercise and nature can

generate, they can also potentially invoke deep material such as what arises within the transcendent experience. Therefore, this research seeks to encourage psychotherapists of able-bodied clients with access to the natural world to integrate aerobic green exercise as a prescribed intervention within their treatment plans.

Furthermore, this research seeks to offer psychotherapists a new perspective on the variety of unexplainable experiences with which clients may come into the room, and to encourage them to see the potential those experiences may bring. Transcendent experiences are naturally blurry and intangible, so it is understandable that a psychotherapist may be unsure what to do with such things. It is my hope that in reading this work, particularly with its offering of the combined active imagination and focusing method, any psychotherapist who engages with such material will feel better equipped to hold for the client whatever the experience presents, thus allowing the client to work toward meaning derivation.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

I conducted this research as a qualitative study and created content through pairing extant literature with my personal experience. I call to hear from other voices who have had similar or opposing experiences with both aerobic green exercise and the transcendent experience. The ineffability of the transcendent experience seems to be a barrier that has limited quantitative research on the phenomenon. However, if the research community could overcome this barrier and collect data from many experiencers, further understanding of the transcendent experience may be reached. In turn, such understanding may allow for greater comprehension of how to best work with the experience psychotherapeutically.

This highlights another area for future study: the call for further exploration about how psychotherapists can best listen to and work with the transcendent experience. There is limited (if any) research on psychotherapy involving the transcendent experience. Therefore, how might psychotherapists work with their clients' transcendent experiences? What could that look like? Moving beyond theory, what actually presents as an effective way for working with this experience? The research presented in this study offers an answer to the last question, but it is one that does not have reliability just yet. The psychotherapeutic community has room to grow with regard to increasing clinician comfort, awareness, and skill when approached by clients with experiences outside of normative consciousness.

**Final Words**

I wrote this work to give voice to what I know to be true for myself and my experience. In my life, I have been granted the gift of only knowing a lifestyle that is grounded in a deep, conscious connection to both the natural world and physical activity. Each has separately and in combination brought countless joys to my life, the most potentially significant of which has been my connection to myself. Through both my static and transcendent experiences in aerobic green exercising, I have been given gifts of bliss, knowledge, compassion, and harmony. As I stand, basking in gratitude for these gifts, I look outward at others, wanting to share.

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