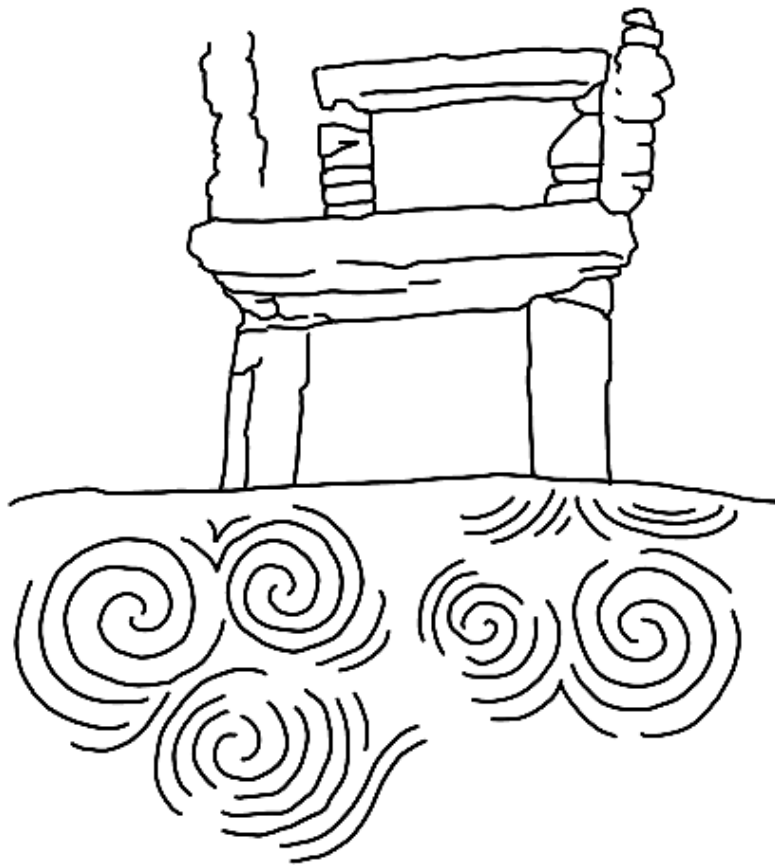


DISCOVERING MEANING IN IRELAND: MEGALITHIC SPIRITUAL
EXPERIENCES



Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Mind Body Medicine

by

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Abstract

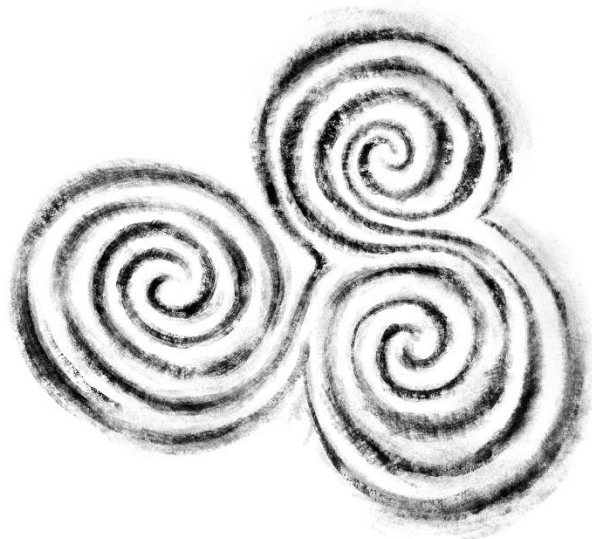
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This research uncovered links to existing studies which described what it meant for the five participants to draw meaning from their spiritual experiences. Jung (2015) determined that embracing the experience of the numinous meant reestablishing contact with one's inner self while manifesting a deeper understanding of the process individuation. Smith (2007) explored the shamanic qualities of residing in liminal space within natural settings, bringing to life the practice of interconnectivity and interdependence with nature and self. Regarding nature, Perlus (2012) highlighted the conscious act of spiritual healing through nature. Indigenous peoples oft spoke of a visceral connection they had to geographic locations (Greenberg, 2009); Greenberg noted how tribal identity was tied to certain land features. McVeigh (2017) shared research on the formation of identity through experiencing the spirit of place. Positing a new clinical approach to mental health issues, Swan (1988) noted how ecopsychology could be a foundation for therapy. Yunt (2001) wrote that changes within the psyche were fostered through experiences with place and nature. Bragg's (2012) study described how environmental motivations led people to connect with nature and culture. For the environmental perspective, Hutchinson (2001) advocated for an understanding of the political climate to facilitate connections with personal and Irish cultural identity. Through an exploration of the spiritual side, Hengst-Ehrhart and Schraml (2013) identified the need for community to bring about profound healing. White (2013) spoke of discovering meaning in life through spiritual dimensions of personal transformations. Stewart (1993; 1998) was a strong advocate for creating, not waiting for, the numinous by consciously engaging in ritual designed to facilitate a personal understanding of the realm of deep healing. With the guidance of the methodology, descriptive phenomenology, I have investigated the eidetic structure of spiritual experiences at megalithic sites in Ireland and identified five essential psychological constituents: connections to nature; cultural identity; spiritual healing; connectivity with ancestors; and discovering greater depth to life's purpose. This study contributed to a clearer understanding of how spiritual experiences at megalithic sites transform people from within. Further research into factors influencing the formation of identity and connection to significant cultural elements is needed.

Dedication

To the supportive people in my life - inspired by W.B. Yeat's "Lake Isle of
Innisfree"

I will arise and go now, go deep within me,
And a small cabin build there, of stars and stones made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, sunflowers for all to see,
And live amid, what has been made...
And there shall peace be, for it comes bubbling low,
Bubbling from the veins of holy springs;
There midnight's all glimmering, and morn an amber glow,
And evening full of the moon it brings.
I will arise and go now, for always earthen clay
I hear lake water lapping, a song I do adore;
While I stand on the pathway, or on grasses of May,
I hear it beat beyond the lakeshore.



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The mere sight of a stone circle embedded in the landscape elicits a deep sense of awe and wonder for many people; they are mysteriously drawn to these structures, experiencing a strong desire to connect with the ancient community who created them. Others view such locations as an interesting mark from history and endeavor to apperceive them through scientific measurements and record their findings for the larger contemporary society to be intrigued by. On yet another level, spiritual traditions from around the world incorporate pilgrimages to ancient megalithic sites as they are deemed sacred for their association with history and events throughout time. The Irish landscape has an abundance of megalithic sites which have been left largely undisturbed for centuries. The people of the Emerald Isle hold a special affinity for these locations for reasons that run the gambit from pure historical significance to a fear of disturbing the beings who reside in the mounds and around the stones (Cochrane, 2006).

Megalithic sites in Ireland have a profound effect on many people, drawing them in with a sense of wonder and curiosity. Some are interested in these structures from a historical or scientific perspective, while others view them as sacred and make pilgrimages to them. This research study aims to explore the spiritual experiences of individuals who have visited these sites and the impact these experiences have had on their lives. The study utilizes the descriptive phenomenological method developed by Giorgi (2009) to identify the essential psychological components of such experiences as reported by participants. Through this inquiry, the research aims to uncover related themes and deeper meaning in spiritual experiences at megalithic sites. The findings of this study may be valuable to humanistic researchers, spiritual seekers, and mental health professionals, adding to the growing field of ecopsychology, spirituality, natural philosophy, and phenomenological research. This research may also offer insight and support for individuals seeking connection to a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in their lives and address symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression.

Whether they are internal or external, it is important to acknowledge how and where the liminality of these sites fit into the context of spiritual experiences. Exploring the meaning of liminal space and the experiences had within is a task that has required great dedication. Cochrane (2006) defined liminal space as places where

two or more junctures meet. It is the in-between space that cannot be fully described yet is often found at gateway points on the land where there is a transition from one location to another. Mountaintops, waterways or shores, thresholds and even dusk, dawn, twilight, where light and dark meet (p. 267) are all prime examples of what liminal means and how it is used throughout this study.

Building on the idea of natural settings as a key to one's identity, my research focused on the exploration and meaning underlying spiritual experiences at megalithic sites of Ireland; it is geared to glean an understanding of how people interpret their spiritual, mental, and physical sense of the event described. While I took every precaution to avoid any perceived bias, this topic is of great personal and scholarly interest to me. The philosophy underlying descriptive phenomenology required that any personal experiences, insights, assumptions, and meanings be bracketed and documented to maintain integrity for the research project.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mystical/Spiritual Experiences Defined

This idea of a spiritual experience begs some context. The notion of finding oneself in a moment of time that is seemingly outside of ordinary reality is one that has fascinated philosophers and spiritual or religious folk for many millennia. Brainard (1996) wrote that a more well-understood phrase is mystical experiences, so the two are synonymous in this context. What makes a proposed definition inadequate is the great diversity of experiential phenomena being labeled as such. Brainard noted Sallie King's description as an awareness of sensate experiences being separate from the subject and object of the event. Forman, Barnard, and Shear (as cited in Brainard, 1996) posited that the experience "be understood as one of pure consciousness or unmediated awareness" (p. 360). These proposals are not even considering cultural perspectives, but what is required is getting as close to a universal understanding of spiritual/mystical experiences.

Either there is no universal reference for the term 'mystical experience' as Katz, Keller, and Penner (as cited in Brainard, 1996) claim or it contains some level of variance. There may be common empirical qualities (Grof, Smith, King as cited in Brainard, 1996) or the commonalities transcend culture and language differences (Izutsu, Sells, Idel as cited in Brainard, 1996, p. 362). Furthermore, Proudfoot (as cited in Brainard, 1996) argued against any possibility of cultural or linguistic separation where an unmediated experience exists. That leaves the idea of individual perception of the mystical experience versus that label placed on it by an outside observer. This may sound very confusing and highly cerebral for people just dipping their toes into this idea, so let us briefly explore one last set of four criteria posited by American Psychologist William James, referring to a specific state of mind, the

mystical/spiritual experience may: 1. Be ineffable – directly experienced yet defies expression; 2. Noetic quality – state of feeling and sudden knowledge; 3. Transiency – short-lived, hard to recall, until struck again where a rich inner life grows henceforth; and 4. Passivity – conscious mind is set aside by something greater allowing for self-transcendence (Brainard, 1996).

Despite one's definition of mystical or spiritual experiences, such events occur leaving the experiencer in a state of awe and profound wonder. In the presence of the numinous, people are changed. For a select few, visiting stone and earthen megalithic sites in Ireland elicits such a unique experience; one that comes on suddenly and is accompanied by a shift in awareness and consciousness. Jung ("Jung and the Numinosum," 2015) uses a term, derived from the Greek word *numen* - a spirit presiding over a thing or place - to describe this rare moment. He says *numinosum* is an experience of the person without their will as the quality of an object or influence of an invisible presence triggers a change in consciousness. Jung goes on to note how said experiences often occur with no warning.

Jung ("Jung and the Numinosum," 2015) noted positive elements found in numinous experiences, such as: awe, trance, allure, and fascination. Additional unpleasant qualities of the numinous included: fear, eeriness, urgency, and mental agitation. Despite the pleasant or unpleasant nature of the numinous, the experience often takes root in the mind of the unwitting participant. It is a moment that will never be forgotten.

Smith (2007) highlighted Jung's ideas as he described, "Any atmosphere which can evoke a sense of extraordinary potency, beauty, awe ... may become an indirect means for evoking a feeling of the *numen*" (p.42). Smith continued by noting how natural objects like stones, bodies of water, and mountains all retain the ability to arouse the sense of *numen*. Given the natural location and elements of megalithic sites, it is not unfathomable to link *numinosum* with the individuals visiting the space. In fact, Smith wrote of a reasonable connection between these experiences and how such events shaped the perspective and even healing abilities of shaman men and women. He posited this conjunction "as a need for environmental contexts which are evocative of the ambivalent experience of the sacred" (p. 43). Perhaps it is not such a great stretch to see the megalithic sites of Ireland as both sacred and places of healing.

Healing through the Stones

"*Numen*, according to Webster's dictionary, is defined as a spiritual force or influence that is often identified with a natural place, phenomenon, or object" (Perlus, 2012, p. 182). A word does not get much more beautiful than that. Perlus could not have chosen a more apt term when describing the nature of holding a relationship with nature and more specifically a geographic location within the

natural world. This is what I have in mind when I think of the connection I have with Ireland. From the anecdotal stories I have heard, I am not the only one with a strong fascination with the great Emerald Isle. I felt drawn towards the language Perlus used to put these thoughts into words in the article called “Following the Raven.”

Perlus argued that it was Western civilization’s loss of the numinous that led us to the heartless destruction of the natural world. Through said loss, it was noted that the perception of consciousness and intellectual pursuits are what led the charge to view humans as superior, therefore rendering all other forms of life as inferior. The author cited C.J. Jung’s theory of archetypes to highlight how “This article points out that the way beyond the ‘cult of consciousnesses’ is to attend to that which the rational mind does not apperceive: dreams, symptoms, and the presence of archetypes” (Perlus, 2021, p. 181). She went so far as to connect Jung’s process of individuation to a connection with the natural world and experience of numen.

Perlus (2012) led me right into a clearer understanding of the foundations of eco-psychology. She described it as being willing to go past the boundaries of familiarity and into the mysterious space where one’s psyche and nature, inner and outer worlds become blurred. This is precisely what I have in mind when I consider the experiential relationship, I had with my visit to Newgrange in Ireland. Perlus wrote that ancient sites evoke the sense of being in the physical presence of archetypes; the places where mythology, fantasies, ideas, and life all intermingle. These are the liminal spaces which foster images of love and death, creation, and destruction; and “encountering the archetype directs our attention beyond our egoic selves and reminds us that there is more to reality than our conscious minds can accommodate” (p. 182). Thereby, the path toward indigenous psyche highlights the need for reclaiming the past and increasing the visibility and numen of nature.

With a turn back towards Jung’s process of individuation, Perlus (2012) wrote that it is not only about confronting the need for power and control, but to do so in a way that honors the goal of wholeness; wholeness as a means of “the individual’s ability to recognize and live with the knowledge that he or she is part of a much greater reality” (p. 185). As stated previously, numinosum being a profound and inexplicable experience of awe and elation, seamlessly weaves into a moment of deep connection with the natural world. Understanding that in the end, this process is one that invites us to regard ourselves as integral components embracing the living world.

Perlus (2012) has laid a significant foundation for research in connecting nature with the human psyche. I am most appreciative for this dedication to understanding what an intangible or ephemeral experience it is to be engaged with the link between mental health and the natural world. My research has lent further

credence and enrichment to the synchronization between the two elements where Perlus left off. I have explored deeper with a specific focus which has allowed a personal understanding of the healing potential of nature as offered directly through the eyes of the experiencer. Each of the participants shared how psychically, emotionally, and physiologically their time in nature and with the stones had significantly influenced their lives.

It is inspiring to look towards those ancestors who felt and expressed a strong affinity toward their natural surroundings. Indigenous Americans and the Celtic Nations of Ireland both left apparent clues and stories which tell of extraordinary connection with nature. The former often wove intricate stories into the narrative which defined their culture for generations. The former left massive stone structures which belied a depth of connection with nature and the heavens that continues to attract us to this day.

Indigenous Perspectives

As Perlus (2012) highlighted the idea of becoming more whole with all of nature, so too does every indigenous culture around the world. Ecopsychology, as explored by Perlus (2012), was the foundation from which native collectivist-communities were inspired to be healed and whole. In her attempts to understand and illustrate a personal sense of ubiety, Greenberg (2009) explored her connection to Silver Strand Beach in Oxnard, California. The author linked the phenomenon to storytellers of Native American descent. Tribal nations designate areas around their lands as sacred and full of meaning which imbues a sense of purpose and connection between the people and the land; this is precisely what the Chumash tribe has done with Silver Strand Beach. Greenberg told of how Jung's idea of 'synchronicity' was involved in the deep connection, as well. The author underlined the importance of the interplay of all animal life as integral to experiencing a deep connection: "As each wave recedes, these tiny birds [sanderlings] in the peep subfamily of sandpipers rush with it, jabbing furiously in the ebb, only to be chased farther back by the next flow as if dancing to some choreography known only to them" (Greenberg, 2009, p. 151).

The myths and legends of the indigenous of southern California elicit a palpable spiritual experience in certain geographic locations which enlivens the stories for the native inhabitants. Greenberg (2009) illustrated how the Chumash maintained a connection to their deities of place as the landscape itself spoke of the weaving strands of their legends. The author explored the nature of life in inanimate rocks and water: she pondered if the rocks and water were alerting her to the sense of ubiety or a particular mindset inspired by a specific location, as if they were beckoning her attention to come and see and sing and dance. I can empathize with these ponderings. The Irish landscape and ancient monuments spoke volumes to me

during my visit. Often, mere sounds, aromas, or pictures of Éire (Ireland) pull me in, tugging at my soul. There lies an intimacy with developing or experiencing such a connection with the earth and places therein. Reinders (2017) encapsulated the sensuous nature of deep connectivity with the land in her “phenomenological meditation on the experiential fabric of an earth-cherishing mode of human consciousness” (p. 15). The author poetically waxed on the refrained of coyotes and birds and land as an expression of the ancient kinship shared by all humans to the universe.

Western culture has thrived and been defined by an egocentric air espousing belief in separateness from the earth and all its life-forms (Reinders, 2017). Personally, I am moved by the words of Reinders, as I have experienced very similar ways of being emotionally touched by geographic locations. However, I must also recognize the importance of contributing to scholarly perspectives while inviting a deeper experiential understanding of moments like these. Reinders (2017) spoke of sensuousness, which should not be confused with sexuality, in this context. She wrote that it is more of a way to listen and sense one’s own body; a way to feel enveloped with a natural setting where sun, wind, sounds, and vibrations weave together linking light and dark with physical and spiritual beings. I have offered that this sensing and perceiving is an embodiment of living engagement with nature in a specific place at a specific time for the purpose of developing an understanding of the ecological psyche.

Taking a breath, I wondered what it could mean or how it would look to use the gathered tools of cultural identity and apply them to a spiritual understanding of my work as a mental health professional. I felt I could clearly see the connections, but how might I convey that to the larger world? McVeigh (2017) spoke right to my soul and offered a concise prescription for that which I sought. Anam Cara is a term I was quite familiar with before reading the words of McVeigh; it is a traditional Irish phrase that translates to ‘soul friend’ (p. 62). What I did not know was that this term referred to “someone to whom you confessed, revealing the hidden intimacies of your life...you could share your innermost self, your mind and your heart” (p. 63). In large part, that is how I view my role as therapist/counselor.

McVeigh (2017) identified the nature of the Celtic Irish as “spiritually charged” and sacred way of life honored all forms of art, and the spoken word as means for healing emotional ails. “As therapists, we engage with the spoken word daily and so must choose words with sacred energy that heals” (p. 64). As counselors navigate the field rife with clinical terminology, it is paramount that to view people beyond the medical model of disorders, measurements, and diagnostic criteria. The words spoken and presence held must somehow convey that a vision is seen that the hurting individual is more than their perceived diagnosis and invite them to acknowledge that, indeed, they are worthy of better health and well-being.

Deep care was taken in this practice of wellness, as even the Celtic Irish understood that spoken words serve as a means of transferring real energy (O'Donohue, 1997). McVeigh (2017) told of how this energy is carried with us through "our bodies, our hearts, our thoughts, [and] becomes part of the work" (p. 64). This healing practice is both a biological and spiritual process that occurs between people. When in sync, healing energy is transmitted in a complimentary manner. One person (the therapist) radiates love and compassion to another (the client) through the human bioelectromagnetic field to elicit true healing.

In conversation about symbols, McVeigh (2017) noted the sacred meaning of Celtic art as depicted by spirals and knotwork that can be found on stones at ancient sites across the island. The author wrote that each symbol carries a sacred meaning which was inspired by all forms of nature and the cycle of life. In fact, taking one of these symbols and tracing it with your finger can be a highly therapeutic exercise in mindfulness which allows the practitioner to feel very calm and grounded. It is an act of connecting with the healer that resides within us all. Individuals and "Families can be invited into exploring their own cultural and spiritual heritage to unlock the mysticism symbols and sacred art that can assist them in their healing process" (p.65). To understand these sacred transpersonal experiences, Swan (1988) was determined to find answers to the question: What precisely does it mean and how might sacred experiences be quantified?

Reinders (2017) and Greenberg (2009) did an excellent job with their exploration of culture, mental health, and well-being. They highlighted the intricate layers of community and connectivity to culture and how it manifests through individual perspectives. With respect, I have borrowed my lead from McVeigh (2017) and O'Donohue (1997) as a launch point from which I have drawn a direct correlation between this research and its implication in the practice of clinical mental health. "May you recognize in your life the presence, power, and light of your soul. May you realize that you are never alone, that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 125). I have taken O'Donohue's sentiment and invited it into the clinical setting by allowing my clients the space to navigate the necessary connections with their culture.

For my part, I have used the idea of Anam Cara in my research to bridge the small gap of clinical application between McVeigh (2017) and O'Donohue (1997). It is a most difficult task "to bring the world of work and the soul together.../it should be an arena of possibility and real expression" (O'Donohue, 1997, p. 132). My research has taught me to employ the mantle of Anam Cara allowing me to truly see, be present, and wholly compassionate not only with clients but with many relationships beyond the professional realm. This study of spiritual experiences at megalithic sites would not have brought me into such an intimate understanding

between culture and mental health had I not focused on the Emerald Isle; that is where my research adds complexity and nuance to the practice of mental health awareness.

Depth & Ecopsychology

Swan (1988) identified nine underlying themes and created a classification of reported transpersonal experiences associated with sacred sites. These include: (a) a sense of unity with nature and clear perception of connectedness; (b) feelings of bliss, awe, and wonder; (c) interspecies - by extension flora and natural inanimate objects - communication; (d) vivid dreams of spiritual quality; (e) waking visions or sightings; (f) hearing unusual sounds; (g) synchronicities; (h) ancestral memory recollections; and (i) ecstasies and profound inspirations. Swan's quantification can be easily extrapolated into moments of time with visits to megalithic sites. After all, Swan noted how specific geographic location triggered an altered state of consciousness.

Rudolf Otto (as cited in Smith, 2007) coined the term 'numen' and defined it as "the non-rational feeling reaction to that universally appearing object of experience" (p. 39); where the sacred/holy was a felt response to some ineffable mystery experienced that was beyond words. Smith wrote that such a moment could not be reduced by concepts contained within psychology, anthropology, or any other academic field of study. These ideas are explored more in depth later, but it is important to know that Jung expounded on Otto's ideas when he defined the concept of numinosum - being a quality of an unseen force causing a shift in conscious awareness, often experienced unwittingly (Jung and the Numinosum, n.d.).

While Jung was not alive for the evolution of ecopsychology, much of his writings espoused significant tenets of the ever-budding nature-based psychology. Yunt (2001) explored how Jung's ideas on archetypes, the collective unconscious, personal/collective shadows, and individuation all play a role in what it means for the self/ego and the world/eco to reunify. Jung (as cited in Yunt, 2001) wrote frequently on the idea that Western world has been driven into a mechanistic view of nature thereby divorcing humans from an intimacy the natural world inspires; and by extension, a sense of loss of self in attempts to grow outwardly. Man has become so isolated; it is challenging to see their part in the natural world.

Upon consideration of the role of humans in the natural world, there has been great awareness of an ecological impact. In fact, the recent environmental movement has tried multiple times through both legal and ethical means to slow and even reverse much of the damage done; all too little avail. "What was lacking, however, was an adequate psychological critique of our highly scientific-materialist worldview and technologically based lifestyles" (Yunt, 2001, p. 109). The immediacy of desired change must be accessed through a deeper understanding that begins within the

psyche. That way more a constructive and holistic approach can be embraced in facilitating change on personal, cultural, and ecological dimensions of life.

Yunt (2001) noted that an ecopsychologist is focused on exploring the human psyche in to understand how such rational beings allow for the destruction of natural habitat, thereby negatively impacting their own life support system. The author argued that people have been at a critical juncture for too long and that is why this new field is considered a crisis discipline. At the heart of it, Roszak (as cited in Yunt, 2001) said ecopsychology is concerned with human nature and behavior where it is understood that human psyches are wholly connected to the Earth (p. 104).

It is imperative to be open to the practice and understanding of psychology as it includes the influence of nature on people, thereby expanding therapeutic treatments past the realms of intrapsychic and interpersonal needs. While it may sound silly or irrational to the more traditional forms of Western psychological disciplines, it is a rather serious matter. For countless decades, humans have been wreaking havoc on the ecosystem. Even the earliest traditional societies have sought to manipulate their environment, on a lesser scale than the modern world, yet all the same, the impulse to dominate in some way has been ingrained for far too long. Yunt (2001) acknowledged that it does not help that modern psychology, being geared toward a more mechanistic view of the psyche, tried to hold at bay the idea that humans are affected by the powers of nature.

To embrace the fact that humans are animals, beings living in and dependent upon the Earth and her natural processes is one more crucial step forward that highlights the need for a deeper understanding of interdependence. These ideas beg the question: what, precisely, does it mean to live according to the notion that people are an interdependent species inextricably linked to every other non-human animal and plant, mountain, waterway, and desert. My research has provided the requisite room and framework to validate the growing practice of ecopsychology as mainstream and worthy of attention within the human psyche, especially as it relates to mental health and well-being.

Environmental Motivations

The integral aspect of my experiences with any location is founded upon the idea of the power of connection. It is an inexplicable draw towards a geographical space/place - typically in nature - steeped in history, practically dripping with stories I can feel with all my senses. Rogers and Bragg (2012) could not have stated it better when they wrote, "Sense of place refers to a psychological construct that involves attributing a geographical location with meaning, values, and a sense of connection" (p. 307). The authors continued by discussing how relationships with areas inspire people to make more positive choices for sustainable living. The focus was on environmental concerns and addressing a means by which to draw people into

connection with nature, thereby influencing their thoughts on more sustainable changes. Rogers and Bragg wrote of a weakening connection between urban dwellers' thoughts and behaviors towards nature; they said that it is imperative to rediscover the lost connection to the natural world. Recreating a sense of place tended to fare better for individuals who have lived in one location most of their lives (Rogers & Bragg, 2012). I agree that the closer one is to a place or person, the more connected they are however, that is certainly not the deciding factor.

In the rush of modern society, it is too easy to be carried away with the immediacy of paying bills and buying things in an attempt to fill the void felt by people; a relationship with nature is often one of the first connections lost. People can too easily become desensitized to nature despite proximity to said location. Rogers and Bragg explored how urbanites could develop a sense of place through four main components: (1) encouraging others - to make better choices; (2) environmental action - identifying actionable steps; (3) education - learning of human impact on spaces; and (4) finding/experiencing sense of place through nature and community - gathering to work together as connection is established. The authors found great success when they applied each of the key elements mentioned above. They emphasized that more people were reporting how engagement was influencing daily choices and that they felt a greater connection to nature and their community.

How are the collective issues of encouragement, education, environment, and community experiences coalesced into purpose and meaning? Yunt (2001) acknowledged how these problems with ecology are often misunderstood as purely external trappings; whereas the act of neglecting one's reflective abilities is what gave rise to modern psychology. "This holds especially true for ecopsychology, as this outgrowth of humanistic psychology does not see ecological problems as being merely 'out there'" (p. 98). As the struggle continues finding such a balance between the internal and external worlds, it is important to acknowledge the role of the purely physical realm of socio-political interests. My research has highlighted the sorely missed integral aspects of self-healing through nature, culture, development, purpose, and ancestors. It is imperative to acknowledge the importance of these facets of life. I have added to the extant research by including a rich diversity of personalized experiences as elucidated by the narratives of people from many areas around the globe. The knowledge I have gleaned from my participants further illustrated the depths of spiritual experiences by exposing the universality of human healing and connection that has been identified throughout many historical traditions (Campbell, 1990; Smith, 2007; Stewart, 1992).

Socio-Political Leanings

It is worth exploring a more tangible facet of Irish culture and its connection to the Ancient Past, as well. Hutchinson (2001) examined the connection between social and political motivations for exploring and embracing the Ancient Celtic past done specifically through the lens of nationalism versus propaganda. The author highlighted the growing interest in archeological findings stemming from the mid-18th century. This Celtic revival in Ireland, “It arose primarily among representatives of the ‘colonial’ Protestant minority of English and Scottish stock who, during the religious wars of conquest of the seventeenth century, had dispossessed the existing Catholic landed elites, and reduced the historic Irish-language” (p. 505). It was noted that to make the Ancient Celts more visible to the average populace, more material artefacts were placed on display (Hutchinson, 2001). On that note, the archeologist, Petrie, held a strong interest in reviving the culture as he was inspired by the art of said artefacts.

He sought a moralistic regeneration of Irish society by studying the art, literature, and music of the past. Additional archeologists were swayed by interests in local history, mysticism, and genealogical connections to the ancient sites (Hutchinson, 2001). From these various interests, arose “the founding of the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) in 1785, which became the leading centre for the study of Irish antiquities in the nineteenth century” (Hutchinson, 2001, p. 507). It was hoped that the RIA would unite and dispel tensions within the communities through an embrace of artefacts and shared ancient culture. In so doing, discover a way to bring the remains of Ireland’s pagan and Christian eras into a shared context of understanding and appreciation. Hutchinson (2001) wrote that from all these activities surrounding archeology, a new vision of Celtic Ireland emerged where each artefact and monument stood as a symbol of identity for the Irish people. The sites and symbols were a physical manifestation of their shared heritage. Hutchinson said, “To have visited an historic site such as Clonmacnois or Newgrange leaves one with the knowledge and responsibility of knowing that we are but the latest inheritors of a long, proud and inspiring past” (p. 512). All this interest culminated in the rise of writers such as W.B. Yeats, Sir Horace Plunkett, and George Russell promoted a strong connection with Irish Celts through spirituality and the arts. Hutchinson (2001) delved into many facets of the Irish socio-political landscape of the late 19th century. The detailed components to understanding the rigor of connecting Irish historical preservation and connectivity to the modern culture were extensive.

Where I have picked up is the inclusion of personal experiences had while directly engaging with the artefacts and monuments that have stood as literal symbols of Irish heritage for thousands of years, I have exhibited the lived experiences of modern people making sense of the influence of megaliths in their lives. The participants spoke vividly of how impactful their experiences were in viscerally

connecting them with Irish culture in a way they never could have imagined. My research validated and encouraged the act of physical connection with culturally living historical sites, which afforded the participants a shift in consciousness triggered by an encounter with the numinous.

Spiritual Community

There remains a group wholly dedicated to the experience of ubiety, and they take it to a level more in concert with my own understanding. Contemporary Pagans build their spiritual beliefs upon the foundation of being nature-based. It is virtually inherent that such a philosophy and approach requires regularly feeling a sense of place with nature and exploring the depths of what each connection means. Hengst-Ehrhart and Schraml (2013) explored such a study which sought to understand the attitudes and behaviors of neopagans towards nature. In particular, the relationship between group members and trees or forests was of great interest. Neopagans tend to seek spiritual experiences in groves of trees where nature is raw and unrefined. “Spiritual experiences with the environment are interpreted and reflected in perceptions and behaviors. Among Neopagans, the spiritual experience is of higher importance” (Hengst-Ehrhart & Schraml, 2013, p. 256). Making sense of connection to nature is the main principle underlying this spiritual approach to the environment. This is precisely my attitude.

Hengst-Ehrhart and Schraml (2013) posed four questions regarding connection to trees, use of nature, treatment of nature, and explaining neopagan spirituality; they received 101 responses elucidating the philosophy of neopagan beliefs from various individuals within the subculture. Spiritual activities in nature were denoted as taking place on a weekly basis (29%); the most (82%) common site was the forest; fire was an integral aspect of 52% of rituals or rites; and 92% of respondents agreed that the relationship between nature and humans was reciprocal (Hengst-Ehrhart & Schraml, 2013). I was happy to find such a large sample size study indicating high numbers of people connecting meaningfully with nature. One respondent wrote, “I don’t just simply walk into the forest. Instead, I usually ask the first tree on the path if I may come in. The tree doesn’t say ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ but somehow, I have a feeling inside that tells me ‘come’ or a feeling that conveys ‘stay away’” (p. 262); this example of communication is the level of depth I feel when experiencing a sense of ubiety.

For Jung, numinosum invited participants to connect with the natural world at a depth which reached beyond the physical and into the realm of spirit by accessing a truer sense of individuation (Yunt, 2001). That level of personal experience can elicit healing for not only the individual, but the community and world itself. And while shamanic practices focus on healing techniques, rites, and medicines, Smith (2007) noted the explicitly personal nature of numen. Such moments “can only be invoked,

excited, or aroused” (p. 42). What about this invocation relates to a purely religious or spiritual experience? It can be argued that archetypes are the foundation of such events. Only certain people, mystics, are connected to a deeper understanding of archetypal imaginings and the role they play in people’s lives. Jung stated, “Mystics are people who have a particularly vivid experience of the processes of the collective unconscious. Mystical experience is experience of archetypes” (as cited in Dourley, 2001, p. 67). In teleological terms, Dourley noted how the numinous identified a wholeness of personal integration and expanded into empathy expressed toward all. Finding meaning in such experiences may be more about understanding their purpose and personal impact, especially as it relates to inspiring profound change within the individual and their community.

This research on spiritual experiences is especially geared towards those seeking a healing event for their spirit. Spiritual seekers will feel validated by the data uncovered through the narratives shared here. My research added a richness to the practice of healing oneself through a deep connection with the inner most self. With a concentrated focus on Irish megalithic sites a new layer of credence is lent to Celtic-based spiritually minded people. Each of the participants were considerably passionate about connecting with their heritage and learned how to use their experience to manifest a profound relationship with their soul.

Discovering Meanings

Otto (as cited in Smith, 2007) identified places of stored numen/power like the ancient site of Stonehenge. Smith went on to describe those natural stones, bodies of water, forests, mountains, and celestial objects all retained the ability to arouse a sense of numen, as well (p. 42). White (2013) studied “experiences relating to both an altered sense of self as well as the numinous or spiritual dimensions of experience” (p. 242). The author's own words describe what I am most interested in, as well. I feel a burning desire to understand how place and perspectives of it influence the whole human being as it potentially adds dimensions to spiritual practice. The broader sense of the study relays personal meanings of social importance as one experience of connection with nature. White detailed how his auto-phenomeno-graphical inquiry utilized first-hand experiences through his perceptions, feelings, emotions, reflections, and thoughts over the course of three years of study. White’s (2013) underlying approach was in utilizing the Mindful-Affective-Perception-Imagination-in-Nature (MAPIN) Strategy; this allowed for “(1) sensory observation, (2) rational and affective interpretation, and (3) imaginal engagement (meditation, contemplation, visualization, imagination, and self-reflection)” (p. 245). White used seven stages to build a base for data: familiar places; meditation; sounds of the land; listening; vision; touch; and connecting. As I enter new spaces, I take on each of these processes naturally. Generally, vision and listening are engaged first; however, the meditative aspect comes on full force as I

lean in to get a feel for the location. If I sense a pull or grounding effect, I know there is depth to explore. Every participant in this study felt compelled to experience all the same stages outlined by White affording them the opportunity to grasp onto a connection with themselves.

Through self, relationship with non-human others, connectedness, and transcendent knowing, White (2013) delineated thematic groups as he recorded data. Of those mentioned, transpersonal connectedness is the theme I am most intrigued by – deeply understanding and experiencing a tangible connection of the interconnectedness with all of life. This truly gets to the heart of the matter. The author wrote that meaningful experiences go well beyond mere stories of perceived connections with nature. White emphasized how the cultivation of mindfulness, connecting with nature through ritual, and evoking wonder and awe were the main components for deriving “transpersonally oriented nature connection experiences” (White, 2013, p. 251).

Being in touch with these transformative experiences inspired by a deep connection with the natural world may be just enough to create change in the person’s life for the better. As will be described in greater detail later, every one of the participants studied in this research walked away from their event changed in some fundamental way. It is as though “...sacred time and space are heterogenous, having qualitative irruptions. To homo religious, certain places and times are qualitatively other; that is, they are manifestations of the sacred” (Smith, 2007, p. 54). Yet not for all people. Given my personal experiences, I have made every effort to keep an eye on and bracket my own perspectives with this research. White (2013) included the Mindful-Affective-Perception-Imagination-in-Nature (MAPIN) Strategy allowing me to shift the perspective toward an attempted quantifiable understanding of the spiritual experiences described in my research. I have added further evidence to White’s research which validated the efforts explored. It was White’s attention on transcendence that struck me, as I noted how three of the participants experienced vivid moments of stepping out of awareness of ordinary consciousness. The other two participants did not experience transcendence to the same degree; however, they did sense a shift in their awareness while at the megalithic sites.

Power and Light Within the Land

Unlike Jung’s idea of numinous being an unpredictable event triggered by an object or specific location, Stewart (1998) wrote that one could create the same experience based on wisdom teachings from around the world. He said that specific techniques and ways of engaging with the natural world and accessing a power which resided deep within everyone, the idea of numen is something that could be controlled. Stewart advocated that no one person or culture held the key to accessing the transformative potential of the profound experiences Jung called the numinous.

Stewart even shared that it was an experience that could be elicited by anyone at any location...they simply needed the knowledge on how to appropriately engage with the myths of tradition.

Stewart (1998) told of how working to intentionally access Jung's numen was a means by which one could tap into the natural world thereby achieving contact with the planetary consciousness (p. 2). He said this act would re-enliven ancestral spiritual practices of sharing intimate kinship with the land facilitating a new form for the old religions (p. 3). Stewart described that accessibility of these Primal/Underworld arts worked by first allowing inspiration and change to occur at the individual's level and slowly seeping its way into the collective level and eventually into the consciousness of many (p. 4). He wrote that "the planet holds a level of consciousness that can be interacted with. The Primal/Underworld traditions propose vast scales of time where the tides of change can only be understood through altered states of consciousness" (p. 5).

Of the grounding type of work with nature and consciousness, "awareness works below conditioning not in the divisive sense of the unconscious of psychotherapy but from the realms of consciousness" (Stewart, 1998, p. 6) and that this can be experienced as people are already home on Earth and not looking to tap into something far off in space. Stewart described that the power within the land can be accessed in various locations around the world. He noted a divisive or disconnect has occurred over time as the ancestors used to live in the realms of myths and that slowly gave way to the materialist sciences in the modern world. He said being alive in the myths meant the ancestors were even more closely connected with the Underworld and had no trouble engaging with the healing practices of the wisdom traditions, yet as materialist science became more prominent so too did a conscious neglect of the natural world. While it may be too difficult to go back to living in the mythical realm, it is important to recognize and work with some balance or bridge so "Primal healing may be brought back to the living world and manifest necessary environmental change" (p. 6).

Stewart (1998) identified a simple, yet profound, pattern reflected by the heavens above that is not mystical but a mirrored relationship between the living Earth, the individual, and then the collective. He said that "this conscious awareness is modified and influenced at three stages: the stars, the sun, and the moon" (p. 7). Reflection of these modes of consciousness can be found within the inner realm and accessed by meditative practices and pure intention on inspired changes. He wrote of how the ability to be formed is a power inherent within the Earth. The natural realm facilitates change and without which humans would not be alive. He said the Underworld traditions speak of "our bodies as the spiritual realization meant to become aware of the relationship between the self and the planet, yet the neglect

shown these days through materialistic science must be taken to refocus us on the practice of elemental regeneration” (p. 8).

Earth, sun, stars are all alive with patterns and cycles of conscious energy. Attuning to those cycles people become aware and invite rapid personal changes. Through the element of Earth, change happens at a significantly higher rate than elsewhere. However, when faced with an experience at a power site - those places where the energy of humans and nature merge, like stone circles and burial mounds - the power takes a specific pattern or form. This is where human and natural energies merge with significantly potent intent.

The Underworld and faerie realm traditions are an inherent part of the collective unconscious. “They are worthy of exploration as we reassess necessary changes in our modern context of life” (Stewart, 1992, p. 1). These Underworld traditions were accessed throughout history by seers, poets, healers, and musicians and can be used no matter where in the world one might be. Stewart said that liberation comes from within, inspired by the Underworld - the original place of the land. “The Primal Land mirrors the planet and the cycles of life found here” (p. 3). He told of once the Primal Land and Manifest Land were much closer together and that they were both easily accessible by all beings on the planet. “As early as 300 years ago it was recounted that Kirk had detailed experiences and wrote of them. He told of three types of encounters: with faeries; with ancestral humans; and with humans that have passed physically into the faerie realm” (p. 4). I wonder how much the participants tapped into this during their experience.

Stewart (1992) recognized second-sight as a means by which “people could more naturally access these experiences as it came easily to certain individuals” (p. 5). He said it is important to go into such events with an open mind as people’s motives are clearly mirrored back at them. If entered with pure intent, people will receive the same but with greed it will be much worse. To restore the planet, humans must go into the Primal Land and bring back inspired change for the better. “In doing so, our state of balance becomes more equilibrated as the upper, lower, inner, and outer worlds come together” (p. 7). There are three aspects of teaching lent by the Underworld: power, for the individual; sacrificial, for giving to all the people and lands; and environmental, meaning “reducing the sense of separation from the planet/nature through meditations and visualizations” (p. 9).

The pull to heritage sites is like that of being lured by the Primal Lands. It may be too easy to allow getting swept up in the moment as an escape. This is when desires must be reined in and keep in mind the purpose for the visit. “By releasing our attachment to such weaknesses, we will have won our place to be inspired by the Underworld” (Stewart, 1992, p. 10). Many orthodox religions have taught that nature was designed as a snare or delusion of the mind meant to keep us away from the good

of life. It was a teaching beset on us for thousands of years and with the advent of materialism, digital media, and countless distractions, those teachings took a stronghold on the world. While orthodoxy claims there is only one way into heaven/afterlife, the “Underworld traditions espouse seeing this path to be multidirectional” (p. 11). Walking between the worlds is a philosophy and practice advocated and taught by the Primal Traditions of the world.

Stewart (1992; 1998) was heavily focused on a particular tradition founded on the myths and legends of Scotland. The author espoused a strict adherence to ritual in a rather formulaic manner which is said to promise reliable results in the exploration of connecting with the Underworld and its indigenous residents. Stewart detailed the physical and mental health implications of working with the Primal Traditions of the world. My research has benefited from the traditions as they highlighted the ephemeral nature of spiritual experiences in nature and at ancient sites.

Stewart (1992; 1998) spoke of the importance of holding to a particular approach for a healing experience with the Underworld. My study has used this information as a backdrop for understanding unique spiritual experiences by layering an ancient oral tradition into a modern experience. The data I have collected has provided evidence that there may yet be something working well below the surface of human consciousness; something perhaps older than anyone knows which can be tapped either purposefully or when suddenly faced with the numinous.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the findings that emerged from the rich narratives of the five participants who so kindly shared their spiritual experiences at megalithic sites in Ireland. The events detailed are expressed in three parts: a summarization of their stories, the general structure, and an exploration of the constituents of the spiritual experiences between the five participants that are featured in the essential psychological structure of spiritual experiences at megalithic sites in Ireland. The summarization is a brief retelling of the participants' narratives. While this study explores the spiritual experiences of the five participants, it was meant to capture the structure of the phenomenon's broad generalizability. The structure is a brief statement that depicts the essence of the phenomenon. The constituents are the explication of the structure of the phenomenon.

Additionally, all five participants of this study signed a consent form granting them confidentiality. Because of this, I chose to use a pseudonym for them in the sections that follow. In so doing, I was able to maintain anonymity while capturing the essence of their human experience when recalling the details of their interviews in the manner of narrative writing.

Story Summaries

Liam

During a visit with classmates in 2004, Liam experienced a deep spiritual connection with Newgrange that led him into his path as a practicing Druid that has been a guiding force ever since. He told of how his classmates were disinterested, but that did not faze him. The visit to Newgrange was unplanned for the group but they decided to stop since it was on their way towards Dublin. The participant described how the weather on that February afternoon all lent to his experience of the sacred site. He shared about the history of his intellectual understanding of the megalithic site as it allowed him to further delve into ponderings about the spirituality/religion, language, and thought processes of the builders of the burial mound.

Liam recounted the experience he had within the burial mound at Newgrange. He noticed the prominent triple spiral inside the inner chamber and passageway as he considered not only the tools used but what if any connection there was between them and the celestial bodies above in the night sky. The participant identified a link between the spirals on the rock face and the movement of stars, planets, and galaxies. He spoke of the significance of ritual and celebrations marking life events and how those are sorely missed by modern society. Liam wondered about how such a connection to nature influenced their understanding of cycles of planting and how people are reliant upon their devices with no deeper grasp of these cycles.

He spoke of a desire to reestablish some level of connectivity with nature even from his urban apartment in the United States. And he gave these ideas as the reason for an interest and practice of a modern form of Druidry. The participant shared the various paths, groups, and learnings he engaged with upon his return home. He went into vivid detail about how he finally found himself in a leadership position with a spiritual group and it was all because of the inspiration he received from a brief visit to Newgrange many years ago.

Cara

Cara told of an experience she had 26 years ago during her first ever visit to Newgrange. She noted that she had been traveling with two other women whom she did not know. The participant spoke of having an intellectual understanding/curiosity of the inner structure at Newgrange but made deeper connections within the burial mound. However, she became highly emotional as she recalled first encountering two kerbstones (ornately decorated massive stones that encompass the immediate perimeter of ancient megalithic sites – Cochrane, 2006, p. 316) outside the mound. Cara recalled feeling an intense physical and emotional response to seeing the all-too-familiar designs on the stones – one's she had never seen before in her life – and feeling an extraordinary disconnect as she could not

translate the symbols “though I knew the images and what they represented. I could not appreciate knowing these carvings were so familiar, yet I could not decipher them...it made no sense...I knew deep inside what they meant but I could not put words to them.”

She reported that she became so highly and visibly emotional that one of her travel mates approached but did not know what to do for her. Cara said that she just needed time to process the ineffable experience on her own and that she would be OK. She described how she could not recall events that followed for the rest of that day or where they stayed that night. The participant emotionally told of how that experience has been with her ever since that day.

Shannon

Shannon reported that she had been on a trip across the British Isles with the sole purpose of seeing as many ancient sacred sites as possible, but she was particularly keen on visiting the Hill of Tara in Ireland. She recalled how nothing special really happened at any other site until she visited Tara. Shannon told of how one woman in the group was very reluctant to go to Tara, but fate stepped in allowing them more time than they thought they would have (in the form of another tour being cancelled due to weather). She recalled how the woman remained reluctant but said that was not going to stop her from going. They made it to the Hill of Tara on a rainy day where the ground was very muddy. Shannon described feeling physically compelled up the hill toward the Stone of Destiny. She even said that it was so special that she and another friend understood the significance and went separate ways toward the stone to have an experience on their own.

She detailed how upon reaching the stone at the top, as soon as she placed her hand on it, images of leaders, kings, queens all rushed through her mind and made her feel off-balance. Shannon said that after lifting her hand and opening her eyes she did not feel like she could move her legs properly. Even as she descended the hill carefully, it was challenging to keep upright. She laughed as she recalled falling and getting soaked in mud, thinking initially the experience was ruined. Shannon said that some people nearby lent another perspective in that Mother Earth was embracing and helping her to become grounded after such an intense moment. Afterwards, she pondered that she may very well have been one of the faces she saw in her mind.

Orla

Orla recalled a time when she visited the Hill of Tara. She said that it was considered her special sacred space otherwise known as a nemeton, meaning ‘sacred grove’ or ‘sanctuary’ (Nemeton, 2020). Orla reported one of the purposes of the visit was to spend time with a close friend and play her sound instruments there. The participant shared that her spiritual school in Ireland taught her many ways of attuning to the natural landscape and how to tap into the energy of heritage and sacred sites. She told of being led through a shamanic journey by the school where “we picture our self a tree between heaven and earth, or father sky and we proceed to our place in the other world.” On this day, as she visited with her sound healing friend, she recalled how the light and atmosphere was particularly clear and she likened the Hill of Tara to a cathedral. She spoke of feeling compelled to move down the hill with her friend even though “we didn’t know where we were going.”

When they reached the bottom, the space opened and invited them in. She marveled at the grove of trees with their size and physical and spiritual presence. Orla told of tuning all her senses to the moment as she smelled the earth, saw the landscape, and “felt like the faeries were there and the Irish here we do believe in Tír Na Nóg and faeries and the wee folk.” They both started playing their drums and dancing in the sacred space. She said they felt the energy moving their bodies and how they embraced the flow of the moment. Orla recalled how the event ended as a random man came walking through their space and she speculated on how spaces like these attract people and often these people do not understand what has brought them there.

Maeve

Maeve reported that she had plans to go on a photoshoot with a close friend to a couple of places nearby. She said that the main reason for visiting them was to show her photographer friend the sites. Maeve shared that they went to a local quarry and took some photos of her there. When they noticed the weather becoming unfavorable, they decided to stop the photoshoot and end at the quarry. Maeve asked her friend if he still wanted to go to Knockroe, and he agreed; they were both very enthusiastic about seeing the heritage site despite the weather. The participant reported that when they arrived at the Knockroe the weather was getting dark, and it was beginning to rain. She told her friend that she was still very happy to make the visit, but that he had to remain quiet as she conducted her ritual of stepping into sacred space. Maeve said that she had to formally request permission to enter the space and wait for an answer that could come in the form of an energetic welcoming. She said she was invited in and then began her movement ritual where she allowed her body to move as it was inspired to. The participant shared that to properly

engage with a space, which is something not many know how to do, you must allow yourself to sink in; she called it “dream the land.”

After she felt wholly settled into the experience, she began to walk in a big circle, and she told that that is how the energy often moves in such an ubiety. “I tapped into and listened and followed the movement.” Maeve said that during the circle walking, she was configuring her hands into shapes like mudras and that is how she communicated her intent for being there. To conclude, she started whole body movements (like Qigong) which signified a closing of the ritual. She reported that she left some offerings - as she does every time, she visits sacred sites. She said this time it was small crystals offered in the spirit of gratitude. After the experience ended, Maeve’s friend told her how he noticed the weather seemed to follow her lead. He said the clouds parted and she was moving her arms about and “rays of sunshine shone down just on the circle and you.” Maeve said she is often unaware of what is happening around her when in such a trance state. The participant acknowledged how grateful she was to have an observer record the moment through eyewitness and photography.

Structure of Spiritual Experiences at Megalithic Sites in Ireland

Whether they have done this regularly or merely once in their life, each participant reported how deeply impacted they were through engagement with a numinous experience at Irish megalithic sites. There were both men and women participants and they came from a variety of socio-cultural and socio-economic experiences; additionally, their educational backgrounds varied widely. Despite these disparities, discovering the numen allowed them to align in key areas. Within the constituents detailed below, three main themes were detected throughout - all dealing with relationships: to nature, to community, and to self. With the enhancement towards relationships, they have become more aware of their respective places in the world. They gained a deeper appreciation for the natural world and learned how to strengthen their relationship to the Earth. The participants were able to shift their perspective on the community from which they have come, thereby inviting a true sense of their purpose in the world. Finally, a new and clear relationship to themselves allowed them to wholly understand what it meant to be true and accepting of their inherent nature. Taken together, the participants have begun to see the world differently. They are better able to not only envisage a wider picture of the whole, but more clearly experience a deep connection with individuation. The detailed spiritual experiences at megalithic sites in Ireland has become a tangible force in their lives, allowing them to reach beyond their ordinary five senses and tap into something more ancient and profound.

Constituents of the Spiritual Experience

I listened to the audio recordings of the interviews multiple times and transcribed them myself. After reviewing the transcriptions twice through, I began to develop a sense of the whole and noticed how the individual parts fit into the grander picture. Data were compared repeatedly to eliminate any overlapping or redundant psychological constituents that did not contribute to spiritual experiences at megalithic sites in Ireland as described by the participants.

After analysis of the audio recordings and personally transcribed narratives given by the five participants, five essential constituents revealed the eidetic structure of their spiritual experiences as follows:

- 1) Each participant felt invited into an intensified sense of oneness with the natural world and reported that this event left an indelible impression on them that lasted for years thereafter.
- 2) participants reported that through this experience they discovered a new depth of felt connection with their ancestral Irish culture which remained with them and reinforced their felt bonds with their family and friends in their cultural community of ancestral origin
- 3) participants reported that during the event they experienced being granted a sense of greater wholeness and intactness as a person, which linked them more deeply to their immediate surrounding world
- 4) the participant reported experiencing an immediate emotional, embodied, and imaginal connection to their Irish ancestors which conveyed an intense impression of their ancestors' spiritual presence for the participants, and which invited a deeper felt joining with the ancestral past
- 5) participants reported that although before this event, they had already felt purpose and meaning in their lives, the event inspired a more clearly defined sense of direction that was both personal and larger than personal, allowing them to henceforth grasp a richer understanding of their purpose in life as directed to fulfilling their individual life-direction and identity

The following is a fuller description of each constituent and how they came about for the participants. Chapter 5 contains a deeper dive into each constituent and compares them with the reviewed literature.

Natural World Communion

At various levels, each participant experienced a visceral connection with the landscape that surrounded the megalithic site they visited. They were each drawn to nature before this experience, yet this seminal moment intensified the psychological

and emotional connection they had with nature. Some described the moment in more intellectual terms, as they would focus on the weather or scientific facts of local geological formations. Others detailed feeling emotionally or physically moved by the natural elements of the place. Orla and Maeve told of highly emotional responses to their unique spiritual experiences which highlighted notions described by Stewart (1992; 1998), Perlus (2012), and Hengst-Ehrhart and Schraml (2013) regarding connectivity to nature. Either way, their spiritual experience at the megalithic site invited them to feel a sense of being in communion with nature.

People all have their own stories about unique experiences of connection with some natural element or another. In fact, Davis and Gaterslaben (2013) wrote on the transcendental experience of encountering wilderness and nature and noted how it “evokes a sense of inspiration, awe, spirituality, and timelessness” (p. 93). The authors went on to detail how being absorbed by feelings of positivity and unity often follow. Therefore, I was not surprised to discover nature as an integral ingredient in the spiritual experiences described by the participants. As Liam reported on his newfound appreciation of natural cycles and the role they play in modernity, he seemed to tap into Prendergast’s (2011) discussion on connections between landscapes and astronomy. Moments of deep connection with the natural world are but one of the essential constituents that showed up early during data analysis. Nature played a significant role in the spiritual experiences each of the participants reported, as reported in detail below.

Orla was particularly keen on losing herself in nature at the Hill of Tara. Just as Reinders (2017) explored the intimate relationship between humans and nature, Orla plugged into the experience deeply. She reported, “looking up at the trees there and at the sky.../it is just something else. It’s the softness of the moss beneath my feet, and the smell of the decayed earth, and it just connected me...earth, sky and the, um, middle world.” Orla’s recounted experience was replete with moments of wonder at and with the elements of the place. Her voice was full of emotion, and I felt just as connected to her special place at the Hill of Tara simply bearing witness to her account. Near the end, she spoke of a random guy walking through the small grove she was in and laughed as she said, “I think the land just attracts people and they don’t know why. So, on a conscious level or an unconscious level” they find themselves in natural locations just soaking it in and relaxing. Maeve takes it to another level as she actively plays with the natural elements at the stone circle in Knockroe.

Maeve comes from an extensive background of using nature as healer. Her gifts of awareness and connectivity were readily apparent even before the interview. She described how her formal training taught her how to engage with nature. Maeve said that to understand the location, one must attune fully to the space...and “read the land and like you know dream the land is what we call it in my training.../you’re just

dropping into that space.” She detailed the steps and state of mind required to be in a natural space: “I’ve got to ask permission, talk to land talk to the elements.../move with the natural energies.../just really feeling into what it is that the land wants.” Maeve shared how this was more of a relationship with nature and the location where, “you know that was just the reciprocation which was this gratitude.”

At Knockroe, she was enthralled by the space and the experience that she did not even notice the extreme change in the weather for the short time she was there: “I didn’t even really realize the rain had stopped, the sun had come out.” There were explicit moments where Maeve encountered the work Smith (2007) discussed on the shamanic qualities of relationships to natural elements which put her in sync with indigenous traditions unbeknownst to her. She went on to tell of a direct interplay between herself and the elements, “the sun went away when I moved my hands, and all the clouds came back over, and it got darker.” Maeve described the closure of the experience as evidence of her continued personal relationship with nature. Liam, too, had a particular fascination with nature, but his spiritual experience took place much farther north at Newgrange.

Many years ago, it was Liam’s first - “and hopefully not last” - trip to Newgrange in County Meath which inspired great change in him. Liam expressed great interest in the relationship of the Sun to the sacred natural site: “[Newgrange] really made me start thinking of the significance of the Sun and it is still important to us today.” He noted how the rising winter solstice Sun shone its light down the passageway corridor leading to the burial chambers deep within the mound. Liam went so far as to draw a connection between the weather of this natural location to his home in the United States, too. He shared that they were both northern climates and similar in some ways, but Ireland was much further north which, “made the winter afternoons much shorter in daylight hours.” He described how “being in [Ireland’s] dark season just really gave me an established connection to a new sense of importance of the Sun.” The story told by Liam reminded me of the extensive work Stewart (1992; 1998) studied and practiced as he explored personal relationships with the natural world through the Underworld Tradition while deep within the psyche. I was intrigued by the connection to nature Liam made, but I would be remiss not to highlight it as one of his essential constituents. In a similar manner, Cara drew a link between the natural elements nearby Newgrange and discussed how the two were connected.

Brú na Bóinne, the Bend in the River Boyne, is where Newgrange is located, and the waterway is especially important to the site. Cara was no novice to archaeological and natural phenomena. Her experience drew her to make connections between the symbols at the burial mound and the river Boyne. Cara spoke of the “cup stones or cup marks and how they related to the phalanx stone at the front of Newgrange with sharp wavy lines rather than the curvy lines one would

associate with water.” She had been attempting to make sense of the spiritual experience, so she told of how “I touched the stone which I acknowledge was not even part of the exhibition, it’s granite, and not all of the structure stones are granite, but it was detailed in an intentionally deliberate way of communicating.” Swan (1988) wrote extensively on this, as well. The author detailed moments of clarity juxtaposed against serious confusion when it came to moments like the one described by Cara. The transpersonal nature of Cara’s experience was mirrored by Swan’s notation of the influence sacred places have on people. Cara was moved by the experience as it was so closely tied to nature. She recalled emotionally, “I didn’t want to leave but I didn’t know what I could do, and that experience was so intense.” At times, Cara was at a complete loss of words. Shannon, as you will see, approached the natural location at the Hill of Tara as a place of healing with the elements as they seemed to veritably call to her.

Shannon had been on a trip across many sacred sites throughout the UK and Ireland...all the while, she had her mind and body wholly focused on the Hill of Tara. She described the day as: “walking it was kind of a rainy-ish day, and there was a lot of mud, so I had to be real careful where I stepped.” As she was mindful of the terrain, it was the carved stone at the top which compelled her ever forward. “I finally got to the top. It just felt like, Wow! What a victory! I had been knowing about this and reading about this for like 30 years” and “to actually be right in the presence of [the Lia Fial/Stone of Destiny] was quite astounding.” Shannon told of how her connection to the stone only became stronger, “as soon as I put my hand on it, I closed my eyes and I felt I felt this energy coming over me.” She told of slipping in the mud on the way back and was frustrated until a different group of people called her attention to it: “they said to me, ‘well, that’s the mother earth, and she’s embracing you, and she’s basically helping you to ground.’ And you know, they thought it was great! they thought it was a blessing.” It was not long before Shannon allowed this final moment to reframe the experience and go with what occurred in the last moments...despite the perceived trouble of being all muddy. Her tie with the stone was further detailed in an essential constituent below, but for now, it is important to note how the experience with the carved stone left her feeling.

Shared Experiences with Community

For the participants, being Irish means having a deep emotional connection with the people as the culture exists today and how the past influences the present. A few of the participants expressed joy in joining the Irish community by inviting close friends to the megalithic sites; thereby, creating a space from which they could witness a shared experience together. Other participants connected the sense of being Irish to the wider community where they could experience a tangible connection to a long history of an important culture; it was reported that this moment fed their

desire for enhancing or manifesting this connection to culture throughout the rest of their lives.

Four of the participants brought close friends with them to their megalithic sites to share a personal experience. They felt so moved to invite another in, that the feeling naturally extended to the wider community and highlighted the importance of shared experiences. Liam did not purposely invite anyone close, but instead, he found out how his impactful experience translated into his life, which drove him to discover his broader community upon returning from Newgrange. This is one sense of community highlighted by O'Donohue's (1998) exploration of Anam Cara where the importance of trusted and deeply spiritual relationships supersedes the constraints of time and location. Such cultivated relationships are described by the author as the foundation of connectivity with the world.

Liam's ponderings of the community that brought Newgrange into existence led him to desire a recreation, at some level, of the same. He aspired to find a greater connection with his preferred community back in the US. "I ultimately joined [a nature-based spiritual group] and am still an active member thereof today." Liam told of how far he had come with the group, as well. It was not quite enough that he found connectivity within this group, he took steps to deepen his resolve to remain in contact by becoming a leader, "In 2015, I was ordained as a priest in the [spiritual group]." He took the time to note how it was "dedicated to the Gaulish sun god," as well. In closing, Liam spoke of the moment with immense gratitude, "Had I never set foot at Newgrange. I am almost 100% certain, we would not be having this conversation today."

While she did not speak explicitly about a wider community connection with the Hill of Tara, Shannon did bring a good friend with her. "I was actually determined to see the Lia Fail, the Stone of Destiny, so was my other friend, and we did it separately." The two close friends respected the moment and each other enough to go different directions but meet up to emotionally process the event: "She took her path, and I took mine. Then we were going to head back and see how the other person was doing." There was an air or energy about Shannon's story that spoke of the underlying importance of community and what it means to share in a beautifully unique experience. In a similar vein, Orla brought her own friend, yet approached the moment slightly askew.

In a very simple, but meaningful way, Orla took a close friend with her to share in the adventure: "I went with one of my.../ friends and we just one day decided to go to the Hill of Tara." What I found special about her retelling was how inclusive she was of her friend. Orla's story was full of how they were doing things together. "We just found, like a hole in the bushes, and followed that hole, like a rabbit hole, down a slope..." Orla rarely referred to herself only minimally. The

whole experience was about how they were experiencing this event as two incredibly close friends. They were a community of two where she described the moments as “it was just ethereal.” In a similar fashion, Maeve brought a close friend, as well.

Maeve had long desired that her friend joins her at a megalithic site and the one she brought had been wanting to see Knockroe for a long time. When Maeve proposed a visit to the site she recalled, “[My friend] really wanted to go. He had never been there even though he [lives nearby].” The two of them were close personal and professional friends who have known each other for some time, too. What struck Maeve was how “he really wanted to see me interact with that world and he wanted to document it.” She described how that experience with her friend was so special that she was reminded that the expression of gratitude was paramount to the community feel of the time spent there: “So I left an offering, so I left a crystal. I always leave an offering.../ at any sacred sites.” In a fascinating turn, Maeve’s friend turned to her aghast at the experience. She recounted it as, “he was like, his mouth was open, and I said, ‘How was that?’ and he said, ‘You commanded the weather!’”

I was fascinated to witness the personal connections to friends, family, and culture these experiences elicited from the participants. Each one beheld clear moments of connectivity to individuals within their lives and discovered a new meaning behind the nature of relationships to other. McVeigh (2017) wrote of an effect akin to what was described as he detailed the importance of growing in relationship to others as a means of uncovering the light within all people.

Growth and Healing

The participants experienced a sense of becoming more psychologically whole and balanced through their spiritual experiences at the various megalithic sites. This moment allowed them to grow further into their being while feeling more in concert within mind, body, and spirit. This is precisely where the healing took place, too. There was no previous physical wound, but it could be argued that having missed this connection to healing, they held on to an invisible spiritual wound unbeknownst to them. The time they spent with the megaliths at Irish sites created a bridge allowing them to experience a higher level of psychological integrity.

In one way or another, each of the participants mentioned a sense of personal growth and healing. Liam’s account of this constituent is more subtle but is surely present as he spoke of the ways this spiritual experience changed and inspired him to grow. When he told of his growth, he referred to the people around him having trouble understanding what happened and why this changed for him: “some people, sometimes ask of people who follow or reconstruct ancient religious practice is, ‘Why are you practicing an agrarian tradition that has no need in modern times?’” Liam countered with reasoning that highlighted his connection to something deep within, “it may have some sort of attraction of otherness to it, it's not a form of

escapism.../that's really what propelled me down the path, was just that continuity of the importance of the cycles of the year.” He felt compelled from within himself to make a visceral connection to the experience. After time in reflection, Liam returned home and dove into research material on anything related to this new path of healing he was exploring. He reported that very soon, “everything kind of started to make sense, with what I considered spiritual experiences versus different methodologies.” He became dedicated to finding his way through these changes by the planted seed from Newgrange.

Cara’s connection to personal growth moved her into an emotional silence, “but inside [the burial chamber] .../ I might have even said it out loud to myself, ‘I can read this! Why don’t I know what it says?’” She strove to understand the missing information not only by looking within herself but exploring clues externally. A deep sense of healing was taking place as she pondered the meaning of the images before her. “I know these images like I know myself, why can’t I connect with them.” The distraught sensation of lost memories filled her being: “I felt I once knew, but had no memory of now, and I still just remember being there.” Cara may not have come to any explicit recall of the images or their meanings, but the spiritual experience led her down a cavernous path toward growth and healing that has remained with her all these years later.

Even many years prior to her trip through megalithic sites across the UK, Shannon had dedicated herself to personal growth and healing. She reported the feeling of being compelled to visit the Hill of Tara for a long time. She viewed this opportunity as the very thing that would get her there. “I had been on a trip to the British Isles, with the intent of visiting as many sacred sites as possible.” Shannon frequently mentioned that despite a few obstacles, she was more determined than ever to visit the Hill of Tara. She said, “we started out in Great Britain, and we did, you know, a bunch of stuff there and we flew over to Ireland...I really, really wanted to go.” It was because of the dedication and focus that inspired her to grow deeper within herself. The time spent at the Hill of Tara created an internal shift within. She recalled how this moment was profoundly life-altering. Orla, too, had been on a path as a healer for many years.

Orla was and is actively engaged with the healing profession through any forms. She advocated such growth, understanding, and healing both within herself and others. In this vein, she stated, “we go through the medicine wheel in Celtic Shamanism.” Based on her connection to growth and healing, Orla’s recounted experience was peppered generously with sentiments of the natural location being a mirror of that which lies within her. She has dedicated her life to helping people heal through mind, body, and soul. This is precisely how healing and personal growth has manifested as an essential psychological constituent for Orla.

In a similar vein, Maeve's search for personal growth and healing extends through her practice as a healer. She has long studied many traditional healing practices and only moves forward with the skills learned after applying them to herself. Her growth is evidenced by the myriad of movements and understandings present during her time at Knockroe. Maeve spoke of approaching the circle with reverence and following its flow through spiraled movements with her body. She said, "I went all the way into the center, and then I did offerings and gratitude offerings." In play with the elements, her understanding of the place shone through as there was an ease and peace to the site which could not have been felt or experienced had she not attended to as much personal growth and healing as she did.

Just as Maeve, Orla, and Shannon, Iwachiw (1997) described pure moments of healing and growth experienced by those visiting sacred sites across the world. The author told of connections between Sedona, Arizona and Glastonbury, England as visitors to the sites recalled feeling a shift within leading them to greater clarity. In a very similar manner, each of the participants in the present study relayed the quality of an inner shift and clarity.

Connection with Ancestors

Taking their time with the stones, the participants reported feeling what they interpreted as an embodied direct connection to their ancestors. There existed a felt sense of connectivity with the ancestors as they spent time in deep psychological and spiritual contemplation over what they were experiencing within the megalithic site. Allowing their minds to ponder the purpose of the structures and stones, while seeing and touching the immediate environment put them in touch with that which their Irish ancestors saw and touched. In that way, the participants could feel they were "with" the ancestors.

Wallis (2015) described how people create meaningful relationships with the past through megalithic sites; he said such locations provide a tangible connection to one's ancestors and care of these sites in modern times speaks directly to some as an extension of ancestor welfare. The participants spoke with deep reverence for their Irish ancestors, echoing Wallis' sentiments. Wallis shared of the practice of modern people making pilgrimages to sites like Stonehenge at the Avebury Complex as an expression of their legacy through "the genetic evidence of mDNA, which links the modern population to prehistoric 'ancestors'" (p. 137) of the Salisbury Plains. It is not a far stretch to extrapolate such an experience beyond the borders of England to the megalithic sites of the Emerald Isle.

Liam started by sharing his inexplicably deep desire to visit Newgrange no matter the weather: "I'd been happy to just go to different ancient sites, whether it was pouring rain or clear sunny day." Once there, he was overcome with fascination and soon linked the moment to his ancestors. "I was in awe that there was like 5,000

years of heritage, that was in one place.” Liam was nearly caught speechless as he recalled: “It was humbling to be inside the tomb, knowing that thousands of years ago, perhaps only a privileged few religious leader would have probably been allowed inside.” He kept going over in his mind how this must have been for the mound builders, as well. “My mind dwelled on the unknown person who carved that stone, 5,200 years before.” He often dwelled on not just the community but the individuals within and their motivations: “it was just so significant to them... they built these monumental objects.../ maybe their celebrations were somehow tied to coaxing the sun back into their lives.” Liam’s tale was intricately woven with ponderings of his ancestors. So inspired was he that upon returning home, he yearned for maintaining the connection and set about recreating elements of their life to the best of his ability.

With Cara’s experience, her great efforts in recalling the lost memory of a time long gone, spoke directly to sensing a connection with her ancestors. There was a large part of her that was actively attempting to uncover something important which she was unable to access. She reported, “I encountered two large cairn stones that were part of the external structure of Newgrange.../I was experiencing a visceral memory of the images on these stones.”

Immediately, she dove into a deeply emotional state. Cara choked up at the vivid memory of her first experience at Newgrange that she would often take long silent pauses. When she regained composure, she told of how “I felt I once knew but had no memory of now and I still just remember being there.” Her attempts at accessing the lost memory of the images and their meaning plugged her directly into what may be construed as the collective unconscious that Jung so espoused.

I was intrigued to hear Shannon tell of her experience of connecting with ancestors: “I sort of went into a trance state and I lost all connection with where I was standing.../ as I was standing there, with my hand on the stone [Lia Fail], I started seeing images.../ of kings or of leaders and rulers.” Her visceral response to simply touching the stone invited an intense spiritual experience allowing her to “see” unique and powerful images of people long gone. She recalled how they were “mostly men, but some women too.” Shannon shared the intensity by describing it: “they were like flashing, one after another, after another, after another, after another.” The experience moved her both emotionally and physically as she said, “I’m just, standing there, watching with my mind, going ‘My goodness! This thing, is just so full of the most amazing and incredible memories!’” She was trying to fathom the event by making intellectual sense of the stone’s history. “This stone has been here for eons, and it’s all there, and it’s all recorded, in consciousness, and you know you can feel it in that stone!” The trance-state described earlier affected her immediately upon releasing her hand from the stone. “I don’t know how long I stood there. I really don’t, but when I finished, I couldn’t even walk.” Shannon’s spiritual

experience of connection with her ancestors made her feel as though she may have been one of the leaders she witnessed: “I felt like I was one of those consecrated kings, or queens, or something, on that stone and it was just, just powerful.” Not only did she connect with her ancestors in this fleeting moment she ended her tale by saying, “It was the most powerful experience I had.”

Of all the stories I heard through the research, it was Orla’s that felt the most moving. As she described the spiritual experience her words were rife with great reverence for her ancestors. She spoke in a manner akin to wise storytellers whose tales are pregnant with respect and honor for all those who have come before. Orla shared that, “the faeries were there, and the Irish here, we do believe in Tír Na Nóg, and faeries, and the wee folk.” The way she imbued emotion without explicitly identifying the feelings was masterful. She wove the past and present by acknowledging connections between the Hill of Tara and places she had been in the US: “at the bottom of the hill, was a grove of trees, and it was almost like a faerie circle, kinda like in California, with the sycamore trees or giant redwoods.” Orla exhibited a true connection with her ancestors in a very simple, yet profoundly deep manner.

Yet another healing storyteller, Maeve recounted her spiritual experience and connection to the ancestors not only through words and emotions but expressed them through embodied movement. She recalled how these megalithic sites seem to call to people as evidenced by her friend’s peripheral experience: “it really connected him to the ancestors, to the land, and how special the space is.” Maeve told of how moved her friend was and pondered how even the people of Ireland do not know the intricacies of sacred sites, yet they know and feel compelled to visit them. She described how to engage with the ancestors and the space more intimately, as well: “in total surrender to the space, and then welcoming, and giving thanks, and offerings, and just feeling that warm, yummy reciprocation from the ancestors, from the land, from the stones.” Maeve expertly wove profound connectivity to the ancestors through her spiritual experience and done so in an incredibly intimate manner.

While Stewart (1992; 1998) wrote of a specific tradition of establishing a relationship with the ancestors through a detailed procedure, Smith (2007) described Jung’s understanding of numinosum akin to what the participants experienced. Stewart (1992; 1998) had merit to his claim toward a prescribed approach, but for some, that is not necessary, it would seem. Given the seeming differences between the two authors, I could not help but imagine how a conversation would go between them in a discussion on creating numinous moments (Stewart, 1992;1998) versus happening upon them (Smith, 2007).

Sense of Purpose

Throughout their lives, prior to this spiritual experience, the participants felt a connection to their purpose in life. This was not an idea or practice far from their minds, yet this moment with the megaliths invited a clarification or honing of their life's purpose. Being in the moment allowed them to create a deeper connection with a part of themselves which let them see how all the various experiences prior came into being and influenced them going forward. The participants felt a shift in their sense of purpose: Liam had begun exploring his purpose through intellectual pursuits which evolved into a nature-based spiritual tradition; Cara experienced psychological and spiritual validation of her budding path as a scholar in academia and healer; Shannon, too, reached within to depths of healing others using natural elements; Orla was inspired to create a business based on healing through sound; and Maeve deepened her personal connection with her practice as a ritualist and healer.

During their time amidst the stones, they could see and feeling a change in perception which led them to work towards the purpose of connecting to the wider Irish community, in so doing they experienced being in *simpatico* through their whole self, getting ever closer to Jung's theory of individuation.

In an interesting twist, Liam found in his experience a new zest for life. He discovered how he could use the moment and context of being amid classmates to feed his desire for a deeper connection with his purpose in life. "My classmates' lack of enthusiasm, gave me a more enthusiastic boost about experiencing something that is significantly older, than my life experiences." He was drawn into the depths of his being as he recalled, "I knew I just had to make the most of my time there." The spiritual experience reached through time as he acknowledged the past, and in so doing, he found a thread that sparked a purpose within his life. "I shared with these ancient people. I wanted to try practicing something like that, and because it seemed like that, I could find some sort of a meaning in it." Liam was moved by the experience of numen which reached a personal meaning and defined purpose for what lie ahead, "that's really what propelled me down the path, was just that continuity of the importance of the cycles of the year." As mentioned above in other essential constituents of Liam, this moment lit a fire within which inspired him to continue forward upon returning home He desired a recreation of times past, not to escape the present, but to tune deeply into his place, path, and purpose in the present.

Cara was less explicit in her words, but like many of the participants, there was an underlying message of connection that spoke of discovering something new about themselves. Her spiritual experience, while focused on the lost meanings of symbols, led her to a place deep within that flavored an understanding of herself that was not present before. Cara's attention to the moment spoke of a purposeful focus

on the task of deciphering a language lost to time. This experience allowed her to tap into a place of purpose and meaning and deeply influenced her life ever since. She turned greater focus toward understanding this event as it applied to her life in the present.

“It was my intent to go to the Hill of Tara,” recalled Shannon. From the outset, she was moved or called to visit this special location. She continued, “I really, really, wanted to go.../ I was actually determined to see the Lia Fail, the Stone of Destiny.” With every step, she got closer to understanding what the inexplicable pull meant: “I finally got to the top. It just felt like, ‘Wow! What a victory!’” Shannon felt a deep connection to the moment in time where she found herself. She, like Cara, was invited to tap into something deep within herself. She beheld a moment of time where all attention turned inward, lighting a clear and bright sense of her purpose in life. “I had been knowing about this, and reading about this, for like 30 years.” Shannon described how her spiritual experience was long in waiting and that this moment solidified her dedication to the healing path. “I sort of went into a trance state, and I lost all connection with where I was.” For Shannon, “it was the most powerful experience I had the whole time.”

Orla had been aware that the Hill of Tara was a truly special location for her. She recounted how this was a place where she could get clearer access to her ability to heal others as she regularly used a visual of the Hill: “It just felt like a cathedral almost, in this grove of trees, which is my nemeton.” Orla told that a nemeton was a particularly powerful location that could be accessed by anyone at any time and all people have a connection to various natural spaces. And when physically in the place, people are led deep within themselves. She described how she was “feeling led to this place at the bottom of the hill.” Upon reaching the bottom: “We played our instruments. We brought the gong, and drums, and that was the image I took that day, to represent my business of spirit, soul, sound, which is my sound healing business.” This is the very moment that inspired Orla to create her sound healing business. With great emotion, she recalled how the space speaks to her: it “calls you into communion with your place in the universe.../ you embody that joy. You feel now, and you just go with it. “That is precisely what Orla did. She tuned in and listened intently to what was speaking directly to her soul as her purpose in life unfolded before her.

In an interesting turn, Maeve became increasingly solid in knowing her place in life. She had known herself to be a healer in many realms, yet this spiritual experience hardened that reality. She described her approach to the moment: “Like, you know, dream the land is what we call it in my training. In dreaming the land, you’re just dropping into that space.../ I’m going to be in prayer for the whole session.../ I work and move with the natural energies that are already there.” This ‘Dreaming the Land’ experience invited a deeper level understanding of her place in

the world. The act of bringing her close friend, she was able to validate the spiritual experience through a witness. What Maeve did not anticipate was how moved and connected her friend felt after witnessing the event. During this rite or ceremony, she described how she made “offerings for the people of Ireland, for my ancestors, and for my family.” This is the moment when she was in direct contact with her purpose and path in life. She was in flow with the rite and with nature: “When I drop into those spaces, I’m not really.../ I move into a different part of my brain.” The way she detailed the shift in consciousness was illuminating, yet very real: “Some people would say it is magic, but really you’re just in alignment with the elements” and with herself.

Hsu (2018) conducted a study on the importance of identity explorers finding their way in the world by actively pursuing transcultural experiences. I was reminded of how the author highlighted a few points that speak to the participants of my study as they were redefining or rediscovering themselves. Hsu wrote that the very “process of migration seeking cultural connectivity was precisely what brought meaning” (p. 129) to people’s lives. Liam, Cara, Shannon, Orla, and Maeve each traveled long ways, some literally, others figuratively, and because of their quest for understanding the urge to evolve or progress toward something bigger than themselves, they found meaning. They discovered a moment in time where the fire of purpose and potential was reignited in their heads, hearts, and souls.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that the phenomenon of spiritual experiences at megalithic sites in Ireland as a uniquely profound existential experience. The phenomenon is characterized by continual purposeful movement throughout healing, growth, culture, and meaning. It did not emerge as one tangible characteristic from these narratives. Rather, as a core host of five components used to promote purposeful and continual movement through personal identity and community. The megalithic sites served as a catalyst for inspiring and holding host to the numinous space within which fostered a clearer understanding and connection to the natural world and ancestors, culture, purpose, and personal healing. This spiritual experience is both a process and product of dedication to discovering wholeness.

The participants reflected on their spiritual experiences as an awakening as they stepped into the liminal space of their chosen megalithic site. They exhibited confidence in their newly uncovered purpose by inviting an openness to the spiritual experience and not closing it out of their lives. The processes for getting through their days after the spiritual experience were fused with new life and vigor. The result of the event was an emergence into a new life, akin to a butterfly shedding the cocoon allowing them to view life, sans filter of mundane life; they touched on a

liminal moment. Taking part in this research also, gave them the opportunity to not only share their transformative experiences but feel a sense of validation knowing others have gone through like events. New meaning grew from a single moment in time and space for the participants producing a new lens from which to perceive their lives going forward.

The spiritual experiences at megalithic sites in Ireland seeded a new psychological of mind frame from which to perceive the world. Each of the participants stepped into the ancient megalithic sites unaware of the magnitude of what was about to happen. The numinous moment allowed them to grasp a clearer understanding of how the missing connections in their lives influenced and veritably consumed not only various areas of their lives, but the depths to which could be experienced. They emphatically described how they were transformed by spiritual experiences. The perceived transformations became readily apparent on the other side of their experiences, where they stepped back into mundanity. The participants continued to move physically, emotionally, and with meaningful purpose and connection to the wider world ever since walking from the megalithic sites and deeper into their lives.

Limitations

This study focused on powerful spiritual experiences of places and how they shaped one's sense of purpose and connection throughout their lives. Four factors affected potential limitations to this study. They were (a) sample size, (b) participant selection, (c) duration, range, and depth of interview, and (d) researcher tendency and bias. The limitations for this study are based on design and findings. The methods underpinning this research were followed, yet there were limitations that emerged that could strengthen future research.

With only five participants in this study, it was important to select diverse participants who met all the selection criteria. I was able to accomplish this very well. However, I worked diligently to get participants from a more varied demographic; I would have liked to speak with those of a more traditional scientific background, yet what I received was absolutely grand given all my efforts.

With my participant selection, it could also be that my network was geared toward a narrow shared social and cultural orientation. All participants shared perspectives, choices, and actions, and there were some common threads among participants' stories that could be attributed to their stages in life. For example, the themes of professional healing and environmental activism, and community connections were shared by all in varying degrees. A selection of participants from a wider spectrum of society, or from different cultural backgrounds, could have changed the data and possibly the findings.

With respect to the interview duration, range, and depth, despite initial concerns about one or all these factors being an issue, I was pleasantly surprised at the level of disclosure and willingness of participants to share memories and personal reflections with me. There was considerable depth, range, and rapport in the conversational content, and participants were both forthcoming and self-inquiring. Given two key time constraints—a limitation on the amount of time for the interviews, and my own need to complete the research in a timely manner, the quality of the data was high. However, time constraints, personal interest in the subject, and my own experience still posed restrictions to this study.

I always kept my eye on potential issues surrounding researcher tendency and bias. Concerns of hindsight bias, choice supporting bias, and availability influence biases were at the forefront of my mind. While maintaining a bracketed approach, I understand that my own internal working models, frames of mind, levels of development, biases, and preferences may have affected the analysis and lens through which the entire research process was conceived, viewed, carried-out, and synthesized.

Implications of this Study and Future Research

This research has highlighted, for me, the importance of cultivating awareness towards relational dynamics between people and places. The idea of place attachment, personal identity, and displacement are all experiences had by people in subtle, yet tacit ways. This can make for unconscious decision-making about the influence of people, cultures, places, and healing within complex living systems.

As Maeve noted many times, the experience of relationship with a place could lead to greater respect for the wisdom and history of places, and what they must teach us and share with us. In turn, greater personal growth and community healing into the future could mean a more intimate experience of interdependence through a shared appreciation of all voices within a system, resulting in a potential rebalancing from the current anthropocentric system to one that is truly organic and holistic.

An additional implication of this research is in re-engaging with place attachment, collectivist identity, and the healing potential of sacred sites across ancient lands associated with one's ancestors. The findings in this study suggest that a focus and awareness on seeking formative experiences of place, considering positive relational connections, may very well be a key factor in determining a true sense of self in the world as a being actively healing the system from the roots. This endeavor, surely, cannot be underestimated.

Final Reflections

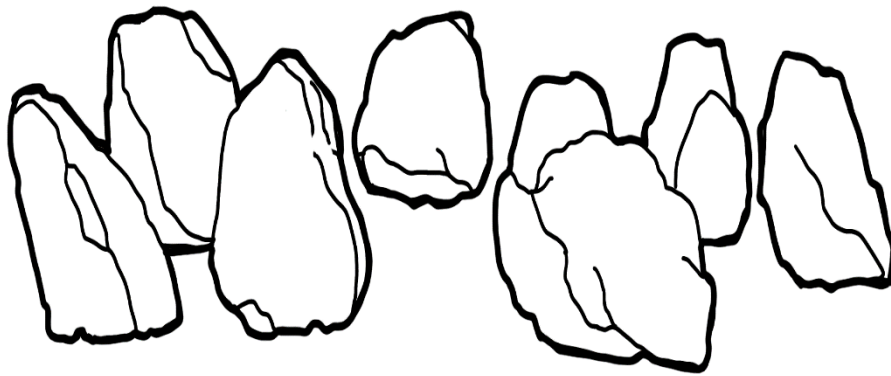
This chapter has concluded the descriptive phenomenology of spiritual experiences at megalithic sites in Ireland. My conclusions have been presented, as well as implications for future research, psychoeducation, and the practice of community building through the healing process. This study was not exhaustive and really has only begun to tap into the complex nature of spiritual experiences at megalithic sites. Many paths lie ahead for exploration because of this modest study.

Throughout this process, I learned a great deal about the depths to which people explore and realize their connection with the world around them. This research endeavor is most certainly a shared experience of intimate moments. There were moments of direct energy exchanges as each participant tapped into the time-tested tradition of conveying and inspiring deeply emotional stirrings through storytelling. I learned about the universal truths linked to spiritual experiences and how they influence modern life. I now understand that people all have access to their own innate wisdom, simply to listen intently with open hearts and minds. I believe spiritual experiences in liminal spaces, such as ancient megalithic sites, could effectively be used to increase one's sense of well-being and connectivity to nature, self, culture, and purpose; all of which feeds into improving mental health.

This exploration on the essential psychological structure of the phenomenon of spiritual experiences at megalithic sites in Ireland, demonstrates the importance of investigating the underrepresented data of spiritual experiences, ancient/megalithic sites, and relationships to self/nature/community; it challenges future researchers to expand their conceptions of personality and spiritual experience research based at ancient sites. These types of sites exist across the globe and are visited by millions of people each year. By investigating how a single event influenced a variety of spiritual experiences in multiple Irish megalithic sites, this study revealed new and complex relationships that are relevant to researchers, healers, and scholars alike. The role of places on human consciousness and in the healing, realm have been explored by few, and little is understood about the dynamic relationships among geography, human consciousness, transpersonal states of awareness, and wellbeing. This data sheds light on the transformative spiritual experiences individuals had at megalithic sites in Ireland, and findings reveal a dynamic interaction of human beings with sacred land. This study counsels on ways in which humans are positively impacted by place; additionally, it provides a possible contribution to the realms of healing the wounds of culture, personal, and within nature. The findings of this study have implications for the future exploration of the geographical correlates of human consciousness regarding wellbeing, growth, human potential, and ecological harmony. A re-imagination of the stage upon which traits are investigated has undoubtedly sharpened human understanding of how personality and community is influenced and developed through interactions with the physical environment of ancient

megalithic sites which inspire spiritual experiences; such a focus not only allows us to expand an understanding of these environments, but also to extrapolate how others may experience them at various ancient sites across the globe.

Whether through nature in its most elemental form or the vital energy of an ancient heritage site that is alive with great energies, or any number of other places that hold special meaning, the spirit of place discovered through spiritual experiences at megalithic sites in Ireland can re-connect individuals with their authentic selves, bringing one in closer commune with the foundations of their being, their culture, and the natural world.



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Bio

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