INTRODUCTION

There is wide public discussion about care for the environment\(^1\). Planet Earth\(^2\) has experienced many events in the past, such as ice ages and other natural events that have changed the climate and led to the mass losses of biodiversity and species. However, significantly, the planet has perhaps never faced such potential devastation from the actions of any one particular species as it does presently with anthropogenic global warming leading to climate change, looming mass extinction and the break down of ecosystems\(^3\). As humans, our insatiable desire to consume limited resources and ‘the cult of limitless growth’\(^4\) is pressing the planet’s ecosystems toward collapse\(^5\). Most people in developed societies no longer move ‘with’ the natural rhythms of the planet, the seasons, or even the cycle of day and night, but rather work over and ‘against’ these rhythms in a desire to control, tame and dominate the natural world\(^6\). Humankind’s relationship with the natural world is at best fractured, at worst destructive.

The exact purpose of this project is to address the question,

> Are there theological understandings and themes expressed in non-church community group programs that encourage children to form a relationship with the natural world and how might these understandings or themes enrich the church’s engagement with such activities?

This study uses grounded theory practice and investigates the work that community groups perform with children in the areas of gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings. Despite the many beneficial outcomes, few Baptist and Church of

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2 Capitalisation of ‘Earth’ is in keeping with the Earth Bible Series principles of ascribing the creation value, dignity and intrinsic worth. See Norman C Habel, “Introducing the Earth Bible,” in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, ed. Norman C Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 25f.
6 In this study the natural world is defined as the outdoor urban garden landscape of plants and animals.
Christ churches in Australia intentionally engage children in these sorts of activities. Community groups involved in this field have the potential to speak into the work that churches do with children. It is hoped that theological themes and understandings emerging from this research, along with outcomes, will encourage Baptist and Church of Christ congregations in Australia to adopt Earth-connecting\textsuperscript{7} activities within children’s ministry programs. Earth-connecting activities include gardening, care of animals and play within the urban landscape. Such activities encourage children to form relationships with plants and animals of the created world\textsuperscript{8}. The intention of these relationships is to cultivate attitudes of mutuality, compassion and care. Children are then offered the opportunity to experience a sense of wonder, connection with, and awareness of, the natural world. This study therefore arises from a desire to help children grow less self-centred and anthropocentric in their outlook. The goal is that children will also be more engaged with wider environmental and ecological issues. More importantly it is hoped they might be thus engaged out of genuine concern and compassion for the needs of Earth-others\textsuperscript{9}, the plants and animals with whom we share the planet. This contrasts with the self-centred interest of caring for a planet that will merely satisfy personal needs.

It is hoped that the theological framework emerging from this study will contribute toward a theology and spirituality of children and the general growing interest in Australian churches of incorporating Earth-connecting activities in children’s ministry. The outworking of this may see congregations establishing children’s gardens on vacant church land, transforming concrete and paved areas into multi-use garden spaces, or working with local schools and other community groups to promote the engagement of children in Earth-connecting activities.

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\textsuperscript{7} Earth-connecting is a phrase I use in this study to describe the process of forming a relationship with a plant or animal of the natural world and associated geographical place, its soil and landform.


\textsuperscript{9} Earth-others is a phrase I use in this study to describe the plants, animals and beings of the natural world with whom we share the planet Earth. The use of ‘other’ is to emphasis the theme of ‘otherness’, a sense of there being another reality separate from self. This concept is significant in terms of developing mutuality, respect, care and love for other beings, and will be explored in detail throughout this study. To my knowledge I don’t believe this phrase is widely used elsewhere.
Given the context of current anthropogenic global warming and climate change, along with urban humanity’s increasing alienation and dislocation from the natural world, this investigation will hopefully make a vital contribution toward the ministry of the church to redress this dislocation. Ultimately the very fabric and integrity of the planet is at risk if human behaviour does not change toward greater empathy and care for the Earth. In keeping with Jesus of Nazareth’s prophetic ministry of justice for the marginalized, oppressed and poor, the church is called to promote care and compassion for the natural world. However, it seems at present that the prophetic voice of the non-church sector is much louder. This research project seeks to reclaim that voice by inviting churches to engage their children in Earth-connecting activities that help in the formation of our children and with their openness to spiritual insights.

BACKGROUND TO THE QUESTION

About the Author

I am an ordained Churches of Christ minister and currently work with the Box Hill Baptist Church, Victoria, Australia. The church is located in an inner city urban landscape. Half of my ministry responsibilities is for the care and oversight of children’s ministries. Theory emerging from this study will inform my ministry with children.

When I moved from my previous placement of a semi rural setting I was overwhelmed by the pragmatic use of concrete, brick and pavement that surrounded the church buildings at the expense of gardens and trees. During a recent redevelopment of the church property there was considerable opposition to a proposal to create a garden in a section that was currently paved with concrete.

The question investigated in this study arises therefore in the context of my work with children who, whilst participating in Sunday school and other activities, play and engage with each other in a paved playing area devoid of plants and animals. The Doctor of Ministry Studies program through the Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD) provides
the opportunity for the researcher to explore and investigate an area of ministry relevant to their setting.

A small book that was significant in my early thinking was Enrst Schumacher’s classic book *Small is Beautiful*[^10]. He argued for an economic model that moved away from growth, based on consumption of finite resources, toward a model that worked more closely with the natural world and her rhythms. We are shaped by our story and experience. Consequently, the six years I spent working in sustainable agricultural community development in West Papua, Indonesia, affirmed the need to consider seriously the principles of environment and sustainability. Upon returning to Australia I was involved in a collegial research project[^11] working toward a Master of Environmental Science. The paper examined the criteria employed by organisations which offered environmental awards. I was surprised to learn that only one award in Australia, from more than thirty on offer at the time, contained a criterion far more profound than merely another award for using less electricity or recycling more paper. The Wilderness Society Environment Award for Children’s Literature affirmed the need to cultivate the experience of ‘wonder’ for children[^12]. This criterion affirmed the connection between the values of environment and the extension beyond oneself, to wonder. This caused me to consider more deeply the significance of our relationship as humans with the natural world and how this extends us beyond our self-enclosed worlds. It also emphasized for me the valuable role the Christian church can have in society’s movement toward environmental reform.

My background in agricultural and environmental science, as well as in theology, has led me toward an active interest in and concern for current global issues of ecology and environment, along with a desire to reflect upon our place as humans in the cosmos. There is a synergy between my environmental roots and my grounding in Christian

theology and spirituality that is deeply connected with the Earth. My conviction is that children need to be offered opportunities to experience wonder in the natural world as they engage with the God of creation.

My operational theology as a Christian minister in parish ministry is grounded in my concern about the consequence of the breakdown in relationship between humans and the Earth, and how I might offer a path toward restoration. This research project is therefore rooted in a desire to seek ways that might address this problem. In my ministry and personal life I seek to discover and develop a functional cosmology\(^\text{13}\) of place and belonging in relationship with God, the plants, animals and inanimate subjects of the natural world. A functional cosmology is an essential aid in guiding and informing our choices and decisions\(^\text{14}\).

My pastoral experience within Baptist and Church of Christ churches in Australia reveals a dominant culture of hierarchical dualism that is a characteristic of modernity. I have observed this in many congregants as a dualistic disconnection from the natural world. The outworking of this has seen the value of the natural world relegated to secondary status, where its existence and purpose is to supply the needs of humans\(^\text{15}\). In eschatological terms the after life, heaven and the spirit world is afforded primary status and valued as our true home and destination. However, we can no longer live on this planet as if it were a hotel, a stop over on our journey to another place\(^\text{16}\). This is our only home, a home where we are placed and invited by God to offer nurture, care and protection to each other and the created world. Not only is it our home but also the home for a myriad of other organisms, plants and animals. Not to share this space, to recognise our proper place in the cosmos and live in a relationship with an attitude of humility and


\(^{14}\) Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 121.

\(^{15}\) An out of context reading of Genesis 1:28 offers this interpretation.

grace is a sin. This I believe is a serious sin and given the context of my background and calling as a Christian minister, a significant portion of my call and mission is to address this issue within my parish and the wider denomination.

**Church of Christ and Baptist Churches in Australia**

Many attribute the Genesis 1:26-28 ‘mandate to dominate’ theology of the Christian church as the root of the ecological crisis. There is now, however, a growing concern and interest in some of the wider churches of Australia in response to anthropogenic global warming and loss of biodiversity on the planet, in the call for humans to take better care of the Earth. Synods, Conferences and Union agencies are beginning to introduce Earth-connecting liturgies and rituals into general worship and children’s education. The Uniting Church of Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania employ staff to intentionally produce and promote such material. Increasingly, local congregations within these denominations are incorporating such activities within children’s ministries. There are a few Baptist and Church of Christ congregations in Australia engaging in gardening and Earth-connecting liturgies in worship, however, very few in my experience incorporate activities with children that engage them with the natural world in the area of gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings. Their focus rather is more toward Bible literacy and evangelism in the context of sin and repentance. The *de facto* doctrine of children within these churches has been shaped by

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17 McFague, *The Body of God*, 110-12. McFague makes this point stating that this is a sin. ‘Sin’ and its context here will be discussed in greater detail later.
the history of the place of the child in society and child theologies such as Augustine’s concept of original sin\textsuperscript{24}.

For more than fifty years Baptist and Church of Christ agencies in Australia, along with related para-church organizations like Scripture Union (SU)\textsuperscript{25}, have engaged children and young adults in outdoor activities. Such activities have included sporting and intentional wilderness excursions. In more recent times extreme outdoor experiences such as white water rafting and abseiling have been included\textsuperscript{26}. Although at one level these are Earth-connecting activities, I am concerned that this outdoor activity model signifies at times the desire to conquer and overcome the natural world, by testing one’s strength and skill against it, and overcoming personal fear of the wildness of nature\textsuperscript{27}.

An intentional aim is to use the fear and stress associated with an outdoor activity as a means of facilitating bonding between the young people and leaders involved. Teaching that has accompanied these activities tends to then return attention toward traditional evangelical doctrine. Whilst this may be of use to the aims of the camp or outdoor activity, the engagement with the natural world becomes a means to an end, within a particular theological agenda. Connection with the natural world and awareness of our place in the order of things is not the focus\textsuperscript{28}.

Whilst this has been my experience in the past of the dominant culture of organisations like SU there is more expression in recent times toward care for the environment\textsuperscript{29}. Some camps and activities now intentionally focus upon awareness of natural surroundings and care for the environment. For many years Tom Slater’s book \textit{The Temporary Community} has been the leading publication underpinning the ministry of SU in Australia and

\textsuperscript{25} Scripture Union Australia, \url{http://www.scriptureunion.org.au/}, Accessed 19-1-11.
\textsuperscript{27} Gathered from personal conversations with wilderness activity leaders.
\textsuperscript{28} Conversations with program leaders 1982-2010 and personal involvement in SU activities 1982-1990.
\textsuperscript{29} Conversation with Tom Slater, November 2010.
articulates the necessity for a theology of discovering God in the created world\textsuperscript{30}. However, Slater writes about internal inconsistencies within SU programming where espoused care for the environment in outdoor education isn’t always reflected in actual practice\textsuperscript{31}.

My observation of the popular piety within many Baptist and Church of Christ congregations in Australia reveals a dualistic, disconnected world view of the physical and spiritual worlds\textsuperscript{32}. I have noted the dualistic misuse of contrasting parallel phrases such as ‘things of the world’ and ‘things of God’; ‘down on earth’ and ‘up in heaven’; ‘the material world’ and ‘the spiritual world’, enmeshed with ‘evil’ and ‘good’\textsuperscript{33}. From my experience in pastoral ministry I have observed the dislocation and separation that congregants experience from the natural world. In pastoral discussions I have encountered the belief that global warming and climate change is inevitable and in many instances is part of God’s overall plan in fulfilling biblical eschatological prophecies. Many, however, see hierarchical dualism as being dangerous and at the heart of the current ecological crisis\textsuperscript{34}.

Therefore it is my observation that Baptist and Church of Christ congregations in Australia have failed to encourage congregants, and in particular children, to form meaningful Earth-connecting relationships with the natural world that are based on mutuality and care, and which provide the opportunity for one to encounter God in the natural world.

\textsuperscript{30} Tom Slater, \textit{The Temporary Community: Organised Camping for Urban Society} (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1984), 192.
\textsuperscript{31} Slater, \textit{The Temporary Community}, 137.
\textsuperscript{32} Mostly influenced and characterised also by a dominant patriarchal and hierarchical ecclesiology and world view.
\textsuperscript{33} The destructive nature of this dualism is discussed in Sallie McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 7-8. See also Denis Edwards, \textit{Jesus and the Cosmos} (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1991), 35. Here dualism is discussed as ‘bad theology’ seeking to elevate one dimension of life over another.
\textsuperscript{34} Clifford C Cain, \textit{An Ecological Theology: Reunderstanding Our Relation to Nature}, vol. 98, \textit{Toronto Studies in Theology} (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 15. Cain explores Platonic and Aristotelian thought as giving rise to dualistic thinking within our culture. See pages 21f. The rise of modern science in Bacon, Descartes and Newton added layers of complexity compounding the issue, with nature described as a ‘machine’ and a ‘slave’ of human endeavour. See pages 35f.
Children in Western Society

Children growing up in urban society are being distanced from the natural world by their physical surroundings and popular culture as presented in dynamic electronically based multi-media. This has the effect of retarding their natural growth to maturity\(^{35}\). This phenomenon is observed in urban children’s imaginary worlds being dominated by electronic pets and toys. Addictive\(^{36}\) electronic communication is increasingly taking the place of intimate face to face conversation\(^{37}\). Children take on adult behaviour and image at increasingly younger ages through dress, substance abuse and even medical procedures\(^{38}\). Urban children are significant consumers who influence adults and their spending and consequently are pressured by advertisers to shop and consume\(^{39}\). Commercialism and the media take advantage of children and their sexuality\(^{40}\). While this has been happening, urban backyard gardens in Australia have steadily become smaller as average house sizes have increased\(^{41}\). Contemporary design of urban backyards most suits the needs of time-poor adults and provides less play space for children\(^{42}\). As a consequence of reduced physical activity, childhood obesity and poor

physical health in Australia have been increasing\(^{43}\) and, with fashion lines being introduced for larger children, there is an indication that such trends are socially acceptable\(^{44}\).

There are many non-church groups who invite children to form a relationship with the natural world through gardening, care of animals, and play in natural surroundings. Relevant literature and media reports, many of which are cited in this study, espouse significant benefits for the health and wellbeing of children engaged in such activities.

The purpose of this research therefore is to address my concern that, although numerous community projects in schools and non-church community groups encourage children to interact with the natural world, few urban Baptist and Church of Christ congregations in Australia do so.

Healthy, vibrant churches provide an important place for children to begin to realise their full potential in life. The character of these congregations should be diverse, heterogeneous, intergenerational, open and inclusive communities with richness of story\(^{45}\). Although the church might normally only form a small influence in the life of a child, I nevertheless consider it important that the church model relationships that are wholistic, rich and inclusive of the created natural world.

**What the Research Experience has been like**

This research experience has been a delight for me! For many years I have been intrigued by the passion and creativity that community groups have with children to engage them in the natural world. Enabling outdoor activity with children is seen as important work in such programs, and those involved appear convicted of the importance and worth of what

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they do. So to have the opportunity to intentionally research these programs has been a privilege that I cherish.

The time and work I have invested in formulating an appropriate question has been rewarding and makes this project a significant contribution to the wider church community. Many months were spent on intentional discussion with colleagues, reading of relevant literature and reflecting and reworking the question. Over time the question became clear, taking on its own energy. Many more months were invested in working through an appropriate methodology in the context of my ministry placement, professional skills and what teachers and parents involved in participating community groups might be comfortable to share about their children’s experiences. The methodology (grounded theory) suits well my research style and character. I enjoyed being ‘immersed’ in the data. The experience of hearing the stories of children was wonderful because the emerging themes and trends in the data found a resonance and harmony in my heart and experience. I am confident that a well honed question and good methodology has opened up an exciting new area for the church’s work with children and the wider community.

By far the most significant aspect of my involvement in this process has been listening to the stories about children retold to me by teachers, program leaders and professionals working with children. Listening to stories that are energising and hopeful has left me overwhelmed at the privilege of being entrusted with them. It is my hope that in faithfully analysing the stories, their enthusiasm will be conveyed to workers in church settings. I feel particularly humbled and grateful because I haven’t met any of the children in the following stories and yet their experience is validated by their teachers’ retelling. There is a sense in which we walk on sacred ground.

The children offered a depth of experiences in their stories. Some made me laugh, like the child who, when asked to plant a potted plant, placed the pot with the plant still in it into the hole, and completely covered it leaves and all with soil. Some made me hopeful, like the children who were stimulated to clean water-ways, having learned of water-birds
and animals being killed by discarded rubbish in local rivers. I was left feeling inspired upon hearing of a child who, frozen with fear and frightened of chickens, took on the challenge and responsibility of befriending and learning how to care for them. Then there was the delight in the story of Sudanese refugee boys hunting possums in a public park while on a school excursion. And finally I was captured by the mystery surrounding the story of a child who seemingly conversed and communicated with a king parrot.

All-in-all the data-gathering process left me with the desire to get hold of a patch of dirt and fill it with kids busily digging, exploring and planting whilst enjoying and delighting firsthand in the experience of touching the natural world: grubs, dirt and all!
CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Childhood is a very significant stage of human development. Anna Freud describes the primary school age in children as ‘the age of conscience…the age that a child’s conscience is built - or isn’t; it is the time when a child’s character is built and consolidated, or isn’t’\(^{46}\).

The proper care and nurture of children is a vitally important task for society. Erikson’s classic study investigating American, Nazi German and tribal cultures revealed that anxiety and fears in childhood can be produced and exploited to shape society\(^{47}\). Childhood, or the way children are raised, influences the character of civilizations. Basic trust or mistrust is instilled at a very early stage of development. Scott Peck suggests that children who are not properly cared for never learn to love or care for the needs of another. In turn, they cause suffering and create for those ‘under their dominion a miniature, sick society’\(^{48}\). The proper oversight and care of children enables them to form relationships of mutuality, care and love that make for a civil society. In the context of the threat of global warming and the loss of biodiversity due to a lack of care for the environment, care must extend beyond the human realm of inter-human relationships to include care for the non-human. McFague therefore argues that nature is the ‘new poor’\(^{49}\) and that Christians are called to form relationships with the natural world based on love, care, mutuality and respect.


\(^{47}\) Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, Third ed. (St Albans: Triad/Paladin Frogmore, 1950).


This chapter explores a general overview of literature from three broad disciplines relevant to the parameters of this study. Rather than provide a detailed analysis of all relevant literature, this review provides broad brush-strokes, drawing on each area, which seeks to integrate the literature. The literature review is presented in three sections and begins with looking at theology and biblical literature focusing upon relationship, interconnection and intrinsic worth. The second section explores literature which discusses the experience of children in Earth-connecting activities in the natural world. The final section briefly presents child theology and spirituality theory.

The focus therefore of this review is to integrate the literature that highlights the significance of childhood experiences and the theology of care for the Earth.

1.1 Theology and Biblical Literature

McFague’s ‘Ecological model and the Community of Care’, explores the relationship between humanity and the created world\(^{50}\). The model is framed in the context of subject-subject relationships as opposed to the common western relationship of subject-object, which models hierarchy and subjugation\(^{51}\). Rosemary Radford Ruether calls for a move away from patriarchal, hierarchical dualism toward embracing an equality of not only women but the whole community of life\(^{52}\). The subject-subject model addresses this with the aim of forming relationships of equality and mutual respect. It focuses upon interconnection, interdependence, friendship, justice and care. This is echoed in The Earth Bible project’s six Guiding Ecojustice Principles\(^{53}\).

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\(^{50}\) McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 152f.

\(^{51}\) McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 36f.


**Intrinsic worth** – The Earth and all its components have worth and value in and of themselves.

**Interconnectedness** – Earth is a community of interconnecting living and non living things that are mutually dependent upon each other for life and survival. **Voice** – The earth is capable of speaking out in celebration of life and against injustice. **Purpose** – Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each has place and being in the goal of that design. **Mutual Custodianship** – Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians function as partners sustaining a
McFague’s model of care draws upon Martin Buber’s concept of *I-Thou* relationship. Buber states ‘in the beginning is relationship’\(^54\). He argues that ‘all real living is meeting in an *I-Thou* encounter’\(^55\). That is, life discovers meaning in relationships, and ultimately with God, as the eternal *Thou*. Developing this further, questioning whether it is possible or even appropriate to form an *I-Thou* relationship with all beings, Santmire proposes an *I-ens* (*I-being*) relationship, which fosters respect and appreciation of otherness, that is, respect for something beyond self\(^56\). In a similar light Tillich describes the ontological structure of self and the world as, ‘every being participates in the structure of being’\(^57\). Each ‘self’ has a ‘world’ in which we relate to other. ‘World-consciousness is possible on the basis of a fully developed self-consciousness’\(^58\). That is, we become more aware of other when we are more fully aware of self and our mutual interdependence. We are never alone and participation described at this level is unavoidable and leads to ‘communion’ with others. Ultimately in this process we find our being in God\(^59\). Fowler therefore describes a triadic pattern of relationships with God, self and other in which we as ‘selves are related to others in mutual ties of trust and loyalty of reliance and care’\(^60\). The journey of relationship with other begins for each of us at birth; ‘that deep social experience of being in the womb and then emerging to a new quality of relatedness is the only context in which we can become selves’\(^61\). Within healthy and stimulating environments we eventually become reflective selves\(^62\). The theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg has helpfully developed the concept of the open person, beginning from human experience at birth:

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Human beings are born into a state of openness to the world in trust, embodied in a relationship of complete openness to the mother. As the mother comes to be seen as
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\(^{58}\) Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 171.


\(^{61}\) Fowler, "Strength for the Journey," 3.

\(^{62}\) Fowler, "Strength for the Journey," 3.
a finite object rather than a horizon-filling mediator of life, the trust of the child
must be extended to a broader and broader environment, and ultimately beyond the
horizon of the world itself to God, who is the only reality capable of sustaining trust
without limit.\textsuperscript{63}

If this process is disrupted, for whatever reason, then the child as adult seeks to close self
in defence against others, ‘and attempts to control the world by gathering into its
centre’\textsuperscript{64}. Adams and others therefore conclude that ‘finding a sense of self is an essential
part of childhood’\textsuperscript{65}. To develop a sense of self and therefore a sense of other invites one
into an experience of relationship.

A child engaged in gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings
encounters subjects of the natural world and is therefore involved in the process of
forming relationships. This study is essentially about relationship, which is a significant
fundamental theme in creation texts of the Hebrew Bible (HB)\textsuperscript{66}. Moltmann considers
relationship as basic to God’s involvement in creation\textsuperscript{67}. He says that ‘life is
communication in communion’ and that ‘isolation and lack of relationship, means
death’\textsuperscript{68}. To know and understand what is real as being real, and what is living as being
alive, we must ‘know it in its own primal and individual community, in its relationships,
interconnections and surroundings’\textsuperscript{69}. He suggests that life is a weave of interconnection
and interdependent relationships within God’s Spirit:

The existence, the life, and the warp and weft of interrelationships subsist in
the Spirit…but that means that the interrelations of the world cannot be
traced back to any components, or universal foundations…but in reality
relationships are just as primal as the things themselves\textsuperscript{70}.

\textsuperscript{64} Cited in Paul S Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity} (London: Darton,
Longman and Todd Ltd, 2000), 22.
\textsuperscript{65} Adams, Hyde and Woolley, \textit{The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood}, 49.
\textsuperscript{66} Terence E Fretheim, \textit{God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation}
\textsuperscript{67} Jurgen Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation}, trans. Margaret Kohl (London:
SCM, 1985), 3f.
\textsuperscript{68} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 3.
\textsuperscript{69} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 3.
\textsuperscript{70} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 11.
Fretheim describes how the HB presents a spider web of the world, where basic to the community of God’s creatures is interrelatedness with each entity in symbiotic relationship with every other. He describes an open-endedness, which is not static or mechanistic, where there is room for novelty and surprise. ‘The God speeches in the book of Job, with their witness to the complexity and ambiguity of the creation, are exemplary illustrations of this kind of world.’

Our existence means that we live in relationships of mutual influence with the other subjects in the Earth community. We are intimately connected with each other in ways that are so profound and deep that we rarely notice or are aware of the connection and level of shared experience. Because of this close connection the actions of one will affect the other in some way. Dempsey therefore reflects upon the concept of interconnectedness embedded in Genesis 1-2 where the text ‘presents a beautifully crafted design of interrelated divine, human, and non-human relationships’. The images of one aspect of creation give way to another and the separation of one then form an interrelated other: day and night, sea and sky, sea and land and so forth. Finally, the creation of humans male and female explains the beautiful relationship of interconnectedness and interdependence upon one another.

Thomas Berry in writing upon interdependence speaks of intrinsic worth in relation to other. He argues, ‘to think of the universe as a communion of subjects and not a collection of objects, means that nothing has value without everything else’. Intrinsic worth is a significant value to be upheld, for when a subject of creation is stripped of its intrinsic worth, in Tillich’s words, it is ‘thingified’ and therefore exploitable. Dempsey, on redemption and ecological crisis emphasises the call to be in ‘right relationship’ with

71 Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament, 19f.
72 Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament, 19f.
73 Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament, 19.
75 Berry, The Dream of the Earth, 121.
the created world, acting from a place of respect for other and mutuality. She says that we must take to heart in the Genesis 1-2 creation stories that ‘all is good’. Not only is the content of each day of creation ascribed the similar value of ‘good’, the completed whole is described as ‘exceptionally good’. Wallace notes that this indicates a collective significance of one in relation to the other. The collective in relationship is greater than the sum of the individuals. The created world is affirmed as being in and of itself inherently good. Olley writes concerning the flood narrative of Genesis 9 where God ‘clearly gives animals more dignity and importance than simply the value they have for humans’. ‘God is concerned for the wellbeing of animals and enters into a covenant with them’. He notes that Kol, meaning ‘all’, ‘everything’ occurs nineteen times in the text. It is God’s intention, therefore, to affirm and maintain the rich biodiversity of the Earth. The psalmist recognises the Earth as a living entity capable of giving praise to God and attributes a voice to Earth. ‘This praise arises in the same way that human praise does: in response to God’s gracious, life-giving acts.

The voice of the Earth is significant because we must learn to hear and respond to her calls of injustice and oppression. However, the human perspective is often narrow and certainly anthropocentric, as has been read by many in the Genesis 1 creation story, with

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78 Sallie McFague, "A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming." (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 147. Notes that God’s declaration that all is good speaks powerfully of God’s aesthetic appreciation and redeeming love for the whole of creation, even to the smallest and least significant.


80 James Gustafson, A Sense of the Divine: The Natural Environment from a Theocentric Perspective (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994). Gustafson importantly notes that ‘if God saw that the diversity that God created was good, it was not necessarily good for humans and for all aspects of nature, but rather good as a whole’.


82 Olley, "Mixed Blessings for Animals," 130.


humanity perceived to be at the pinnacle of creation. The human being has a tendency then to see oneself as separate from creation, as superior, and potentially misses the interdependence of humanity within the creation schema, along with the intrinsic worth of each individual subject of the Earth community. This is particularly seen in a reading of Genesis 1:28 taken out of its context in the overall Genesis 1-2 creation story, where humans have taken to heart the call to have dominion over and to subdue the creation. But the overall context of Genesis 1-2 offers an explanation to proper living which is in right relationship. Brett argues that the authors of Genesis 1-3 intentionally undermine the hierarchies of their day and that the text focuses upon interconnection and human’s kinship within the animal community.

Habel suggests there is no reason why the ‘pristine Earth, having just been revealed as a source of life and fertility, should need to be “subdued”’. He goes onto suggest that there is no weakness or wildness that is identified in the text that needs to be controlled. On the contrary, Elohim finds Earth a reality that is to be celebrated as good. The wisdom tradition of Job 38-39 is helpful here because the story of Job offers a theo-centric view of the creation and undermines the mandate to dominate described in Genesis 1:26-28. The speech of ‘YHWH from the whirlwind challenges Job – as a representative of primal humanity – to recognise that he cannot “rule” Earth or Earth community. He does not have the knowledge to “care for” the mysterious world of the wild. The story of Job

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85 Habel, An Inconvenient Text, 3.
86 Norman C Habel, "Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis," in The Earth Story in Genesis, ed. Norman C Habel and Shirley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 46. Habel discusses the word subdue or kabash (Gen 1:28). In the context of crushing an enemy there is nothing gentle implied by the use of this verb (Num 31:22 Josh 18:1 and 1 Chron 22:18). Elsewhere kabash refers to enslavement (Jer 34:11 and Neh 5:5) and the subduing of a woman to be raped (Est 7:8).
87 Dempsey, "Creation, Evolution, Revelation, and Redemption," 5. In the context of Genesis 2:15 ‘to till’ and ‘to keep’, dominion (Gen 1:28) must be seen in terms of care-giving and non-exploitation and in regard to ‘subdue’ this needs to be in reference to cultivation of the Earth in terms of the planet being a dynamic non-static reality. See also Bruce C Birch et al., A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).
89 Habel, "Geophany," 48.
90 van Dyke, Between Heaven and Earth, 193.
explores rich themes of interconnectedness, interdependence and intrinsic worth. YHWH reminds us to be humble and aware that as humans we are not able to tame and control the dawn, the wild animals and the rhythms of the natural world that God has set in place. Cain emphasises this:

The verses of Genesis 2-3 point to human’s ultimate dependence upon God, humans’ futile attempts to become like God, and the obligation placed on humans by God to live in God’s world on God’s terms. As a result, Genesis 2:4ff is an attack on human pride, a pride often accompanying a false sense of independence and self reliance\(^92\).

Texts of the HB instruct us that if we are able to grasp the concepts of interconnectedness, interdependence and intrinsic worth we can form relationships based on mutuality, care and equality. Those who can adhere to these values are more able to engage in sustainable ways of living, having greater respect for other, moving away from exploitation and abuse. However, the world we live in is complex and far from simplistic. McFague describes the difficulty that arises with the concept of mutual relationship with subjects of the natural world, when we move from thinking about pleasant bugs, cute animals and beautiful flowers to viruses, weeds and cancer cells\(^93\). Habel exploring the Job narrative adds:

In this world of paradoxes, YHWH continues to operate with the opposites of life and death, chaos and order, freedom and control, wisdom and folly, evil and blessing\(^94\).

Nash also raises this issue in the context of justice in terms of intrinsic worth and the difficult questions around the rights of one species or organism over another\(^95\). The anthropocentric view enjoys the things that serve to meet the needs of humans. Those that might threaten our wellbeing, or at the very least are unappealing, are to be eradicated. In an effort to prosper and survive we combat and kill plants, animals and viruses that endanger our existence\(^96\).

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\(^{92}\) Cain, *An Ecological Theology*, 79.

\(^{93}\) McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 150f.


How might this fit then in a model of relationship based on interdependence and mutuality? If approaching this conundrum from a place of ‘subject-subject’ relationship, and as McFague argues, with an attitude of respect and mutuality, there is the opportunity to act and move from a place of awe, insight and understanding. When we image our relationship with the virus, weed or cancer cell as ‘subject-subject’ we are better able to picture the other as being similar to ourselves, merely seeking to survive and prosper rather than being ‘out to get us’. Holding such an attitude helps us understand and sit with our personal mortality, which is what John Paver experienced as he described his cancer as a conversation partner. Such dialogue offers better understanding of the global picture and offers an alternative to the dualism of judging others in creation as either ‘good’ or ‘evil’. Each animal, plant, being or enclosed ecosystem exists neither for the benefit, nor potential exploitation by the other (often humans), but rather for mutual relationship. Within this, at the very least McFague argues, we owe the other ‘respect’, where ‘respect means nothing more or less than acknowledging the otherness of the other’.

McFague argues then for a model of community with an ethic of care: ‘Care for the whole, for the sustainable planet, and also care for the parts, for the local, particular bit of the planet that is our own neighbourhood’. This means more than attending to the basic needs and rights of the other. There is a sense in which one is more fully present to the other, more fully aware of the other. Such care is dependent upon awareness of the other, the local and detailed knowledge of the other and her needs. Such care is about ongoing creative engagement with the world about us and is an act of love. If God is love then the process of creation is an act of love. All, therefore, are products and recipients of ongoing

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99 John Paver, *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 39f, 67. Investigating an integrated approach to theological reflection in field education, Paver describes the conversation partner relationship as one of mutual dialogue, where equality, attentiveness, awareness and listening are important factors. In the context of his deeply personal journey with cancer, he shares his struggle to discover mutuality and dialogue with the cancer cells in his body.
100 McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 152.
love. Many scholars believe the creation accounts of the HB refer not to a creative act in the past but rather to an ongoing creative action of God in the present that gives life to every creature. Moltmann speaks of ‘continuing creation’ as an activity that both preserves and innovates, and where ‘God’s preserving activity manifests hope, and his (sic) innovating activity, his faithfulness’. God therefore has an ongoing relationship with the world as Creator of newness. This sustaining characteristic of God and imagery of birth, life giving and growth, empowers and enables the opportunity for mutual growth and love. Love is communion and is the ‘drive toward the reunion of the separated’. Fiddes describes God’s love in Trinitarian terms:

Through his work of the creation, he impresses his own triune image upon the human mind, so that all human loving participates in the divine Being which is love, and in the loving humility of his act of redemption he draws us anew to the good as the source of our being.

Drawing upon the Christian mystical tradition, Matthew Fox advocates for a ‘creation spirituality’ for our age. His emphasis has been to shift the focus from sin and the redemption of humans, toward the creation and the cosmic Christ over the historical Jesus. In this there is the opportunity to experience the ‘self transcendence of the cosmos into God’. God is embodied in the creation through Jesus’ person and life, communicating God’s grace to the whole of creation. Paul Collins also emphasises the significance of the Incarnation in the ‘development of a theology of ecology’, and advocates for experiencing the transcendent presence of God in the natural world in

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111 Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos*, 80.
112 Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos*, 84.
sacred and significant places of isolation and profound beauty and mystery. Collins describes this worshipful experience as sacrament.

In a detailed analysis Braatan highlights Hosea’s land as the ‘household of God’ (Hos. 8:1, 9:15), ‘Land is the place where YHWH, Israel, plants and animals dwell’. There is an intimate relationship between God – Land – People. ‘Land is not real-estate where the drama of salvation is played out or where Israel receives agricultural blessing – she is a major participant in the story’. The created world is an expression of God. ‘God is said to use everything from a small spring to a massive mountain, from a human form to a thunderstorm, to mask – yet reveal – the divine self’.

The place of Jesus Christ in cosmology is pivotal. In Jesus of Nazareth we see God becoming an integral part of an interconnected ecosystem that supports life on Earth. Gregersen describes this as ‘deep incarnation’ where God enters into the very tissue of biological existence, and systems of nature. Paul in Colossians ‘images Christ as a divine-human presence as the whole of cosmic reality begins. He focuses on the human image of Christ in the very process of cosmic-coming-to-be’:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things…were created…all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:15-17)

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115 Collins, *God's Earth*, 220. His concern here is for the Catholic tradition’s narrow definition of sacrament. The protestant tradition, to which I belong, with its diminished sense of sacrament, is at greater risk of further narrowing an experience in worship of transcendence in the natural world.
117 Braaten, “Earth Community in Hosea 2,” 188.
In addressing the perception that Pauline theology diminishes the value of the non-human created world, Byrne argues that Paul’s theology, espoused in Romans 8:18-22, extends toward ‘promoting a positive attitude to the material world in the present rather than as a statement about the future of a disposable material realm’\textsuperscript{122}. This proposes that the redemption of the universe ultimately is a question of allowing the Spirit to come to ‘dominance in the universe of matter - not against matter or separation of matter, but in and through matter as its true home’\textsuperscript{123}. We are called to be a part of this new creation.

The good news of the kingdom of God is the central theme of Matthew 6:25-35, the Sermon on the Mount. God’s reign is here and now, as well as in the future, and the announcement of blessings in the sermon, with its roots in second Isaiah, heralds the present as having the potential of being the new heaven and new Earth\textsuperscript{124}.

In the introduction to his book, \textit{The Weather Makers}\textsuperscript{125}, Tim Flannery refers to \textit{Gaia}\textsuperscript{126}, by James Lovelock, in which the planet is described as one living organism\textsuperscript{127}. Flannery’s focus is upon the importance of interconnection. Like the organs of a body, each needs the other, each is intimately connected and each is important to the whole. Flannery goes on to suggest therefore that extinction is seen as the eating away of self\textsuperscript{128}. McDonagh likens this to ‘The Death of Life’\textsuperscript{129}. Collins goes on to suggest that with the demise of the natural world:

\begin{quote}
Its beauty, multiplicity, mystery and complexity, we human beings will simply shrivel up spiritually and lose our ability to perceive and experience the deeper issues that give meaning to our lives and the transcendent reality that stands behind the natural world and all that is\textsuperscript{130}.
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[123] Byrne, "Creation Groaning," 203.
\item[127] See McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 127. The Gaia model is useful in emphasising the interdependence and interconnection of a living planet. However as the Earth and cosmos is therefore imaged as a single ‘subject’, the Gaia model has limitations within the subject-subject model of care proposed by McFague.
\item[128] Flannery, \textit{The Weather Makers}, 36f.
\item[129] Sean McDonagh, \textit{The Death of Life: The Horror of Extinction} (Blackrock: The Columba Press, 2004).
\item[130] Collins, \textit{God's Earth}, 4.
\end{footnotes}
The declining health and biodiversity of the natural world reflects our alienation and broken relationship with God and the Earth community.

If one is to follow the prophetic vision of diversity, individuality and peace, with all honouring God, then one must respond to the moral claim to do what is possible to minimize violence and enhance harmony now\textsuperscript{131}.

However, too many Christians have accepted too easily the principles of imminent cataclysm, inevitability, self interest and disconnectedness, and choose to do little toward healing a hurting Earth\textsuperscript{132}. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us, however when we begin to see land as a community to which we belong, there is potential for us to ‘use it with love and respect’\textsuperscript{133}, for we need the humility ‘to walk more lightly on this Earth, with more regard for the other life around us’\textsuperscript{134}. We are called to care for the Earth and Earth-others from a place of love and humility. As adults we have the important task of recognising and learning how to practice this and then to empower, instruct and nurture our children to do likewise.

1.2 CHILDREN IN EARTH-CONNECTING ACTIVITIES

Many children growing up in urban society do not have the opportunity of interacting with the natural world. Research suggests that children are increasingly spending most of their time indoors\textsuperscript{135}. Richard Louv reflects upon a conversation with a young boy in the late 1980s:

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\item[134] Bill McKibbon, \textit{The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).
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‘I like to play indoors better, ‘cause that’s where the electrical outlets are.’ In many classrooms I heard a variation on that answer. True, for many children, nature still offers wonder. But for many others, playing in nature seems so…Unproductive. Off limits. Alien. Cute. Dangerous. Televised\textsuperscript{136}. If this were an anecdote from the 80’s, how much more connected to technology have our children become in this present era?

Currently, childhood obesity and diabetes have become a national concern in the United States\textsuperscript{137}. In response to this, upon entering the White House, Michelle Obama planted the first vegetable garden since Eleanor Roosevelt’s victory garden at the end of the Second World War. The garden planted on the south lawn in March 2009 aimed to encourage children to play outdoors and educate them about the benefits of healthy, locally grown, seasonal vegetables and fruits. Mrs Obama’s hope is that children will teach their families and communities about healthier lifestyles\textsuperscript{138}. A report from the Victorian State Government noted that the number of overweight children in Australia has doubled in recent years\textsuperscript{139}. The article highlighted the social and health problems this trend threatens, with a quarter of Australian children considered to be overweight or obese. The article suggests the two main causes of obesity in children are consumption of unhealthy food and lack of physical activity.

Currently there are many studies being conducted in Australia to help address this issue. Research commissioned by the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, undertaken by Deakin and Melbourne Universities, indicates that children involved in growing vegetable gardens make better food choices\textsuperscript{140}. The St Vincent’s Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne has found that gardening and playing outdoors improves

\begin{footnotes}
\item[136] Louv, \textit{Last Child in the Woods}, 10.
\end{footnotes}
heart health in children\textsuperscript{141}. Studies such as these are being used to lobby government to fund gardening and nature play in Australian schools. The Australian Government has indicated a sympathetic attitude to such suggestions and there is hope that funding will increase as more positive studies indicate improvements in child health\textsuperscript{142}.

Exposure to the natural world and physical activity is important for child health and growth to maturity\textsuperscript{143}. As early as 1936, Maria Montessori described how ‘physical activity connects the spirit with the world’\textsuperscript{144}, and that a ‘lack of physical activity can lead to psychic depression and poor spiritual health’\textsuperscript{145}. Louv suggests there is growing evidence that the increasing incidence of attention disorders in children is directly linked with their disconnection from nature\textsuperscript{146}. In recent times in the United States the prescribing of antidepressant medication for children has been on the increase\textsuperscript{147}. Keith White, founder of the child theology movement, suggests that we should be treating the social and cultural world to which our children belong, rather than medicating children with the aim of making them function in a dysfunctional world\textsuperscript{148}.

As the urban environment becomes increasingly dense there are fewer opportunities for children to play in wild spaces. Wild spaces are sometimes perceived by parents as having more risk. Some studies affirm this perception. A recent report in the United States warns of the dangers associated with children playing in trees at heights greater

\textsuperscript{144} Montessori, \textit{The Secret of Childhood}, 99.
\textsuperscript{145} Montessori, \textit{The Secret of Childhood}, 98.
\textsuperscript{146} Louv, \textit{Last Child in the Woods}, 48.
\textsuperscript{148} White, \textit{The Growth of Love}, 127.
than three metres over sharp or hard ground surfaces\textsuperscript{149}. The study reported that injuries requiring hospitalisation in the United States of children falling from tree houses alone totaled 2800 annually. Such reports are leading legislators toward what Louv describes as, ‘the criminalization of natural play’\textsuperscript{150}. Louv cites many examples where children have restricted access to local parks and woodlands. Although the tree fall report offers alarming statistics, the Center for Justice and Democracy of America suggests that rising injuries and litigation is most often only a perception\textsuperscript{151}. The authors suggest improvements in design and safety of playground equipment have meant that children are at lower risk of serious injury. In any case Louv argues that despite the potential injury risk for children playing in unstructured parks and woodlands, children need the freedom to play making dams, bike ramps, tree houses and hiding places\textsuperscript{152}. Similarly White argues for ‘safe play and adventure’ and that children must take risks if they are to learn, for a ‘world purged of all risks and dangers would be so sterile that it would probably prevent children’s growth and maturing’\textsuperscript{153}. The recent controversy in the United States around Lenore Skenazy’s decision to allow her young son to ride the subway, highlights the tension\textsuperscript{154}. But it has given rise to a debate around healthy risk and the need to offer opportunities for children to creatively explore their environment. A degree of risk affords the opportunity for children to learn to measure and recognise their vulnerability and strength, and gain a realistic awareness of hazards and likely scenarios. Caldwell describes this as developing ‘a faltering trust’ where a child learns to trust, and yet holds in healthy tension the awareness that things can go wrong\textsuperscript{155}.


\textsuperscript{150} Louv, \textit{Last Child in the Woods}, 27f.


\textsuperscript{152} Louv, \textit{Last Child in the Woods}, 27f.

\textsuperscript{153} White, \textit{The Growth of Love}, 163. See also p197


Many argue for a full and rich experience of the natural world that includes the cycle of life and death. In nature death is not an enemy, but rather a friend of the life process. The opportunity to grow and nurture plants and animals offers this experience. Plummer, enquiring into hunting and recreational experiences in the wild, describes the awareness and recognition of death as a natural process within nature. He suggests that the recognition and experience of an animal dying is a critical element that is missing in the education of urban children in western society. The many children who no longer play outside are restricted in their experience of the natural life and death cycle of plants and animals. The valuable experience a child gains in raising a pet from a small animal through to its death should never be underestimated. Such experience, West suggests, can help them as adults come to terms with their own mortality and the loss associated with the death of a loved one.

Robin Moore, director of the National Learning Initiative in the United States, believes the mostly dual sensory experience of vision and sound in postmodern indoor childhood play is of concern in the healthy development of the child. His research suggests that:

> Children live through their senses. Sensory experiences link the child’s exterior world with their interior, hidden, affective world. Since the natural environment is the principle source of sensory stimulation, freedom to explore and play with the outdoor environment through the senses in their own space and time is essential for healthy development of the interior life.

In the context of healthy development, Rebecca Clay writes about the influence of contact with the natural world on behaviour. Clay explored the work of Rachel and Stephen Kaplan who describe ‘directed attention fatigue’. The Kaplan report indicates that extensive directed attention, such as watching television or playing computer games, leads to irritability, agitation and an inability to concentrate. Behaviour characteristics

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158 Personal discussion with John West, a retired primary school principal and trained pastoral care support worker with Eastern Palliative Care, Melbourne, Victoria.


such as these impact upon learning, social interaction and growth to maturity. Clay notes that open natural spaces, even a glimpse from an office window, can have a restorative effect on behaviour and attitude. However, television screens dominate children’s landscapes, even when outdoors. Louv reflects upon the rise in popularity of television screens in the rear of touring vehicles:

Why do so many people no longer consider the physical world worth watching? The highway’s edges may not be postcard perfect. But for a century, children’s early understanding of how cities and nature fit together was gained from the backseat.\(^{162}\)

Richard Louv’s book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from nature deficit disorder* is rapidly becoming the handbook for community groups working with children in Earth-connecting activities. He quotes from an interview conducted with a scout leader who took a group of children into the woods camping:

One night a nine year old woke me up. She had to go to the bathroom. We stepped outside the tent and she looked up. She gasped and grabbed my leg. She had never seen the stars before. That night I saw the power of nature on a child. She was a changed person. From that moment on, she saw everything, the camouflaged lizard that everyone else skipped by. She used her senses. She was *awake*.\(^{163}\)

The experience described here is common. When children’s senses are stimulated and extended beyond the contained inside world they are nearly always awoken and aroused with a sense of awe, wonder, excitement and enthusiasm. Maria Montessori writes how children notice and respond with joyous shouts and exclamations of wonderment even to the smallest bugs and the finest detail that adults often miss. She observed that children delight in the invisible.\(^{164}\) Robert Pyle a leading researcher on butterflies describes what happens when a butterfly is placed on the nose of a child:

Noses seem to make perfectly good perches or basking spots, and the insect often remains for some time. Almost everyone is delighted by this: the close-up colours, the thread of a tongue probing for droplets of perspiration. But somewhere beyond delight lies enlightenment. I have been astonished at the

\(^{162}\) Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 62.
\(^{164}\) Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 64f. Where the invisible refers to the objects and things that mostly go unnoticed by adults.
small epiphanies I see in the eyes of a child in truly close contact with nature, perhaps for the first time.\(^{165}\)

Such delight offers a building of aesthetic awareness. Maria Harris highlights the importance that aesthetics and beauty have in education because they heighten awareness and arouse curiosity and delight.\(^ {166}\) We go to nature to discover beauty and ‘quite simply, when we deny our children nature, we deny them beauty.’\(^ {167}\) We deny them the opportunity of experiencing the wonder of an intimate encounter with a butterfly, or the experience of discovering the night sky. An aesthetic appreciation of the natural world better enables an expression of awe and wonder.\(^ {168}\)

Significantly, once there has been an epiphany or an awakening of the senses, a child’s imagination is stimulated. Robin Moore has observed this phenomenon on numerous occasions. He notes that natural spaces, along with natural materials have the potential to stimulate the limitless imaginations of children. These serve as a medium of creativity and inventiveness. He suggests also that this can be observed in almost any group of children at play in the natural world.\(^ {169}\) Froebel invented many of his games to encourage the development of a child’s imagination. One such game was attributing symbolic names to toys and animals.\(^ {170}\)

Naturalist Stephen Trimble believes that children can gain a greater sense of self-worth by forging connections with animals, the land and plants, ‘by finding ways to experience some relationship with the Earth.’\(^ {171}\) He quotes Edith Cobb who, whilst analysing the roots of creativity in great thinkers, discovered that many had encountered pivotal childhood experiences. The twin concepts of discontinuity, ‘an awareness of [one’s] own


\(^{167}\) Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 186.

\(^{168}\) Adams, Hyde and Woolley, *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood*, 60f.


unique separateness and identity’, and continuity, ‘a renewal of relationship with nature’ serve to stimulate the person in ways that develop critical and creative thinking172.

The location of natural space does not need to be on a grand scale. It merely needs to be accessible. ‘Nearby nature’ is the term used by Rachel and Stephen Kaplan to refer to those spaces that children explore: back yards, vacant land and nearby bush173. Experiences in these places lay the foundation for what Edith Cobb calls ‘a living ecological relationship between…a person and a place’174. That is, children discover a sense of place and belonging, home, when they play outdoors.

This sense of place and belonging, of security and nurture has been explored by numerous researchers. Most children who play in natural spaces have a predilection for playing in nest-like areas or refuges. They create smaller spaces for security and safety and from which to outplay their imagination. The environmental psychologist Mary Ann Kirkby mapped the play behaviour of twenty six preschoolers175. She found that more than a quarter of their playing time was spent in a small section of the playground with nest-like refuges amongst which, the children would hide and play.

However, in contrast to this, child psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith has observed that play equipment is becoming more machine-like and open in its design176. There are fewer places in which children can hide and find refuge, which suggests that children’s play experiences are consequently diminished. In the interest of reducing risk, natural play surfaces are being replaced by synthetic furnishings; climbing walls with safety ropes replace rock faces; climbing frames with regular angles replace trees; swimming pools replace streams; visits to theme parks are more common than genuine expeditions into the wild177.

Each of the authors referred to above advocate for more connection with the natural world in the formal education of children. Hattie and others note that outdoor experiences in education have had a rich history\textsuperscript{178}. Drawing on the experience of Plato and Rhoades, they extol the educational benefits of a physical experience of engaging with the natural world. In wilderness and other experiences in nature, students learn many important life skills such as careful observation and planning, resourcefulness and resilience.

The literature suggests that an important adult role is to empower children’s learning capacity by creating opportunities and places for experiences in the natural world. Naturalist Gary Nabhan in describing the importance of teaching children about nature, suggests that someone needs to show us another world. As a child we need people to take us by the hand and ‘initiate us to the delight of encountering the other in the form of lizard, hawkmoth, or bat’\textsuperscript{179}. It is a wonderful privilege for parents and adults working with children to engage at this level.

1.3 Child Theology and Spirituality

Keith White brings child development theory, theology and praxis together in five significant categories necessary for the child. He presents these as security, boundaries, significance, community and creativity\textsuperscript{180}, where the ‘fundamental need, desire, hunger, longing and potential gift of every being is to love and be loved’\textsuperscript{181}. A community with the overriding ethos of being ‘sensitive to and in tune with the seasons and patterns of life’ will help children to ‘discover that they are creators and creative, their contributions are valued and valuable, that they matter and that they count’\textsuperscript{182}. Play, fun, everyday experiences and humour are key elements in this process and way of life. Montessori describes the adult as being ‘the product of the creative activity of a child’\textsuperscript{183}. White and


\textsuperscript{180} White, \textit{The Growth of Love}, 30.

\textsuperscript{181} White, \textit{The Growth of Love}, 45.

\textsuperscript{182} White, \textit{The Growth of Love}, 26.

\textsuperscript{183} Montessori, \textit{The Secret of Childhood}, 196.
other scholars highlight, therefore, that there is more to religious education than biblical literacy.

White, drawing on the work of Loder, suggests that the classical linear child development theory is missing significant spiritual and theological elements. Psycho-social theory focuses more on stages of growth from immaturity to maturity, where spirituality and religious experience is sometimes described as ‘immaturity or inadequacy’\(^{184}\). There is, however, compelling argument that spirituality is an ontological reality and a way of expressing one’s sense of unity with one’s world\(^{185}\). Tacey understands spirituality in terms of connectedness and relationality\(^{186}\). Hay and Nye describe spirituality as relational consciousness. It is relational because it involves a person’s sense of connectedness, or their relationship with self, with other people, with the natural world or indeed the cosmos itself\(^{187}\). Access to nature is important for children to experience transcendence and the sense of connectedness with other\(^ {188}\). Adams and others suggest an aspect of this spirituality is to extend beyond the five physical senses to the awareness of the sense of feeling, sensitivity, care, kindness, love and even sensuality\(^ {189}\).

Children have a natural desire to observe, which Maria Montessori believed can be described in Dante’s words as the ‘intelligence of love’\(^{190}\). Love of surroundings is a ‘spiritual energy, a moral beauty which accompanies creation’\(^{191}\). Hart argues that the moment of awe and wonder in which a child is captivated by a new insight or natural phenomenon is an expression of spirituality\(^{192}\). Montessori also suggests that the wonder and joy expressed by children is a spiritual expression. She described poor city children who were sponsored by the Queen of Italy to live in a Franciscan convent. The children,

\(^{189}\) Adams, Hyde and Woolley, *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood*, 73.
\(^{190}\) Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, 103.
upon experiencing the ‘spacious gardens, wide paths, pools of goldfish and beautiful beds of flowers,’ were bright, happy and delighted. This she described as a ‘conversion’ or spiritual renewal in terms of the ‘spiritual character of the remarkable phenomenon that was apparent to all’, where the children moved from a state of grief to happiness and joy. Conversely she observed that the pampered children of the wealthy, indulged with many physical objects, quickly tire of them and have no desire to be engaged with or interested in gardens, paths and flowers. She discovered that getting them to ‘lose their insatiability and learn to concentrate’ involved trying to focus their attention upon one small thing.

Montessori believed that children need to be exposed to the natural world and its rhythms as much as possible. Babies should be placed in such an aspect to ‘see birds, flowers and gently swaying trees’. Children, where possible, should wake to natural light, and in order to develop and mature both physically and spiritually, they need freedom to play and explore by touching and tasting, whilst moving at their own pace. David Elkind also advocates the importance of play and allowing the child to establish pace.

Berryman believes that children should be free to express themselves in play. Fun, creativity and laughter characterise healthy child activities. Such activity helps children discover their deep identity as creatures who create in relationship with God. This discovery ‘enables us to cope by creating with and transcending the existential limits that both confine and help us’. Hobby’s work with children suggests the most beautiful gift we can offer is time and space. ‘Time to explore the world around them, time to learn about themselves, time to learn what it means to be and the space to do that in.’

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193 Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, 140f.
194 Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, 145.
196 Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, 74.
197 Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, 82.
200 Berryman, Godly Play, 13.
However, time and space in the classroom is a measurable commodity that is negotiated within a demanding education system. Watson believes that schools influenced by western socio-economic values are rigid and overly programmed and lack the freedom and diversity necessary for personal and full growth to maturity. Such education institutions lack the ‘creative thinking and relational feeling necessary for the development of morality and a sense of community’\textsuperscript{202}. Children need space to explore and question. Hay and Nye see nourishing spirituality in the child as releasing not constricting their understanding and imagination\textsuperscript{203}. Access to nature allows children to experience transcendence and a sense of connectedness with other\textsuperscript{204}.

The development of such a connection arouses an awareness of self in the larger context, and impacts growth of moral and ethical values. McLaughlin expands this to describe the importance of children developing a wider moral ecology beyond individual needs that encompasses a social ethic and responsibility to the community, with a consensus on the common good and notions of loyalty\textsuperscript{205}. Facilitating pro-social behaviour in children’s activities is essential. The simple task of giving up a bus seat for an older person is a lesson in the awareness of other\textsuperscript{206}. Adams and others suggest that the link between individuals and unknown others within the community upon whom we depend for food, clothing and other services is a spiritual link: ‘A spiritual link through interdependence and shared humanity’\textsuperscript{207}. They suggest that spiritual intelligence, the capacity for discovering meaning and value, along with virtuous behaviour is found in connection and spending time in silence\textsuperscript{208}. This suggests the time-space paradigm is a serious factor in shaping children.

\textsuperscript{203} Hay and Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 146f.
\textsuperscript{204} Adams, Hyde and Woolley, \textit{The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood}, 116.
\textsuperscript{206} Caldwell, "A Faltering Trust," 73.
\textsuperscript{207} Adams, Hyde and Woolley, \textit{The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood}, 106.
\textsuperscript{208} Adams, Hyde and Woolley, \textit{The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood}, 101.
This view contrasts with the busyness and individualism of modern society. Lasch describes narcissism as the dominant reality in western society where adults mostly live with unresolved anxiety, characterised in anxious, ambivalent relationships. Parents and adults attempt to make children feel loved by offering them gifts of electronic toys and other ‘gadgets’ that only serve to distance them further. He notes that:

Everything conspires to encourage escapist solutions to the psychological problems of dependence, separation, and individuation, and to discourage the moral realism that makes it possible for human beings to come to terms with existential constraints on their power and freedom.

A sense of place, acceptance and love is not found in toys and gadgets. Richard Bauckham’s observation adds to this:

Thus not wanting to be bothered with a despairing shared world, we postmodern individuals retreat instead into our private televisual and computerised virtual realities which, unlike the ‘real world’, we can programme, control and edit to our own advantage and personal delight. Instead of sharing in community we now prefer to face not other people but the monitor, logging into a cyber-personal internet which grants us hitherto unimaginable access to a vast electronic cosmos, but which ironically, simultaneously divorces us from flesh and blood reality itself.

In stark contrast to the individualism characteristic of western society, Adams and others suggest that children need to develop a link with unknown others within their community, the people who make up society that children would not normally become familiar with. They suggest also that as children question origin and sense of personal identity they develop a sense of purpose, and ‘foster a positive identity and a sense of being a part of something far greater than themselves’. They begin to see themselves as part of a larger reality, with connected responsibility and care. ‘Finding one’s place in the world is essentially a spiritual journey: it requires the development of a sense of self-respect as well as the ability to respect others in one’s community and the wider world’. Finding one’s place offers a sense of belonging. Ron Buckland, who has worked with Scripture Union for many years, follows a theology of ‘belongingness’. He believes children

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belong, have a place in relationship with God and suggests that his task is reminding them and making them aware that they belong.\textsuperscript{214}.

Children need the opportunity to discover who they are in relation to the world around them. They do this through play, creativity, being offered an experience of being valued and significant. In such discovery they develop a spirituality that is deeply embedded in the nature of a loving and creative God.

1.4 Drawing the Threads Together

Engagement with the natural world invites experiences of awe and wonder which lead to closer and more intimate relationship which has the potential to create a better world than the present.

McFague highlights the importance of enabling and empowering children to engage in activities that help them form a relationship with a fellow being of the planet.\textsuperscript{215} Her particular emphasis is upon poorer urban children who have limited access to parks and grasslands. In the light of her earlier work, \textit{The Body of God}\textsuperscript{216}, where the Earth and cosmos might metaphorically be viewed as the body of God, she alludes to the potential of forming an intimate encounter with God through relationship and connection with plants and animals of the natural world.

‘If one cannot marvel at the intricacies of the natural world, how can one learn to find one’s voice to express concerns about the destruction of the planet, care for its resources, appreciate its beauty or its complexities?’\textsuperscript{217} In the final analysis, global concern, that is care for the Earth, often arises from local encounters like caring for one’s garden or local park. It is hard to care for the Earth as a whole if one has never tried caring for a small

\textsuperscript{214} Buckland, \textit{Children and the Gospel}, 63.
\textsuperscript{215} McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, 170.
\textsuperscript{216} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}.
\textsuperscript{217} Adams, Hyde and Woolley, \textit{The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood}, 45.
local piece of it\textsuperscript{218}. The particular is the basis for the universal. Teaching a child to care for a pet or plant at home or school creates the opportunity to learn about its needs, respecting its otherness, delighting in its hues and colours, its fruit or friendship. It is ‘better education than a lecture on climate change’\textsuperscript{219}. David Sobel adds, ‘if we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the Earth before we ask them to save it’\textsuperscript{220}.

Children offered the freedom to play and explore in the natural world have the potential of growing into more healthy, caring, creative and engaging adults. There is greater opportunity for them to become more deeply spiritual. The great philosopher and education reformer Friedrich Froebel focused his philosophy of education upon ‘inner connection’ as the law of development. His greatest contribution to pedagogy is education through self-activity. Recognising and celebrating the divinity within, he suggested that ‘play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man (sic)...it gives joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. Holding the sources of all that is good’\textsuperscript{221}. In the context of urban children being time poor and restricted in their outdoor free play, what a challenge to see how this takes shape in the research protocol!

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{218} McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, 155.
\item \textsuperscript{219} McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, 155.
\item \textsuperscript{220} David Sobel, Beyond Eco cited in Hobby, \textit{Nurturing a Gentle Heart}, 74.
\end{itemize}
CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH DESIGN

My aim in ministry is to enable children to be fully integrated and connected within their worlds and with God. In my experience I have observed the responses of children as they have engaged in outdoor activities. Anecdotally I have observed, as well as heard and read of the many benefits for children who are involved in gardening and outdoor play. I consider such activities are important to include in the work I perform with children. This study arises from my desire to develop a theological framework that will inform the ministry I have with children, in empowering children to form meaningful relationships with the natural world and with God.

This theological reflection is built upon literature and the experiences of non-church community groups working with children. A clear and appropriate methodology is therefore significant. Max van Manen writes:

…there exists a certain dialectic between question and method. Why then should one adopt one research method over another? The choice should reflect more than mere whim, preference, taste or fashion. Rather, the method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator…in the first place.\(^\text{222}\)

I come to this subject with an interest and some ‘hunches’ but with no specific theory to test. I was interested to see what might emerge from the stories of people working with children. My learning preference is to be immersed in the activity that I am exploring, allowing the activity itself to inform me. My training as a scientist alongside my theological formation provides an integrative framework for analysis and reflection. For me this brings energy to the subject and the opportunity to learn. I enjoy listening to what the activity might speak into the topic. Whilst discipline and rigour are required for data

to be analysed there was also the need to allow themes to emerge during data gathering. By its nature this research project requires a qualitative approach.

For these reasons I have chosen to embrace the principles of grounded theory as an appropriate methodology for this study. Grounded theory is not the only methodology suited to this style of investigation. An alternative would be phenomenological enquiry and an example from this study would be around the focal experience of wonder in the natural world. The essence of phenomenological enquiry is to try and understand the experience with the aim of clarifying understanding of anything which one is able to experience. In a conventional sense it deals with the feelings and consciousness of experience. This form of enquiry would be well suited if this study were investigating in the first person the experience of the children in the natural world, rather than relying upon the retelling of children’s stories and experiences as observed by their teachers and supervisors.

2.1 METHODOLOGY

Charmaz describes grounded theory methods as systematic, inductive guidelines for gathering and analyzing data to construct a theoretical framework that explains the data. In this research process, grounded theorists build analytic interpretations of their data to focus further data collection. This in turn informs and refines the developing theoretical analysis. Elsewhere Charmaz comments:

> Used well, grounded theory quickens the speed of gaining a clear focus on what is happening in your data without sacrificing the detail of enacted scenes. Like a camera with many lenses, first you view a broad sweep of the landscape. Subsequently, you change your lens several times to bring scenes closer and closer into view.

Data collection in this study initially involved interviewing three participants to gain a broad and foundational view of the work performed with children in gardening, care of

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animals and play in natural surroundings. Themes emerging from coded data gathered in these three initial interviews were used to inform and focus data collection in the succeeding seven. In this process I followed guidelines offered by Charmaz:

> The logic of grounded theory entails going back to data and forward into analysis. Subsequently you return to the field to gather further data and to refine the emerging theoretical framework.\(^{225}\)

In order to explicate the emerging categories I used theoretical sampling for the seven subsequent interviews and focus group\(^{226}\). Theoretical sampling ‘involves starting with data, constructing tentative ideas about the data, and then examining these ideas through further empirical inquiry’.\(^{227}\)

Emerging questions and theory were checked comparing data with data, and emerging categories were focused during this process. Data collection was conducted until the point of ‘saturation’. Charmaz suggests this is achieved ‘when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories’.\(^{228}\)

I developed an initial series of ‘in-depth interview’\(^{229}\) questions for the first three interviews from a general review of relevant literature. These questions were also informed by my experience of working and interacting with community groups who engage children in the area of gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings. The initial interview questions\(^{230}\) were created with awareness of the concerns raised by Glaser\(^{231}\) who warns, in critiquing the work of Strauss and Corbin\(^{232}\)

\(^{225}\) Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 23.

\(^{226}\) At the conclusion of each interview the respondent was invited to also participate in the focus group.

\(^{227}\) Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 100.

\(^{228}\) Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 133.


\(^{230}\) Appendix 5


about the gathering of ‘data without forcing either preconceived questions or framework upon it’\textsuperscript{233}. Charmaz develops this to describe how:

Theoretical categories must be developed from analysis of the collected data and must fit them; these categories must explain the data they subsume. Thus grounded theorists cannot shop their disciplinary stores for preconceived concepts and dress their data in them. Any existing concept must earn its way into the analysis\textsuperscript{234}.

In this context Charmaz raises the concern that a review of literature prior to data collection has the potential of introducing ‘received theory’\textsuperscript{235}. Strauss and Corbin argue ‘we all bring to the inquiry a considerable background in professional and disciplinary literature’\textsuperscript{236}. It is not possible to remain entirely detached from the literature. In this case, therefore, care was taken to only engage in a general review of relevant literature before the interviews. In formulating and developing the initial interview questions, particular awareness of personal hunches and intuitive response was heeded:

Every qualitative researcher should take heed of his (Glaser) warnings about forcing data into preconceived categories through the imposition of artificial questions. However, data collecting may demand that researchers ask questions and follow hunches, if not in direct conversation with respondents, then in the observer’s notes about what to look for. Researchers construct rich data by amassing pertinent details\textsuperscript{237}.

The interview questions in this study were designed to be open ended and ranged from general overview to personal observations of children by the interviewee. Some of the questions were framed around ‘sensitising concepts’\textsuperscript{238}. Sensitising concepts offer initial ideas to pursue and sensitise one to ask particular kinds of questions. My past experience, and information gathered from the literature review, offered a loose frame of guiding empirical interests. Charmaz\textsuperscript{239} suggests that sensitising concepts provide a place to start. Sensitised concepts in this study included exploring times where children may have experienced gaining a sense of awe and wonder, empathy and compassion, change of behaviour, and the opportunity of working with the natural world.

\textsuperscript{233} Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," 512.
\textsuperscript{234} Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," 511.
\textsuperscript{235} Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, 165.
\textsuperscript{236} Strauss and Corbin, Basics of Qualitative Research, 48.
\textsuperscript{237} Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," 514.
\textsuperscript{238} Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, 16.
\textsuperscript{239} Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, 16.

Interviewees were invited to describe as much as possible their experiences in the form of stories. This was in keeping with the aim of ‘gathering rich data - detailed and full data’\(^\text{240}\). Lincoln and Guba describe this as ‘thick data’, which is data rich in description of the experience\(^\text{241}\). I aimed also to develop ‘thick descriptions’ that explained not just a particular behaviour or practice outlined within a story but also the context of the practice in its setting\(^\text{242}\). All interview data was transcribed and coded by myself in keeping with the practice of grounded theory of being immersed and fully engaged with the data to best draw out themes, trends and conclusions\(^\text{243}\).

The focus group was conducted following guidelines offered by Hurworth\(^\text{244}\) from the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Program Evaluation. Particular observation was paid to the following:

- Opening question and attention to guiding the conversation
- Inclusion of all participants
- Checking and confirming emerging themes with participants

The focus group, consisting of participants from the field, offered important testing and confirmation of the emerging theory.

### 2.2 Methods

The question posed in the introduction to this study is:

> Are there theological understandings\(^\text{245}\) and themes expressed in non-church community group programs that encourage children to form a relationship

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\(^{240}\) Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 11.


\(^{245}\) Specific theological questions were not asked of the interviewees, rather theological understandings and themes were drawn from the experiences and stories told about the children in their care.
with the natural world and how might these understandings or themes enrich the church’s engagement with such activities?

To address this question nineteen non-church community groups and individuals were contacted by letter inviting their organisation’s participation. These groups were selected from across rural and urban Victoria, and represented a diverse range of children’s programs. The intent was to have representation from the broad spectrum of the private and public sector, public and private schools, disability services, indigenous services, cultural and socio-economic background, government departments, community organisations and media. Organisations also varied in size and public exposure from large public programs such as the Royal Botanic Gardens to small private enterprises with a single operator such as an equestrian school. The letter of invitation sent to the individuals and organisations explained the purpose of the research and the time and people commitments that involvement might entail. A follow up phone call or email was sent to confirm the letter had been received and to enquire if there was potential interest.

When managers within organisations gave their permission for their organisation to be involved in the project, a face-to-face meeting or telephone conversation was conducted. In this discussion I gathered public domain documentation and relevant organisational reports. During the discussion I also established who would be the most appropriate person from the organisation for me to interview. This person was either invited to contact me by phone or email, or the person’s contact details were given to me. Each interviewee was also invited to participate in a focus group at the end of the interview process.

The Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD) Human Research and Ethics Committee (HREC) approved this study. Throughout this investigation, letters, emails, phone calls, interviews, focus group and analysis and storage of data have been in keeping with HREC guidelines and approval.

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246 Appendix 1 Community Groups.
247 Appendix 2 Letter of Invitation and Participant Permission Slip.
248 Appendix 3 Follow up Email.
Of the nineteen organisations and individuals contacted, ten responded positively, indicating a desire to participate in this study. In-depth interviews of about one hour’s duration were conducted by myself with one person from each of the participating organisations. Most often these interviews were held on location, with the opportunity of viewing the site of the work with children. Several interviewees offered a guided tour of their children’s activity sites. Each interview was recorded digitally and stored on CD. Transcripts of each interview were compiled by me to facilitate my immersion in the data. All interview data was analysed by myself and stored in keeping with MCD’s privacy and ethics requirements, ensuring that no personal details or stories that might identify the interviewee or children would enter the public domain.

Data gathered in the three preliminary interviews was coded and then used to construct themes and emerging trends. I followed the process of initial coding explained by Charmaz where ‘coding of initial data means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorises, summarises and accounts for each piece of data’249. Analysis at this stage involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, along with listening and re-listening to the recorded interviews. I made notes in the margins of transcripts and wrote summary statements. From this process a theoretical framework emerged that was tested on the subsequent seven interviews. Data coding for the following seven interviews was more directed, selective and conceptual. I followed Charmaz’s guide on focused coding where the most significant, or earlier codes, were used to sift through large amounts of data. Decisions were made in this process about which initial codes made the most analytical sense for categorising the data incisively and completely250.

Throughout the data coding process I kept memos as notes in the interview transcript, along with diary entries. Charmaz argues that memo-writing is a crucial method in grounded theory, prompting analysis of data and codes early in the research process.

Writing successive memos throughout the research process keeps you involved in the analysis and helps you to increase the level of abstraction of

249 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, 43.
250 Charmaz, Constructing Grounded Theory, 57.
your ideas. Certain codes stand out and take form as theoretical categories as you write successive memos.\(^{251}\)

During the process of initial coding, focused coding and memo writing, a theoretical framework emerged from the data. The emerging theoretical framework, as it emerged from the data, was tested as further data was collected throughout the interview process until the point of saturation.

At the completion of the interviews the theoretical framework was further tested in a focus group. Each of the ten interviewees was invited to participate in the focus group that was conducted at the conclusion of the interview process. To maximize attendance two potential dates were offered with six interviewees responding positively to the invitation. However, only three actually attended on the night. The focus group of about an hour was conducted at a central location, Chapel on Station Gallery, at the Box Hill Baptist Church. A scribe attended the group who made notes from the discussion. The focus group conversation was recorded and not transcribed. The focus group served to further test the theoretical framework. Because only three interviewees attended the focus group, the final emerging theory, gathered from the group, was sent to each of the ten interviewees for their responses. Seven of the ten responded, each affirming the findings.

I undertook a more extensive literature review following the interviews and focus group. I then further tested the emerging theory by going back to the relevant literature.

Charmaz comments:

> Through comparing other scholars’ evidence and ideas with your grounded theory you may show where and how their ideas illuminate your theoretical categories and how your theory extends, transcends or challenges dominant ideas in your field.\(^{252}\)

Theory developed from this process was compared and contrasted with theological themes and biblical texts. A theological reflection upon the involvement of children in Earth-connecting activities was then developed, and this forms the structure of Chapter Four.

\(^{251}\) Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 72.

\(^{252}\) Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 165.
2.3 Participating Organisations

The ten participating organisations represent a broad range of programs in rural, urban, multicultural and socio-economic settings. They are briefly described below. A quote from the interviewee highlights a feature of each program. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of interviewees. Apart from the equestrian school, the names of the participating organisations are disclosed.

2.3.1 Kevin Heinze Children’s Garden

This is a garden located in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne which offers social and recreational gardening for children with disabilities. The age range of children involved is generally from seven years up to eighteen. Situated in a gently sloping and green setting, the children are encouraged to participate in planting and growing vegetables. The children care for plants by watering and feeding them to maturity. Harvested produce is taken home or back to school to cook and eat. Some children who are not physically or cognitively able to grow plants are encouraged to play in the ‘dig garden’. Some of these children sit and listen to the sounds of the garden which include running water and birds. A large unfenced pond is a feature of the garden. Water from the pond is pumped to the highest boundary, feeding a stream that runs the full length of the garden. The children often walk in the stream. They are also involved in art and craft activities at the garden centre. Programmers aim for the children to feel free and non-pressured.

*The biggest focus has always been, and what would always be reinforced here, is a sense of fun. They go home a little bit happier than when they arrived!*

Craig who is the program director was interviewed in his office. He is currently working on a PhD at Deakin University, Melbourne, in the field of children and gardening.
2.3.2 Eaglehawk Primary School

This school houses a Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden and is located in a northern suburb of Bendigo in central rural Victoria. Every child in the school, from year one to six (aged six to thirteen) is involved in the garden. Under the guidance of a gardener, the children are encouraged to participate in all aspects of gardening. They dig and fertilise the garden beds, nourishing them with compost which they make from leaves, weeds and vegetable scraps. They grow everything from seed. They tend and care for plants and chickens, finally harvesting produce and seed for replanting. Harvested food is prepared and cooked in the classroom under the supervision of a specialist cooking teacher. Their new kitchen classroom is currently being constructed through fund raising and local business donations.

I made a list on the white board of what needed to be harvested and I think there was (sic) more than a dozen different things that needed to be picked that they had for lunch. At the moment broccoli, spring onions, two different types of spinach, lettuce of which there is (sic) three or four different types, rocket, celery, impale...

The gardener, Ben, who has a diploma in horticulture, was interviewed. The interview was conducted in a quiet sitting area of the school kitchen garden. During the interview several children were engaged in digging compost at the other end of the garden. An artist employed by the school on art projects was in the garden that day and casually participated in the interview.

2.3.3 St Leonard’s College Early Education Centre

This early education centre, attached to the private college, is set on one hundred acres in the south-east area of metropolitan Melbourne. The children, aged between three and five, enjoy growing vegetables, and play in natural surroundings. Once a week the children participate in a nature walk to sit and play in an open grass and woodland area. The school has a large, unfenced lake. Outdoor experiences are recorded and expressed in indoor activities involving drawing, photography, story-telling and writing.
We have a strong image of the child for we see the child as a competent, thinking, curious child rather than an empty vessel to be filled up. We believe the environment works as a third teacher, inside or outside; that is, has the possibility to engage children and stimulate their learning.

I interviewed Kristen, the early education centre program director. The interview was conducted in her office while other teachers worked with the children in the adjoining classroom.

2.3.4 CERES

CERES is located in inner-city Melbourne beside a large community garden. School groups visit the site choosing from a wide range of programs including land, waste, water and energy, in the context of global warming, fossil fuels, renewable energy and eco-friendly housing. Nature walks and gardening are offered, and they cater for ages from preschool to university.

Ecology, respecting the environment, knowing the environment and being part of the environment will teach you everything you need to know, really. I mean, all the other things are important, but I think they should be taught in a different way.

Shaun who is a schools program teacher was interviewed in a café situated in the grounds of CERES.

2.3.5 Royal Botanic Gardens Children’s Garden

The Ian Potter Foundation Children’s Garden, located in the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne, caters for school groups and children, young and old, from the general public. The garden was created to address the concern of increasing urbanization, higher density living and the declining opportunities for children in the city to venture outdoors to enjoy the natural world. The garden is designed to invite children to explore and enjoy play in natural surroundings. Scheduled programs are offered in music and nature, nature walks and vegetable gardening. The garden consists of climbing trees, rocks, hidden

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253 Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies, pronounced ‘series’. 
walks and a creek bed. A lake, which is not fenced off, has mesh just below the surface for safety.

*There are a lot of people, schools and kinders that just choose ‘Introduction to the Garden’, that’s the most popular. And so for that they come along and are introduced to the plants and do several activities. They do a potting-up activity. We walk them through the gardens, we show them some of the magic - the secret things that they might not be alert to otherwise. We turn it into a sort of discovery. We go to the herb garden and smell all the different herbs and they end up making a potpourri bag that they take home.*

I interviewed Peta, a schools program teacher who has a master’s degree in music and early childhood education. The interview was conducted in a café adjacent to the children’s garden within the grounds of the Royal Botanic Gardens.

### 2.3.6 Gardening Australia

Gardening Australia is a popular gardening program produced and televised nationally by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Joan, a well known female presenter who has worked with children as a teacher for over thirty years, was interviewed. In her role she has the opportunity of visiting schools all over Australia, encouraging children to be actively involved in gardening. Articles and stories on the television program often focus upon the importance of teaching children to garden.

*I worked with children, before this whole media thing started, at a place called the Victorian School’s Nursery and we used to grow plants and we had kids coming in on excursions to learn how to grow and they would all take a seedling home, that they had grown, with them. They didn’t know where plants came from. They had no idea. Like the old story they don’t know where a carrot comes from, they think it comes from the supermarket.*

I interviewed Joan at a café in East Malvern, Melbourne, near to the place of her next scheduled engagement.
2.3.7 Kallista Primary School

This Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden is located on the outer eastern fringe of Melbourne in a semi-rural environment. The children participate in all aspects of growing, tending and harvesting fruit and vegetables. They then prepare and cook a meal to share at school under the supervision of a specialist cooking teacher. The children keep chickens. They sell any excess produce of seed, vegetables and eggs at the local market.

*I am hoping that these kids will go ‘Yeh, look we can put a veggie patch in here, I know what to do with that!’ And if turned around and asked ‘Where did you learn that?’ I’d like them to say ‘I have just known it forever! It is just something that is in me’. And that’s I guess what I hope the kids get out of it.*

The interviewee was Jane who is a teacher and horticulturalist and helps manage the garden program. The interview was conducted in the school library.

2.3.8 Equestrian School

This privately owned equestrian school offers tutoring in horse riding and horse management for ages four to adult. The school offers courses through a TAFE\textsuperscript{254} college at VCAL\textsuperscript{255} level. Many of the children participating in the course come from disadvantaged backgrounds where there are often learning difficulties, behavioural issues and problems at home. Children are often involved in the school’s horse-rescue program where injured and abused horses are rehabilitated.

*Losing touch with another living being that is maybe dependent on humans to care for them… I think that is a really big thing that a lot of children are not aware… that all these animals do require care… Lots of children aren’t interested in that, so to discover that again, and to actually get a sense of accomplishment of caring for another animal is quite strong. It brings out qualities.*

Mary, who is the principal owner of the riding school, a riding instructor and trained art therapist, was interviewed in her home on the farm where she keeps her horses.

\textsuperscript{254} Technical and Further Education.  
\textsuperscript{255} Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.
2.3.9 Bass Valley Primary School

In the Western Port district of rural Victoria children, aged between ten and twelve, at the Bass Valley Primary School are engaged in rehabilitating mangroves along the coast. Mangroves, considered unsightly by many local residents, have been removed over the years, leading to the degradation of sea grass beds and consequent decline in fish stocks. The children collect germinating seeds from mangrove trees on Western Port. The seeds are potted and raised at school for twelve months before being transplanted to eroding, cleared mudflats.

It is dirty and the kids love it! Some of them will just, you know, instant hipopotamuses and others are very tentative. And you can sort of see the mums, it is interesting. They love to see their kids involved and they really support the work. But the whole thing is about mess. They don’t say anything. They are really good, but you can see their faces! Oh no! (laughing). It really stains the clothes!

Tanya who is a teacher involved in the mangrove planting program was interviewed outside school hours on a deck area at the school.

2.3.10 Glen Devon Primary School

This is a multicultural school located in a dry and dusty area of the western suburbs of Melbourne. Many of the children who attend the school are from low socio-economic backgrounds. Through fund-raising and working with the ‘Home Grown Project’\(^\text{256}\), the school has converted a barren paved area into a native garden and vegetable garden. Children have planted seeds in the garden beds and have been involved in adding fertiliser to the soil, as well as weeding and watering. The project has only been going five months, with each class timetabled for a forty-five minute period per week. A group of up to ten students volunteer to work on the garden before school and during lunch. They are looking forward to their first harvest.

I knew this school quite well and how much it had changed. I just thought this is perfect for this school. So since I arrived here I was just like, ‘We need to

\(^{256}\) For information on the project see (http://www.thehomegrownproject.org.au/).
do this, we need to do this!’ It took a lot to get it going, but now that it’s going I’d say it will keep going.

Ken, the acting school principal who initiated the project, was interviewed in his office during school time.

2.4 DISAPPOINTMENTS

Although the ten participating organisations represent a diverse range of activities from a broad social and cultural background, the inclusion of three programs that declined to be involved might have enriched the gathered data. These programs are briefly noted:

1. The day before the scheduled interview, a state government department declined access to an indigenous native garden that was established to help aboriginal children in the juvenile justice system from age ten to eighteen.

2. An inner city primary school garden project with adjoining high rise public housing estate failed to respond to the letter of invitation and follow up call.

3. The principal of Victoria’s most multicultural school apologised that due to time constraints their school could not be involved.

As discussed above in section 2.2, only three participants were able to attend the focus group. Hurworth suggests that the ideal size of a focus group is six to eight participants with a minimum of no less than four257. A higher level of attendance for the focus group would have enriched the data. However those who did attend I believe offered a depth of insight and understanding that strengthened and adequately tested the emerging theory. An allowance for the small sample involved sending the focus group findings to the other participants for affirmation.

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257 Hurworth, "Qualitative Methodology," 49.
2.5 LIMITATIONS, CONSTRAINTS AND ASSUMPTIONS

This project assumes, and will not seek to argue, that current global warming and consequent climatic change is caused by human activity\(^{258}\). It also assumes that grounded theory practice is a well-established and an accepted qualitative methodology within the social sciences.

An innovative aspect of this study is the use of data drawn from non-church community groups. Some may consider the contribution that community groups might offer the church would be unhelpful or at best limited. However, my personal experience of working with non-church community groups has highlighted the fact that they have a lot to offer. The work of community groups can stimulate the church’s theological reflection and ministry, particularly in the area of care for the environment and ecological issues in general.

Whilst I believe the input of non-church community groups is beneficial, nevertheless this does present a challenge. The difficulty is to use this data to legitimately, and with integrity, construct a theological argument to persuade churches of not only the physical and emotional benefits of gardening for children, but also of the spiritual benefit. The language used by interviewees to describe situations and events is not traditional ‘church’ or religious language, and therefore requires care with interpretation.

Data used in this study concerning children and their relationships and engagement with the natural world relies on the stories and information supplied by teachers and program organisers. The study assumes that retold stories are accurate, and reflect with integrity what was actually happening for the child in each situation. Such accounts are always interpreted through the values lens and experience of the teller. Although care has been taken to process stories thoughtfully, comparing data with data, this might be limiting. Participants may have misread the child’s experience, reframed or even distorted stories

\(^{258}\) See Flannery, *The Weather Makers*. There are numerous more recent books that present arguments for anthropocentric global warming and climate change.
with personal bias, or forgotten significant detail over time. This may lead to poor recollection of the circumstance, and also to the increased likelihood of reading into a situation something that may not have occurred, nor have integrity with the child’s experience. In some ways it may have been more ideal to work directly with children, and observe first-hand children exploring the natural world. However this also would be limiting given the restraint of time, resources and the researcher’s skills. Several of the participants interviewed have worked with children for more than 25 years. Each of the ten interviewees in this study brings a wealth of experience and reflection from working with children. Each is highly respected and trusted in their field. Collectively they draw on an estimated 160 years of experience in this field. Their combined educational skills, insight, wisdom and observation of children and their commitment to seeing them grow and develop is more than one researcher could first-hand observe in several lifetimes. These people are all reflective thinkers who observe keenly and reflect upon the experiences before them.

Whilst care and intention has been focused on selecting a broad range of community groups, this project is limited to the experience of ten organisations based exclusively in Victoria, Australia.

The term natural world used in this study has many potential meanings. Numerous articles and sections of books have been devoted to describing, contrasting and blurring distinctions between natural world, nature, wilderness and the human constructed environment\textsuperscript{259}. In this study the natural world refers to urban parks and garden landscape. This might include zones for the care of pets and animals, backyards, playgrounds, vegetable gardens, vacant land and bushland inhabited by plants and animals.

To my knowledge and understanding there is no similar project or research thesis that is currently being undertaken or has been undertaken previously.

\textsuperscript{259} See Louv, \textit{Last Child in the Woods}, 8.
CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT FINDINGS

In this chapter I present the emerging theory gathered from interviews and focus group. The data is presented in two sections. Firstly, the dilemma facing children in urban communities: Disconnection from the Natural World, and secondly: Children Connecting with the Natural World. Significantly each participant raised the underlying issue that urban children are generally distanced and disconnected from the natural world. Reinforcing the literature, section 3.1 explores this dilemma that confronts urban children.

In response to this concern each of the ten programs featured in this study aims to empower children to form meaningful connections with plants and animals by engaging them in Earth-connecting activities such as gardening, care of animals, and play in natural surroundings. Section 3.2 describes the outworking of program activities and the experiences of children participating in Earth-connecting activities. This section is presented in the form of a diagrammatic cycle using the metaphor of growing a plant from seed through to maturity.

To protect the anonymity of participants and children pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. Quotes from interviewees in this chapter are highlighted in italics to more easily distinguish them from the general text.
3.1 THE DILEMMA: DISCONNECTION FROM THE NATURAL WORLD

Interviewees were invited to share their views on the issues affecting children. All participants had views on the issues they believed to be the most significant for children today, with clear distinctions according to socio-economic backgrounds.

Ken (Glen Devon) and Tanya (Bass Valley) who work with children particularly from lower socio-economic backgrounds reported the need to provide welfare support for their children who are mostly from transient families. Their children often came from welfare dependent, single parent households. Many children have parents with poor literacy skills, some of whom struggle with mental, drug and other health issues, along with long term unemployment. Tanya told me that some children in her school were themselves ‘drug affected from birth’. Many transient families are constantly on the move avoiding debt collectors or family conflict with ‘nearly one third of our school population turning over every three years’.

She also believes that children from these backgrounds ‘often spend a lot of time watching TV or playing computer games and therefore spend limited time outside playing’. Some have too much time on their hands and, as Ken noted, ‘probably spend time outside doing things they shouldn’t be doing’. Implying that the children sometimes get up to mischief.

The other participating organisations, those structured to welcome visiting children from a range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and those working more specifically with children in higher socio-economic areas, raised different issues. The most notable mentioned by four participants is articulated by Peta (Royal Botanic Gardens):

*There’s not the space for peace and relaxation perhaps that children of an earlier time had. What little free time they have is often given over to scheduled activities, ballet or music or any sport or whatever. A whole range of things...I think they just don’t have time to muck about or be with their friends to be at peace and to explore (outside).*

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260 Appendix 5 Interview Questions.
Common to all ten interviewees, though, is the concern that children are increasingly becoming dislocated, disengaged or disconnected from the natural world. Some refer to literature and many cited personal experiences to describe this. Others considered it common sense that children who spend excessive amounts of time indoors playing with electronic toys, watching TV and playing computer games or otherwise busied with scheduled after school activities, will suffer a lack of connection and engagement with their outdoor environments. The issue of technology was noted by five people in the study. Craig’s (Kevin Heinze) comment illustrates this:

_Kids are growing up in an increasingly technological society, (which) disengages people from other people, disengages people from the natural world. We have a real need for that engagement, a part of a natural heritage from where we have evolved. We need to be in touch with it._

Passionate about this he went on saying:

_I was horrified when at a speaking engagement a parent said to me their child got a poor report from kindergarten on computer skills. To me that is horrifying. Kids shouldn’t be doing anything with computers. They should be kids and allowed to run around and skin their knees and climb trees and do kid things rather than be in front of a computer. It’s not going to engage them in a better life._

Three interviewees cited examples of an observable growing ecophobia or fear of the natural world. Parents fearing harm or injury will not allow their children to play freely outside. Craig articulates this particularly well:

_For some reason there is a fear of the natural world. There is a fear of children going out and doing the sorts of things that we used to do as children. Like catching fish or tadpoles or lizards, jump off cliffs and things and sure they are dangerous activities, but we are better people for it._

Each participant went on to say that this disconnection or disengagement from the natural world means that many children are not aware of ‘where their food comes from’, commented Ben (Eaglehawk). They do not have a sense of place and belonging, as Peta notes, ‘_they don’t have a sense of where they fit in the world_’. Mary (Equestrian School) suggested that a lack of connection with the natural world impacted on ‘_body awareness_’ and ‘_sense of self awareness_’.
In response to this experience of disconnection, lack of a sense of place and fear of the natural world, each group sought to redress these concerns through ‘hands on’ activities that encourage children toward an intimate and personal engagement with the natural world.

Ken says that for children from low socio-economic backgrounds the school setting is ‘often the one consistent and stable thing in their lives’. Both he and Tanya see their task of enabling children to connect with something that is consistent as being very important. Describing his school’s garden, Ken sees it as:

*Something that they don’t experience at home because so many things are transient in their lives, the people in their lives. Objects aren’t always around. They could be sold one week and re-bought the following week or could just disappear. Or house. They are constantly moving.*

Connecting with the garden provides the children with an experience that is solid and consistent.

Helping children to connect with the natural world through gardening, care of animals or play in natural surroundings is a key aim clearly evident in each program. Ken says ‘It’s fairly simple. To just engage them in anything where they can touch nature.’ Ben adds. ‘For me it is a lot to do with their connectedness with things like, where does their food come from’. Kristen (St Leonard’s) sees also the importance of slowing children down. ‘Using meditation, to not rushing the children and giving them time, to not pressurizing them into a fast society’. In each interview there was an underlining of the significance of how time and space is used and its impact on the child.

Each project featured in this study encourages every child to be fully engaged in at least one of the areas of planting, nurturing, growing and tending plants, caring for animals, along with enjoying play in natural surroundings. The aim of each project therefore is to create the time and space for children to form relationships in the natural world through connection and engagement in Earth-connecting activities.
3.2 CHILDREN CONNECTING WITH THE NATURAL WORLD

A focus group, consisting of three of the ten interviewees, was the third stage of data collection. In the context of engaging and connecting with the natural world the group was invited to discuss the question, ‘what comes to mind when you think about ‘wonder’ in the context of children and gardening?’

The group began their discussion with this question, talking around the process of offering a place for children to experience wonder in the natural world. They discussed the question for over an hour and concluded that there is a significant flow or movement in the work they do with children in gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings, particularly with children who have behavioural, developmental or cognitive issues. This flow or movement is outlined as follows.

They described that the process begins by creating a safe outdoor space in the natural world for the freedom to explore. In such a place many barriers, like the walls and expectations of the classroom, or difficult family and peer situations that otherwise might create stress in relationships, are removed. The group articulated that this allows a movement from initial anxiety or dysfunction toward introspection. This is particularly noticeable in the behaviour of children with behavioural issues. They described this movement as the child being more aware of ‘self’ through connection and relationship with other living beings, like a plant, animal or bird. Each participant agreed that in their experience the autonomy of the child is affirmed within the relationship. A child when in such a relationship exercises their natural desire to care for, to nurture, to hold and to be held.

They continued by describing that as children play with water, dig in soil, smell compost and handle bugs and animals, there is a heightening of their senses and a consequent release of inhibitions. The shedding of tension and the resulting relaxation allows the stimulation of imagination to create the opportunity to experience wonder and the freedom to explore and imagine. Evidence supporting this process was observed in the
interview responses as themes and meta-themes. Although only three participants were able to attend the focus group, a summary outlining this progression was sent to each participant for verification. Seven of the ten interviewees responded, each affirming this finding as a process they have observed in their work with children.

Inspired by the stories of children growing plants and caring for animals and the dawning of awareness of the flow and rhythms in the natural world, a metaphor has emerged to assist the examination of theory that emerges from the data. I have chosen therefore to present the theory likening the process outlined above to the cycle of:

- Planting a Seed - The lived experience
- Germination - Awakening
- Growth to Maturity - Awareness
- Fruition - Expression
- Replanting - Adding to the Whole

Preceded of course by the necessary task of:

- Composting and Conditioning the Soil - Creating Space

This primary task is akin to creating a space for the larger experience to unfold. The following flow diagram presents this pictorially.
3.2.1 Creating Space – Composting and Conditioning the Soil

The preliminary and central task of preparing a garden is composting and conditioning the soil, just as the preliminary and central task of introducing children to the natural world is to provide a space. Each participant articulated the importance of creating a space for children to play outdoors. This is central to all of the activities featured in this study. Craig voiced his concern about urban development at the expense of natural spaces for children to play:

*I used to go gold mining in the creek just behind us as a little kid. I’d go there early on Saturday morning and come home late in the afternoon with a speck of gold. Now that creek is a concrete drain. You wouldn’t know there was a creek there anymore. This is a sad thing.*
Significantly five participants described how they utilised barren and often discarded zones to create their gardens and play areas.

Ken, now an assistant principal at his school, had attended this same primary school as a child. He recalls that the physical structure of buildings and play areas in the school hadn’t changed in the many years he had been away. His childhood memories ‘were of a lot of concrete and paved areas, with few trees and little grass’. At university he had chosen an optional unit on environmental studies and says ‘this is where my interest in this began’. He described his school grounds before the gardening program:

The buildings, in two parallel sections, were placed in and around a large quadrangle of concrete and bitumen paving. It was an out of bounds area, a waste of space, a concrete area which looked ugly and which wasn’t needed, we have so much other space that is also concrete.

It took a lot of convincing and he admits that he ‘had to wait for a senior staff member to retire ’ before he could finally get approval to create a garden area. However, there were many supportive parents who focused their annual fund raising toward the cost of excavation work. Their enthusiasm resulted in the largest annual total being raised in ten years. Initially, they created a native garden with wetlands and an undulating landscape of shrubs, small trees and grasses which made the whole area much more attractive and pleasant. ‘Later a vegetable garden was added with help from the Home Grown Project, a not-for-profit organisation based in Melbourne’. A space was created!

Both Ben and Jane’s schools also used underutilised, paved or discarded areas to create gardens for their children as part of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden program. The Royal Botanic Gardens and CERES intentionally created spaces for children to visit on school and private excursions. The area that CERES is built upon was once a disused quarry.

An important partner to providing the physical space is making the time for children to be involved. Each of the projects in this study working with children in schools has timetabled significant amounts of time for outdoor activities during normal school hours.
‘Often teachers don’t like to give up their class time for ‘playing’ outside’. A comment made initially by a staff member at Ben’s school in Bendigo. However, now the garden is strongly supported by all the teaching staff.

Kristen’s school, on the other hand, has a strong focus on outdoor play. Intentionally located on one hundred acres the school provides a substantial space for children to play. Incorporating a large lake, bushlands and open paddocks significant amounts of time are scheduled into the timetable for activities within this vast outdoor space.

Creating a space and intentionally setting aside time for children to enjoy and engage with the natural world provides the opportunity for children to experience the process of growing plants, caring for animals and playing in natural surroundings.

3.2.2 The Lived Experience – Planting the Seed

The activity of preparing soil, planting seeds and caring for plants and animals is a tactile experience whereby the senses are fully engaged. Gardening requires physical activity and can be a shared experience affording the opportunity of experiential and consequential learning. Many of the participants in this study teach children the skill of attending, paying attention, to their surroundings.

Sensory – Engaging the Senses

In speaking with each of the interviewees one of the first images that struck me is how the sensory experience enables an intimate connection with the natural world. ‘It is about being connected to the senses. Walking in the long grass, lying down and looking at the clouds, climbing trees’ is how Kristen describes this.

The children involved in each of the programs in this study are physically close to the natural world, touching, feeling, tasting, smelling and seeing. Ben’s children often ‘smell the earthiness of soil’. Craig spoke of disabled children, while making mud bricks to
build a chicken enclosure, ‘eating the worms and the stuff that went into making the bricks’. Joan tells of children ‘smelling the scent of herbs’. Ken’s children watched with anticipation for ‘seedlings breaking through the soil’. In her program ‘The Garden of Rhythm and Rhyme’ Peta says her children are encouraged to listen to the sounds in the garden. Later they participate in writing a song. Jane’s children ‘sit and watch birds’, while Tanya’s children experience the sensation of the ‘grittiness of tiny broken shells in mud’ along with its associated smells as they plant mangrove seedlings.

All of the programs in this study enable children to fully engage each of their senses as they physically encounter the natural world. It is perhaps the most significant redress to the concern that children lack connection and engagement with the natural world.

Consequential Learning – Risky Experience

A significant theme emerging from the data is that a degree of risk is important for the development of children. The creation of spaces where children have the freedom to explore, climb trees, play in water, use adult sized tools, dig in the soil and eat food from the garden is imperative. Four participants shared their belief that children given the freedom to try and fail, to climb and fall, better learn and grow in understanding their physical limitations and personal exposure to risk in later life. This theme was further tested when the findings of the focus group were sent to each interviewee. Three other interviewees added their affirmation.

The theme of exposure to risk emerged in the interviews from a question that the Human Research and Ethics Committee (HREC) required for inclusion in this study. The question read ‘In the interests of children’s safety and wellbeing, what recommendations would you offer to churches considering taking up similar activities to your program?’ The first person I interviewed, Craig, responded saying, ‘Interesting. It is interesting that you have that question because here that has never been a consideration’. He went on to describe one of his greatest concerns as being that children are ‘separated’ and ‘protected’ from the natural world because of parental fear that harm might come to their
children. He noted that activities with any level of risk are removed from school playgrounds because of the fear of harm to children and litigation. He lamented, ‘The kids can’t have a swing. Swings are banned’. This was a significant issue for Craig and with his voice rising he continued:

We are getting to the point where perhaps the next step is to ban fun altogether because it is too dangerous! Certainly they wouldn’t let kids anywhere near our pond because it isn’t fenced off!

Children have ‘fallen into the pond, thrown their shoes in, walked up the flowing creek bed with their shoes off, and on!’ and later added ‘we haven’t lost a kid in thirty years, so it’s not an issue for us’. Craig’s program actively encourages engagement with the natural world with a minimum of restriction and a degree of risk. In our discussion Craig explained ‘we do things safely’ making a clear distinction between safe practise and risky behaviour. Many of their practices, some might consider though, are irresponsible or even dangerous, for instance:

We have poisonous plants growing here. Regardless of the fact that we have children with disabilities we have rhubarb. The leaves are quite toxic. I find kids chewing on the leaves and they spit them out as they taste terrible. This is how we have learnt to evolve as human beings. Don’t eat the poisonous stuff, it is bad for you.

Craig’s program advocates experiential and consequential learning, and most other participants agreed.

Kristen’s preschoolers are encouraged to climb trees and play freely around their unfenced lake. The teachers diligently watch out for the children with frequent inconspicuous head counts with the aim of the children feeling free to play and explore their natural surroundings. One of the major issues for children that Kristen raised early in our interview was that children do not have enough risk in their lives. I brought this comment to her attention in the light of the HREC inclusion. Asking her ‘Do children have enough risk in their lives?’ She exclaimed:

They don’t. They don’t! And if children, it comes back to our image of the child, if we don’t give children the opportunity to experience risk and they don’t find out what happens when a glass breaks or if they fall out of a tree, they don’t learn how to handle themselves. They don’t know how to hang on tighter or use and develop their muscles and develop their strength.
Kristen doesn’t see the vegetable patch at her school as being inherently hazardous for her preschooler children even though the staff intentionally allow the children to use real, adult sized, garden tools. Under supervision there is the opportunity for the children to learn the skills they need to use them properly.

The children of Jane’s Kitchen Garden (Kallista) enjoy the same opportunity. Highlighting the importance of safe tool handling Jane doesn’t directly refer to exposing children to risk. Rather, she talks about respect, ‘It’s not so much hazard, it is treating the kids with the same respect and the same level of trust as you would treat an adult’. When the children sense they are being trusted she believes they most often honour that by being trustworthy. As a teacher she was clear and consistent in the way she disciplined and instructed the children. Later in the interview she talked about her preschooler’s garden club who at lunch time use secateurs to prune plants around the school, ‘I say to them “they are very sharp tools. But you can use them. There is no mucking around. If you muck around you stop!” And those kids respect that’. The consistent approach allows the opportunity yet again for consequential learning.

Shaun from CERES and Peta from the Royal Botanic Gardens cited nut allergies and the expectations of visiting schools as something their program organisers need to be aware of in the context of exposure to risk and potential harm. Their programs are open to the wider public, and the issue of litigation and policies maintaining safety, mean that even the most benign complaint needs to be scrutinized. They err on the side of caution. Peta cited the example of a garden in Great Britain ‘that was sued for millions when a child fell from a tree onto a rocky surface’. She laments:

I hate the super safe, no adventure-type, or challenge-type environment. I think it is very sad, but I suppose on the other hand you have got to protect yourself against the occasional accident or litigious parent.

The Royal Botanic Gardens do, however, intentionally invite and encourage children to climb in and out of trees and up and over rocks in as safe a context as possible. The ground surface is soft and there are no sharp edges. There is a sense in which children are
invited to experience freedom and adventure within safe boundaries. I describe this observation as ‘safe risk’\textsuperscript{261}.

Suspecting her conservatism was more in line with the expectation of her role as a child educator at the gardens, I extended this further with Peta. She later then added:

\textit{But children don’t learn how to manage their own body. If the environment is so structured and safe and they are so over-controlled that they are never allowed to challenge themselves in their environment they are at a greater risk than if they are sensibly allowed to explore their own bodies, what they can do with them and know what their limits are. You know. I can climb that high but I can’t manage it if I go any higher.}

During the Focus Group discussion Peta expanded this point further suggesting that high risk behaviour in middle class, ‘private school teenagers such as drug abuse, binge drinking and speeding in cars’, is perhaps due to a lack of opportunity to explore and extend themselves as younger children. She suggested ‘they were not free to test their limits as children’. This could be the case as participants from higher socio-economic areas in this study indicated that parents restrict their children’s exposure to risk due to concerns about them coming to harm.

Tanya’s mangrove project involves a considerable risk with mud, water and sharp shells. ‘It’s mud, real mud and it’s black and you sink in it and its thick and you can’t guarantee one step after another is going to be secure’. Initially some parents were concerned about the risk of injury to their children through running and falling in mud. However, ‘once they saw how much fun the children had and the freedom they enjoyed, all the parents were very supportive’. Tanya indicated that the only adult who articulated some reservation was the bus driver who needed to balance getting the children back to school with keeping a clean bus!

In the context of general health and risk Ben and Kristen talked about children’s exposure to dirt and soil. Ben said:

\textit{There is a real problem for me because children need to get dirty. I think there are more allergies, asthma and all that stuff. There are heaps of studies}

\textsuperscript{261} Louv, \textit{Last Child in the Woods}, 176. Louv refers to this as ‘controlled risk’.
that say these things are caused by living in a sterile environment and we need to get dirt under our finger nails and maybe even eat a bit of it!

Kristen added:

We had a pediatrician come(to school) and talk to us about anaphylaxis and he said that he is involved in research indicating that this is because children are not exposed to enough bacteria living in urbanized, sanitized environments.

Ken’s response differed from the other participants. He indicated that his parent base would not be concerned at all about the risk of injury to their children. He cited an example from his school, which is in a lower socio-economic area, of removing an old play fort because it was constructed from treated timber that the Education Department now considers unsafe for children. ‘There was an out-roar from the parents because, “It’s fine. They have been on that for years!” It is almost quite the opposite’, he said. His greatest concern in the area of risk is that the children in his school ‘sometimes take a lot of risks!’ Without supervision and careful parenting some of his children have been seen wandering the streets at night and could be at risk of becoming involved in crime. This emphasizes the need for places where there is a safe level of risk, places where children are free to explore and play to extremes and yet safe from the risk of serious injury. Boundaries and guidelines are necessary to maintain safety.

**Attending to the Experience**

Peta at the Royal Botanic Gardens described how children in their program are often invited to sit and observe sounds, smells and the movement of leaves and insects:

> When I take groups through the garden here we sit by the pond and I make them be still and quiet and then I ask them to close their eyes and listen and to tell me what they hear.

One of her activities involves the children writing a song around these observations. Some of Craig’s children are not physically able to play or dig in their garden but ‘they can listen to the birds, listen to the water fall and be surrounded by the natural environment’. Jane in Kallista spoke of several experiences where she takes her children to places in their garden to spend time sitting and attending to what is happening about them:
The sage bush was in full bloom. Flowers all over it. Beautiful. And I think I probably had half a dozen kids and we all just sat around and watched bees. And we talked about bees and what they do and you know the whole experience of getting in there, the honey, the pollen...

On another occasion Jane’s children went for a walk through the garden. At one point she invited them to stop, focus and look around them:

*It is just about being aware and being focused and stopping and just looking at our surroundings. And it might be something like we were watching an eagle the other week and he was being dive bombed by a Kurrajong and he was just circling and circling and these Kurrajongs were attacking his tail and we just stood there for ages watching.*

Tanya believes this experience can occur spontaneously. Towards the end of the day when her children were visiting a remote and beautiful island, she said, ‘*They wanted to stay, and not even do anything, just watch, just be there*’. Kristen relayed a similar story of a small boy in her class:

*There was a little tree trunk which had been cut down. We were out on our walk and this child sat in this tree trunk like it was a nest. The other children were playing, running around and climbing and he just sat in this little tree trunk and watched. It was almost like it was a little nest for him and he loved being in this space.*

Shaun takes visiting children on creek walks where they are encouraged to pause and observe the effect of rubbish in the creek without being caught up with the distractions that might normally occupy their attention:

*It’s one of those times when they are not actually riding across the creek with their friends or family they are stopping at points and looking at the storm-water drains.*

The experience of sitting and observing or ‘attending’ to their surroundings in the natural world is contrary to the usual experiences of children, as described by each of the research participants. Attending to their surroundings is one of the primary elements in children’s experience of learning. That is, learning is substantially based in experience.
Learning from the Experience

Each participant described an emphasis upon learning. Most articulated this in terms of experiential learning. In the example above, Jane noted that it’s one thing to talk in the classroom about bees and what they do, but it is certainly another thing to get right up close:

*It really opened the kid’s eyes, rather than just having the pictures in a book. Physically watch an individual bee doing his job and see his little thingies going and look at the hair on his back and the pollen on his hair…*

Jane explained that this type of experience sticks in the minds of her children. They often refer back to similar experiences revealing their learning and memory retention.

Being in the garden and generally just outside is a wonderful place to stimulate discussion, questions and learning. As Kristen noted for example:

*We were surprised by what came out of the veggie patch. So many things have come up in terms of discussion about what they have been wondering about and it comes very naturally. ‘How did the beetroot get its colour?’*

All of the participants engage children in activities where they are learning skills. Ben told me that the children in his garden perform all of the tasks that relate to gardening, ‘they dig over the garden beds, make all the compost, grow everything from seed, do all the harvesting’. The children are learning as they perform the tasks. Ken’s most memorable story was of a child who:

*Planted the pot, the plant and all in the hole and completely covered it with soil, then said ‘It’s planted!’ I explained to her that you first need to take it out of the pot and then make sure the leaves aren’t covered over. Then the following week a new girl was in the class and the girl who had buried hers the week before showed her how to plant it without covering it up. ‘Don’t put it all in the ground.’ She said. ‘It won’t grow!’ So she learnt from her experience.*

Shaun believes that:

*Ecology, respecting the environment and knowing the environment and being part of the environment will teach you everything you need to know, really, I mean all the other things are important but I think they should be taught in a different way.*
Shaun shows children pictures of birds and animals that have been harmed by roadside rubbish washed into creeks. He described a typical creek walk:

A dead duck we saw once had a plastic ring around its neck. You get a lot of kids who can sometimes cry, it’s not what we are looking for, but a lot of the time I think that drives them to be able to go home and say, ’Maybe we shouldn’t get a plastic bag because I saw this duck today’.

The photographic images displayed in the classroom setting seek to capture and reinforce the experience of walking the creeks. In three other programs, Tanya, Peta and Kristen also spend a balance of time in the classroom discussing experiences and observations from their time outdoors. The remaining six generally do all their learning outside, physically engaging in hands-on activities related to gardening and care of animals.

Children learn by experience how to ‘handle delicate plants and baby animals’ whilst performing tasks in the garden, explained Ben. Ken also describes how ‘some children are naturally gentle and therefore do well when transplanting small seedlings’.

Conversely, the more ‘robust’ children, he continued, ‘learn to be gentle when it comes to handling small animals’. This is learning by doing. Children engaging in outdoor activities have a wonderful opportunity to learn by experience.

**Physical Activity**

Physical activity for children is an important theme emerging from the data. Each of the ten participants in this study described their children as being physically active. Tanya spoke of the physical energy required to walk through mud harvesting mangrove seedlings and how ‘they fall over, I fall over, but then we get back up’. Children involved in Mary’s equestrian school ‘learn all aspects of horse care, feeding, grooming and looking after them’, which includes cleaning stables and carrying feed and grain. Riding a horse requires physical exertion, strength and balance. Joan (Gardening Australia) says:

*There are those who like the practical, the physical activity of doing gardening. We have forgotten how important doing physical stuff is, we just can’t be sedentary in this world. You just can’t sit there watching a computer or television. You have got to be physical or you will end up, you know, perilless! (sic)*
Some of the gardens I visited had children at work and I noted in passing the sheer physical effort of gardening and tending animals. While interviewing Ben in a quiet, reflective section of the garden, several children in a far corner worked with piles of compost. Ben explained to me the children’s task involved aerating the compost by digging it from one bin to another. This was an energetic activity that the boys particularly seemed to enjoy. Jane agrees ‘I have some boys who dig the poo in the leaf pit. That’s all they want to do in the garden. They really have fun. It’s not that bad a job, they enjoy it and it’s physical’.

Peta, Shaun and Ken reminded me with their stories that children love to climb, run and play when the opportunity is provided. Kristen spoke of her children and their weekly adventure around the school property describing ‘lots of children playing and climbing trees and picking grass’. Joan described boys in one of her classes while teaching in a rural area who enjoyed ‘digging over the soil in preparation for planting trees’.

Physical activity is intrinsically an important component of each program explored in this study. Most often the activities are also shared experiences.

**Shared Experience**

As each of the respondents described their projects I became aware that the children are nearly always performing their activities in groups, sometimes large, other times small. Some of the activities that Mary described in her equestrian program, such as teaching a child to ride a horse, did not always involve group work. However the activities outlined in the other nine programs almost always involved the children working together and sharing the experience. School groups visiting CERES and the Royal Botanic Gardens might break into smaller more manageable groups, but mostly stay together in their school group.

Most respondents working with older primary school age children describe how they gather the children into working groups and issue tasks for the session. They then set the
groups to work. Ben talked of one boy, who ‘some of the others don’t like because he often interrupts’ as being a ‘capable boy who remembers instructions and leads the other children’. Listening to the participants’ stories, it is clear that there would be considerable negotiating around ‘who will do what’, what tools they will use and who will use them. When the children have a set activity to perform there is the opportunity to learn about cooperation. This model helps children develop important social skills. During Ben’s interview he issued instructions, which was followed by discussion amongst the children. Even from a distance, the negotiations appeared to be around who will perform the set tasks, which I observed as them cooperating.

The kitchen garden projects run by Jane and Ben harvest food which is taken into the classroom where the children together process and prepare a meal. The final product is shared together, sitting around tables. Ben noted that:

*The garden is a team effort. Everyone in the school is part of a big team. They all work on it. As a class they are a team and in each of their little groups they’re a team as well. Some of the team effort they’re involved in, some of it they’re not, until the work comes together at the end and they are eating it in the kitchen.*

Tanya described the importance of children having a common experience in the midst of the children’s transience and unsettling ‘coming and going’. The children in Tanya’s class have one thing in common; they learn about mangroves in Westernport, ‘so it gives us all a common thing, and with that there is a common language, a common story’. And indeed they do have a lot of stories they can remind each other about:

*You know, the time when somebody fell over in the mud or the time when this happened or that happened. So that gives us a sort of common bond through story telling and shared experiences.*

In the context of experiencing grief at the loss of an animal, class pet or significant plant, Craig believes there are often shared moments of engagement for children in the garden. ‘They’re not necessarily going to stay engaged like that for ever’ he added, however there will be ongoing experiences. Craig also talked about the significance of belonging to a group:
To me it seems there is a need to be a part of a group or, well I call it a tribal thing. We had one young fellow at the time he came into a group and he wouldn’t be a part of it. He would just lay down and wouldn’t engage in what the others were doing in the garden. But after three months he was doing exactly what the others were doing because he wanted to. He wanted to be a part of that group, regardless of what his own behaviour had been in the past.

Significantly Craig noted that he had only seen this occur in a gardening and outdoor context and never in the built or classroom environment.

3.2.3 Awakening – The Germination

The shared experience of physical activity and the opportunity to fully and freely engage their senses, in connecting with and attending to their natural surroundings, stimulates an awakening within children. The participants described this in their stories as wonder, amazement, excitement and joy. Upon awakening to the needs of others, children are better able to form relationships with subjects of the natural world which are based on mutuality and care.

Awakening to Wonder, Amazement, Excitement and Joy

Craig’s experience with a profoundly deaf young person who visited the Kevin Heinze Children’s Garden illustrates this phenomenon. She didn’t particularly want to participate in the program, however:

On the first day we went out into the garden and we collected some tomatoes, tomatillos and zucchinis and what we did was brought them inside and crushed them all up. And for these kids, there was two of them, for them crushing up the fruit was an experience. The fruit was all squishy. It was very tactile, and then I pointed out that there were seeds inside that we were looking for, and we found the seeds for the tomatoes and tomatillos and zucchinis, and we separated them out. And this particular young girl was amazed to find that’s where seeds come from. They were inside the plant. Ever since that time, she has been totally engaged in finding more seeds... ‘Where are this plants seeds? How does it grow?’ All of this was through an interpreter of course because I can’t sign very well, but excitement! Engagement! That continuing excitement about knowing, wanting to plant things, totally engaged in nurturing the plants that she had planted from seeds. A total turn around! A total love of what she is doing.
When invited to tell of their most memorable or significant experience of working with children in gardening, care of animals or play in natural surroundings, seven interviewees told stories of children experiencing a sense of ‘wonder’. All told stories of children experiencing amazement, joy, interest, excitement and enthusiasm. Each also told how contagious this experience is for other children in the group. Even parents and program coordinators could experience the excitement. Peta said they often reported feeling ‘albeit tired and drained at the end of a session, up lifted because they’d had a lovely time together’.

All interviewees described how their children generally loved being outside. Tanya commented on her children whilst on the mud flats, ‘they love being there, I mean, all the kids love it. They are so highly delighted to be out of the classroom and into the outdoor environment’. Similarly Peta’s response is typical:

That feeling of excitement of being, I mean, you don’t have to sell nature to children. They love being there. All of the kids love it. They are so highly delighted to be out of the classroom and into the outdoor environment. I give them little stories and anecdotes that give them that delight and they want more and they keep telling their stories from home, grandpa or whatever.

Craig reported that the experience of awe and wonder, ‘and surprise happens all the time, every day!’ He adds ‘the biggest focus for us has always been, and would always be, reinforced here is a sense of fun’.

Often boys are excited and naturally taken by the ‘strange and bizarre’. Creatures like spiders, strange insects and bugs that Shaun refers to as ‘mini beasts’, along with strange plants like the Venus Fly Trap are intriguing, and yet, it is not always the strange and bizarre that elicits curiosity. Most often it is the simplest or most common things that stimulate a sense or experience of discovery. Joan’s response is typical:

It doesn’t have to be a plant that is as strange as the Venus Fly Trap. It can be something just like mint. I used to have two little girls who lived down the road from me and their mother would walk them to school and a little bit of mint plant was creeping out and the mother would bend down every day and the little girls would touch the mint and say things like, ‘Ooh, it smells like spearmint, it smells like chewing gum’. And that was wonderful because that
little bit of wonderment from a plant that was just straggling the path is fantastic.

Craig also emphasised the theme of children experiencing wonder in the simple things:

Sometimes it is the simplest things. Finding a worm in the garden is incredibly exciting for kids, they are so happy to discover something they have dug up out of the ground wriggling. Especially a worm.

Craig went onto say even a potato can be like a ‘treasure’ to the children, bringing joy and excitement, ‘Incredibly joyous, finding is a joyous moment’.

Two other participants also used the word ‘joy’ to describe experiences of children. Kristen told of her preschoolers planning their first harvest, a beetroot, which they decided would parallel the tale of the enormous turnip. They all joined hands and arms together to pick the plant because:

It was so special, and the joy on the children’s faces! This was about a beetroot! And it was such a celebration. You’d think what happens in their lives and materialistic things would make them happy, but, here we are being so excited about the picking of a beetroot. This is so important because they have been involved in every part of the process. It is joyous.

Jane referred to joy several times to describe the school garden and the experience of the children:

It’s a joy, you lose track of time whilst in the garden…
To me it is what the garden should be, a place of joy, a place of relaxing…
The kids love the chickens. That’s just the joy, joy of joys, I say to the kids ‘Go and look for some slugs and snails for the chickens’. That’s their joy.

Peta at the Royal Botanic Gardens talked about discovery which appears to stimulate the children’s natural curiosity. ‘We walk them through the gardens and show them some of the magic, the secret things that they might not be alert to otherwise. We turn it into a sort of discovery’. The wonder of discovery in learning captures the children as they engage with something for the first time. Children familiar with mangroves were amazed and fascinated to learn what they thought were mangrove shoots were in fact aerial roots. Due to water logging and mud compaction aerial roots help mangrove trees take up oxygen from the atmosphere. In a television interview, Tanya described how:

When they find things or discover things they’re so excited in a way that I don’t see in the classroom all the time. They’re just jumping out of themselves.
They're calling you over. They're telling you what they know. They’re asking questions.262

Kristen describes the sense of awe and wonder in the way the children ask so many questions. They are excited by what they are learning and experiencing in the outdoors:

They are constantly wondering and struck. That’s why I was saying we were surprised by what came out of the veggie patch. There are so many things that have come up in discussion about what they have been wondering about and it comes very naturally, like’ how did the beetroot get it’s colour?’ They are fascinated.

The visit of a heron captured the attention of children from Ben’s school near Bendigo. A water bird, normally only ever seen on the fringes of lakes and water-ways, visited the school pond looking for fish and frogs to eat during the drought. Busily working in their garden one of the children looked up and called out, ‘What’s that bird?’ Ben reported what he, and the art teacher who attended the interview, and was also in the garden when the bird visited, had to say:

Ben: Yeh, that was amazing. There was a heron sitting up on the shade house on there. The children were quiet and watched

Art Teacher: There was a definite sense of wonder.

Ben also told the story of a boy’s fascination about the potential for seeds to reproduce:

We were cleaning cucumber seeds, we were taking them out of the really ripe cucumbers and we were cleaning them so they could be replanted. And a boy picked up a seed and said ‘You know it’s fascinating that one seed can grow so many fruit and so many more seeds!’

Several participants also described the sense of excitement at seeing the first sign of life as a seedling begins to push out of the ground, ‘especially for the child who planted that seed’ noted Joan. Ken told the story of his school children ‘experiencing anticipation’, returning each day to see if there were ‘signs of life’, going through the stage of thinking that nothing is going to happen, before, ‘all of a sudden, there it is, a seed begins to emerge’. One child exclaimed ‘Wow! So this is how it all starts...’ As more and more

seedlings emerged Ken said ‘the children were amazed at how many there were’. Some of the children commented to him how amazed they were about ‘how big plants can become from such small seeds’.

Visiting a school one day Joan had a discussion with an excited young boy about his school garden. ‘He told me. ‘I love eating peas straight from the garden out there. They’re just as good as lollies!’ And I said ‘Are you serious?’ It’s just amazing!’ The natural curiosity of children to engage with their surroundings is stimulated in the natural world toward wonder, amazement, surprise, joy and delight. An integral aspect of this experience is the recognition of beauty.

**Recognition of Beauty - Aesthetics**

Being in a place that is completely natural and ‘untouched’ can be a special experience. Tanya observed this with her children on Reef Island in Western Port, an isolated place that most of the children in her class would never have visited before. The island of mud and sand is covered in crabs and mangroves, and in season is visited by migratory birds. The island is only accessible by boat or on foot at low tide so there are only a few hours available for a visit before the tide comes in. Toward sun set, Tanya said, ‘yeh the tide was coming in and there was water rising around our ankles, but it was just so beautiful’.
Tanya, added that the children ‘experienced the beauty of this remote place’.

It is difficult to know if Tanya attributed this experience of beauty to the children or if it was hers alone, however, when Ben described the visiting heron the response of the children was one of recognition of the beauty of this majestic bird. Here is more of Ben and the art teacher’s conversation from above:

**Art Teacher:** There was a definite sense of wonder.
**Ben:** The children were really quiet and watching.
**Art Teacher:** It was very noticeable.
**Interviewer:** So for them there was a sense of wow! Where has this bird come from?
**Art Teacher:** And what it was doing, because they’re a fairly large bird, and you don’t see them every day at all and it was just there.
Ben: It was impressive.
Art Teacher: It had a really long beak
Ben: It was an incredible size and it had its eye on that little holding tank by the bike pump, obviously it thought there were fish or frogs there. But how it spotted it I have no idea.

Both Ben and the art teacher described the children as watching in silence, taken by the bird’s beauty and magnificence.

Jane told me the story of an older year six boy who like some his age had begun to grow bored with the normal gardening program. He seemed disinterested. Jane encouraged him to wander through the garden and look for something that caught his attention. Reporting back that he had found nothing Jane took him over to a red currant bush:

Jane: Okay have you seen the red currants?
Boy: Nup!
Jane: I thought you have seen it all!
We bobbed down, it was all a bit of a conspiracy you know, next to this red currant bush, which was covered in leaves.
Boy: So?
Jane: Watch this!
And I lifted up the leaves and all these little translucent red and green orbs and the light was coming from behind and it just backlit them all so they were all, you know, perfect little, just thousands of them.
Boy: Oh wow!
Jane: Imagine having the skill to draw that and capture that light.
Boy: Oh how cool would that be?

Aware that the boy not only enjoyed drawing but was actually quite gifted Jane saw his attitude change completely when the beauty of the red currants captured his attention. Summoning children from all over the garden, Jane went on to say, ‘that he set about showing off how beautiful they were and how good he was at capturing this image with paper and pen’.

### 3.2.4 Awareness – Growing to Maturity

Once children are awoken to their natural surroundings there is often a growing sense of autonomy alongside the awareness of others. This is revealed in the data in the children’s awareness of the needs of plants and animals and the forming of relationships. Here also
is a growing awareness and recognition of the origins of food. Children become more aware of interdependence and rhythms within the natural world. Children, particularly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, also express a greater sense of place and belonging.

**Awareness of Others – That which is beyond self**

The awareness of that which is beyond ones’ self is revealed in the growing recognition of the needs of plants and animals. Jane in Kallista comments:

> We had one chicken which was...it was an unfortunate situation where one of the chickens snuck into the shed as the children were coming in and out and was locked in over the weekend. It was hot and the chicken basically baked. She didn’t die. It was really touch and go and I explained to the kids. I sort of said ‘Okay guys this is what has happened’. For about three weeks after, every single child kept telling me there was a sick chicken. So we talked and I explained to the kids how important it was that they are vigilant.

Depending on the age and cognitive ability of a child each participant furnished examples of how children learn about the needs of plants and animals. The distressing experience, told by Jane above, enabled her children to learn about the needs of chickens. Ken said that ‘children generally quickly learn that a plant needs water, sun, compost and fertilizer in order to grow into a healthy and productive plant’. Many older children, noted Jane, ‘become aware of the seasons and learn that some plants like it hotter than others’. While working in the garden, children see firsthand the effect of low water on a plant. ‘Especially now that it is getting warmer the kids are looking at the veggies and as soon as there is a little bit of a wilt then they are in telling me, “They need water, they need water!”’ exclaimed Ken. Mary teaches children about the needs of horses. Children have to learn how to approach a horse. ‘The horse is a large unpredictable flight animal that has blind spots, so children need to learn where to stand, how not to startle them and how to handle them’.

Ben commented that children feeding weeds to chickens learn ‘how much the chickens really enjoy scratching around eating the leaves and bugs’. Ben teaches the children
about plant competition and how plants grow better when weeds are removed. Weeds mulched down with other scraps and manure from the chicken cage, go well in compost which is good for garden beds, making the soil softer to work, suppressing weed growth and fertilizing the plants. Children involved in programs like the Kitchen Garden project work on their gardens from year one through to year six. Over this period of time the children become very familiar with this cycle and routine of weeding, feeding chickens and composting. Both Ben and Tanya believe that over time their children will recognise this connection. Ben added ‘Where there is a focus on making compost children learn about soil fertility and how a soil improves over time if lots of compost is added’.

Working with unusual plants can be an effective way for children to become aware of the needs of plants. Children on the mangrove project with Tanya were intrigued about salt water and plants. ‘They trialled watering mangrove seedlings with salt water, which grew as normal, and then found using sea water on normal veggies quickly killed the plants’. Tanya indicated that the children have learnt about the evolution of mangroves, their tolerance to salt water, along with the different needs of plants generally. Children’s awareness of varying levels of care, for instance, was highlighted at Ken’s school where initially a native garden was installed. Later the garden was extended to include a vegetable garden. ‘Once the children had learnt to care for the native garden they found it a surprising challenge to manage the more intensive veggie garden which required a great deal more care and monitoring’.

Ken believes class pets make a significant contribution toward a child’s learning about care of animals. He described ‘how children are placed on a roster to provide food and take the class pet home on weekends’. Changing water, cleaning cages and moving to and from sunlight educates the children on routines to best care for their animals. Ken added that ‘the children also develop a sense of responsibility by not wanting to let the class, themselves or the pet down in not caring for it properly’.

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In each of the examples described above there is a strong indication that the children develop a sense of awareness of other through recognizing need. They learn to care for a plant or animal recognizing its need for nurture and support beyond their own needs and desires.

Several participants described the children forming relationships within the natural world. Kristen noted that ‘relationships are really important. Whether that’s relationships with each other, with the environment, nature’. Ben also adds:

*I suppose in a sense they’re forming a relationship with the garden and the environment or the world around them. They respond to the things growing and changing in the garden because the garden is always changing and is not static.*

The theme of relationship was particularly evident in the projects involving animals. Mary, while working with teenagers in a VCAL course on managing and training horses, told the dramatic story of her students rescuing a horse destined for slaughter:

*I realized they were talking about a particular horse that had very little hope of being rehabilitated. It had been extremely injured and had been returned to the market after being quite aggressive with a person who had bought it previously. It had laminitis which was quite extreme which is a swelling on the inside of the hoofs. That horse would normally have been put down. The horse was very frightened and very aggressive and they came up to me and said we want to take this horse.*

This particular example highlights the significant opportunity of learning about the physical and psychological needs of an animal. Mary went on to describe how the horse had been mistreated most of its life resulting in it being:

*Very poorly nourished and difficult to control. Rehabilitation was costly and time consuming. The students needed to work hard to earn the trust of such an abused animal, however, having formed a relationship with the horse they were committed to the project seeing him through to a full recovery.*

And commitment is what they are taught. Mary said her young people are required to sign an agreement before commencing her training course indicating they will commit to attend each session because their horse is relying upon them for food and care. ‘If they are not able to attend the program they need to ring another student and ask if that
student can care for the horse for that day’. Mary told another significant story of a child and the process of him beginning to form a relationship with a horse named Spike:

I had a student who was only four years old who wanted to learn to ride horses. He had no regard for animals at all. He thought they were like trucks and cars that didn’t have feelings. So after the first couple of lessons he thought, ‘Well this is interesting. I can maneuver this horse around and it does what I ask.’ And I think after about six lessons I thought this is very strange this child is not wanting to connect with this horse because one of the things that I teach is to connect with the horse by looking in their eye, not just getting up on their backs. The horse is a sensitive being that requires some sort of connection and communication. That often surprises people because they think they are just like a bicycle. On you hop and off you go! This child even though he was four it was just like talking with a ten year old. He was very blasé about it, almost clinical in the way that he approached horses. He started to relax a lot more through the movement of riding and the action of brushing the horse and stopped talking as much and started to feel more about what he was doing. One day, when we finished the lesson he reached down and brushed the horse’s neck and said, ‘I think I like Spike.’ And that was the first moment of him connecting with any animal.

Mary also added that horses although large had evolved from small prairie animals and so behave, as did their ancestors, as ‘prey’ animals. Horses therefore react to pressure and fear by either fight or flight responses. The horse-human relationship is a predator-prey relationship which makes it very easy to dominate a horse into submission. ‘This is very commonly practiced in the horse industry and can be very subtle’, added Mary, critical of this approach. Mary explained that people can assert their will in very subtle ways that don’t appear to be abusive, however someone sensitive to this practice can notice in the horse’s manner that their spirit is being crushed. ‘It’s not possible for a small child to outweigh a horse with strength. It is only through the relationship with that animal that the child is able to control the horse and maneuver it around’. Mary’s work encourages children therefore to form a relationship with the horse that is based on mutuality and care, as opposed to a relationship where the interests and needs of one party are met at the expense of the other.

Awareness of the Origin of Food

A little girl picked up an apple and said ‘hey mum, mum, look there is a leaf on the apple!’ This was a new thing. Why is there a leaf on that apple? She didn’t know that the apple had grown on a tree.
Stephanie Alexander initiated the Kitchen Garden Scheme in response to a similar experience as Ben described above. Ben went on to say that:

*Stephanie Alexander had a restaurant in Collingwood and the young chefs she had there didn’t know where the food came from. They didn’t know that a plant had a flower then a seed and fruit, so here they were cutting it up and cooking it and they didn’t know where it had come from.*

Apart from Tanya’s mangrove rehabilitation program and Mary’s equestrian school each participant enthusiastically reported their outdoor activities involved teaching children about food and the origin of vegetables. Ben went further to say his children are learning, not only where their food comes from, but more significantly to recognise vegetables and fruit throughout their stages of development:

*The other day we were doing some harvesting, we were harvesting some parsley, and I asked ‘what plant is this?’ Someone said that it was a carrot. The leaves look very similar to carrot leaves. Another child however called out saying it was parsley. They are learning all the time.*

Jane’s children are involved in an ongoing project. Jane says her children ‘over many years of harvesting and replanting seed will become familiar with which seeds belonged to which vegetable’. The children harvest seed which is cleaned, stored and labelled. ‘We bundle them up into little envelopes and package them up nicely and then we sell them at the market across the road’. Some is saved for the next planting, and recognition of the cycle of growth emerges.

**Interdependence**

Jane’s children not only learn about where food comes from but also interdependence within the natural world between plants and animals. Jane noted that in caring for the vegetables, fruit trees and chickens in their garden, her children become aware of plant’s and animal’s connection within cycles and systems.

*I need this plant to eat. This is where my food comes from. The plant needs me to water and care for it. We are each dependent on the other.*
Children in Tanya’s mangrove project have learnt about the ecosystem of the Western Port region as part of their involvement with the ‘Western Port Seagrass Partnership’. They have become familiar with interdependence. Seagrass in Western Port has been dying for many years with resulting erosion and depleted fish stocks. Over the past several years scientists have made the link of regressing seagrass to several local phenomena, including the removal of mangroves from the coastal mud flats\(^{264}\). Mangroves hold mud in place and protect the shoreline from erosion. When the mangroves are removed, the eroded sediment suspended in the water reduces the amount of sunlight reaching the seagrass on the sea bed. The settling sediment also kills the seagrass by smothering the leaves. Tanya points out that:

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\text{As the kids investigate Western Port they become aware of the complexity of the whole system. The mangroves are an intrinsic part and without mangroves there are no fish. The fish are an intrinsic part of the whole and the extent to which the mangroves have been lost over time, especially on the western side of Western Port, makes the kids become aware that we really do need to put the mangroves back.}
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The children see the effects of erosion firsthand:

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\text{There are a few sites where we go where you can really see the erosion impact. We do life charts in different locations and the kids see where the mangroves are established and the shoreline is intact, there is salt bush, marsh and melaleuca. Where the mangroves have been removed, the kids see that it’s just desolate and the water is creeping further and further inland.}
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With extra funding, Tanya’s desire would be to take the children for more frequent field trips to the mud flats, where they could explore more closely migratory birds. She believes the ‘global’ significance of birds migrating from China and other parts of Asia to the children’s local water ways would help them become more aware of their place in the world and the significance of:

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\text{Interconnectedness, because if we are not doing our bit here to look after the place where the birds need to come, then we are affecting a global cycle.}
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Awareness of the Rhythms in the Natural World

Each participant commented that children become more aware of rhythms in the natural world when they spend significant amounts of time outside. Children experience and recognise the transition of seasons, through flows of hot-cold and wet-dry, the changing colours of leaves, day lengths, changing shadows and seasonal growing. Jane describes here the recognition of cycles:

*We were doing something the other week and one of the kids said ‘We did this last year!’ And I said, ‘Hello, this is what it is all about! The cycles. Can you remember doing it last year? What was the day like? Yes it was much like this. It wasn’t hot was it? It wasn’t raining?’*

Responses from the participants suggest that the degree of recognition of rhythms and flows varies depending on cognitive skills, age of the child and the length of engagement in an activity. Young or cognitively impaired children, noted Craig, enjoy playing with leaves and might ‘*notice that they change colour but not necessarily understand that this is because the season is changing*’. Young children, Kristen suggested, ‘*recognize that it gets cold and then it gets hot but wouldn’t necessarily grasp fully the concept of seasons*’. However children engaged in ongoing, long term programs explored in this study learn to recognise the repetition of cycles over time.

Peta, Joan, Jane and Ben believe that, for older children, the teacher’s explanation of how seasons change is reinforced by the experience of playing and engaging in outdoor activities. Shaun from CERES strongly agrees with them, indicating that the experience of being outside reinforces their in-class learning. Shaun emphasises this by telling children about ‘*Melbourne’s indigenous culture’s observance of six seasons, as opposed to our traditional European four seasons*’. He believes that many children from Melbourne better understand the seasons when this is explained to them ‘*because the six season model better fits their outdoor experience*’. He describes this in terms of teaching the children ‘*about not connecting the calendar to the seasons but rather connecting the seasons to the calendar*’. 
When asked if she thought children working outdoors become familiar with seasons, Joan commented, ‘that’s a hard one. Because I truly think adults have got no idea of the rhythms of the seasons, they have got no idea. And that’s terrible’. As we sat during the interview in a café under an outdoor gas heater, she commented, ‘look we have a heater here, it’s not really cold, all we need do is put on a jumper, or go inside!’ She suggested that children do learn about seasons if given the opportunity to grow and tend plants outdoors in gardens, and in the context of the outdoor gas heater, how significant this is ‘for the future of humanity in a world facing climate change’.

Jane’s kitchen garden program in Kallista, and Ben’s in Bendigo, focus upon the seasonality of foods. The children work toward harvesting produce from their garden which is taken indoors and cooked, shared and eaten by the whole class. An integral part of the program is learning to cook a meal with the seasonally harvested food from their garden. Both Ben and Jane commented that over time the children become familiar with the availability of seasonal vegetables like tomatoes and the planting time for onions, potatoes and corn.

Children involved in such gardening programs experience fully the life cycle of growing. As Jane says, ‘They grow it, look after it, feed it, nurture it, mulch it, it grows, they harvest it, they cook it, they eat it and they share it’. Ben adds ‘We let things go to seed and let them come up by themselves’. Jane’s project relies on self funding so the children engage in packaging harvested seed which they sell, along with eggs, at the local monthly market. Funds are used to purchase chicken feed, straw and organic fertilisers for the garden:

Not only do the children learn of seasonality of seed supply and when the chickens are on and off the lay but also the economics of keeping animals and gardens. It’s a cyclic thing, and it is self-sustaining and it looks after itself.

Kristen’s teaching style is to ask questions of her preschool children when they spend time sitting outside:

Okay what is going on with the trees at the moment? They were naked a few weeks ago but look at them now, that one’s got buds on it! And what are we noticing, and what is flowering at the moment? What are the birds doing?
And what’s the sun doing? And look at where the shadows are! We are always talking about that, all the time.

One of many foci at Ken’s school is the rain gauge ‘which often helps to explain the mystery behind damp soil’. The children, keen to water their vegetables, so they don’t die, will come to him demanding, ‘It’s watering time, why aren’t we watering?’ however Ken will get them to dig their fingers into the soil and check the rain gauge. ‘Oh yeh, there has been a bit of rain, that’s why we don’t need to water today’.

The behaviour of horses changes considerably depending on the season and weather conditions. The flush of growth in grasses with higher carbohydrates and sugars during spring causes horses to be much more energetic. This accounts for Spring Racing Carnivals and riding instructors issuing warnings, reports Mary, ‘We’ll just have to be a little more cautious today because spring is in the air!’ Mary teaches children with horses to constantly be aware of the weather and how this might affect horse behaviour:

On a windy day the sound travels and horses can hear sounds from three kilometers away, which is a very important part of their defense mechanisms. They need to interpret sound, so not only are they trying to listen to the child but they are also trying to interpret whether there is something out there. So the children need to learn about weather and how that affects horses and their behaviour.

The commitment to caring for a horse is an all year activity, so children become very aware of when it is wet and cold, hot and dusty, ‘hay fever season’ and the ‘extra grooming required when the horse sheds a winter coat’.

Children in Tanya’s mangrove project are continually exposed to the rhythms within the natural world of tides, migratory birds and collecting mangrove seeds:

We get the word that the mangroves are going to seed. The mangrove seed actually germinates on the bush so we collect the seed when it is just about ready to drop off.

There is an anticipation of harvest as children report at school that the mangroves are in flower and ‘the seeds are starting to set on the bushes; it won’t be long before we will be able to pick the seed!’ Amongst other things over the years Tanya added, children have noticed the onset of the season for seed collecting is arriving earlier, which has brought
concerns and discussion about climate change. Once mangrove seedlings have been collected and potted the children tend them in the school shade house over winter, watering and weeding the pots. Then, with the arrival of warmer weather in spring, the seedlings are taken out to the mud flats and transplanted.

Perhaps the most significant rhythm of the natural world that six participants noted is a child’s experience of the cycle of life and death. These participants told of how children experience feelings and emotions associated with an animal or significant plant dying. Ken and Jane described special occasions around children sharing in the death of a class pet and a chicken in the yard. Ben commented that, ‘because they appear more alive’, animals evoke a greater affinity from the children than when perhaps a plant dies. Kristen says of her preschoolers:

We want them to experience that authentically and that if something does die, or whatever, or is finished or seeds, they get to see that and witness it and not be protected from it but really live it. The veggie patch really provides a great opportunity for that.

Craig adds:

We don’t necessarily save a plant that looks like it is going to die, because that becomes an experience in itself. Here is a plant that is dying. Why? We engage them in dialogue.

Children experiencing the flows and rhythms of the natural world learn to recognize and understand the changes occurring around them. They have the opportunity of learning to move and work with natural cycles.

**Sense of Place and Belonging**

It has always been important for me to give them a more intimate relationship with where they live. And that is part of going out there, having field trips, exploring it. It is always a sad thing when kids are disconnected from a sense of place. They really struggle with a sense of place, and you know my aim has always been to cultivate that with the kids.

Tanya’s response here, similarly with Ken whose schools are in low socio-economic areas, revealed that children engaged in gardening or care of animals experience a greater sense of place and belonging. Although particularly evident in children from unstable and
insecure backgrounds, four other interviewees also observed this in children. A growing sense of place and belonging was displayed in children when they became upset over their gardens or projects being vandalised, along with their enthusiasm for telling others about their gardening activities. They began to identify with the place, to claim its significance for them, and experience a pride in belonging within their space.

Often schools experience vandalism, usually when older, bored teenagers graffiti walls, smash windows and, in extreme events, set classrooms alight. Each of the two schools from low socio-economic areas, where vandalism is unfortunately most prevalent, noted that children are rarely troubled or upset by such events occurring around the general school grounds and classrooms. However, it’s a different story when it comes to their gardens. Tanya was surprised at first, commenting ‘that was very interesting because the children were so upset about that. They were upset’. Ken similarly noted:

*The kids’ responses to that (the vandalism) were amazing. Like we have had vandalism to windows or graffiti on the walls here before and the kids don’t blink an eye-lid to that but when the garden! The kids were distraught!*

In each of these two examples, and also from four other vandalised projects, the children’s ‘first priority, they wanted to fix it all up and make it like they had made it’ (Ken). Only secondly did their attention turn to retribution, with Tanya humorously adding that one of her children demanded that the perpetrator be ‘Trustified!’ In each of the six reported cases of vandalism in the study the teachers were able to work with the children, helping them to understand what happened. ‘And again there was an opportunity of going into dialogue, here is something that you have looked after and here someone else has destroyed. How do you feel about that?’ (Craig)

The immediate response of wanting to restore their gardens indicates a sense of pride and ownership of the project and therefore a sense of place and belonging. The child is claiming the space they are caring for, that he/she is responsible for. This is particularly significant for children whose families are constantly on the move. As mentioned earlier, when Ken described the transient nature of the families and children in his school, he promotes the importance of connecting the children with the garden. An intentional aim
is to help the children realise the garden is there for them so that they may experience a sense of belonging and stability. This is certainly the case for Tanya who also has a transient school population. She sees it important that children find a sense of belonging and connection with place:

*I really think that if you can embed them really quickly in their new place and if you can very quickly help them know that place and be interested in that place. That might help stabilise things and hopefully their whole families. I'd like to do more to get whole families involved in this.*

Her hope in whole families becoming involved in the project might foster an emotional connection or commitment to the area, offering therefore more reason to stay. Certainly Tanya has observed that new children, once involved in the mangrove project, quickly feel as though they belong and fit in with the other children as they learn about landmarks and terms peculiar to Western Port. ‘You know, they start to feel more a part of it rather than just a visitor’.

Jane says that her children, having been in the program now for many years, have:

*Taken the role on and they get it now. Their whole behaviour has just totally changed they have taken ownership of that garden and they know what to do.*

The children have become so familiar with the tasks of managing and caring for the garden and the roles they play as the carers that she need only put up a list of jobs on the board, delegate them initially to the children, and then as they finish them they go on to complete the others. She does note that ‘you get a couple of them, you know, that don’t want to be there, but that’s life, there will just be people who just don’t want to be there’, however generally all of the children are engaged in the garden ‘and they’re brilliant...they know just what to do’.

Joan in her work as a television media presenter visits many schools and described some of the multicultural schools she has attended. One school had dozens of children from different nationalities:

*In front of me there were all these little faces, there were black faces, there was Chinese, there was Asian, there was African there was (pause). You couldn’t believe. And these children were growing a vegetable garden!*
Joan described the teachers in the program researching plants and vegetables that would be familiar to each culture. They introduced these plants to the school garden for all the children to grow and then share in the eating of national dishes representing their cultural background. She observed that this helped children feel validated and self confident in their history and culture. It offered a sense of feeling comfortable with who they are and the place they have within their multicultural school community.

Certainly Mary noted her students experiencing a sense of belonging in her course on horse studies. She described two teenage girls in one of her VCAL programs who for most of the term were homeless:

Those students would arrive with clean boots and jodhpurs and their homework, even though they were sleeping under Safeway\textsuperscript{265}, maybe for two nights in a row. The first time I heard this and I realized that they were hungry and we had plenty of snacks and things and we were able to feed them, but they weren’t going to say anything. They wanted to be there. They were committed to the course. They loved being there with the horses. Their attitude was that they still wanted to be a part of the group, you know, it was almost like the horse program became their tribe, it was one place that they felt a sense of belonging and the horses instigated that as well and it was very, very powerful.

As described earlier the most memorable story for Kristen was the boy who sat nestled in the tree stump while his friends played in the grass. I wonder if for this little boy his sense of contentedness and comfort at being in this space reflected an experience of security and a sense of belonging.

3.2.5 Expression - Fruition

In this section I explore what might be considered the fruit of children’s gardening and outdoor experiences. Participants reported improved behaviour, a growing capacity for empathy and an increasing expression of creative and imaginative play.

\textsuperscript{265} A local supermarket chain.
Changed Behaviour

Craig told the most outstanding story of changed behaviour. Early in his career he had encountered a younger teenager who had an issue with anger. He often became extremely violent, to the point of threatening to kill Craig and others. He had to be restrained by police on a number of occasions. Several years later, on his first day working at the Kevin Heinz Children’s Garden, Craig came face to face with the same young fellow:

*His behaviour had changed totally, to the point where he didn’t need any ‘one-to-one’ support or control anymore. To me that was the environment helping to change the individual. Now, that said, that person outside this environment is still extremely violent. So, in this environment, a non-threatening natural environment, he has never had any issues, and he has been coming here for a number of years. I have noticed that a lot here and in other places where I have worked in an open natural environment. I worked with a large group of children about ten years ago and their behaviour over a period of time altered to fit the environment despite what they came with, their baggage etc. I am not saying that they were totally overcome and moderated, but to the point where they became more sociable humans, having a better quality of life. I have found that theme right the way through. I didn’t find that working in a city environment. In a city environment the behaviour didn’t alter.*

Craig added further examples throughout the interview and that teachers and parents ‘*all the time*’ comment on the improved behaviour of children in the gardening program, ‘*where there is an emphasis upon having fun and being free of expectation*’. Whilst indeed, there are expectations, like mutual care and respect for each other, there is an ease of being in the garden that allows the children the opportunity to relax and be themselves.

Ben in Bendigo had a similar response. ‘*Some (who) really play up in class are actually very gentle in the garden*. One boy during lunch prior to our interview had ‘*twice been told to get down from the school roof*’, reported Ben. In the garden Ben said ‘*he’s very, very careful and always is doing something really productive and is always busy*. Ben suggested this was because ‘*the garden was not static or constrained like that of the four walls of a classroom but always changing, always engaging children like this boy*. Ken tells a similar story with his children from Werribee in their gardening program:

*We have got some of the children on the integration program who are quite hyperactive and you could probably say have learning difficulties, so they*
struggle to follow basic routine (in the classroom). But outside in the garden! There are probably three of those children in particular (who) are there every day and they know the procedure they need to do, going out and watering the plants...

Ken has also observed a significant behaviour response when children are with class pets. ‘The big rough kids, you know, being so gentle and nurturing and that’s why we introduced them (class pets) in the first place’.

However, Ben commented about the improved behaviour of another boy:

I don’t know whether it’s been by being involved in the garden. I think it partly is, but also about developing a relationship with me. Do you know what I mean? I really try to strive to do that...I think the garden provides a better setting to do that than a classroom does. I think it is a better environment for a number of children who don’t respond well to classroom learning because it is not seen as school work.

It is difficult to weight the proportion of improved behaviour upon forming richer relationships with leaders and other individuals or being outside in the natural world.

Some children appear to need the physical activity that being outside provides. Joan found, whilst working many years ago as a student teacher in the country, there were many disruptive boys who didn’t want to be in class. They would rather be outside working on the farm with dad. She would often take a group to do tree planting:

And one of the kids in that little group was, what would you call it? He might have been a little bit dyslexic. I’m not quite sure but he didn’t learn very much academically (in the classroom) but he could learn and knew every Latin botanical name of plants and he would go, ‘that’s one of those and that’s one of those’ and he became a nursery person.

Joan went on to suggest that this young fellow and others from her experience developed ‘good self-esteem as they gained respect from friends as strong and physical’ which they may not have found in the academic environment of the classroom.

Jane described similar experiences of boys who, whilst bored in class, love being outside physically working in the garden. There was one young boy whose self confidence grew to such an extent that his whole outlook on life changed. He was profoundly frightened of birds however it was suggested that he become the next ‘chook monitor’, the person
responsible for overseeing that the chickens get feed, watered and locked up at night. At first he wouldn’t go anywhere near the cage, ‘I took him down there and he hung onto me, behind me. He was petrified, he was so scared’. However, over time, with Jane’s help and noting the privileges this position brought, he was able to overcome his fear. Eventually, to the astonishment of his mother, he wanted chickens of his own to care for at home.

Kristen, working with preschoolers mentioned that she didn’t have ‘any children as extreme as that’, when I alluded to some of the other stories. However each week on a Thursday morning the class participates in a nature walk with the opportunity of playing for a time in natural surroundings:

What we see in the children in general is very striking and even when we come back. The level of engagement of the children and the calmness they have after they have been on their walk, is different to when we start a normal day, it is strikingly different.

These children are very happy and engaged and nearly all from stable families and yet it is note worthy that they ‘display a certain calmness about them’. Kristen passionately believes this is about being in nature, ‘not just about running and letting off steam, which is an important aspect, but rather interacting with the natural world’. She goes further to say ‘I think it is something about connecting with nature and contentedness you get from that and that happiness. There is something to the soul that nature does’.

When asked about changes in behaviour Mary responded. ‘Absolutely!’ Working mainly with teenagers, often with significant behavioural issues, she tells of dramatic improvements in self esteem, confidence and social engagement. As described above, students kicked out of home would still attend her classes with clean boots and clothing ‘whilst having slept in the car park under Safeway’. One young man got himself into terrible strife at school having been provoked into doing outrageous activities and being excessively bullied to the point of breaking his arm after being thrown from a second story window. He completely lacked the self-confidence and ability to say, ‘No or stop!’ In the course of learning to work with and manage a horse he learned to tell the horse when to stop and when to say no, which later Mary explained, ‘meant he was able to say
‘no’ and ‘stop’ to those who provoked and bullied him’. His confidence had grown. Adding to this later in her interview Mary described a heavily medicated young woman suffering from depression, after experiencing profound child abuse, found that ‘as she formed a relationship with a horse, needed less medication and was able to express herself in a way that she couldn’t do in everyday life’. Mary quoted her as saying that she experienced a sense of ‘freedom, expression and escape’ as she experienced the ‘spiritual’ feeling of ‘flying’ whilst riding her horse. I asked Mary to explain how this occurs:

Horses are not judgmental so, if a child feels self-conscious or has low self-esteem or is antisocial, the horse doesn’t care. They will see the real person and will respond accordingly. So if given a little bit of care and acceptance then the horse will respond affectionately. And you will experience instant feedback. Because the horse is large they emanate a large feeling of passion and love when this happens.

Mary has observed dramatic changes in the lives of young people working with horses.

Not all agreed. Shaun who dealt mainly with children who were on a one-off excursion, reported mixed behaviour. Spread over each day he receives a range of comments from teachers and parents saying that ‘this boy normally never plays up like this’ and ‘she is surprisingly calm today’. Mostly though he does hear more positive comments from teachers and suggested that perhaps many children are over-stimulated with the wide range of activities on offer at CERES, the freedom to run and explore and the fun and excitement of participating in strange new activities. An issue here is that Shaun’s program at CERES lacks the consistency of an ongoing program, which could account for his ambivalence about changed behaviour.

Tanya described her situation with a third of her class, eight children in total, suffering with ADHD\(^{266}\), intellectual disability or autism:

In terms of ratio, that is really high. And those children, when we are out there on the field trips, can often be the experts. They have got things to say. They have got things to look at. They are just more validated. In the school environment all their limitations are obvious because they are more contained. There is more expectation of them, demanding a lot of them in a

\(^{266}\) Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.
very confined environment. You take all that pressure off, because you are out there in the natural environment, so they can just think and they can talk and they can look at things and they can explore and they can explain and they use their oral language more because you are not saying that they have to write it down.

Whilst in the more enclosed surroundings of the glasshouse, tending the mangrove seedlings, Tanya noted ‘these children need to be in smaller manageable groups, or else they can get out of hand’. With some of them lacking impulse control, hitting, pinching or annoying others is their way of communicating. However, when they get out on the mud flat Tanya explains:

_They just change. You know, they’ll be itchy for the first bit of time, trying to go a bit silly. Then they just, I don’t know. It’s almost like they take a breath or something and just sort of relax into it. I don’t know what it is they do but once they’re out there you just don’t have to be on their case anymore._

Conveying more of the story, Tanya outlines that the children have few rules and boundaries on the mud flat. At this I pictured them swimming off to French Island in the centre of Western Port, however she assured that they:

_Just get it and even those ones who are always pushing the boundaries, when we are out there in the field they just sort of get it. I think it is like they are out of the pressure cooker._

Working with children with intellectual and physical disabilities has its challenges. While we were talking about behaviour Craig mentioned in passing, ‘_particularly if the stream is running..._’ I asked him to describe what he meant by this:

_It alters. It has a soothing effect, particularly on autistic children. They love the sound of the water, as it ripples over the rocks, as it falls over the walls and into the pond and the feel of the water. Quite often we find one of the kids walking up the stream with his shoes off, or on, liking the sound and feel of the water. And this again is something that you can’t force or you can’t tell someone. It also goes back to what kids are meant to do. Here is a natural environment, what are kids supposed to do in this environment? Take off your shoes and walk up the stream. It feels good._

Ken added that with their:

_Natural flock of rainbow lorikeets, the trees and the associated sounds there is a lot that contributes to soothing children who might normally display disruptive or unsocial behaviour in the classroom._

And finally Craig once more, who added at the end of his interview:
In my reading and the research that I am involved in these kids are going to be less stressed. They are going to cause less problems for their teachers. Less problems for their parents. They are going to be happier. They are most likely going to have less health problems they are going to be doing exercise. All those things are all beneficial for kids. They are not given the opportunity to do these things. Get out there and build a cubby house for God’s sake, don’t do a virtual one on the internet, get out there and plant a plant in the garden.

Empathy

As children grow in their awareness of the needs of plants and animals they very often develop their natural capacity for empathy and compassion toward plants and animals that are unwell or disadvantaged. This is Tanya’s most memorable story from her experience with children on the mud flats of Western Port:

There were some kids that were missing. I wondered where they were and saw them up on the shore line. They’d had enough of being in the mud. They were sort of just crawling up and down the sand along the flotsam and jetsam line, and poking at all the bits. They found quite a few mangrove seeds on the line that had actually sprouted, that had a bit of a root system on them. They had their main little root and two side roots. They were just fascinated and they must have crawled for about two hundred meters just going through all this black stuff collecting all these mangrove seedlings. And they went and got someone’s clothing and they were placing them all very carefully on this windcheater and dragging it along the beach and adding to it because they really wanted to give these mangroves a chance to grow. There was no way they wanted to leave them on the beach to just dehydrate and get sucked back out into the water. They really wanted to give them a chance to grow.

Tanya told several stories from the mangrove project around compassion and giving the disadvantaged a chance to survive. One young boy, from a difficult background:

who suffered from asthma, with behavioural and anger issues, worked for more than an hour one day on the mangrove flats with several of his friends removing seaweed and algae that was twisted around the branches of the trees.

Tanya said he was ‘concerned that the seaweed and algae might harm the mangroves, he was worried and wanted to clean them up’.
As described above, schools often experience vandalism where plants in the vegetable garden are destroyed:

*The garden got absolutely trashed by kids from another school and they really did some horrible damage and the kids here were mortified, absolutely mortified that they should do what they did and I think the biggest thing was they just couldn’t get their head around why someone would do that. Why would you do that? Why would you wreck a garden?*

Jane described how she worked with the children to help them express how it felt for them and what it might feel like for others who had lost something precious to them. Although they still don’t understand why anyone would want to destroy their garden they have expressed to her that ‘we don’t want somebody else to feel what we felt’.

Similarly, the children from the pre-primary school in the study were very upset because ‘here was something they had cared for and looked after that was now gone!’ Kristen guided them in dialogue and reflection asking of them, ‘Here is something that you have looked after and here someone else has destroyed. How do you feel about that?’ The very early experience of loss offered an opportunity for young children to begin to develop a sense of empathy. By acknowledging their own feelings, Kristen believes their development of the capacity to acknowledge and be aware of the feelings of others is aided. Kristen also told me the story of the missing strawberry. The class had been watching the strawberry for several days when one day it vanished. ‘It was a three year old child and some of the other three year olds knew who it was, and wanted to reveal the suspect’. However Kristen asked them all to describe what the experience of ‘what no longer having the strawberry felt like for them’ and how it would be good if we made ‘an agreement from now on to not secretly take things from the garden but to share them together’. Acknowledging the personal responses was more important for all the children than revealing the culprit.

Shaun from CERES described how primary school aged children and older girls in particular, are more able to feel and express compassion for birds and animals on their guided creek walk:

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The walk takes the children past storm water drains full of roadside rubbish washed into the creek. Often they see birds and animals dead or maimed, having been entangled in plastic and debris.

The children’s responses to what they see are quite marked, expressing sorrow and compassion. Shaun ventured to say that he believed ninety five percent of children have ‘an instinct to feel compassion but as they grow older it somehow slowly gets driven out of them’.

Tanya recognised in her children the natural instinct to feel compassion on the first day they began the mangrove project. A retired scientist Dr Tim Ealey, who helped instigate the project, brought mangrove seedlings to the school for the children to plant in pots. Throughout the day each class came to the shade house to plant seedlings and were:

*Instructed by Dr Ealey that seedlings with black sections on their roots were less viable as they had began to die so needed to be separated from the more viable seedlings which were to be potted.*

Those with black sections were to be discarded. However, Tanya noted the strong response of the children:

*They were determined to try and give every seed a chance of life that they could. Even though we had hundreds of them. It wasn’t like they were short of numbers or rare.*

When Joan was talking about her visits to the multicultural schools and how children of different nationalities feel included and a sense of belonging when their national dishes are cooked and shared, she quipped:

*You can’t just live for yourself. You’ve got to have responsibility for, you know, birds, animals, plants, living things, and that’s why nature study and gardening is really important.*

Joan articulates here what each of the interviewees hopes to communicate to their children, a sense of empathy and respect for other.

Finally, once again the significance of class pets was highlighted by Ken:

*We have had a few of them that got sick, that have been sick for a time and also when they have been pregnant, they have been so amazing again on animal watch, you know watching and waiting. Definitely some of our naughtiest kids are as quiet and beautiful holding these baby animals or*
looking after the mother. You definitely have the empathy building and the caring side of these kids coming out in relation to that.

For all of the participants, watching children respond to plants and animals with compassion is considered an incredibly important benefit of their programs, and a critical value to nurture in children.

**Imagination**

Many respondents talked about engagement in the natural world as a stimulus for imagination. The focus group discussion revealed an important aspect of creating and making space available in the natural world for children is to use that space for exercising their imagination. There is almost a sense in which children fill the space with ideas, dreams and possibility.

Jane promotes the use of imagination in learning when she encourages her children to find something in the garden to study or perhaps draw:

> Go out there and find something in the garden that captures your imagination. It might be the tendrils on a pea curling up here or it might be the new little flower or it could be a bee on a sage flower or it could be whatever it is.

Kristen also talked about imagination in her interview. Her philosophy of educating preschoolers rests on fostering the natural sense of curiosity in a child. Children in the garden are always asking questions, noted Kristen. ‘What’s this on this leaf? How do the shoots get there? How has it grown? Where do the bugs come from? How do we get rid of the bugs?’ Curiosity feeds their imagination. Setting tasks for the children to encourage them to use their imagination to answer the questions brings on all sorts of theories. They may or may not be correct, but that’s not the point. ‘There’s a bit of a mystery for them. That’s why we really like to create that sense of anticipation rather than giving them all the answers’ (Kristen). The children are encouraged to draw pictures retelling the stories they have imagined. In the story of the missing strawberry, described earlier, the children were encouraged to imagine what might have happened to the
strawberry. ‘Why is there a bite in the strawberry? A monster came or a birdie came. They are constantly wondering and struck’.

Creating a space for mystery and imagination is an intentional aim within the structure of the garden and play area at Kristen’s early childhood centre. The area originally housed an old climbing frame, which was removed, freeing up the space to create a vegetable garden and play area that now has more ‘wildness. Places to hide, places that are growing and unexpected, you know, a garden that’s not manicured but that they could create’. A place to stimulate imagination is created and its benefits measured in the creative response of the children.

Tanya fosters in her children their natural curiosity and desire to learn by encouraging them to think of experiments they would like to perform on the mangrove seedlings in the shade house:

We trial different ways of sprouting the seed and growing them into little seedlings and I always, even though we are starting to get a handle on what is the best method, make sure each year level of kids has a more scientific involvement. We keep trialing different ways so it doesn’t become just a robotic following of procedure. They try and grow some one way or try and grow some another way or have a little control, set up a control, with experiments, we will put some in the green house, others we won’t. So even though we know the best method, the kids are still being investigators. I still keep letting them have their experiments. For the children it still means they are more involved with it because their ideas and the things they want to try are being given attention.

The use of imagination and experimentation is an important tool in the learning experience of testing theories and ideas. However, as Mary pointed out in her interview, it is also a significant tool in therapy. She described the importance and use of imagination, particularly for children who don’t feel good about themselves or their life situations. ‘With a horse as a companion and with guidance to use their imagination, children can take themselves to different places in their minds’. Mary reports how this helps children and young people ‘gain a better image of themselves, improves body awareness and self confidence’. In one example that Mary cited she invited younger
teenagers to think of creative names, assigning symbols for horses based on their characteristics:

We had about twenty seven horses and the young people were to go out and choose a symbol for each horse to describe what that horse represented to them. So we had a little white pony who was either a ballet dancer or a fairy and another very, very elderly horse who everyone drew a walking frame or walking stick. A black and white horse who was given a clown symbol or a joker symbol, whose name was actually Joker! They didn’t know any of the names of these horses. So to watch them go out there and spend time with each horse and think about some of the attributes that the horse had was quite incredible. They actually slowed down. They didn’t want to come back inside. They wanted to stay outside. They did that for two hours, an activity that would normally take ten minutes. That was quite amazing to see, children to stop and to decide to spend time outside using their imagination for something that was so simple.

In other stories Mary told me about younger teenagers with low self-esteem and how she encouraged them to use their imagination while riding their horses. ‘Who do you imagine yourself to be on your horse? Where would you like your horse to take you?’ Natural surroundings create a space for children to relax from the demands of a busy world. In effect it serves as a significant place to stimulate imagination.

3.2.6 Replanting – Adding to the Whole

As children develop the skills and behavioural responses outlined above there is the opportunity to offer back to their community. Recognizing the need to work with the natural world fostering creativity and offering hospitality, many children in this study are working toward restoring, healing and nurturing the Earth.

Working with the Natural World

Recognising and understanding the rhythms of the natural world, along with the needs of plants and animals, helps children learn to work with the natural world. However, in the normal daily routines of children this is not what they often experience. A characteristic of popular culture is the control of physical environments which often works against natural flows and rhythms. Air conditioning, climate control, long term storage of food
and hothouse grown produce are examples within developed societies. In general, people have come to expect exotic foods to be available all year round, and to manage their environment to suit their lifestyle.

This tension was observed in the mangrove replanting project and has created its controversy even amongst the children in the class. It was highlighted when Tanya explained that:

Not everyone is supportive. The person who vandalized our project had a holiday house right behind. People see the mangroves as being smelly, making mud and blocking views of the water. Some are happy to see them removed. We had a child who was very upset that we were transplanting sea grass in an area where his family and friends go swimming.

When gardening, children can learn to grow and eat food in season. Some children in this study are aware that out of season produce supplied in supermarkets is often transported over long distances. Jane has an ‘activity explaining carbon foot-prints in food production’. She encourages the children to think of food items and blow up balloons, representing carbon emissions for each stage of production. The children perform this activity in groups looking at different produce both in and out of season along with locally and overseas produced foods. They found:

The difference in energy use staggering, comparing local in-season tomatoes with those grown 2000 kms in the north.

Jane added:

We buy (local) tomatoes and take them home and then we put them on a plate and eat them and you’ve got maybe ten balloons, as opposed to sixty!

Jane also said that the kitchen gardening programs often use ‘companion planting. It keeps the bugs away’. In this process the children learn how to work with the natural world, which Craig believes for children, ‘is a natural thing.’ When asked if his children recognise the need to work with the natural world he responded:

I don’t know if it can be put into that framework. Most of our kids wouldn’t be sophisticated enough to understand that theme. As far as working with the natural world themselves – that’s what they want to do!

Having experienced a drought for more than ten years, the children of Bendigo have become aware of water as a precious resource along with the importance of recycling.
Re-‘cycle’ is literally what they do. Water used for washing hands, tools and vegetables for cooking in class is collected in a large tub. From here the children take turns to ride a bicycle connected to a pump which moves the water up into a large overhead tank. This water is used then for watering the vegetables and fruit trees in their garden. As part of an ongoing art project at the school the over head tank has been designed and painted to look like a large watering can sitting above the chicken cage and shed.

Important life principles of working with rather than controlling the natural world are imparted with ease, and the impact of human behaviour on the natural world is experienced first hand.

**Creativity**

An emerging theme in the data was one of creativity. Children in the garden often seemed inspired to draw things of interest. The boy in Jane’s class, excited about the light that captured the red currants, set about drawing them. Jane, Craig, Ken and Ben’s gardens have art projects associated with them making scarecrows, water tanks to look like watering cans, decorated and painted bollards and mosaic.

Jane says *‘there is art in the garden as well that makes it attractive and fun and there is some magic going on there’*. Craig’s children have *‘art and craft activities as part of their program’*. He describes also the creative process of growing vegetables:

*Where kids want to look after their things, want to see them grow, and the new growth is very important to see things growing bigger, staying healthy, growing flowers, growing fruit, growing potatoes, growing tomatoes or whatever they want to see all that coming from their efforts.*

This is then translated into creative responses in the art program. Ben in describing his children in the garden comments:

*It is being creative and learning in a healing environment, it’s practical... I engage them in the stewardship of the garden and of the Earth. Trying as much as I can to get their hands dirty. Create something. Help create something. Help something to grow.*
And the art teacher at Ben’s school who sat in on the interview added in the context of the creative process of growing plants and for the children engaged in art projects in the garden:

But I guess in art it’s not just something you do in an art room then just take it home and then it goes on the refrigerator or gets thrown out before you get home or something. It’s something of use that fits in with your environment.

Cooking produce harvested from the garden is a creative process and that creativity both connects with the gardening activity and extends to other expressions in the school, home and beyond.

**Hospitality**

Offering hospitality is a theme that emerges clearly from the stories in this study. The heron who visited the school garden in Bendigo is perhaps the most striking. Much of the school region, along with most parts of central and northern Victoria had experienced drought for over ten years. Most large lakes had all but completely dried up. Bendigo’s water supply reached the record low of less than three percent of capacity at the height of the drought in 2007\(^{268}\). This was when the heron visited the school having spotted the pond in the water recycling system. Pausing with amazement to observe a bird looking to see if there were any fish or water-life to eat, indicates that the children began to understand that they were providing a place for this bird’s visit.

Six other participants noted the increased numbers of birds around their schools and activity sites as gardens were established. Joan notes that ‘children love that whole thing of thinking that they are planting a row of trees to bring the birds, or even to have a koala corridor’.

The whole process of gardening is one of hospitality. Worm composting bins provide space for worms to flourish and grow. Composting piles attract a huge range of insect and

\(^{268}\) ABC News on Line, *Lake Eppalock Records in Flows*, (http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200705/s1913493.htm), Accessed 23-1-11, Reported that Bendigo’s largest water storage dam was at less than one percent capacity at the time.
soil organism life that break down the organic matter making nutrients available for plants. Transforming barren, out-of-bounds concrete and paved bitumen areas into lovely gardens offers hospitality to plants and animals. The children provide a space where plants and animals are welcomed to thrive, flourish and reproduce. In many programs sharing the produce in a meal around the table is seen as a critical outworking of the process.

Each of the three organisations that invite the general public to visit and participate in their programs is designed to welcome and offer hospitality. I observed this in the staff demeanor, the program activities on offer and the design of the gardens. Such design and layout included cafés, sitting areas and a general ambiance of welcome. In my observation at every level, the concept of hospitality is embraced outwardly and freely.

**Nourishment, Nurture and Healing of the Earth**

Peta, Jane, Tanya and Kristen each expressed their concern about the ‘heaviness’ and ‘depressiveness’ associated with ecological issues and the degradation of the environment. Tanya said that ‘some children experience a sense of depression and being overwhelmed about the ecological health of our planet’. Many teachers are therefore active in finding ways to encourage children to feel positive about the future. The programs at CERES are heavily focused upon changing behaviour and encouraging the children who visit to not only feel positive about the future but to get involved in healing and rejuvenating the Earth. Shaun, describing his program says:

> We encourage children to be involved in recycling, energy and water conservation, waste minimisation and care for wildlife. I get passionate about it and up the ante a bit but not to scare the children in a negative way but to scare them, you know, ‘This is serious, let’s get onto it now!’ And then we get onto some solutions.

Tanya believes the mangrove project is a good example:

> There is empowerment. There is an involvement there. It is like ‘Okay, we know the mangroves have been taken away and it has done really bad things to Western Port. We strongly suspect that the sea grass loss in Western Port

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269 Pears, ed., *Organic Gardening in Australia*, 42.
too happened because the mangroves were removed. So the mud now comes off the land, isn’t kept in the mangrove zone, but smothers the sea grass that is dying and we can’t rejuvenate the grass. We are trying but we can’t rejuvenate it. So it seems that the mangroves are the key there that if we can do more along the shore line to stabilize all of the mud and fix up some of the drains that just go out into Western Port that might help. So when the kids start to know all that. Well we are doing something about that! That is a real positive thing.

Making a positive contribution not only makes the children feel better about the future but also empowers them to have a part in what the future might look like:

So by growing the mangrove we have purpose. It is something that we are doing, making a contribution to an ecosystem that isn’t in the best shape.

And finally Tanya adds,

By planting the mangrove and giving back the role it has in buffering the shore line and holding the shore line together the kids start to feel really important.

Joan believes that even something simple like feeding worms in a worm farm and using the ‘worm wee’ on the garden as a fertiliser is a wonderful way for young children to feel positive and empowered. She tends to think that young people are resilient when they learn about environmental issues, and when they are taught positively, they are empowered to act:

That’s why this whole environmental thing is really important. People say to me it’s not right that kids are taught about global warming and climate change and all that kind of stuff because they will get worried and think the world is going to collapse and kids can’t take it in. But the kids are focused on the positive. We focus on the negative but the kids can take it in and they can do something about it in the garden.

Teaching children about gardening and care of the Earth is a long term investment in the health of our planet. Five participants said they believe that children who learn to garden when they are young will come back to it when they are older. Ken articulates this well. ‘Every teenager will go off the rails and do their own thing, but they will come back to it later’. And Joan adds ‘get them when they are about seven years old and you’ve got them for life’.
The process of transforming concrete and paved areas to garden is a recurring story in this study that here illustrates nurturing and healing the Earth. Soil once covered by concrete, starved of light, water and nutrients, becomes a place of growth and life. Barren and bare soil comes to life with organic matter, insects and microbes, earthworms, plants and wildlife. Children in these places are actively involved in the process of offering life and nurture to barren land.

### 3.3 Summary of Findings

The focus of this study centres upon the relationships children form with plants, animals and their natural surroundings as they engage in gardening, care of animals and play in the natural world. Interviewees expressed the concern that most urban children spend much of their time engaging in indoor activities and therefore do not experience an adequate sense of connection and engagement with the outdoor natural world. A serious consequence of this is a diminished sense of place and belonging.

Emerging theory from this study highlighted that children involved in Earth-connecting activities can form meaningful relationships with plants and animals and consequently develop a greater sense of place and belonging.

**Space**

Children need safe outdoor spaces in the natural world where they have freedom to engage in Earth-connecting activities, explore and play with freedom to test boundaries.

**Experience**

Here children are able to fully engage their senses in the tactile outdoor world of compost, bugs, dirt and water. There is the opportunity of consequential and experiential learning, attending to their surroundings, physical activity and shared experiences with peers.
**Awakening**
In the outdoors a child’s senses are heightened and stimulated to recognize the beauty and hidden treasures of the natural world. This is most often expressed in the experience of wonder, amazement, excitement and joy.

**Awareness**
Children in relationship with other living beings such as plants, animals and birds, experience a greater sense of autonomy and are more aware of ‘self’. They become more aware of the natural world’s place in their worlds. There is greater recognition of the origin of food, interconnectedness, interdependence and the rhythms and flows of the natural world.

**Expression**
In the outdoor world many barriers, like the walls and expectations of the classroom, or difficult family and peer situations that otherwise might create stress and anxiety in relationships, are removed. Children are therefore more calm and relaxed and can better express their imagination. Children exercise their natural empathy and form relationships where they can offer care and nurture. They discover a place where they can hold and be held, offer love and be loved.

**Adding to the Whole**
Children appreciate working with the natural world as they creatively engage in offering hospitality for plants, animals, birds and other creatures to grow and be nurtured. Children are empowered to heal, restore and nourish impoverished environments offering hope for a better world.

This summary therefore concludes that the provision of outdoor space is necessarily vital for the physical and emotional wellbeing and development of children. Indeed, it becomes evident that creating such an environment rests upon significant theological themes that find their meeting place in our faith tradition.
CHAPTER FOUR

‘And children’s faces looking up,
Holding wonder like a cup.”

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

4.1 A METHODOLOGY FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Theological reflection begins with experience. By this I mean experience informs and speaks into our relationship, encounter and understanding of God. In this chapter I explore the experience of children in the natural world in the context of biblical and theological themes. Credible theologies need to take seriously the current view of reality. That is, the current cultural climate and informed scientific evidence. My aim in this chapter, therefore, is to present the theological/biblical themes relevant to this study and the experience, or emerging theory, as mutually informing each other. The methodology I will employ follows what Tillich outlines as ‘correlation’. He describes this as making ‘an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions.’ My use of this methodology aims to discover meaning with the

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272 Whitehead and Whitehead, Method in Ministry, 53. Whitehead and Whitehead place particular emphasis upon experience in the context of tradition and culture for an individual and their reflection upon pastoral ministry praxis. Here, though, in this study the experience is of a community of children engaging in the natural world.
273 McFague, The Body of God, 73.
274 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 62.
275 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 62f.
questions raised from the data in conversation with the symbols and themes of the Christian tradition.

The intention, therefore, is to formulate a practical theology around children in relationship with God and the created world. Tracy describes practical theologies as beginning with assumptions about how the world ought to be and empirical studies on the world as it is, that then seek to redress the imbalance between ‘ought’ and ‘is’ through intentional action. Pattison and Woodward describe practical theology as the interplay between idea and action, when ‘religious belief, tradition and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions and actions’. This research is an empirical study of ideas and actions and this chapter seeks to bring the experience into conversation with the literature.

Tillich’s correlation methodology, where lived experience and Christian theology are drawn into conversation, invites the potential to delve into the very essence and substance of the experience to discover meaning. In this context the ‘ought’ and ‘is’, described by Tracy, can reflect greater contrast and starkness. Therefore the practical theology emerging from the experience and literature can offer depth and relevance to the subject.

The question then is ‘How does one choose a conversational partner for the experience or emerging theory contained in this study?’ For decades systematic theologians and biblical scholars from various traditions have been reflecting upon the human condition and our relationship with the natural world. I will draw from a range of traditions, however for me, given the organic and dynamic nature of this study, the eco-feminist theological tradition has the greatest synergy and harmony with the experience. I draw this view based on the following points.

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• It was a woman’s voice that first responded scientifically and emotionally to the human destruction of nature\textsuperscript{278}.

• Eco-feminist theology is multi-layered and multi-voiced\textsuperscript{279}.

• Eco-feminist spirituality values God’s immanence and presence in the materiality of what is actually seen and observed in the natural world\textsuperscript{280}.

• Eco-feminist thought recognizes the interlocking character of oppression on our planet, which is arguably most notably that of women and the natural world\textsuperscript{281}.

• There is an endeavour to address the concern of logic domination within a dualistic and hierarchical world, where an inferior is dominated by a superior\textsuperscript{282}.

• There is more focus upon recognition that we are part of the web of life, in communion and interdependence with all living things\textsuperscript{283}.

Eco-feminist theology therefore offers an alternative perspective to the Christian traditional androcentric, hierarchical and dualistic relational models humans experience with each other, ‘the natural world and most often with God’\textsuperscript{284}. In this context Pinnock argues for an open view\textsuperscript{285} of God suggesting it better fits the current climate and provides a more appropriate ontology and cosmology, because intellectual research has ‘shifted from static to a thoroughly dynamic understanding of the world’\textsuperscript{286}.


\textsuperscript{280} Mary C Grey, Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 166.

\textsuperscript{281} See Radford Ruether, Gaia and God.

\textsuperscript{282} Cain, An Ecological Theology, 168.

\textsuperscript{283} Grey, Sacred Longings, 130.

\textsuperscript{284} Heather Eaton, "Ecofeminist Contributions to an Ecojustice Hermeneutics," in Readings from the Perspective of Earth, ed. Norman C Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 69f.

\textsuperscript{285} Clark H Pinnock, Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness (Carlisle Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2001), x. Defines an open view of God as ‘inviting believers to consider a new perspective on God in relation to the world. It asks us to imagine a response-able and self-sacrificing God of interchangeable faithfulness and vulnerable power…the open view favors thinking of God as open, loving and personal’.

\textsuperscript{286} Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 121.
To introduce a context for a Christian audience I have structured this chapter to see the experience emerging from this study placed alongside the biblical story of Job. The story of Job has many parallels with the experience of children in the natural world. In an attempt to construct a practical theology of such experience, I have undertaken a theological reflection that explores the over-arching theological themes emerging from this study.

The reflection begins investigating the concern raised that children are alienated from the natural world:

- Alienation and Togetherness – The Christian Doctrine of Atonement

The outline of Figure 1 introduced in chapter three; *Creating Space, Lived Experience, Awakening, Awareness, and Expression*, forms the basis for the structure of the rest of the reflection which initially explores:

- Belonging – Finding Place in the Land
- Creation – Earthiness and Commonality of Existence
- Participation in God – Trinitarian Theology
- Incarnation - The Cosmos in God

The pivotal focus of the chapter, the *Awakening*, is the experience of wonder:

- Wonder – A Response to Beauty, Mystery and Sacredness Within Other

Exploring the *Expression* I then look at further biblical themes that might characterize children having engaged in the natural world:

- Sabbath – Rest, Play and the Celebration of Life
- Hospitality – Welcome
- Hope – Healing and Restoring the Earth

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The outworking of the findings in conversation with the literature is presented in the conclusion and summary.

4.2 A Biblical Context to the Experience

The story of Job offers many parallels that inform our ways of understanding and theologically interpreting the experience of children. Like many of the children in this study Job experienced a close encounter with the natural world that completely turned his world upon its head. Chapters 38-39 of the Book of Job is the longest passage in the Bible about the non-human creation. Bauckham argues that ‘this in itself ought to have guaranteed them a larger place than they have had in discussions of biblical views of creation’\(^\text{288}\). The Book of Job is also ‘potent poetry’, spoken from the mouth of God, and is God’s self-revealing of the order of creation\(^\text{289}\). A pivotal moment in time in the life of Job is his experience of marvel and wonder in response to YHWH’s address. An emerging theology of wonder is a focal theme in this study. For these reasons the story of Job holds a prominent place in the structure of this chapter.

The story of Job is essentially the story of a good man overwhelmed by troubles who encounters God through an experience in the natural world. Stripped of his wealth, his family and his health Job is alienated from his world. Expressing his lament and confusion as to God’s purpose, Job demands an audience with God, requesting either a summons with specific charges against him, or else a verdict from his judge, which he confidently expects to be a declaration of innocence\(^\text{290}\). The androcentric world view he espouses (along with his friends) assumes a natural order entirely predicated on human behaviour and need.

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\(^{289}\) Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 38.

Job’s encounter with YHWH occurs in chapter 38, and comes close to meeting the unfolding of the emerging theory previously explored in the data. There is a significance of the Space created, a heightening of the Experience, an Awakening to insight, a heightened Awareness, and finally an ongoing Expression of that which has emerged.

From ‘out of the whirlwind’ (Jb 38:1), YHWH speaks and responds to Job’s questions with questions that bring a fascinating change in the flow of this story. YHWH’s appearance in the whirlwind deconstructs Job’s world view and invites Job to see the greater mystery of creation that has purpose and meaning apart from human understanding. YHWH’s response is ‘magnificent poetry, wild, untamed, unrivalled by anything else in the Bible’ \(^{291}\), where the author seeks to redress the androcentric interpretations of Gen 1-2 and the Deuteronomic law codes.

God’s name changes to YHWH, the holy and intimate name of God that was revealed to Moses \(^{292}\). Notably, apart from the first few chapters, other less intimate names are used for God \(^{293}\). To this point Job and his friends have referred to God in the abstract, as a principle, a distant, remote and insignificant character, however, here YHWH speaking from within the whirlwind is revealed as being more fully present, the great and mighty power within the cosmos.

This image of YHWH, speaking from out of the storm and referring to wild animals that tear one another apart, might seem to reveal a God of violence and rage \(^{294}\). However, there is playfulness in the speeches which is relaxed and inviting, where Job is neither crushed nor belittled, yet becomes fully aware of YHWH’s greatness and awesome power and the mystery of YHWH’s being, wisdom and natural wilderness \(^{295}\). The divine

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\(^{291}\) Grey, Sacred Longings, 161.
\(^{292}\) Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament, 233.
\(^{293}\) For example Eloah, Shaddai, Qadosh and El.
\(^{294}\) Andersen, Job, 270. cites George Bernard Shaw, The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God (London, Penguin, 1932), 12 in which a woman calls the speech ‘a sneer’ and that God ‘jeers’ at Job. However the Hebrew poetic style of the text brings a sense in which we encounter the wildness and naturalness of God.
\(^{295}\) Andersen, Job, 270f.
speeches are creation texts ‘about the potent beauty of creation, of God, (and) of Job himself’\footnote{Kathleen M O’Connor, “Wild, Raging Creativity: Job in the Whirlwind,” in \textit{Earth, Wind and Fire}, ed. Carol J Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 49.}. God is revealed as intimate and close, and we, along with Job are invited into a relationship of participation, discovery and knowing of YHWH, the mysterious and great God of Israel.

YHWH takes as the school room the natural world, along with the school of experience and encounter, which lead to exciting discoveries that bring a quantum leap in Job’s knowledge, understanding and insight of himself, his world and of course YHWH. A fascinating array of creatures, some twenty both inanimate and living, are mentioned and paraded before Job\footnote{See Bauckham, \textit{Bible and Ecology}, 49. who reports that the interconnection and interdependence within creation is highlighted in the description of the habitat, characteristic behaviour, feeding and treatment of young.}. In the wisdom tradition the animals, birds, Earth and fish teach, tell and declare knowledge (Jb 12:7-8)\footnote{Alice M Sinnott, “Job 12: Cosmic Devastation and Social Turmoil,” in \textit{The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions}, ed. Norman C Habel and Shirley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 80.}. Human knowledge and wisdom is limited, but the created world conceals and reveals great mystery and wealth (Jb 28:1-6)\footnote{Katharine J Dell, “Plumbing the Depths of Earth: Job 28 and Deep Ecology,” in \textit{The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions}, ed. Norman C Habel and Shirley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 118.}. There are cosmic elements, meteorological phenomena and finally birds and animals in no particular order. The only domestic animal, a horse, is included for its majesty rather than usefulness for an owner; all others are wild and untamed by humans\footnote{Andersen, \textit{Job}, 272.}. The setting within the storm adds a wild energy that encompasses layers of meaning, paralleling Job’s stormy life and revelation of deity as ‘wild, beautiful, free and deeply unsettling’\footnote{O’Connor, “Wild, Raging Creativity,” 49.}, heightening the awareness of risk and danger inherent within the natural world. The poem acclaims the wonders of the wild and its innate ability to prosper and survive apart from human intervention. To YHWH it is nonsense, a joke, to think that humans can rule such free spirited and untamed fauna\footnote{Norman C Habel, “Earth First: Inverse Cosmology in Job,” in \textit{The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions}, ed. Norman C Habel and Shirley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 76f. ‘Is the wild ox
YHWH arouses in Job a sense of awe and wonder at the beauty and order of the created world, along with a sense of mystery in the strangeness of YHWH’s creatures. Job encounters beauty, that is sacred, unprecedented, life-affirming, life-saving, life-giving. The story pays attention to the intertwining of beauty, savagery, danger and risk within the natural world, holding them together in the sacredness of the universe. Beauty draws Job to a place beyond himself, where his focus shifts from inward to outward, sharpens his awareness and attentiveness, inciting creativity in the replication of that which is beautiful.

The horizons of Job’s world, a world filled with difficulty and anguish might now be extended to see further beyond as he forms relationship with ‘other’. Job’s first spontaneous outburst, at the conclusion of the divine speeches, is of unreserved admiration: ‘I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted’ (Jb 42:2). It is by forming a closer relationship with YHWH, by becoming more fully aware of the natural world, that Job is able to exclaim in the end; ‘I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you….’ (Jb 42:5). Job has changed, and his whole stance towards the world and towards YHWH is ‘reoriented in a way that no mere reasoning, but only encounter with otherness, can effect’.

Job is called to a proper sense of humility and place by the imperious tones of YHWH’s address. There is a warning to those who seek to take the place of God in controlling creation through manipulation of genetic structures of plants and animals and the degradation of natural cycles. YHWH’s words to Job are clear; ‘Have you commanded willing to serve you? Will he spend the night beside your crib?...Can you trust him to harvest your grain and gather it from the threshing floor?’ (Jb 39:9, 12).

303 Andersen, Job, 273.
305 Grey, Sacred Longings, 171.
306 Bauckham, Bible and Ecology, 45.
307 Bauckham refers to a ‘cosmic humility’ as a much needed ecological virtue. ‘We need the humility to recognise that our place in the world is a limited one’. Bauckham, Bible and Ecology, 46.
the morning? (Jb 38:12) Have you entered the store houses of the snow? (Jb 38:22) Do you know when the mountain goats bring forth? (Jb 29:1)\textsuperscript{308}

Finally the theme of togetherness emerges as Job’s life is fully restored when in humility he discovers his place in the order of existence\textsuperscript{309}. In one aspect the ending detracts from the power of the poem potentially entering into the naïve and simplistic notion of punishment and rewards, which at many levels the story aims to thwart. At the danger of expressing the image of ‘right relationship’ as being blessed with great possessions, wealth and privilege, the poet highlights the grace and abundance of God and the character of the new relationships Job forms. There is a sense in which Job becomes more fully human. Living through the grief, confusion and questions, having encountered God in the wild chaotic beauty of the natural world, he lives to enjoy and value more meaningful relationships with Earth-others.

Significantly the names of Job’s sons are not mentioned (Jb 42:14), however the names of his daughters are, along with mention that they share with their brothers their father’s inheritance\textsuperscript{310}. Naming the daughters who share the inheritance accords to them dignity, respect and equality with their brothers, and demonstrates Job’s continued policy of justice and equality in his life which goes beyond normal practice\textsuperscript{311}. Job was drawn from his own self into a world that included many Earth-others. He has a new and richer sense of other. His relationships now appear to be characterised by mutuality, respect and care. His wealth is greater, his daughters more beautiful and his days long, arguably because his new relationships are richer, more meaningful and of greater value and significance to him.

The story of Job is a useful place to begin a discussion on a practical theology of children engaging with the natural world. The emerging theory suggests that children who fully

\textsuperscript{308} Grey, Sacred Longings, 162. notes quoting McKibbon, The Comforting Whirlwind, 79-80. In the pride and arrogance of the place humans in modern society believe they occupy in the world today, some might very well retort to YHWH: ‘Yes, been there, done that! Haven’t you heard of the Genome Project?’

\textsuperscript{309} O’Connor, "Wild, Raging Creativity," 54.

\textsuperscript{310} Numbers 27:1-8 outlines the condition that daughters inherited only when there were no male heirs.

\textsuperscript{311} Habel, The Book of Job, 585.
engage with their natural surroundings form meaningful relationships with Earth-others, therefore redressing the concern that urban children are mostly distanced from the natural world. In theological terms, children who were once alienated from the creation, its maker and fellow creatures are brought together (togetherness), through engagement, relationship and encounter. From a place of encounter, like Job, children are then more able to form relationships characterised by mutuality, respect and care, and with greater potential to develop a personal sense of autonomy. Like Job, a child can discover who they are and their place within their worlds. The narrative of Job supports the experience revealed in this study that wonder is an expression of spiritual awareness and a significant Earth-related spiritual experience. The recognition of beauty emerges in the awareness that there is something beyond self. In the garden and outdoors amidst the danger, chaos, risk and mystery of the natural world, for Job as for the children, there is more opportunity to be aware of their Earthiness and commonality of existence with Earth-others.

As the storm settles for Job, and awareness of his place in the world emerges, so too the children in the study experience calmness and improved behaviour. They begin to feel more at home and at peace with their surroundings and experience a sense of rest, play and celebration of life. In this place creativity and imagination can be exercised. In such a place they can offer hospitality to Earth-others and hope for a better world as they work toward healing and restoring eroded and degraded environments.

The deeper significance of the wider experiences described above is the potential for a child to encounter the source of life and indeed the very source of their being. Just as for Job, being in and interacting with the natural world enlarged and developed the character and nature of God, so too does such experience afford children the opportunity of discovering the character and nature of God as the Creator and sustainer of the Earth and cosmos.
4.3 TOWARDS A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF CHILDREN ENGAGING WITH THE NATURAL WORLD

In the following section I bring the experience of children as revealed in the emerging theory into conversation with the literature and relevant theological themes. Each section begins with a quote from the Book of Job which connects the story of Job with the theological reflection\(^\text{312}\). Conclusions, specific to children encountering the natural world, are drawn to bring each section together.

This section begins reflecting upon the human separation from God and the natural world and the impact this has upon a sense of place and belonging. Creation theology illuminates our place in the order of things and the invitation for us to participate in the Divine Being. An argument for panentheism as a working theistic model of God is discussed, building to the chapter’s focus upon an emerging theology of wonder. The outworking of an improved sense of being and the experience of wonder naturally leads then toward the celebration of Sabbath, welcome in hospitality and hope for a better world.

### 4.3.1 Alienation and Togetherness – The Christian Doctrine of Atonement

There once was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.

That man was blameless and upright,

One who feared God and turned away from evil.

(\textit{Jb 1:1})

The Christian doctrine of atonement, which offers salvation, affirms the extraordinary significance of one \textit{particular} event and moment in time, the death of Christ on the Cross\(^\text{313}\). Within the Christian notion of a ‘fallen’ world Fiddes notes three aspects to the

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\(^{312}\) This I believe sits comfortably with the themes of metaphor and symbol which characterise eco-feminist theology.

human predicament. Firstly, a sense of alienation or estrangement, with symptoms associated with feelings of loss, straying and aloneness. Secondly, a falling short of potential, where there is an estrangement in meeting our true being. The underlying cause of these, the third aspect, he describes as ‘sin’ and defines it as ‘a failure in personal relationships between human beings and their Creator due to a rebellion from the human side’.

The traditional terms ‘sin’ and ‘salvation’ have all but lost meaning and significance to a contemporary audience. Given the prejudice of some toward the church they can even be detrimental and misleading when trying to explain the themes of estrangement or separation, and reconciliation or renewal of relationship. ‘Alienation’ and ‘togetherness’ can be useful synonyms for the ‘consequences of sin’ and ‘salvation’ and are terms that I believe in the context of this study would be helpful. However, care is required around terminology and meaning associated with the use of such synonyms. Although there are obvious and good reasons to replace dated and meaningless words, Tillich correctly suggests that estrangement, or in this case alienation, cannot replace the word sin. Sin Tillich defines as the ‘turning away from the infinite ground of our being’, and therefore estrangement or alienation is a consequence (as Fiddes suggests above).

Human history affirms the universal quest of ‘salvation’, or a ‘making whole of what is broken in existence’. It has an ontological reality and therefore, in the words of Tillich, is a matter of ‘to be or not to be’. Fiddes describes Christian ‘salvation’ as an idea which has wide scope, ‘including the healing of individuals and social groups and even the conserving of a natural world ravaged and polluted by human greed’ and therefore has scope in the context of this study. Salvation or togetherness, can therefore be seen as

314 Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, 6.
315 As the Apostle Paul says ‘fall short of the glory of God’ Romans 3:23.
316 Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, 6.
317 Steindl-Rast, Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer, 29.
318 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 46.
319 Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, 3.
320 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 165.
321 Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, 3. Fiddes notes the literal meaning of salvation being healing, from salvos ‘healed’. p10. See also Tillich, Systematic Theology, 165. ‘Healing is about reuniting that which is estranged’.

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‘breaking the isolating boundaries of individualism into a life of inclusive communion with persons, and with all creation’, within God322.

Although the death of Christ upon a cross around 2000 years ago is the central concept of Christian atonement, this event, however, is not bound by time and space, and focuses upon restoring a relationship between human beings and God, ‘who are estranged from each other’323. The resurrection and the new creation is therefore ‘the uniting of what has been separated’324. Much has been written about the nature of God’s judgment and issues surrounding Christ’s substitution for the sins of humans, along with debate around whether the Father is angry with the Son325. However, it is most significant to note, in the context of this study, the affirmation that ‘God was in Christ’ entails the belief that God’s-self shares in the desolation of human life, ‘entering the realm of estrangement and hostile death’326. The character of this ‘divine suffering’ is ‘not substitution but free participation’327. Atonement-as-participation requires God to share in human life as both Father and Son in the context of judgment within atonement328.

History has shown that each of the aspects of human rebellion, alienation, estrangement and the falling short of potential can take on a different shape and colour across the spectrum of time and culture. ‘As the expression of human predicament alters, so there will likewise be a shift in the way that salvation is expressed’329. Significantly for this present time and culture many observers have noted human kind’s estrangement from God and the natural world330. The separation of children from the living plants and

323 Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, 3-4.
325 This study by its nature is too brief to adequately debate such issues.
326 Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, 104.
327 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 176. Tillich adds further that ‘God participates in the suffering of existential estrangement, but his suffering is not a substitute for the suffering of the creature’.
328 Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, 109. ‘Participation’ is a significant theme that will be further developed.
329 Fiddes, Past Event and Present Salvation, 7.
330 Many authors and commentators referred to in this study for example, Bauckham, Grey, Habel, Northcote, McFague and others.
animals of the natural world is a model of alienation and broken relationship. Children are separated from living Earth-others, and arguably they are then separated from the essence of God the Creator. Certainly this study affirms the presence of such dislocation and alienation in many urban children.

As Job experienced, in the state of alienation or estrangement, we are outside the divine centre to which our own centre essentially belongs\textsuperscript{331}. This structural centeredness gives us our being as created in \textit{imago Dei}, which gives us the ability to transcend both ourselves and our world. To be a self, and to have a world, constitutes the challenge to humankind as the ‘perfection of creation’\textsuperscript{332}. This perfection is also our temptation to make ourselves existentially the centre of our worlds. In the context of our limitless creative potential and freedom to explore, question and reflect within the confines of a finite body bounded by time, and ultimately death, John Macquarrie describes ‘an existential imbalance’\textsuperscript{333}. Humans, in their anxiety, fail to hold the balance between the two poles of existence, ‘and we tip over to one side at the expense of the other; we either ignore our limits and posture as gods, or we give away our freedom and succumb like animals to the forces that squeeze and determine us’\textsuperscript{334}. As a consequence we are alienated from ourselves, others and the whole of reality.

Salvation should essentially be seen as ‘divinisation’ (\textit{theosis}), which Fiddes suggests is not becoming God, but rather being incorporated into the fellowship of the divine life\textsuperscript{335}. This is a returning to the essential nature of our being. We are invited to participate in the divine life. Tillich discusses the term \textit{hubris}, to describe the spiritual sin of pride where, rather than being incorporated into the fellowship of the divine life, humans seek to become an equal with God. The human desire to control and tame is the ‘\textit{hubris} self-elevation of man (sic) into the sphere of the divine’\textsuperscript{336}. YHWH addressed this with Job by

\textsuperscript{331} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 49.
\textsuperscript{332} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 49.
\textsuperscript{334} Fiddes, \textit{Past Event and Present Salvation}, 11. See also Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 67f.
\textsuperscript{335} Fiddes, \textit{Past Event and Present Salvation}, 76.
\textsuperscript{336} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 50.
asking him questions about the beginning of time and Job’s ability to harness the wild and untamable capacity of animals\textsuperscript{337}.

In a state of alienation our hunger and desire is for togetherness, so that we might be reunited, and at one with the whole. This poverty and hunger can be insatiable and lead to an unrestrained desire to ‘draw the whole of reality into one’s self’\textsuperscript{338}. Augustine described this as ‘concupiscence’\textsuperscript{339} which literally means, ‘insatiable sexual desire but, more broadly, wanting to have it all, whatever the all is’\textsuperscript{340}. In the fear of missing out Bauckham adds in this context, ‘the horizon of our own finitude haunts us’\textsuperscript{341}. In other words sin can be described as insatiable greed. Endless consumption seeks to satisfy the hunger for togetherness, which paradoxically alienates further one from the other, especially the natural world. The current ecological crisis has arguably been caused by our alienation from each other, from the Earth and from God\textsuperscript{342}. Genesis 3 describes how as humans we struggle to be humble and be comfortable in our proper place. The Genesis 1-3 creation story is rich and profound and highlights that our alienation from God is ‘our unwillingness to stay in our place, to accept our proper limits’\textsuperscript{343}, and to accept our place in the order of creation.

To bring about togetherness we are called to live in right relationship. In doing so we engage in the ‘divine work of liberation that leads to the lived experience of God’s vision of salvation’ for all of creation\textsuperscript{344}. As we form relationships of mutuality, care and respect there is less fear of the unknown and the uncontrollable, and therefore less of a hunger to consume, tame and control, as Job’s transformation bears testimony. This is what appeared to occur for many of the children in this study. The focus group described

\textsuperscript{337} Fiddes, \textit{Past Event and Present Salvation}, 17. Calming the waters and bringing order from chaos is an ancient Hebrew (and other ancient cultures) concept of God’s salvation, which is particularly evident in themes throughout the Book of Job. For example Job 26:12-13 and 38:8-11, conquering the sea and liberating the land. See also Psalm 89:9-10 and Isaiah 51:9-11.

\textsuperscript{338} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 52.

\textsuperscript{339} From the classical name for this desire \textit{concupiscientia}.

\textsuperscript{340} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 115.

\textsuperscript{341} Bauckham and Hart, \textit{Hope against Hope}, 178.


\textsuperscript{343} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 113.

\textsuperscript{344} Dempsey, "Creation, Evolution, Revelation, and Redemption," 17.
children as having a better chance of forming autonomy, of being relaxed and comfortable in their space when having formed right relationships within the natural world. They co-operate with one another, recognising the part they play in the whole.

Knowing our place, having a sense of being, means that we are able to relate with one another from a place of mutuality, equality, care and respect. In the context of our Earthiness it is about finding place in the land.

4.3.2 Belonging – Finding place in the land

*Let the day perish in which I was born,*

*And the night that said,*

*A man-child is conceived.*

*Let that day be darkness!*

*(Jb 3:3)*

Having lost his family, animals and land, Job wrestled with his understanding of his place in the order of life. Land, in the context of place and belonging, is a central ‘if not the central theme of biblical faith’[^345]. Meaning and purpose grow out of an historical experience of place, so that a sense of place is a central element of how one makes meaning in life[^346]. A sense of place and belonging is therefore a central element of faith[^347]. The covenant between YHWH and the children of Israel is associated with the land. With the land comes responsibility of managing and care, along with equality of distribution and availability for future generations. There is a sense in which there is a symbiotic relationship between God-people-land, in the context of the land being a heritage, God’s own possession, that is passed on from generation to generation[^348]. The land is not ours to do with as we please, it is rather God’s and belongs to the whole

[^347]: Liburne, *A Sense of Place*, 27.
community. For the people of Israel connection with the land was in terms of covenant and relationship, which explains why they experienced such terrible pain, loss and sense of ‘not being at home’ when forced into exile. Whilst in the land of Babylon they encountered dislocation and alienation.

Jane described how her children had learnt to care and nurture the soil by making and adding compost. As children get their hands dirty nurturing and caring for the land there is a sense in which they enter into the covenantal relationship with God. This relationship may not be articulated as in the text of the HB, however, as they care for the land they enter into the place where God intended humans to be. In this place they experience God’s blessings as they bring life to seemingly lifeless seeds, as Ken described of his children. As they offer care and respect for the land they share in the joy of nurturing and feeding, harvest, eating and replanting.

The prophet Jeremiah reveals the intimate connection God has with the land and the people of Israel. There are deep and genuine divine feelings and emotions associated with God and the land which Jeremiah ascribes to God. These feelings indicate the depth and intensity of the relationship God has with the created world. A virtual refrain throughout Jeremiah is that a fruit of broken relationship is devastation for the land. Exile and ecological collapse, Jeremiah writes (Jer 5:22-28), are the consequences of failing to care for the land and refusal to follow YHWH’s terms around occupation of Promised Land. When the relationship is broken we read that God’s forsaking is comprehensive in scope; God’s presence departs from the temple, land and people (Jer 12). Temple and land are interrelated throughout the text. From this sanctuary, God’s special dwelling place in the land, blessings flow out into all the land (Ps 132); however, if God forsakes this dwelling place (Ezk 8:6), ‘then it no longer has the capacity for blessing’.

350 Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament, 173.
351 Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament, 175.
352 See Northcott, A Moral Climate, 12f.
In their stories all of the interviewees described how children encountering their natural surroundings by creating gardens and caring for animals, or simply playing outside, form a connection in the natural world that leads to a greater sense of place and belonging. With a sense of place the children were offered the opportunity to hold and be held. An extension of this is to know that they can love and be loved\textsuperscript{354}. The children’s connection with the land is characterised by a level of intimacy and closeness, which is what YHWH invited of Job through his attentiveness and marvel.

A sense of place and belonging affirms a sense of being. In this way, place has ontological significance\textsuperscript{355}. This reflects the challenge of ‘being’ in a sociological context where people move from vocation to vocation, relationship to relationship, house to house. By implication children are therefore on the move. Not having place, given that our lives are so place-oriented, can bring a horror of displacement with the emotional feelings of depression, desperation, isolation, dislocation, homesickness and disorientation\textsuperscript{356}. It is vitally important therefore that a sense of ‘being’ be established in childhood. A child who doesn’t feel a sense of belonging or a sense that, ‘this is my space that I share with others’, will struggle to form relationships of mutuality. A child cannot have meaningful relationships with Earth-others devoid of a sense of personal being. Children in Earth-connecting activities gaining a sense of place and belonging can develop a sense of ‘acceptance’ in which their lives are less characterised by a sense of meaninglessness and doubt\textsuperscript{357}.

YHWH invited Job to experience a sense of place and belonging by understanding his place within the cosmos through heightened awareness and humility. The children in this study found a sense of place and belonging as they discovered their Earthiness and sense of being.

\textsuperscript{354} White, The Growth of Love, 45.
\textsuperscript{355} Edward Casey, Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 71.
\textsuperscript{356} Casey, Getting Back into Place, ix.
\textsuperscript{357} Alain de Botton, Status Anxiety (New York: Vintage Books, 2004). Expands this concept in terms of modern society offering the freedom and incentive for people to aspire and achieve what ever level they wish, and the associated anxiety that this desire for status recognition creates.
4.3.3 Creation – Earthiness and Commonality of Existence

The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning;
And he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels,
A thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys.
He also had seven sons and three daughters.
(Jb 42:12-13)

A theology of human beings engaging in the created world naturally finds its source in the creation story. More than a hundred readings in the HB contain the creation motif. The most familiar is Genesis 1-3. Traditionally Genesis 1-2 has been divided into the Priestly version (Gen 1:1-2:4a) and the Yahwist version (Gen 2:4b-25), however, recently scholars have called for a more unified reading that recognises the text’s inherent differences and its points of complementarity. On the first day God creates light separating ‘night’ from ‘day’, each complementing and distinct from the other. On the second a dome is created in the midst of the waters that separates one body of water from the other (Gen 1:6-8). Originally one, the bodies of water are now separated. The third day the waters under the sky are gathered to form the sea so that the dry land, the Earth, can appear (Gen1:9). In this creative process over the first three days we see that ‘one aspect of creation gives way to another’ where each comprises a central habitat for life on the planet. The birds and creatures that occupy each respectively receive a divine blessing, enabling them to share in God’s creative process, which is later also bestowed upon human beings (Gen 1:20-22, 28). On the fourth day the sun, moon and stars appear and with their respective functions serve to separate the light from the darkness and day from night (Gen 1:14-19; cf. 1:4-5). On subsequent days the Earth brings forth vegetation.

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359 Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament, 3.
360 I have previously discussed the significance of God’s ruah as a precursor and source to God’s creative process. God’s ruah, ‘breath’, ‘Spirit’, ‘wind’ sweeps over the face of the waters (Gen 1:2). ‘With this “wind”, this “breathe”, this “spirit” the creation process begins’. See Dempsey, "Creation, Evolution, Revelation, and Redemption," 2.
(Gen 1:9 cf. 2:9) as food for human beings, along with birds, and all other Earthly creatures (Gen 1:29-30). To be fully fruitful and thrive, the vegetation is dependent upon rain, which God will bring, and humans to cultivate it (Gen 2:5). ‘Furthermore, the Earth brings forth living creatures of every kind; from the Earth – out of the ground – God makes cattle, creeping things and wild animals’ (Gen 1:24; cf. 2:19). We read then that from out of the dust of the ground God also forms a human being (Gen 2:7). A portion of the Earth is then turned over to garden that God plants (Gen 2:8) which the human being is entrusted to ‘till it and keep it’ (Gen 2:15).

The creation story to this point is one that reflects interdependent, interconnecting relationships between the divine, the human and the non-human worlds. Children in this study encountered and developed interdependent and interconnecting relationships with the plants, animals, soil and colleagues with whom they shared space. Job also was challenged to recognise this.

In Genesis 2:7 we read that God creates human beings by breathing life into them. This intimate communion with God is seen as the core of our being human. ‘We are alive with God’s own life’. The centre of our aliveness is the centre point of our communion with God. Not only is our life linked to the breath of God, but also the creation story shows the clear link humans have with the Earth. Bauckham reminds us that we are ‘participants in the community of God’s creatures’. It is about rediscovering our Earthiness, and that we are formed from the dust of the Earth. Essentially, it is about being humble and recognising our place in relationship with the humus of the soil. Through the verbal connections in Genesis 2:7 the link is brought out playfully yet profoundly between the

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363 Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, 31.
364 Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 75. He adds, ‘No doubt we are eminent participants in the community of God’s creatures, but participants nonetheless’.
365 Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, 134. In a pastoral context Steindl-Rast writes: ‘After all, humility is down-to-earth and to an earthiness we are rediscovering today. Humility is down-to-earth. It is, therefore, related to “humour” and to plain “humanness”. Only when we are down-to-earth can we laugh about ourselves; and that makes us human. The etymological connections may be doubtful. But the psychological connections hold. The truly human is marked by the humor of humble realism’.
human being (ha adam) and the dust of the ground (ha adamah)\textsuperscript{366}. Human life is clearly dependent upon and connected with the ground. Genesis 4:10 makes an explicit connection with these terms (ha adam, ha adamah) and blood (dam, dammin) when the blood of Abel cries out from the ground. The significance and symbolism of this link of the blood in New Testament soteriology is profound\textsuperscript{367}.

As the Genesis creation account continues to unfold animals are revealed to be helpers as partners for the human being (Gen 2:18-19), and additionally human beings are to be helpers as partners for one another (Gen 2:20). Gender equality is suggested from the forming of the woman from the male’s bone and finally we read that the human beings are created in God’s image, according to God’s likeness (Gen 2:26-27) embodying the \textit{imago Dei}. The people of the ancient biblical world would have understood this as meaning that they shared in God’s creative process and God’s work of exercising dominion (Gen 1:28)\textsuperscript{368}. God is therefore ‘not in heaven alone, but is engaged in a relationship of mutuality and chooses to share the creative process with others’\textsuperscript{369}. Humans share power with God, which presents a strong challenge to human beings to exercise with care the invitation to be co-creators with God. \textit{Imago Dei} is significant because it pertains to one’s sense of self as well as one’s role in creation\textsuperscript{370}.

A characteristic common to God and humans is the desire and ability to make things\textsuperscript{371}. Rowan Williams suggests that ‘human making seeks to echo, necessarily imperfectly, the character of God’s love as shown in making and becoming incarnate’\textsuperscript{372}. Engaging in the process of being creative and creating we are living in the dynamic of the Spirit’s activity and are co-creators with God. This is why children creating a garden from paved and

\textsuperscript{366} The pun draws attention to the relationship and indicates its appropriateness. Loren Wilkinson offers an English equivalent to the Hebrew pun: ‘God made humans out of humus’, see Bauckham, \textit{Bible and Ecology}, 21.
\textsuperscript{368} Dempsey, "Creation, Evolution, Revelation, and Redemption," 4.
\textsuperscript{369} Birch et al., \textit{A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament}, 49.
\textsuperscript{371} Dorothy Sayers, \textit{The Mind and the Maker} (Cleveland: World, 1956), 34.
\textsuperscript{372} Rowan Williams, \textit{Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love} (London: Moorehouse, 2005), 165.
barren landscape is such an enriching activity. Here there is the opportunity for them to be co-creators with God as they provide a space for life to flourish and grow. Job’s restored life was characterised by creativity, in establishing and caring for his many thousands of animals, and his part in creating ten children.

The way we perceive ourselves as created imago Dei is significant\(^{373}\). Our experiences and external influences in childhood shape and define our adult values, attitudes, perceptions, expectations, hopes, desires and character. My experience in pastoral ministry suggests that the outworking of people’s values and character is informed and influenced by their image of God, and I suspect that most often adult images of God are formed through childhood experiences. The rise of the biological sciences causes us to think more of the Earth as a living organism and a community of relationships in process of development. This is significant because ‘the way we think about the world will shape the way we think about the Creator’\(^{374}\). Our image of God will affect the character of our relationships and the way we interact within our worlds, and the way that we perceive in ourselves imago Dei.

A child engaging in the natural world might develop later in adult life an image of God who is creative, imaginative, diverse and full of fun, with a depth and richness of being. This is what makes the Job narrative most interesting. YHWH’s response to Job’s request for an audience to speak his case is not in the setting of the temple or courtroom, but rather YHWH speaks from the whirlwind, parading animals before Job. Playing and interacting in the natural world affords children the potential to develop an image of God who governs and orders the beautiful, wild and chaotic natural world. Consider for a moment the image of God one might have living on the moon surrounded daily with the


\(^{374}\) Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 120.
grey and lifeless lunar landscape\textsuperscript{375}. Consider also the image of God a child might develop from living and existing entirely within the surrounds of the constructed environments of buildings, shops, concrete, glass and asphalt, with climate control and filtered air and water\textsuperscript{376}. Might this image be of a God who is controlling, ordered, containable, tameable, predictable and useful? A God who can change my world to satisfy my needs?

Interacting and existing within the wild and chaotic natural world, children experience the reality that risk is real, which was YHWH’s message to Job. Children experience the reality that life is unpredictable and that things don’t always go to plan. Many of the interviewees described how their children were aware that plants die and crops fail from disease or lack of water. Such experiences enable children to develop a realistic picture of life and can teach skills in resilience\textsuperscript{377}. Nature is raw; it is about eating and being eaten, infesting and being infested. It is messy. The Job narrative hides none of the paradox, ambiguity or mystery that confronts us everyday in life. We cannot hide from the horror and savagery of nature. In this can be found humility in relation to the awesomeness and wonder of the created world\textsuperscript{378}. The natural world can become the child’s classroom, as it was for Job, where they learn the natural laws of the created world. They discern and learn of the world and order that God has created. Like Job, they experience an encounter with YHWH as mystery, chaos and beauty. In this place they see the world as largely untameable, unpredictable, wild and chaotic, rugged, beautiful, dangerous and risky. The design and beauty of a place reflects the being of its Creator and such encounters can shape a child’s image of God as the source of life. Therefore there is potential to

\textsuperscript{375} Berry, \textit{The Dream of the Earth}, 11.
\textsuperscript{376} David Ranson, \textit{Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today} (Strathfield NSW: St. Paul’s, 2002). This might also influence the expression of spirituality. Ranson compared and contrasted the spirituality emanating from Franciscan enchantment in creation and the Benedictine spirituality of mysticism as products of their respective landscapes. He and others suggest that an Australian spirituality is characterized by silence and wide open spaces.
\textsuperscript{378} Dillard, \textit{Pilgrim at Tinker Creek}, 176. Dillard, reflecting upon natural selection, comments that creation loves death more than it loves you or me.
encounter a spiritual experience of oneness with God and the created world, and discover God as the source of life.

Our investigation into discovering God in the natural world progresses now into an exploration of Christian Trinitarian theology, which reveals an image of God as three movements in the dance of life to which we are invited to participate.

### 4.3.4 Participation in God – Trinitarian Theology

Where then does wisdom come from?
And where is the place of understanding?
God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.
For he looks to the ends of the Earth, and sees everything under the heavens.

(\textit{Jb} 28:20, 23-24)

The model of relationship central to the Christian tradition is the Triune relationship of God in three persons. The universe is held together in Divine Communion and the Trinitarian process within God provides the place and space for the cosmos to exist\textsuperscript{379}. The relations within the whole cosmos reflect the divine nature, where God, in a dynamic act of self-communication and freedom, opens out God’s being of Father-Son-Spirit, to include every creature of creation. The relations within the created world belong to God’s being\textsuperscript{380}. Central to the outworking of relationships of mutuality, care and respect, along with developing a sense of being in God, is an understanding of Christian Trinitarian theology. The contemporary rediscovery of Trinitarian theology has brought a renewed interest in the concept of participation in the divine life\textsuperscript{381}.

When Jane’s children discovered that one of their chickens had been locked in the garden shed over the weekend and nearly died, their experience of life was extended and

\textsuperscript{380} Edwards, \textit{Ecology at the Heart of Faith}, 70.
deepened. There is a sense in which their empathy and concern for another being was founded on an awareness of the sacredness and reverence of all life. The Christian Trinitarian theology of persons in communion, of being fully relational within the world, enables us to acquire a reverence for even the smallest and least significant life form. Here, through encounter and relationship, there is the opportunity of taking seriously Christ’s call to lose self in order to find it (Mt 10:39), where the self we find is in communion with other, far beyond the narrow confines of narcissistic individualism.382

The early church developed Trinitarian theology in an attempt to understand the experience of Jesus Christ and the presence of God, understood as Spirit. The living Trinitarian spirituality (the economic Trinity) that grew from the early church’s Eucharistic experience was distanced over time from its biblical base toward a more speculative theology that focused more on the inner life of God (immanent Trinity). At this time Trinitarian theology lost its significance and relevance in its failure to explain the experience of God.383 The contemporary renewal of Trinitarian theology has returned to the origin of the symbol’s roots in the early church to reveal fresh approaches to understand the God revealed in Jesus Christ. More significantly there is an attempt to explore the otherness of the triune God ‘that still shatters the idolatrous boundaries of humanity’s limited constructs about who God is’.384 The limited constructs of the church’s expression of the nature of God has traditionally ignored the experience of knowing God through an encounter in the natural world. This new paradigm is a movement toward a retrieval of the Holy Mystery of the Triune God, who is in communion with the created world.385 This makes YHWH’s address to Job from out of the whirlwind poignant.

The early church theologians found a language in which to express both the oneness and the diversity of God: ‘One essence, three persons’.386 After much dispute with Arius an

382 Grey, Sacred Longings, 134.
384 Fox, “God’s Shattering Otherness,” 88.
385 Fox, “God’s Shattering Otherness,” 88.
386 Fiddes, Participating in God, 13.
agreement was eventually reached among Greek Christian thinkers that *hypostasis* should denote the ‘otherness’ or distinct identity of Father, Son and Spirit, while *ousia* should denote the one divine nature with which each was identified. By the beginning of the fifth century, the church fathers of both East and West came to the agreement that the nature of God, that is, God’s *ousia* or *substantia* should be thought of as a *communion* of persons. In order to account for the unity of *ousia* in God, and to better explain this concept, the verb *choreo* was sometimes used to express the way that each person ‘penetrated’, ‘filled’ or was ‘contained’ in the others. Some what later, Pseudo-Cyril in the sixth century used the noun *perichoresis* to express this concept, followed later by John of Damascus in the eighth century. Perichoresis has the ‘advantage of emphasising reciprocity and exchange in the mutual indwelling and penetration of the persons’ and is a crucial concept in the contemporary conversation on Trinitarian theology. It depicts the three persons of the Trinity as separate persons (*hypostases*) of equal standing. Each relates to each other in perfect unity and harmony. This concept breaks down the interpretation of divine monarchy and associated ecclesiastical structures of power and hierarchy and gives way to the leveling interpretation of mutuality, equality and interdependence. This contribution shows that the divine persons exist so intimately with one another, ‘for one another and in one another, that they constitute themselves in their unique, incomparable and complete unity’. Pinnock suggests therefore that ‘God is to be thought of as movement, not simple, immutable substance’.

Although scholarly work presents a range of approaches, essentially the doctrine of Trinity seeks to describe God as ‘persons in communion’ (*koinonia*)*. Zizioulas contributes to the debate with the *ek-stasis* of being ‘a movement towards communion which leads to transcendence of the boundaries of self and thus to freedom’. True communion can only occur when the uniqueness of each entity is fully respected.

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387 By Hillary and Cyril of Alexandria, see Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 71.
390 Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 84.
392 Cited in Fox, "God's Shattering Otherness," 90.
Similarly, ‘it is only in communion that each entity can come to its full, unique potential’. This understanding of the Trinitarian model of God reflects the model of all relationships within the cosmos. Fiddes adds that the concept of God as Trinity is a language of participation, and can be seen as a symbol for being drawn into the life of God, which is a communion. To confess God as Trinity is to share in relational movements of love like that between a Father and a Son, ‘which are being continually opened up by a Spirit of newness each towards each other and to the future’.

Tillich describes the ontological structure of self and world as, ‘every being participates in the structure of being’. Each ‘self’ has a ‘world’ in which we relate to other. ‘World-consciousness is possible on the basis of a fully developed self-consciousness’. That is, we become more aware of other when we are more fully aware of self and our mutual interdependence. We are never alone and participation described at this level is unavoidable and therefore leads to ‘communion’ with others. Ultimately in this process we find our being in God, and with an acceptance of mystery, we glimpse a power beyond and other than ourselves.

A person is only a person in relationship with other. As persons or entities we are in communion with all others within the cosmos. This is who we are. Each exists not in its own right but in relationship with other. Job experienced this when YHWH paraded majestic, wild and magnificent creatures. This offered Job a glimpse into another world, a world of animals in communion, interconnection and relationship. In offering care for an animal or sharing an experience with a peer, children have the opportunity of realising this communion. It can be a difficult realisation that something other than oneself is

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393 Cited in Fox, "God's Shattering Otherness," 91.
394 Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 204.
395 Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 204.
398 The significant contribution of the Earth Bible series has been to challenge Christians to reread the bible from the perspective of Earth: to read from the context of endangered species, loss of biodiversity, overconsumption of meat and declining rain forest.
real\textsuperscript{401}, however, when aware that the other exists, has a right to breathe and have space, then we can enter into communion. When fully attentive and in communion with at least one other particular being, there is the possibility of acknowledging the reality of many others\textsuperscript{402}.

The language of Trinity certainly encourages the values of relationship, community and mutuality between persons, and it is about interdependence and not domination. However, Fiddes believes that the point of Trinitarian language is not necessarily just to provide an example to copy, but rather ‘to draw us into participation in God, out of which human life can be transformed’\textsuperscript{403}. In his comprehensive work, \textit{Participating in God}, Fiddes goes to great length, investigating the work of many authors, to suggest that the notion of the divine Trinity just being a model for human relationships, has ontological limitations. He believes that it is necessary to distinguish between the Trinity being a model for human practices, ‘and the Trinity as place of engagement with divine activity’\textsuperscript{404}. It is not enough to plead, ‘God is united and yet lives in relations, so we should be like this too’. He therefore argues for a complement to the imitation of God with a proposal of participation in God\textsuperscript{405}. The emphasis is upon an appreciation of the experience of God rather than the observation of God.

The notion of participation in God is built upon Moltmann’s early concept of God in terms of an event, who then questions; ‘Can one pray to an event?’ The answer is of course ‘No’, but rather one can ‘pray in this event’\textsuperscript{406}. Contained within this statement is the language of a participator rather than a spectator, with a call for participation ‘in’ the event of the divine relations.

\textsuperscript{402} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 54.
\textsuperscript{403} Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, 66.
\textsuperscript{404} Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, 54.
\textsuperscript{405} Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, 28. His particular emphasis is upon pastoral ministry.
Fiddes stresses the importance of *engagement* in God’s ‘interweaving of relational movements’, which are characterised by a flow or dance to and from the one ultimate source. Moreover, these relational movements are not static links between individuals, but rather are described as love in movement, which create an interweaving dance of ‘perichoresis’ in which we are summoned to be involved. ‘God happens, moves and comes’. This relational activity is not simply therefore an ‘I-Thou’ encounter with either one personal being or three personal beings, but rather it is about participating in a flow of personal relationships within God which are like ‘movements between an I and a Thou’. Engaging children in Earth-connecting activities that offer life, hospitality and restoration invites participation in God. Such activities are ontologically and theologically significant.

In translating the Greek noun perichoresis, two Latin words were used. First, *circumin sessio* meaning that one person is contained in another – ‘literally ‘seated’ in another, filling the space of the other, present in the other’. Thomas Aquinas preferred this term which stresses a state of being. The second word, *circumincessio*, which was preferred by Bonaventure among other theologians in the West, conveys a sense of activity, and evokes the interpenetrating of one person in another. It captures the sense of one person moving in and through the other. The active nature of this image was sometimes expressed in the form of a divine dance. Fiddes emphasises the play on the word *choreo* relating to *choreia* meaning ‘dance’ which illustrates well the dynamic sense of perichoresis. The image of the dance, he suggests, ‘makes most sense when we understand the divine persons as movements of relationship, rather than as individual subjects who have relationships.’

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407 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 79.
409 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 279.
410 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 72.
411 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 72.
413 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 72.
This contribution places greater emphasis upon the concept of the Godhead as ‘persons as relationships’ over the more social doctrine of ‘persons in relationship’\(^{414}\). Identifying the divine persons as relations brings together a way of understanding the nature of being (ontology) with a way of knowing (epistemology). The being of God can be understood as event and relationship, however it is only through an epistemology of participation that each only makes sense in the context of the other. We cannot observe, even in our imagination, being which is relationship. It can only be known through participation\(^{415}\). Trinity therefore is a movement of relations, where there is a moving in and out in a dance of interweaving as wide as the universe, as God.

In the natural world there is the opportunity to encounter the Spirit of God who offers life and breath\(^{416}\), simply because each member of the Earth community is of God. Each being derives its purpose and life, its being, in the Spirit of God, working in and through uniqueness and interdependence. In relationships of mutuality, respect and love within the natural world we commune with God and each other. ‘The Spirit’s role with each creature needs to be understood as a relational and personal one. The Holy Spirit creates a relationship between each creature and the divine perichoretic community’\(^{417}\).

In the next section I explore how in an act of self-limitation, God opens the divine communion of life to enable all created beings to dwell within God’s self. Every being participates therefore in God, which is implied in the story of Job. The game YHWH played with Job has life and amusement, for there is a sense in which YHWH beckons to Job; ‘come on, become an actor in the greater play of life’.

\(^{414}\) Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 50.
\(^{415}\) Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 38.
\(^{417}\) Edwards, “‘For Your Immortal Spirit Is in All Things’,” 53.
4.3.5 Incarnation – The Cosmos in God

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:
‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth?’
(Jb 38:1–4)

After 37 chapters of narrative, YHWH became fully present to Job. The incarnate presence of Christ in the world speaks of redemption and transformation. The incarnation is the locus of God’s decisive self-revelation and therefore is the point from which God’s relationship with the created order is best manifested418. This is the crowning point of God’s interaction and engagement with God’s people and where God enters into the deepest possible relationship with space and time419.

The prologue of John’s Gospel evokes the cosmic reality of the Christ’s presence from the beginning of time. Just as the Colossian hymn, John reads the whole biblical meta-narrative of God’s eternity, as the story of Jesus420. John’s intentional parallel with the Genesis creation story establishes the theme that the coming Kingdom of God is the renewal of creation421. All New Testament Christology is stated in the highest terms available in first-century Jewish theology. It is certainly not a merely functional Christology, but is best characterised as a Christology of divine identity. Jesus, the New Testament writers are saying, belongs inherently to ‘who God is’422.

418 Lilburne, A Sense of Place, 90.
419 McFague, The Body of God, 75. McFague refers to natural theology, which she describes as ‘most broadly, [it is] concerned with showing the continuity between creation and redemption; that is, to show that the God of redemption, the loving power who heals and saves the world and its creatures, is also the source of the entire cosmos and has been working in it from the beginning’.
420 Bauckham, Bible and Ecology, 162.
421 Bauckham, Bible and Ecology, 164f.
In the historical Jesus we see a person who is at home in the natural world\(^4^{23}\). He communes with God not in the temple or the room of a house but rather on the hillside or in the garden or wilderness. He freely engages with the realities of urban life and yet also is often found on a vantage point outside townships\(^4^{24}\). He lives a level of intimacy with both the built and the natural environments, drawing upon images and metaphors from the natural world with remarkable freedom and frequency\(^4^{25}\). Such observations have their place as we consider the involvement of urban children in the outdoor environment, however, we cannot stay with the historical Jesus, who offers a ‘limited, historically conditioned human expression of divine Wisdom’\(^4^{26}\), at the expense of denying the broader Christological significance of who Jesus actually is. The word became flesh. If we hold to an Incarnational theology beyond the historical Jesus of Nazareth, one that includes God’s presence at some level in all matter\(^4^{27}\), we encounter God in the natural world. God is closer to us than we are to ourselves\(^4^{28}\). God’s presence is the very air we breathe. Here is the possibility of imagining a divine transcendence in the natural world\(^4^{29}\). Encountering that divine transcendence is a spiritual experience that later will be described as the expression of wonder.

Wisdom Christology extends our reflection here for God’s Wisdom is associated with God’s work in creation. Wisdom is concerned with the whole of creation, its interdependence and intricacies, its relationships and interconnections, along with God’s presence. Following his death and resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth was understood by the early church to be divine Wisdom\(^4^{30}\). This became the essential link in the development of the doctrine of the Incarnation in the early church. In John’s gospel we see Jesus as the

\(^{423}\) ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head’ (Mt 8:20).
\(^{424}\) The feeding of the five thousand (Lk 9:10-17) and the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7).
\(^{426}\) Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God* 66.
\(^{427}\) Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God* He argues for an Incarnational concept that suggests a piece of God entered into a physical and spiritual union with the matter of the Earth and cosmos.
\(^{428}\) Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, 31. Steindl-Rast quotes St Augustine as saying ‘God is closer to me than I am to myself’.
\(^{429}\) McFague, *The Body of God*. McFague talks about how we can imagine metaphorically the earth as ‘God’s Body’ as having innate sacredness beyond what there would be in seeing earth as a lifeless artifact God has created. The significant contribution this provides is that this image brings Christianity down to where we really live, in our bodies on earth.
\(^{430}\) Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God* 50.
eternal Word made flesh. The identification of Jesus with personified Wisdom leads to the insight that what is divine in Jesus (Wisdom) pre-existed his life and ministry and has become incarnate in him. God’s Wisdom is a strong theme throughout the Bible and provides an ecological understanding of God’s Incarnational presence in the natural world.

As they engaged in the natural world, the children in this study became familiar with the origin of food, the interconnectedness of life and the interdependence of inanimate and living systems. We don’t know if they are fully aware of their Earthiness and their commonality of existence with Earth-others. Neither are we aware if they know that God is somehow intimately connected and related to the natural world, however, their intimate physical connection with the natural world must somehow sit alongside a spiritual connection with God as Creator of the cosmos and Christ’s Incarnational presence.

Metaphorically McFague speaks of the world as being God’s body. She uses the classic story of God’s self-disclosure to Moses, when God declares that he may see God’s backside, but not God’s face, and thus proposing that all bodies of the world are the ‘backside’ of God (Ex 33:23). All bodies are therefore visible signs of the divine radiance, showing the reflected glory of God’s invisible divine face. The basis of the metaphor is in the universal, not in one particular body, such as the body of Jesus of Nazareth. Contrary to this however, Fiddes defends the opposite movement, from the particular to the universal, which is rooted in taking seriously the nature of the presence of God as participation. We are called to participate in God, who participates in our lives. The whole world can be seen as God’s body in the sense that the eucharistic bread and the church meeting are the body of Christ: ‘they are a place of meeting, and a point of being drawn into the life of God’.

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431 Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God* 51.
433 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 291.
434 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 298.
The concern that Fiddes raises is that beginning from a universal cosmic body may mean everything gets swallowed up into an undifferentiated oneness. This is especially the problem with pantheism (‘everything as God’) as espoused by some theologians. Jantzen resolutely holds to pantheism, regarding the cosmos as the entire body of God. She promotes this model to avoid the dualism of models proposed by process theologians insisting that God is ‘more than the cosmos’, and that ‘the all which is in God [is] yet not all of God’. Similarly Fretheim argues for the deep significance of God’s presence referring to God and Space and argues that YHWH’s place is in the world, and adds, ‘only in the world’. However, the absorption of ‘all that there is’ into God raises considerable theological concerns. Tillich defines God as ‘the creative power and unity of nature, the absolute substance which is present in everything’, emphasising that God is the essence of all things, rather than the totality of things. A pantheistic or animist vision of nature as divine might imply the Earth is to be worshipped. McFague, aware of these concerns therefore describes how ‘it is the back and not the face of God that we are allowed to see’. It is the ineffable face of God that keeps us from a pantheism in which ‘God is embodied necessarily and totally’. Her vision is thus panentheistic (everything in God). McFague’s understanding of the world as God’s body leads to a concept of Trinity in which the first person is the invisible face, or the ‘mystery’; the second person is the visible body, or the sheer ‘mud’ of the world and the third person is the breath in the body which mediates ‘the mystery and the mud’.

The issue around pantheism is the distinction between God and the cosmos. The panentheistic model in order to maintain a necessary distinction between God and the cosmos describes God withdrawing and vacating space from which to create the

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435 Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 87. ‘Pantheism absorbs them into a vague divine synthesis’
437 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 288.
cosmos. The room that God has vacated for the creation is still a part of God. The use of images in creation theology such as ‘womb’ and ‘holding’ indicate that the metaphor expresses at once the inseparability of God from creation and God’s ontological difference from the cosmos. McFague’s model therefore fits well where God is necessarily hidden, or veiled but not absent.

Moltmann suggests that ‘the space of creation is its living-space in God’, and that God has made room for those who are created ‘by withdrawing himself (sic) and giving his creation space’. This image implies that God already embraces or fills something corresponding to ‘space’ in God’s own self. Only then can God ‘give’ space. However, contrary to Moltmann, Fiddes suggests there must be a mutual indwelling of God and creation, each in the other’s space, not only in the future creation, but throughout the whole span of the history of the cosmos, which is in keeping with the logic of the kabbalistic metaphor of zimsum, to which Moltmann refers. Fiddes therefore presumes that if the kenotic withdrawal of God is from God’s own self rather than from an external space that God occupies, ‘then it must not only be true of the resulting space of creation that ‘everything is in God’ but also that God is present to everything.

Fiddes proposes therefore that ‘pan-entheism’, as the participating of everything in God, is a sharing in interweaving movements of relational love. This makes clear that God is not separable from the world; it affirms the reality of God; and it prevents us from simply identifying God with the world. This concept and interpretation of panentheism sits well for the exploration of the findings of this project as children engage in Earth-

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445 Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 253. Fiddes discusses concerns with Moltmann’s use of this image to imply God’s general absence from creation. ‘But since Moltmann assumes that the ‘dwelling’ of God in creation must mean a fullness of presence in which God deristricts God’s self and ‘creation loses its place outside God’, he is necessarily ambiguous about the presence of God here and now’. Moltmann is aware that his model does not translate well into Christology, which requires a fuller indwelling of the divine glory.
448 See Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 86-7. who suggests that it is important to distinguish between ‘divine’ and ‘sacred’. In the Bible and the Christian tradition before modern times nature is ‘de-divinised’ but not ‘de-sacralised’.
connecting activities in the natural world. When YHWH spoke out of the storm Job was drawn into the awareness of YHWH’s presence and being within the cosmos.

We are derived from a piece of the Earth and therefore our bond with the Earth is part of our essential being. Our Earthiness, our common existence with all creatures, our place in the order of creation, means that we are intimately, physically and spiritually connected with God in the natural world. Through the Incarnational presence of God and God’s redemptive and restorative character, God’s purpose in the world must be conceived in relation to the story of all God’s creatures, including the land. With God’s self expression in each creature of the natural world and in Jesus of Nazareth, we see that the resurrection of Jesus crucified can be grasped as the beginning of the transformation of the whole universe.

There is potential for children in this study to know that they are formed from the Earth and that their bodies are strengthened and made alive from soil, water and sunlight. Although they might not be cognitively aware, the reality is that their spirits are enlivened by God’s Spirit through beauty, shared experience and joy. Although in their garden experience they may not necessarily come to know God as described in the biblical narratives and the history of the people of Israel, their encounter is in God’s garden, a garden which reflects the very nature, essence and character of God as Creator and source of life. Whilst in the garden, in a very real sense, the children like Job, experience God.

Creation therefore is more than the work of God’s hands. It is the presence of God. God lives eternally with all creatures and they with God, because ‘all things have been created to make the “common house” of all creatures the “house of God”’. Therefore with this

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452 Jurgen Moltmann, "Reconciliation with Nature," *Pacifica* 5, no. 3 (1992): 308. This is particularly evident in the flood narrative of Genesis 9:9-10 where all creatures are included in God’s covenant.
understanding of God, the very act of engaging in the natural world implies an experience of being in God.

Earth-connecting activities for children such as growing seeds and caring for animals is a truly significant Earth related spiritual experience of connection, engagement, meaning and fulfilment in intertwining relationship and dance with God. An Earth related spiritual experience of participation in God, characterised by the expression of wonder and joy.

**4.3.6 Wonder – A response to beauty, mystery and the sacredness within other**

*Then Job answered the LORD:*

*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*

*Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?*

*Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,*

*Things too wonderful for me,*

*Which I did not know.*

*(Jb 42:1-3)*

In response to YHWH’s speech from out of the whirlwind, Job confesses in wonder, the things of God that are unfathomable. This is the pivotal, liminal moment in Job’s life.

Macquarrie points to experiences of ‘awe and wonder that we can identify as encounters with ‘holy Being’⁴⁵³. This is in line with the theology of Paul Tillich on the nature of God as ‘Being-itself’. Fiddes summarises this highlighting that ‘being is unique and incomparable, we only come to recognise the presence of ‘being’ indirectly through a contrast with another kind of experience, that of ‘non-being’⁴⁵⁴. The expression of awe and wonder is not dependent upon moods or swings of emotion or anxiety, but rather more significantly can be seen in the face of loss. When we become aware of the

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nothingness of ourselves that we suddenly notice being: ‘For the first time our eyes are opened to the wonder of being, and this happens with the force of revelation’\textsuperscript{455}.

Great mystery surrounds the experience of wonder expressed by a child encountering the natural world. There is a sense of encountering something that is bigger than self, of growing awareness of something other than self, the recognition of another world beyond my immediate being. In such encounters the eyes and souls of a child are opened to recognise beauty and surprise\textsuperscript{456}. An encounter with the natural world can leave us changed\textsuperscript{457}, and wonder can be a response to the recognition of the sacredness of other. Otto describes the elements of the numinous as experiencing the feeling of dependence or awareness of an absolute power or might other than or apart from our self\textsuperscript{458}. There is a sense in which the expression of wonder is recognition of God’s Spirit, mystery and presence in the other. In wonder there is an expression of the fascination of mystery\textsuperscript{459} and although there can be at times a strong interplay between fear and awe, it can be expressed in creativity\textsuperscript{460}. The awareness of the holy is awareness of the presence of the divine, which brings faith in something other than self that elicits a response\textsuperscript{461}. Wonder or surprise is like taking a fresh look at the ordinary, not the extraordinary\textsuperscript{462}. It is an act of mindfulness and a response of gratefulness, which is aliveness. Aliveness is being in full communion with God and eludes to an image of full participation in God\textsuperscript{463}.

God’s Spirit is present in all. In Genesis we read that ‘a wind (\textit{ruach}) from God swept over the face of the waters’ (Gen 1:2). \textit{Ruach}, in the HB refers to ‘wind’, ‘breath’, or ‘spirit’ and is the precursor of God’s creative activity for in the next verse we read; ‘Then

\textsuperscript{456} As noted in literature review from Montessori and others.
\textsuperscript{457} Grey, \textit{Sacred Longings}, 169. Transformation and transfiguration of ourselves and the cosmos is the way of God. Grey notes ‘It is not simply being held, being seen, being dreamed. A response is called forth from us’.
\textsuperscript{462} Steindl-Rast, \textit{Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer}, 21.
\textsuperscript{463} Steindl-Rast, \textit{Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer}, 27-31.
God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light (Gen 1:3). The Spirit of God is in creation and indwells in all creatures, enabling all creatures to exist, flourish and evolve. The God of the Bible is worshipped as rock, fire, running streams, eagle and dove, as well as through personal imagery of Protector, Nurturer, Parent, Guardian, Shepherd and both Father and Mother. In the tradition of Trinitarian theology ‘we find that it is precisely the role of the Spirit to be the one who is the principle of the indwelling of God in creatures’. The recognition of the divine Spirit in the other, therefore, is a spiritual experience that can be expressed as wonder. In the language of participation in God, Cullen suggests the ‘Spirit choreographs the dance of God and also directs the steps of creatures entering God’s dance’.

The most prominent finding of this investigation is the expression of wonder a child experiences in the natural world. Every interviewee shared stories of many children experiencing wonder that brings, in their words, ‘excitement and joy’. Children become enthusiastic and eager to learn more of the natural world, and to experience discovery. It was revealed that the experience of wonder is a regular occurrence and nearly always happens when encountering the simple and common things of the natural world, such as earthworms, potatoes, birds and berries. The necessary ingredients for wonder are intimacy and attentiveness. Children need the opportunity to be attentive and physically up close, intimately interacting where they can feel, hear, see, smell and taste the soil, bugs, fruit and atmosphere within their gardens. At such times there is an intimacy and oneness that is strangely common and necessary for a child’s healthy development, yet as noted in the literature review, mostly absent for children growing up in city and urban neighbourhoods. The experience of wonder can be a paradoxical mix of beauty and terror or potential risk, which stimulates the senses and elicits a response.

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464 Edwards, “"For Your Immortal Spirit Is in All Things"," 49. Edwards provides a more detailed explanation.
465 Edwards, ""For Your Immortal Spirit Is in All Things"," 54. see Ps 139:7-10.
466 Grey, Sacred Longings, 134.
467 Edwards, ""For Your Immortal Spirit Is in All Things"," 51.
469 As noted above there is risk and danger as children are exposed to gardening tools, animals, activities, microbes and creatures that can cause harm.
If we are to recover what Grey describes as culture’s misplaced crisis of desire we must reconnect with the Earth in a healing way. Children, along with adults, in this process of reconnection are confronted by the Earth’s wildness, dangers, risk and chaotic unpredictability, as paralleled in the Job narrative. It is time for us to rethink the mystery of God, and rather than imaging God as a Being separate and isolated from the cosmos our challenge is to approach God as the mystery of life, and dynamic being itself as process, imaged within the fullest possible range of life forms\(^470\). In this place it is possible to experience ‘epiphanies of connection’\(^471\), and ‘journeys of reconnection to the Earth’\(^472\), as places where we discover our truer selves in the expression of wonder. In such times we reawaken to joy and delight, and create moments when God’s powerful love moves freely within us\(^473\). At such times we can be drawn into a response similar to that of Job\(^474\). We can be drawn toward compassionate care for those who suffer. The relationship with Earth and nature is complex, and cannot be reduced to romantic idealism like the beauty of sunsets and rainbows; however, there is beauty, ambiguity, danger, risk and tragedy in relating to Earth and her cycles. As Job encountered, in the possibility of experiencing wonder, ‘there is both agony and ecstasy’\(^475\).

For the children in this study the everyday, common experience of wonder wouldn’t have necessarily been understood in terms of encountering the sacred, the divine or mystery of God as Spirit in the other. The children simply respond with surprise and joy in the discovery of something new that is beautiful. Yet this is a profound experience that speaks of the significance of the experience of forming relationships that extend to include the non-human dimension. The Spirit’s role with each creature is importantly a relational and personal one. The Holy Spirit’s role is to create a relation between each creature and the sacred Earth community\(^476\).

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\(^{470}\) Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 234f.


\(^{474}\) Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 147.

\(^{475}\) Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 139.

\(^{476}\) Edwards, “‘For Your Immortal Spirit Is in All Things’,” 53.
The liminal experience of awe and wonder provides the platform of a life characterised by the celebration of Sabbath, welcome in hospitality and hope for a better world.

4.3.7 Sabbath – Rest, Play and the Celebration of Life

*But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
The birds of the air, and they will tell you;
Ask the plants of the Earth, and they will teach you;
And the fish of the sea will declare to you.*

(*Jb 12:7-8*)

There is surprise, joy and a place for rest and relaxation to be found in the natural world. Popular Christian dogma places humans at the pinnacle of creation. This can be observed in our behaviour, liturgy and attitude toward the natural world. However, in Genesis 1 the setting aside of the Sabbath, a day for rest and celebration is the fulfilment of creation\(^477\). The Sabbath is the crowning glory of God’s life-giving work in creation that provides coherence and meaning to the cosmos. It is the day to celebrate and take delight in the creation\(^478\). It is a time to participate with the natural world in praise of God’s creation\(^479\). The Sabbath of the Earth instituted by God is the divine ecology, for ‘it is the celebration of the Sabbath, the day of rest, the day of letting nature be’ that is at the pinnacle of creation\(^480\).

Many children in this study were guided by their teachers to gain a sense of ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’ in the way time was provided for play and attending to surroundings. In these moments the children were afforded the opportunity to take time to feel the world and be touched by all God’s creatures\(^481\). Attending to their surroundings, just being and

\(^{477}\) Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 197.
\(^{479}\) See Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 76. for a detailed list of Psalm 65:12-13, 69:34, 89:12, 96:11-12; 97:7-8; 103:22; 145:10 and 150:6) as well as in some other parts of the Bible (1Chr. 16:31-33; Isa. 35:1-2; 40:10; 43:19 and 55:12; Phil. 2.10; Rev. 5:13)
\(^{480}\) Moltmann, "Reconciliation with Nature," 311.
\(^{481}\) Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 64. See particularly Job 38-41.
playing in the natural world, the children participate and celebrate the Sabbath. YHWH invited Job to observe the rhythms and creatures of the created order.

Most of the children’s programs also practice Sabbath principles of rest for the land through crop rotation, eating fruit and vegetables in season and respecting and caring for the land. This practice is important arousing the awareness that we are not to be slaves to the Earth, but rather we are called to serve and care for the Earth and then take a step back to enjoy⁴⁸². The awareness of the rhythms of the natural world, the flows and cycles, along with the ability to listen to what the natural world is saying (Jb 12:7-8) about its health and well-being are important Sabbath principles taught to many of the children. The act of gardening and caring for the land might be seen as movements of play or dance that reflect ‘the dance of all creation in the perichoresis of God’⁴⁸³.

The Sabbath commandment is the most often repeated injunction in the HB⁴⁸⁴. Observance is seriously enforced with Exodus 31:14 asserting that whoever profanes the Sabbath ‘shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people’. In Exodus 20:8-11 we read that Israel is to observe the Sabbath because it was the day God rested at the culmination of creation. The people were commanded to ‘remember the Sabbath’, which, in biblical parlance, does not refer to merely intellectual recall, but rather means ‘to make present again’⁴⁸⁵. The Sabbath is to be kept ‘holy’ (godesh) which means ‘separated, set apart’ from the other six days⁴⁸⁶. God gives to the people a moment in time that is consecrated and set apart, rather than a physical place or object. The Sabbath is to be a day where God’s people are attuned with holiness in time⁴⁸⁷. The emphasis in the text which is grounded in the creation is that this be a day of celebration and delight in the creation rather than a day to recover energy in order to

⁴⁸³ Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 107. Fiddes discusses this in the context of children participating in worship. It seems to me feasible in the context of this study to extend this to the act of gardening, restoring and caring for the land as participation in God.
⁴⁸⁴ Reid, “Sabbath, the Crown of Creation,” 71.
⁴⁸⁵ Reid, “Sabbath, the Crown of Creation,” 71.
⁴⁸⁶ Reid, “Sabbath, the Crown of Creation,” 69.
continue work for another six days. It is a day for recovering creativity (re-create) and is at the core of our being human. Theology around the Sabbath suggests a time for rest and play, which is ‘wise environmental politics and a good therapy for ourselves and our restless souls’. Children participate in this principle when they are encouraged to spend time just ‘being’ in their gardens.

The reading in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 has a different emphasis. This text is framed in terms of ‘remembering the creation of God’s own people as God liberated Israel from servitude to Egypt’. The Sabbath’s purpose here is to ensure that the people of Israel are a holy people, free from bondage, want, exploitation and oppression. Observance of the Sabbath will create a people free to worship and praise God. The Sabbath is a means of liberation and can provide a sense of humility in each of us in the light of our place in the whole of creation and before God. There is no sense of hierarchy in the commandment to keep the Sabbath. From the least to the greatest, the servant and householder, the foreign guest and the animals in their care, each is called to observe the Sabbath. Even the land is to rest in the fiftieth year with slaves to be set free and the land left fallow and returned to its ancestral owners (Lev 25:8-17, 23-55; 27:16-25 and Num 36:4). Failure to adhere to the Sabbath broke the covenant God had with the people, sending them into exile. Here the land had the opportunity to enjoy the Sabbaths that had not been observed through enslavement of the land and poor (Lev 26:33-35).

Significantly the ministry of Jesus had a large focus upon the Sabbath. A startling number of his healings were performed on Sabbath days. Except for one of them each attracted...
controversy with Jewish leaders about breaking the Sabbath. The Sabbath is important for observant Jews, even until today, and indeed, Jesus himself observed the Sabbath law and practiced it by attending the synagogue on the Sabbath ‘as was his custom’ (Lk 4:16 and similarly Mk 6:1-6). His followers also were seen to be Sabbath-observant. However, Jesus was accused of breaking the Sabbath by performing miracles of healing, which in the context of death being the punishment for breaking the Sabbath, is serious accusation. Jesus’ intention must therefore have been to make a significant statement that the Sabbath is a time to set free those who are bound, to heal those who are oppressed and to celebrate life and wholeness in its fullness.

In this context, the children involved in programs that offer healing and restoration to the Earth demonstrate a significant parallel with God’s command to observe the Sabbath. In attending children are invited to ‘be still and know’ (Ps 46:10) the presence of God. The children’s awareness of rhythms within the natural world can only help them to better understand and respond by listening to the voice of the Earth and appropriately meet her needs. We are called to have empathy for the creation. The creation is a blessing and our proper response is to celebrate and enjoy it.

A natural response to such engagement is to offer welcome and hospitality.

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494 Reid, “Sabbath, the Crown of Creation,” 69.
495 For example when the women disciples wait until the Sabbath is over before attending to the body of Jesus (Mt 28:1, Mk 15:42, 16:1, Lk 23:54-56 and Jn 19:31).
496 Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 138. Empathy for animals from Exodus 23:9 where the verb *yada* (to know) and the noun *nephesh* (life, desire, feeling, person, soul)...You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know (*yada*) the heart (*nephesh*) of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (NRSV) ie if you translate this to mean you can empathise with the alien, you can also say you can empathise with an animal.
4.3.8 Hospitality – Welcome

He also had seven sons and three daughters,
He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch.
In all the land there were no women as beautiful as Job’s daughters;
And their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers.

(Jb 42:13-15)

‘If there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality’\(^{497}\). In the opening section of the Job narrative we read that Job was generous and offered hospitality (Jb 1:1-5). We can assume that later when his life is restored the concept of hospitality was indeed evermore real. In the context of children caring for the environment and Incarnational theology, Matthew 25:31-46 requires consideration, ‘for I was hungry and you gave me food…’. With proposals such as the natural world being the ‘new poor’\(^{498}\), offering hospitality to an endangered species is a Biblical concept. New Testament hospitality reflects values of equality, humility and mutuality. Children sharing a meal together from produce they have grown and harvested expresses the life of that community in welcome, inclusivity and equality\(^{499}\).

The children in their respective projects offered space, food and shelter for animals and plants to grow and flourish. As children offered hospitality the plants and animals in turn reciprocated offering food and shelter. Jane’s children experienced this with bees. Tanya’s children planting mangroves provided spawning areas for fish and clearer water for seagrass to flourish. Forming relationships based on hospitality at the local level is an intrinsic aspect of forming relationships with neighbour\(^{500}\).


\(^{500}\) Holt, *God Next Door*, 113.
Pohl, reflecting upon the first biblical story of hospitality, writes of the connection of God’s presence, promise and blessing\textsuperscript{501}. Abraham and Sarah offered hospitality to strangers who brought confirmation that they would have a son in their old age (Gen 18). The strangers also warned of impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this text we see the important aspect of mutuality that hospitality affords, as each offers something to the other. This is a divine encounter\textsuperscript{502}. In offering hospitality children can be in close relationship with the animals and plants, and can hear their voice\textsuperscript{503}. Inland water birds spoke to the children of the repercussions of drought\textsuperscript{504}.

Offering hospitality is fruitful, fertile and life giving. Jesus encouraged his host to offer hospitality to all, particular those unable to reciprocate and offer anything in return (Lk 14:12-14)\textsuperscript{505}. The provision of hospitality very often gives the experience of profound blessing as life is offered to another\textsuperscript{506}. Therefore in hospitality there is a sense of mutuality that can be expressed in the theme of ‘embrace’ where each ‘holds the other’\textsuperscript{507}. Moltmann describes this in Trinitarian theological terms as being in ‘reciprocal relationship’\textsuperscript{508}.

In Incarnational terms the sharing of the Lord’s Supper is most significant. Fiddes describes the extension of sacrament as reaching ‘beyond the bodies of believers into the whole body of the world. From the focus of the Lord’s table, we can discern the presence of God at every meal table, and in the whole process of sustaining life in our complex

\textsuperscript{501} Pohl, Making Room, 24.
\textsuperscript{502} Pohl, Making Room, 24.
\textsuperscript{503} As noted earlier in chapter one listening to the voice of Earth and it’s creatures is one of the six guiding principles of the Earth Bible project.
\textsuperscript{505} The children discovered that rarely do even the neediest bring nothing to the table. Caring for microbes and earthworms reciprocated healthy soil which returned good crops.
\textsuperscript{506} Pohl, Making Room, 13.
\textsuperscript{507} Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 100f.
ecosystem\textsuperscript{509}. Every living creature requires food and nourishment in order to survive and flourish. Life is offered with the provision of space, food and shelter in the context of welcome and hospitality. In offering welcome to Earth-others children welcome Christ into their midst as they break bread together in the communion of creatures\textsuperscript{510}. The reality is we live in profound communion with all other creatures\textsuperscript{511}.

As discussed above a sense of place is significant. Offering hospitality arguably makes someone feel at home and demonstrates that there is a connection between hospitality and belonging\textsuperscript{512}. In offering hospitality children experience the other as having value and intrinsic worth and work toward healing a broken world offering hope for a better future.

### 4.3.9 Hope – Healing and Restoring the Earth

\textit{And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends,}

\textit{And the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.}

\textit{(Jb 42:10)}

The capacity for hope is one of those characteristics which is distinctively human. Lynch suggests that ‘\textit{hope comes close to being the very heart and centre of a human being}’ and implies that we are not content with the givens of our particularity\textsuperscript{513}. The quest for truth, meaning, goodness and beauty is closely bound up with hope as an activity of imagination in which we seek to transcend the boundaries of the present, to go beyond the given, outwards and forwards, in search of something better, something more, than

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{509} Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God}, 283.
\item \textsuperscript{510} Bauckham, \textit{Bible and Ecology}, 84. Although not specifically relevant in this context it is worth mentioning here that Bauckham raises caution with regard to humans making themselves ‘priests of creation’. Christopher Southgate integrates humans as priests of creation into ‘his evolutionary theodicy and interprets it to mean that humans are not only ‘contemplatives of creation’ but also co-redeemers, engaged with God in the redemption of creation from evil’. Bauckham correctly notes that animals and the creation need not have a representative or mediator to God. He refers also to John Zizioulas and Moltmann in their association with the concept that all of creation be offered to God in the Eucharist.
\item \textsuperscript{511} Berry, \textit{The Dream of the Earth}, 37.
\item \textsuperscript{512} Pohl, \textit{Making Room}, 154.
\item \textsuperscript{513} William Lynch cited in Bauckham and Hart, \textit{Hope against Hope}, 52. (Italics in original)
\end{itemize}
the given might afford us. Hope is a hunch about what is genuinely possible. It is rooted in an intuitive judgment about the help which lies at hand. In Steiner’s sense it is a wager on transcendence, on something which lies beyond us, as yet unseen but, we believe, real enough.

Biblical theology teaches us that God is the God of the future and is a God of hope. Hope is an activity of ‘imaginative faith’ where there is a requirement to trust in the essentially unknown future with its threats of inevitable lose and ultimate nothingness. Hope therefore is the inseparable companion of faith, and where faith develops into hope, it ‘causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience…Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it.

The Christian past event of atonement sits integrally with the future hope of a completed salvation. Block speaks of ‘the ontology of the not yet’ and ‘real-possibilities’ as the objects of hope. There is a creative tension of hope, ‘the tension between not yet and already’. This is the paradox of hope that we are on the move and yet it is in the settling that we find our being. There is both stillness and movement. Some of the children discovered in their projects that there is much that needs restoring. If true hope is directed to a ‘desirable future’, then it is the church’s task to expand the imagination of our society which is mostly imprisoned within a sense of what is merely ‘feasible’.

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514 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 52. Imagination is important, particularly in a balanced sense of reality. Not wild hopes, or beyond reality, but a sense of being taken from the present into the future by imagining what might be possible. See p85-6.


517 Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 53, 57.


522 Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, 126.

This is because hope means having a love for the future of the Earth and her inhabitants. In this state we work toward the fulfillment or eventual realisation of what might be. With promise and future hope we wait therefore, as Moltmann suggests, in ‘active hope’\(^{524}\).

Although he allows room for resistance and addressing the status quo\(^{525}\), Moltmann’s hope is in the coming of the Christ – not in the present reality\(^{526}\). Hart points out an incompatibility and contradiction in Moltmann’s argument that the present has little or no bearing upon the new creation\(^{527}\). Moltmann’s thesis comes from a dependence upon a millenarian reign of Christ, to which Bauckham\(^{528}\) argues, is limiting and fraught with many difficulties associated with North American theologies around post and pre millennialism. Both he and Hart are also not comfortable with Moltmann’s careful phrase, ‘cannot bear’\(^{529}\). That is to say, the present creation cannot give birth to the new. ‘The potential for or capacity to produce the new does not lie latent within the old, but relies utterly on a new work of the God of resurrection’\(^{530}\). In defense of his use of the term ‘cannot bear’ Moltmann states the two are not different divine creations which exclude each other. ‘They are two world times of God’s one same creation’\(^{531}\) and states that when we seek for a new world we seek for this world to be different.

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\(^{525}\) Trevor Hart, "Imagination for the Kingdom of God?,” in *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jurgen Moltmann*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 62. ‘Moltmann insists that the capacity to envisage a hoped for future, far from dulling our sensibilities to the pain of the present, actually serves to heighten those sensibilities and is a powerful stimulus to resistance and reaction which itself drives us to break away from the present towards the future’.


\(^{527}\) Hart, "Imagination for the Kingdom of God?,” 66-7.


\(^{530}\) Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 80.

Bauckham believes that the recreation will be one that realises the full potential of Eden, suggesting that the creation as described by God as ‘very good’, is actually not yet ‘very good’, and referring to Isaiah 11:6-9 looks forward to the eschaton when it will be\textsuperscript{532}. He suggests that Christian hope has a very significant place in this present reality\textsuperscript{533}, however he believes the presence of God’s Kingdom in the work of Christ needs to be seen as anticipation of what is to come, rather than a gradual expanding of God’s Kingdom and new creation\textsuperscript{534}. However, for the purposes of this study there is an imperative for continuity between present actuality and the future world for which we hope, where ‘the end organises and unifies the whole’ and ‘the end expresses a desired world\textsuperscript{535}. Pinnock believes it makes good ‘sense to think about the future as partly settled and partly unsettled, otherwise it would be the realm of settled actualities and not open possibilities, which would undercut meaningful human life\textsuperscript{536}. A view which best fits the purpose of this project is one where God invites us to participate with God in loving dialogue, to bring the future into being\textsuperscript{537}.

Interviewees spoke of children’s imaginations being stimulated in the natural world. Certainly Job’s imagination was stretched by YHWH. Imagination offers us possibilities to our will and aspirations of what might be. Possibilities can be adopted to form projects which are dependent upon conditions in the present\textsuperscript{538}.

The future resurrection is a symbol or metaphor of what might be realised in the present, and can be seen as a ‘passion for the possible\textsuperscript{539}. Jungel reminds us that possibility can only begin from a human reduction to nothingness\textsuperscript{540}. When we are faced with the reality

\textsuperscript{532} Bauckham, \textit{Bible and Ecology}, 124.
\textsuperscript{533} Bauckham and Hart, \textit{Hope against Hope}, 69-70.
\textsuperscript{534} Bauckham and Hart, \textit{Hope against Hope}, 162.
\textsuperscript{535} Fiddes, \textit{The Promised End}, 41.
\textsuperscript{536} Pinnock, \textit{Most Moved Mover}, 137.
\textsuperscript{537} Pinnock, \textit{Most Moved Mover}, 4.
\textsuperscript{538} Fiddes, \textit{The Promised End}, 41.
of death, the experience of separation and its consuming ‘nothingness’ we find possibility and hope in God\textsuperscript{541}. As children become aware of the desperate nature of climate change and environmental degradation, they are potentially faced with the ‘ontological shock’ of non being, and the realisation of the death of the Earth\textsuperscript{542}.

Children are a common symbol of hope for the future, even when there might be no other cause for hope\textsuperscript{543}, and child as metaphor of hope is a distinctively Christian theme with Jesus being born of Mary\textsuperscript{544}. Children were empowered to offer healing, restoration and nourishment in environments that had been exposed to degradation and erosion. Children engaged in these activities speak of Paul’s call that we are to ‘abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit’ (Rom 15:13). Children at play are a gesture of hope. God delights in social existence, ecstatic dance, creativity and spontaneity - play bespeaks eternity and can take us for a moment away from the realm of suffering and give us a glimpse of a deathless joy. Play is a gesture of hope in the face of fear and destruction\textsuperscript{545}.

\textbf{4.4 Summary}

The story of Job has many parallels that inform our ways of understanding and theologically interpreting the experience of children in the natural world. The focus of this chapter is around the expression of wonder. Many of the children in this study, like Job, experience close encounters in the natural world that offer them an experience of awe and wonder.

Engagement in Earth-connecting activities offers the possibility of movement from alienation toward togetherness. The emerging theory from this study suggests that children in the natural world gain a sense of place and belonging through their connectedness in the land. In the garden children have the opportunity to discover their

\textsuperscript{541} Fiddes, \textit{The Promised End}, 49.
\textsuperscript{542} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 207f.
\textsuperscript{543} Bauckham and Hart, \textit{Hope against Hope}, 211-12. Reflecting upon the poem of Charles Peguy, \textit{The Portal of the Mystery of Hope} (1911)
\textsuperscript{545} Pinnock, \textit{Flame of Love}.-4
Earthiness and the source of their energy and existence. There is the opportunity for children to discover the source of their being and in response to beauty, mystery, and the divine within the other, experience the spiritual expression of awe and wonder.

An Incarnational theology beyond the physical life of Jesus of Nazareth reveals God’s reconciling presence in the Earth. YHWH’s response to Job’s questions about meaning and existence, spoken from out of the whirlwind, is very significant in the context of the findings of this study. Through relationships formed in the natural world, in the context of panentheism as a working model for God, children can discover the nature and character of God. As they enter into relationships with Earth-others of care, empathy and mutuality they enter into a covenantal relationship with God as Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos. Central to this proposal is the invitation to participate in the interweaving dance of perichoretic relations in the Triune God. At its heart is a sense of place and belonging.

In this state of being children can be joyful and express their imagination and creativity. Through creativity and imagination a child can offer hospitality and nourishment which can generate and feed hope for a better future. A child transforming barren and lifeless land into vibrant, fertile and rich garden full of life and potential embodies hope. Children themselves can realise the possibility of imagining a different way, a better way of life that is more compassionate and inclusive with depth and richness of relationship. Children in this place are more able to be co-creators with God offering creative and imaginative solutions to address the problems facing the Earth.

Like Job’s experience of the beautiful, wild, chaotic and dangerous created world, children have the opportunity of experiencing life in all its fullness. There are important life lessons of mortality, loss and interconnection to be discovered in the natural world. There is a sense in which the children were in communion with Earth-others as they
planted and tended trees and plants forming relationships of mutuality and respect that celebrate the reverence of life\(^{546}\).

Children, along with adults, in this process are confronted by the Earth’s wildness and chaotic unpredictability. Having the humility to recognise our authentic place in the web of life will result in not only the recovery of awe and wonder at beauty, to satisfy our yearning for deeper connections, but also our encounter with loss, with ambiguity and terror brings us to a place of confession, like Job’s of faith in a Creator God whose purposes are unfathomable\(^{547}\).

\(^{546}\) In the context of reverence for life Peter Cundall tells the anecdotal story of the ‘child who plants a tree will never cut it down’. *Lecture on Gardening*, Gardening Australia Expo, Melbourne, 2005.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND STRATEGY FOR CHANGE

If the outcomes of this research project are to be taken seriously, then we are faced with a serious challenge as a Christian community. In grasping an understanding of the profound spiritual awakening that occurs when children engage with the natural world, we must allow ourselves to be open to how this re-shapes both our theological world view and behaviour. Certainly this suggests a call for major culture change within Baptist and Church of Christ churches in Australia.

In Daniel Quinn’s fascinating novel, a gorilla named Ishmael identifies two types of human stories in the context of world view and the use of natural resources. One is the ‘Taker story’, where the premise is that the world belongs to humans who mostly take to meet selfish needs. The other, the ‘Leaver story’, is where humans belong to the world. The Leavers generally leave resources for others to access. Most in modern western society reflect the attitude of the Taker story when it comes to natural resources and attitudes toward the natural world. This paper challenges this world view in the light of biblical and theological principles that suggest adherence to the Taker story is a sin that the church is required to address.

For many decades scientists and philosophers have been warning that our current way of living is killing the planet. Jeremiah’s prophetic message to the people of Israel has relevance for western Christians in the twenty first century. In exile the people of Israel were reminded that their ancestors had exploited the gift of abundance and fruitfulness of

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548 The story is fascinating in that it draws upon Hebrew Bible theology and the notion that the Earth has a voice, and that humans in modern society need to re-learn the skills to listen and respond. Woven through the text is a concern to address anti-Semitism.
the land to expand beyond their means. Essentially the concern of Jeremiah was that the people had lived lives of excess and over-burdened the land\textsuperscript{550}. The prophets tell us that the central reason for the fall of Israel was that in her imperial projects she had abandoned the terms of the Mosaic Covenant. Israel had become too powerful, her rulers too successful in their military enterprises, her elites too wealthy, and conversely, her smallholders, the poor and the marginalised, along with the land and soil, were being enslaved in the project of a Greater Israel\textsuperscript{551}. They were being exploited to serve the wealth and extravagance of those ignorant and unaware of their proper place.

Whilst many leaders in Baptist and Church of Christ churches in Australia hold to the premise that church growth and evangelism are key priorities, there is little hope for a change in attitude with respect to our place within creation\textsuperscript{552}, least of all the engagement of children in church-sponsored activities involving gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings. Radford-Reuther suggests there is no solution forward to the ecological crisis (and the oppression of women) when the fundamental model of relationship is one of domination\textsuperscript{553}, which unfortunately best characterises contemporary church evangelism within a corporate style of leadership. Not only is the future of the plant at stake if the church is not able to change and adapt to the requirements outlined in this study, but the very future of the church herself maybe in the balance. If the church is not able to maintain its relevance in the context of a warming planet, then people will move toward the groups that offer some hope for a more stable climate. Those who remain in the church are at risk of being gripped with the fear of existing upon a fallen and God forsaken planet in the hope that sometime in the near future God will provided an eschatological escape into heaven.

\textsuperscript{551} Northcott, \textit{A Moral Climate}, 8f.
\textsuperscript{552} Churches of Christ Conference in Victoria and Tasmania, (http://cofaustralia.org/cofcms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6&Itemid=63), Accessed 7/2/11. Following links to ‘Missional Church Growth’ and ‘Theological Education and Ministry Formation Review’ highlights the emphasis being placed upon church growth and evangelism through corporate style leadership training.
However, as general societal values shift and evangelical church leaders begin to see that at the very least Christians are called to be good stewards of the Earth, I am hopeful that a rising movement will see care for the Earth become a priority and legitimate focus.\(^{554}\)

The key issue here though is not a move toward environmental stewardship, which is a model not dissimilar to a benevolent dictatorship, but rather a re-imagining of our connectedness and kinship with Earth-others. The focus will need to be upon the forming of relationships of care, mutuality and respect as outlined in this paper. As we do so, care for the Earth and maintaining the integrity of her natural cycles and rhythms will no longer be an issue for debate. Care and sustaining of the natural world will flow as an extension of our relationship of mutuality, care and love.

Just as Jeremiah described for the people of Israel in exile so too for children growing up in the context of a consumerist, globalised world, gaining a sense of place and belonging, in terms of a connection with the land in their local setting, is important at many levels. For example in the pursuit of finding meaning, a sense of belonging or an expression of their being, most in urban society seek satisfaction in consumerism. The model of economic growth that fuels our unsustainable materialism worships ‘a spirituality of shopping’ that has taken the place of forming meaningful connections with place in the land.\(^ {555}\) As a society we have lost our place and lost therefore our ‘ecstatic capacity’, that feeding and being fed by nature’s regenerative cycles which creates and supports a sense of belonging and social living its potential for happiness.\(^ {556}\)

I therefore advocate in this paper for a practical theology that expounds a practical engagement in the forming of relationship with the Earth. I also argue for an understanding of God as being present and dynamic, who can be discovered and known through an intimate connection and relationship within the natural world. When we discover God in the place where we live, walk and breathe, then we are better able to

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\(^{554}\) About.Com, For God’s Sake: Religious Organisations Preach Environmental Stewardship, (http://environment.about.com/od/activismvolunteering/a/religion.htm), Accessed 7/2/11. Revd Jim Ball, who started the influential “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign promoting hybrid cars back in 2003, has more recently worked with likeminded evangelical Christians to craft a faith-based policy statement on global warming.


\(^{556}\) Grey, Sacred Longings, 20-1.
share this place with Earth-others, offering life and hope. An integral and key aspect, which is the focus of this paper, is engaging children in this process. Young children are particularly excited about gardening, care of animals and playing in natural surroundings, and offered the opportunity, children will inspire hope and the desire to recreate a new Earth.

For this reason I offer a strategy for change in theology and practice within the Baptist and Church of Christ churches of Australia.

5.1 Strategy for Change in the Church

By far the best outcome from this research would see churches engaging children in Earth-connecting activities like gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings. It is important that respect, care and mutuality be foundational principles in any program. For this to be achieved there is need for change. Change occurs through enlightenment and is most successful when each aspect and level of a community’s life is addressed. A strategy for change must therefore be inclusive, incorporating denominational leadership, church leadership training, ecclesiology and the place of the child.

Educating churches and pastoral leaders is imperative, as Collins suggests, ‘once you change your view of the world and its history, you also have to shift all of the key elements in your religious cosmology’. Our image and understandings of God, and the role of Christ, are to be questioned and reconfigured if we are to move forward as a church. Seminaries and colleges for the training and formation of ministers and pastoral workers can make use of the many tools in books and articles reflecting upon the church’s place in care for the Earth’s fragile ecology. Importantly, a significant emphasis needs to be placed upon the key theological principles raised in this study,

557 Appendix 8 – Outcomes and Resources for Churches.
558 Collins, God’s Earth, 231.
559 In researching this paper I was surprised and pleased to see that the many new publications about the church’s engagement in care of the Earth entering the library were from evangelical authors covering such topics as ‘ecological mission’.
including perichoresis in Trinitarian theology, Incarnational theology and creation theology in humans knowing their place within God’s created order. A strategy for empowering ministers to shift the thinking and attitudes of congregants is also necessary.

Such a strategy might include Wright’s proposal that care for creation should be viewed as a mission of the church. Creation is a divine gift and a human responsibility which incorporates a biblical balance of hope, compassion and care, and prophetic ministry.\(^\text{560}\)

Fred van Dyke argues for greater focus upon the wider and more general creation texts of the Bible, emphasising the theocentric feature of the Job narrative that offers a contrast to the traditional anthropocentric tradition interpreted in Genesis 1-2.\(^\text{561}\) In worship it is important that congregants experience the transcendence in the mystery, beauty and wonder within creation.\(^\text{562}\)

There is compelling evidence in the data and literature for the church to adopt Christian eco-feminist theology and liturgy within worship and in the generation of ethical values, where the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ is celebrated as a community act of solidarity with the Earth and those who suffer. Entering as a church into the lament and grief for all of God’s creation that has disappeared, and that is in the process of disappearing at this very moment, we can remember and honour that of God’s Earth which can never be, because of its loss and destruction. Songs of praise can be sung for the ‘vulnerable beauty that remains’.\(^\text{563}\) And most significantly, we embrace a hope for a better world with spaces for the unfolding of new life and new species as the Holy Spirit’s regenerative power through natural selection creates a new Earth.

Wisdom theology has much to offer the church in this process. In the nurture care and love offered by the feminine we learn of the wisdom inherent in creation. In terms of the interrelatedness of creation, woman wisdom is the ‘glue’ that holds everything together in


\(^{561}\) van Dyke, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 193.

\(^{562}\) Collins, *God's Earth*, 222.

\(^{563}\) Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 171.
a ‘stable and harmonious whole’ and is ‘the relational infrastructure of creation’. The role of women (and children) in church life and society underlies ‘every important personal, social and religious experience familiar to the ancient Israelite’, and can speak into our world’s current subversion under masculine domination.

Perhaps the most central focus in addressing cultural change within the church is articulating a theology that values and affirms the place of the child at every level of the church’s existence. White’s contribution is valuable here, arguing for a theology that places a child in our midst. He uses many Hebrew Bible and New Testament texts that contain the child motif. From the gospel of Matthew (Mt 11, 18) he describes a theology of the child that offers children a place of significance and integrity within the life and ministry of the church. He concludes that ‘the child standing beside Jesus, among the disciples, is the language and the revelation’ of God. The involvement of children within the church at a level of mutuality will see children making a valuable contribution to the life and wellbeing of a church as the children are offered care and love. This research study affirms that this includes a healthy engagement within the natural world.

As a society, distancing ourselves from the natural world means we have lost the ability to take seriously the forces of nature. Tragic bushfires, devastating floods and droughts across the nation of Australia, along with the threat of further catastrophic changes in climatic patterns is possibly God’s apocalyptic voice from the whirlwind that offers our last ‘chance to wonder and be in awe of the mighty forces of nature. A last chance to

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564 Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament, 209.
567 The prayer of Jesus in the garden, ‘I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to little children (Mt 11:25-26) and, ‘He called a child, whom he put among them, and said ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me’. (Mt 18:2-5).
568 White, “‘He Placed a Little Child in the Midst”,’ 373.
develop a proper respect\textsuperscript{569}. The church is called by God to hear the voices of those whose land has been turned into wilderness or is being swamped by raising sea levels, to feel and have compassion and empathy for animals respecting their wildness and not hunt or degrade their environments to extinction. We are called to have respect for place and work toward establishing social and inclusive policies based on ecological and sustainable principles. Children as members of God’s community have a place in this movement.

The data and literature suggests that empowering children to strengthen their innate bond with the natural world will facilitate this change, not only within the church, but within the whole of society. Encouraging the participation of children in Earth-connecting programs has the potential of empowering the church to spearhead a revolution within society. Given the state of our planet we probably don’t have any longer than the life span of this current generation of children. It is therefore imperative that the Baptist and Church of Christ churches of Australia are open to hear and feel, then act and respond, to the groaning of the Earth under the weight of an oppressive society’s lifestyle.

\section*{5.2 Future Research as an Extension of this Investigation}

For the people of Israel there is a strong spirituality connected with place and land. In a similar way, the indigenous people of Australia experience a spirituality that is intimately connected with the land. Many researchers suggest that Australian society is experiencing a growing secular spirituality associated with landform and ritual\textsuperscript{570}. This is particularly noticeable around the commemoration of ANZAC day\textsuperscript{571}. A challenge for the Australian church is to speak into and inform this growing trend. Much research is currently being

\textsuperscript{569} Grey, Sacred Longings, 162f.


\textsuperscript{571} Anzac Day is a national day of remembrance in Australia and New Zealand, and is commemorated by both countries on 25 April every year to honour members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) who fought at Gallipoli in Turkey during World War I. It now more broadly commemorates all those who died and served in military operations for their countries.
undertaken on this area and there are many useful publications in circulation\textsuperscript{572}. It would be good to see Australian theological colleges taking a collegial approach to this research by working more closely with secular institutions. I would encourage students and researchers in practical theology to explore this opportunity\textsuperscript{573}.

This study noted also the significance of the sensation and sound of water in the calming experience, particularly for children with autism and behavioural issues. Water is a common theme in this study as children learn of its preciousness and uses in the context of drought. Water has an important place in the rituals of most religions. It is the source of life and has a significant place in Australian spirituality characterised by a dry continent\textsuperscript{574}. The place of water in ritual and Australian spirituality would be interesting to explore in the context of an eco-feminist theology.

This study, due to several constraints outlined above\textsuperscript{575}, is necessarily broad and general in its approach. To my knowledge there has been little research within the orbit and scope of this study and therefore I would encourage researchers to explore this subject further. There are a number of specific points that could be more thoroughly investigated by observing and researching children firsthand, rather than the general approach of working with program facilitators. Areas that warrant further investigation might include:

- A study investigating adults who as children were involved in school gardening projects, compared with those who were not. Their ‘Earth-connectedness’, sense of place and/or ethical values might be explored.
- Investigating the spirituality associated with the experience of wonder by more closely enquiring into a child’s language and response in such moments.

\textsuperscript{572} See particularly the work of David Tacey at Latrobe University and Brendan Hyde of the Australian Catholic University.

\textsuperscript{573} An informal Eco-Theology group has been gathering in Melbourne for a number of years. The group was initiated by post graduate students and lecturers from the Melbourne College of Divinity and Monash University. Members constitute a broad background of experiences and disciplines.

\textsuperscript{574} Tacey, \textit{Re-Enchantment}.

\textsuperscript{575} See section 2.5 Limitations and Constraints.
• A child’s growing awareness of Earthiness and creatureliness whilst involved in Earth-connecting activities.
• The place of risk and unstructured play in natural surroundings in childhood and how this might relate to the propensity toward excessive risk taking and risky behaviour in young adults.
• Exploring with adults and/or children the Earth related spiritual experience of recognition of connection and kinship with water, Earth, plant and animal. Investigating this in terms of being created in the image of God.
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


## Appendix 1 – Community Groups

**Table 1. Participating organisations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Interviewee Position Backgroun d</th>
<th>Description of children activities</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Garden</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Animal s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Heinze Children’s Garden</td>
<td>Craig Director Enrolled in Phd</td>
<td>Groups visit every month or so to garden Primary age to adult</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Suburbs of Melbourne</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eaglehawk Primary School (Kitchen Garden)</td>
<td>Ben Gardener Horticulture certificate</td>
<td>Weekly gardening from prep to year 6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Rural Victoria</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes chickens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Leonard’s Early Childhood Centre</td>
<td>Kristen Teacher</td>
<td>Weekly nature walk and gardening Age prep</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Suburbs of Melbourne</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CERES</td>
<td>Shaun Teacher</td>
<td>One off visit, organic gardening, energy, recycling etc Primary to adult</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Inner City Melbourne</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes chickens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botanical Gardens Children’s Garden</td>
<td>Peta Teacher</td>
<td>One off visit Gardening, play, talks Prep to adult</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Inner City Melbourne</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes possums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening Australia Presenter (a)</td>
<td>Joan Presenter Horticulture Teaching</td>
<td>Visits schools to speak.</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nationally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kallista Primary School (Kitchen Garden)</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Kitchen Garden Weekly from prep to year 6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Rural Urban Melbourne</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes chickens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running Horse Equestrian services</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Groups work with horse care and rescue Primary to Adult</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Rural Victoria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes horses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bass Valley P.S. Mangrove project</td>
<td>Tanya Coordinator</td>
<td>Replanting mangroves on Western Port. Primary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Rural Victoria</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glen Devon P.S. Home Grown Project</td>
<td>Ken</td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>East Suburbs Melbourne</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Invited organisations that declined involvement or did not respond to invitation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Description of children activities</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Garden</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Animals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 Indigenous Garden Project</td>
<td>Garden for Aboriginal children</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inner City</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Gardening Australia Presenter (b)</td>
<td>Visits schools to speak.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Collingwood Children’s Garden</td>
<td>A working farm in a central urban location of Melbourne less than 5 km from the CBD</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inner City</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Fitzroy Primary School</td>
<td>Gardening program with a high proportion of children from the adjoining Fitzroy public housing estate.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inner-City</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Australian City Farms and Community Gardens Network</td>
<td>Network for the promotion and development of community gardens. Connection with CERES.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inner-City</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Brunswick North Primary School</td>
<td>Vegetable garden, native garden and chickens.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inner-City</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Environmental Education in Early Childhood Vic. Inc.</td>
<td>A network of early childhood educators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 The Australian Association for Environmental Education Inc.</td>
<td>A national network of early childhood environmental educators. An annual peer reviewed journal, the Australian Journal of Environmental Education is published.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Glen Orden Primary School</td>
<td>Multicultural school in a low socio-economic area</td>
<td></td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Letter of Invitation for Organisational Participation in Research

I am writing to invite your organisation’s participation in a research program toward completion of my study in the Doctor of Ministry Studies degree of the Melbourne College of Divinity.

I am a minister in a local church working with children. My background is in agricultural and environmental science along with community development.

Over the years I have noticed children become less aware of their natural surroundings focusing more on electronic toys and games. I am interested in exploring the experiences of community groups who engage children in the care of plants and animals. I would like to hear stories of how children have grown, developed and matured whilst in these programs. I am interested in exploring if children have had experiences of gaining a sense of awe and wonder through their relationships with the natural world and if they have developed as a consequence a greater sense of empathy, care and concern for the natural world.

Using the invaluable experience of community groups such as your own I hope to articulate a theological argument encouraging churches to engage their children in gardening and earth connecting activities.

Your organisation’s involvement would entail me interviewing a key person, perhaps the founder or current leader. The interview will be 60-90 mins in duration and, if meeting with your approval, be conducted at your organisation’s facilities. The interviews will be recorded digitally and on cassette tape, later being transcribed and analysed by myself. The interviewee will receive a copy of the transcript.

I am planning to interview 7-9 other organisations similar to your group. From these interviews I hope to draw common threads and trends. These outcomes will then be tested in a focus group that I plan to hold in October 2008 in Box Hill, Victoria. Each interviewee will receive a copy of my preliminary findings and be invited to discuss this summary in the focus group which will be in the form of a group discussion with a duration of up to 60 mins. This conversation will be recorded, and another person will accompany me to take notes from the discussion.

A final report will be sent to each participating organisation.

All recordings and notes will be analysed by myself, stored and used in accordance with the Melbourne College of Divinity’s strict privacy and ethics requirements ensuring that no personal details or stories that might identify the interviewee or others will enter the public domain.

It is important to note that you may at anytime withdraw your involvement in this research project.

I invite your response by filling in the enclosed form and returning it to me in the mail. If you chose to be involved I will contact you to discuss who might best represent your organisation for the interview stage.

If I do not hear from you after four weeks I will endeavour to email or phone you to enquire if you have received this letter.

My contact details for further discussion are as follows;

Email: mallabyx@tpg.com.au
Phone: 0408 174 717
Address: R. Mallaby
        PO Box 22
        Kallista Vic 3791

Thank you for you’re your time and for your careful consideration of my invitation.

Kind regards, Richard Mallaby.
Participation Permission Slip

Doctoral Research Project – Researcher Richard Mallaby

Please tick the appropriate box and return in the addressed stamped letter enclosed.

☐ I and/or my organisation WOULD NOT LIKE to participate in this project.

☐ I and/or my organisation WOULD LIKE to participate in this project.

Comments if necessary:
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________ 

 Signed: ________________________________

 Name: ________________________________

 Position in organisation: _________________________________

 Dated ____/____/2007
Appendix 3 – Follow up Email

**Follow up Email to Letter of invitation to Organisations.**

Four weeks ago I sent a letter to your organisation inviting participation in a Doctoral research project looking into the work community groups perform with children in the areas of gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings.

I am sending this email to enquire if you have received the letter and if your organisation would like to be involved.

Thank you for your attention, regards, Richard Mallaby
Appendix 4 – Participation Information and Consent Form

Melbourne College of Divinity
Established by the Melbourne College of Divinity Act 1910
Affiliated with the University of Melbourne 1993
21 Highbury Grove • Kew • Victoria • Australia 3101
Telephone: +61 3 9853 3177 • Fax: +61 3 9853 6695
Email: hrec@mcd.edu.au  www.mcd.unimelb.edu.au

Participant Information and Consent Form

Research Topic
An investigation of non church community group work with children in gardening and care of animals and how this might enrich the church’s work with children.

My name is Richard Mallaby, and I am conducting research on the work community groups undertake with children in the area of care of animals, gardening and play in natural surroundings.

Over time I have noticed children become less aware of their natural surroundings focusing more on electronic toys and games. I am interested in exploring the experiences of community groups who engage children in the care of plants and animals. I would like to hear stories of how children have grown, developed and matured whilst in these programs. I am interested in exploring if children have had experiences of gaining a sense of awe and wonder through their relationships with the natural world and if they have developed as a consequence a greater sense of empathy, care and concern for the natural world.

Using the invaluable experience of community groups such as your own I hope to articulate a theological argument encouraging churches to engage their children in gardening and earth connecting activities.

The outworking of this research may see congregations establishing children’s gardens on vacant church land, perhaps transforming concrete and paved areas into multiuse garden spaces or working with local schools and other community groups to promote the engagement of children in gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings.

In consultation with ………………………………from your organisation your name has been put forward as a potential interviewee. Thank you for your willingness to work through this form which explains what is required by your involvement in the research. I can be contacted by email mallabyx@tpg.com.au and phone on 0408 174 717 if you have any queries.

I plan to interview 7-9 other people from organisations similar to yours.

Your participation in this project will require the following commitments.

An interview conducted by myself for a duration of 60-90 mins in a location convenient to you. This might be best conducted at a suitable location close to the children’s activity site. The interview will be audio-taped both digitally and on cassette and then transcribed by myself. A copy of the transcript will be given to you.
Each Interviewee will be invited to participate in a focus group discussion on the findings of the collated data. The findings will be sent to each interviewee prior to the focus group which is planned to be held in Box Hill, Victoria, in October 08, with duration of 45-60 mins.

Your total time commitment of interview, focus group and travel may entail 3-4 hours over a 6 month data collection period.

The confidentiality of each participant will be given the highest priority. The information you provide will be stored in keeping with the strict guidelines of the Melbourne College of Divinity to ensure that no identifiable information will enter the public domain. For example your name will not be recorded on your interview transcript. Data will be stored for a period of five years and will be destroyed at the end of this period. The information you provide will not be used for any other purpose.

Each interview will be stored in hard and electronic copies and be used in reporting and/or publications, including the possible publication of interview transcripts.

You may request at anytime a copy of any personal information about yourself which is collected in the course of this research project. You will be provided with an opportunity to review your interview transcript prior to the submission of the thesis or any publications.

The findings of the focus group will be prepared into a summary of results that I will post to you and your organisation.

You have the right to withdraw without prejudice from active participation in this research project at any time prior to your giving information. Once you have been interviewed, you have up to two weeks to withdraw your permission for the interview to be used in this research project.

If you have any questions regarding this project you may direct them to the MCD Administration on (03) 9853 3177.

If at anytime you have any complaints or queries that the researcher has not been able to answer to your satisfaction, you may contact the Liaison Officer, MCD Human Research Ethics Committee: phone (03) 9853 3177, or email on hrec@mcd.edu.au

Thank you once again for your time in reading this information and carefully considering your potential involvement. Please find following a consent form which, should you wish to participate in this research, you are invited to sign and return to me.

Kind regards,

Richard Mallaby.
Consent Form

Research Topic:
An investigation of non church community group work with children in gardening and care of animals and how this might enrich the church’s work with children.

I (the participant) have read and understood the information above, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in the research project, realising that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time and may also request that no information arising from my participation is used, up to two weeks following the completion of my participation in the project.

I agree that information provided by me or with my permission during the research project may be included in a thesis, presented at conferences and published in journals on the condition that neither my name nor any other identifying information is used.

Name of Researcher (in block letter):

Signature:________________________Date:___/___/_____

Name of Participant (in block letter):

Signature:________________________Date:___/___/_____
Appendix 5 - Interview Questions

In-depth Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in my research. In our time together I am interested in hearing stories about the children with whom you work.

To protect the anonymity of the children please use false names and, if helpful, change the gender of the child or the project location.

I have some questions to guide our conversation.

1. What do you consider are the primary issues confronting urban children today?
   1.1 How do you rate the importance of ecological issues in the education of children?

2. What is the most remarkable story of a child in your care experiencing the natural world? What made it significant for you?

3. What aspects of your work with children are most important for you? Can you give me some stories of your work with children that highlight this importance?

4. There are a number of themes that I would like to explore in my research. Can you tell me any stories that relate to any of the following?
   4.1 A child experiencing a sense of awe or wonder of the natural world.
   4.2 A sense of empathy or compassion.
   4.3 A child’s growing awareness of the needs of plants and/or animals.
   4.4 A child’s commitment or appreciation of the need to work “with” the natural world rather than “against” the natural world. (A sense of the ‘wildness’ of nature)
   4.5 A child’s growing awareness of the rhythms of seasons.
   4.6 An example of changed behaviour in response to a raised awareness of the environment.

5. In the interests of children’s safety and wellbeing, what recommendations would you offer to churches considering taking up similar activities to your program?

Thank you for sharing with me. Are there any stories or other information that you would like to add that you think would contribute to this research project?
Focus Group Information

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this focus group where we will discuss the findings of my research into the work that community groups perform with children in the area of care of animals, gardening and play in natural surroundings.

It is important for us to protect the privacy and confidentiality of each other and the stories of children that we will talk about. If the discussion does not adhere to this then I will intervene and if necessary in an extreme case need to terminate our conversation.

The discussion will be recorded digitally and on cassette tape and stored in keeping with the strict guidelines of the Melbourne College of Divinity. The recorded conversation will not be transcribed. My scribe Anne Mallaby, who is my spouse, will make notes on our discussion.
Appendix 7 – Findings Sent to Participants for Verification

Summary of Findings for Validation
MCD – DMinStuds project – Richard Mallaby

The following is a brief outline of findings for validation. Please make any comments as to your agreement or disagreement. Ticks, crosses or notes would be great. I appreciate your time in responding.

Data collated from ten interviews showed that very often children experience a sense of “wonder” when involved in gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings. This might be expressed in amazement, excitement and enthusiasm.

Most children become more aware of the rhythms of the natural world when working outside, the transition of seasons, hot/cold and wet/dry. There is therefore increased opportunity of learning to work “with” the natural world rather than “against” natural flows and rhythms.

Children, particularly from unstable and insecure backgrounds, display a greater sense of “place and belonging” as shown by how upset they became when their gardens or projects were vandalised or how enthusiastic they are at telling others about their gardening activities.

Children grow in awareness of where their food comes from and how it grows.

Children grow in awareness of the needs of plants and animals and also their empathy and compassion toward, in particular, animals that are unwell.

Children with in class behavioural issues displayed improved behaviour when outside being generally more engaged, easier to manage and less disruptive.

A degree of “safe risk” is important for the development of children where they have the freedom to explore, climb trees, play in water, use adult sized tools, dig in the soil and eat food from the garden. Children given the freedom to try and fail, to climb and fall, might better learn and grow in understanding their physical limitations and exposure to risk.
A focus group, consisting of three of the ten interviewees, was the second stage of data collection. The group were invited to discuss the question, “what comes to mind when you think about ‘wonder’ in the context of children and gardening?”

The group discussed this for over an hour and concluded that there is a significant flow or movement in the work that they do with children in gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings, particularly with children who have behavioural, developmental or cognitive issues.

The process begins by creating a safe outdoor space in the natural world for the freedom to explore.

Barriers, like the walls and expectations of the classroom or difficult family and peer situations, that might create stress in relationships, are removed.

This allows a movement from initial anxiety or dysfunction toward introspection (the exploring of self and awareness of self) through connection and relationship with other living beings, like a plant, animal or bird. (The autonomy of the child being affirmed in the relationship)

The child exercises their natural desire to care for, nurture, hold (and be held)

Through touch and sensation experienced in playing with water, digging in soil, smelling compost and holding bugs and animals, there is an awakening of the senses and a release of inhibitions.

The shedding of stressfulness and the resulting relaxation allows the stimulation of imagination to create, experience wonder, explore and imagine possibility.

Is this progression something that you can relate to in your work with children in one or more areas of gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings? Or would you suggest some changes, additions?
By far the best outcome from this research would see churches engaging children in earth-connecting activities like gardening, care of animals and play in natural surroundings. It is important that respect, care and mutuality be foundational principles in any program.

There are many interesting aspects that flow out of this study for the church to consider. Aside from the obvious of encouraging children’s participation in earth connecting activities there is potential for churches to engage the wider congregation. Gardening at home, around the church or in other public places that promote the gathering of people to share in the experience of growing, harvesting and sharing produce are important activities to consider. Garden tours, incorporating earth-connecting liturgies in general worship and conducting worship in the natural landscape of beach, bush or backyard have the potential of raising awareness and connection. Resources for such activities are all readily available within the wider church and secular community and there is no need for any particular church fellowship to ‘reinvent the wheel’, so to speak. Conducting these activities in an atmosphere of inclusivity in the context of a wider community across generations, ethnic and socio-economic divides and even faith backgrounds can only enrich, enliven and deepen the experience.

Other activities might include the use of vacant church land for a community or children’s garden. Increasingly, however, vacant church land is in short supply being sold or leased to support dwindling parish incomes. Parents therefore can work within their local schools to establish gardens and natural play areas. There is broad institutional support for such activities so introduction most often only requires time and energy to gain the support of other parents. Fortunately in the present time there are few cases like Ken’s where he needed to wait for an influential teacher to retire before it was possible to establish a vegetable garden in his school.

Outings and activities as a Sunday school or church community group are worthwhile. Consider some of the following:

- Take a picnic in a local park. Children and those more able can walk or ride their bikes.
  
  Consider this as an activity during ‘Ride to Worship Week’.

---

576 See for example, Season of Creation, (http://seasonofcreation.com/), Accessed 8/2/11. Incorporates several Sundays in the liturgical calendar leading up to St Francis of Assisi day, the first Sunday in October.

• Celebrate Harvest Sunday with produce locally sourced and produced. Consider intentionally donating the harvest to a local charity rather than dividing amongst the members of the congregation.

• Have a living Christmas tree in the church during Advent with decorations made by the children.

• Nativity display with live animals578 and end of year Sunday school gifts that reflect a creation theme for Advent579.

• Visit a local children’s garden or animal farm. Information will be available on line or in your local directories. In Melbourne there is Collingwood Children’s Farm, CERES, RSPCA, the Botanic Gardens and many others.

• Participate in ‘Clean up Australia Day’580.

• Plant trees on ‘National Tree Day’581.

• ‘Walk Against Want’582 is very useful for helping children become aware of the needs of others. The walks around Melbourne are mostly in parks and treed areas.

• Gather like minded folk for intentional study and reflection on eco-theology themes.

• Form an interest group around gardening. Share gardening stories, tips, seeds and produce583.

• Create art projects with paint, timber and mosaics on walls and pavement around gardens and buildings. A cup and saucer glued onto a wooden stake placed in the garden as an ornament offers a wonderful symbol of hospitality and connection with the Earth.

Some very useful suggestions and tips offered to me during the data collecting process by participants, casual onlookers and public domain literature include the following:

• The best programs are those that are long term, on going and relational based.

• It is important to engage children with questions, allowing them to tell their stories encouraging them to use their imagination. Correcting the ‘facts’ around a child’s story needs to be carefully weighed against the importance for them of owning the realism of their ‘interpretation’ of the experience.

• Get children to draw pictures, write stories, take photos and create presentations associated with their outdoor earth-connecting activities.

578 In 2005 I installed a small recycled timber framed shed as a nativity in our church with chickens who laid eggs in the manger.

579 In 2006 eggs with a recipe for pancakes was the end of year gift. In 2008 the children received a small scarecrow, seeds and bible verse from Genesis 2:15 encouraging them to care for the earth.


581 Planet Ark, National Tree Day, (http://treeday.planetark.org), Updated 14/1/11, Accessed 8/2/11.


583 Our church hosts a group called “Sacred Earth” who meet monthly.
• Encourage and foster the innate enthusiasm and energy of a child to explore and discover new things. As a group celebrate this as a symbol of life and newness, rather than as an occupational hazard for a teacher trying to tame and control in order to complete a task.584

• A parent suggested that recent research has shown that for the brain there is ‘very little difference between going for a walk on the beach and simply imagining you are there’585. Guided mediation can offer access to the natural world for all children, even those who live in inner city regions with limited access to the country side. I would commend Kristen Hobby’s book Nurturing a Gentle Heart: Exploring Spirituality with Preschoolers586. Children who have acquired very basic meditation skills respond positively to guided meditation walks through gardens587. Hobby is committed to the importance of nurturing a natural heart by encouraging children to be outside and experience first hand the elements, wind, rain and sun588.

• It is necessary for there to be a sense of ‘wildness’ or ‘natural feel’ to the setting. Avoid plastic play equipment, regular angles or straight lines. The use of recycled materials adds character and breaks from the norms of the constructed and built worlds that children encounter far too much of in everyday life.

**Community Groups suggested during the interviews that offer support and assistance.**


584 See Montessori, The Secret of Childhood, 105-7. Being a practical and task orientated person I found Montessori’s views on this challenged my approach working with children.

585 Hobby, Nurturing a Gentle Heart, 25.


587 Hobby, Nurturing a Gentle Heart, 51.

588 Hobby, Nurturing a Gentle Heart, 73f.