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NAME OF AUTHOR: Andrew Craig

TITLE OF THESIS:

GOD KEEP OUR LAND: WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN ALBERTA'S WILDERNESS?

DEGREE:

MASTER OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED: 2011

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Signature

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GOD KEEP OUR LAND:
WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN ALBERTA'S WILDERNESS?

by

Andrew Craig

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of St. Stephen's College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

Edmonton, Alberta
Convocation: October 24, 2011

ABSTRACT

The thesis, *God Keep Our Land*, investigates the relationship between geography and spirituality. To this end, our setting is Alberta's wilderness and the characters herewith are a combination of historical personalities in text and contemporary interviewees as per the research behind this project. The product is a reflection of spirituality as articulated in the context of an eco-theological paradigm. To be sure, this is not a systematic theological development or meta-narrative on the varieties of religious experiences in a natural setting. Instead, this thesis attends to an underlying premise: that geography and the human experience are inter-related, and, that such a conversation necessarily attends to a post-modern fascination with the authenticity of phenomena. The significance of this work rests on the observation that there exists both environmental and spiritual disillusionment in this current era, and, that their synthesis offers insight into possible congregational directions in our twenty first century.

The qualitative research conducted here represents a blend of historical and phenomenological approaches, via literature reviews and interviews respectively. In order to articulate something authentic about Alberta, geography is discussed and defined according to its parameters: historical, societal, and natural. Subsequent to this, it is the narrative of this project that synthesizes the dialectic between geography and spiritual experience.

What *God Keep Our Land* uncovers is Alberta's authentic geographic factors and their spiritual consciousness. From this, it is observed that Alberta's spirit is a unique summons to a peoples' awareness; an eco-theological wake-up that transcends seasonal and denominational boundaries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to Dr. Clair Woodbury, my Thesis Supervisor, whose wisdom and insight allowed me to look deep within myself.

For Angela, my wife, whose love and kindness allows me to see beyond myself.

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Statement of the Problem:

It's 8:35 a.m. on a Tuesday in March. The date is merely for the reader's orientation as, from the point of view of this middle school teacher, in Spruce Grove, Alberta, the scene is predictable, familiar. At this time, on any given day between Monday through Friday, the national anthem is played over the school's intercom. Students are expected to stand, remove their hats or hoods and observe silently this tradition. Times have changed: the students are restless; the minute-plus version of our anthem nears eternity as the students break the silence for exchanges of giggles and text messages. I resign myself to a conviction as I ask rhetorically, "Is nothing sacred?"

I cannot blame them. With these disaffected, ill-convicted youth, I can relate; in their reality I participate. It seems that we are moving toward the demystification of the universe; along the way the idea of God in education has surpassed offensive as it now flirts with absurdity as the new default has become a sort of nihilistic malaise. Today's youth purport this nihilism without any apparent second thought. Of course, from a pedagogical perspective, I wonder, "Have they an intimate knowledge of the questions associated with their omissions, their denial?" Do I? I am part of this generation, which claims that our personal search for spirit is a legitimate replacement of yesterday's Church experience. I, too, question the values implied by the removal of hats from one

setting to the next. I, too, catch myself slouching during the singing of the anthem.

What do I believe in? Can I encourage conviction for the national anthem, for Canada (at least Alberta) in a way that engages the new citizen, the nihilist-lite? Can I get excited about God and not betray my values for liberty, criticism, or even speculation? Not without contemporary relevance. Not without a Canadian, an Albertan sense of citizenry, accountability, and self. The unexamined self is lost in a regional projection of a global, digital hologram; void of Earth's viscera and God's spirit.

Here, at the outset of the third millennium, we live in a period of global, spiritual envelopment. Alternatively, from a conservative point of view, this is a period wherein tradition is threatened. Which institutions will be rendered obsolete as this next era unfolds? In a period characterized by secularism, what "traditional" institutions, associated with religion, risk banishment?

For how long will this line, "…God Keep Our Land…" remain as such before it becomes popular opinion that we abandon such exclusive language? How do we interpret the priority between the words: "our" and "land"?

I feel detached from the Earth itself. I grew up with urbanization; it was a given all my life. I am fortunate in my own experience, however, as I've lived in places large and small, central and remote, from one Canadian coast to another. To be sure, this doesn't make me an expert on regionalism, national identity, or

the like. Nevertheless, for me curiosity has developed as a result of my pan-Canadian upbringing.

I wonder about the experience of God in Alberta's wilderness. We hear much about the wilderness experience and how it affects us spiritually. In light of this, there is a temptation in this thesis to relate these peoples' various spiritual experiences, as related to this region's geography, to a theological narrative; a meta-narrative that compartmentalizes the experience of God as encountered in Alberta's wilderness is not required. These are experiences that go beyond words. We wish to avoid putting these in systematic (Tillich), doctrinal boxes, re William James' variety of religious experiences. Instead, we want people to have permission to have their own experience of God, free from binary logic: of God or not of God. This thesis will not attempt to systematize the phenomenon as such. Alternatively, this thesis will attend to the intersection between a region's spirituality and the human experience in context. It is the bias of this author that the natural state manifests in our spiritual experiences while in the wilderness and the wilderness, as such, reflects itself on this spirit.

Introduction

I used to think that God was up. As a child, I was fascinated with the sun, moon and stars. I committed to memory the basic facts about each planet in the solar system. My notion of "up" included an infinite universe and above this, God: a man who knew everything that everyone had ever done and would ever do. At some point, however, this concept no longer worked for me – space was real, it was true. Thus, God had to go.

God's upward orientation is anything but new. On the other hand, neither is the argument that God is spiritual imminence. This thesis will reflect the perspective that God is a way of understanding first the life abundant that our human consciousness has availed us to recognize. It is understood that the life experience emerges and evolves through an unfolding of complexity. This process is a projection of the component bits that participate cyclically according to the programs of cells, DNA, and, beneath these, atoms. Such a progression, in conjunction with our earthbound presence, avails any and all of the atoms of our universe to the life experience. From here, the experience toward higher consciousness is a miraculous journey reserved for a fortunate few - us. This is not to say that anything outside of the human experience is inferior or something to be feared. Our consciousness allows us to see much about what we might have been and may become. In a sense, it is a sort of revelation of the infinite cycle. Through this process of being and becoming there is shared an

experience – if not an awareness – of life. This experience, and its universality, is my way of understanding God.[1]

How can I give thanks for the blessing bestowed upon me? I must remember the cradle from which I, and this higher consciousness, have come. This is the Earth. Outside of the Earth, there is seemingly unlimited possibility for the orientation of atomic complexity. However, to my knowledge, it is only on Earth that such complexity might become life. Although, it is not unlike the difference between a rock and a tree, the difference is great nonetheless. Thus, whatever the status of God, my ability to ponder anything at all is a result of the life system here on this planet. This is how I wish to speak about God, about life, about Earth. Without one of these, there is no other.

Thus we have a short summary on the nature of the lens through which we will consider the relationship between God, consciousness, and our geographic orientation. The theology herewith is largely reflective of the eco-theological paradigm. Henceforth, this project will attempt to narrow its focus toward a specific place: Alberta.

Is Alberta a theoretical construct? Yes, in part it is. However, there exists much that point to an authenticity of this place called Alberta. It is here that we wish to consider how place impacts the spirit of people, a people. In order to investigate this, we require a system by which we qualify this thing called spirit.

In her *Edmonton Journal* article, Chris Standring quoted Clair Woodbury, "spirituality is to experience what is outside oneself, what summons 'a sense of awe and wonder.'" Thus, we have a definition for spirituality from which we will work.

Part I. Where is Alberta?

I am curious about the dynamic between Alberta's geography, symbolism, and subsequent theological reflection. This first part will look like history research. What does Albertan literature, music, and art say about our environment, our geography? Can we identify some common themes in these?

Chapter 1: Alberta's Geography and Two Emergent Factors

> Canada is a country without a soul…A European can find nothing to satisfy the hunger of his heart. The air is too thin to breathe. He requires haunted woods, and the friendly presence of ghosts…For it is possible, at a pinch to do without gods. But one misses the dead.
>
> Rupert Chawner Brooke, *Letter from America*, 1916 (Kroetsch 1993, 293)

"Say, does this place called Alberta really exist, or did you make it up?"

(van Herk 2010, 27)

Situated on the eastern slope of the continental divide sprawling out toward three different oceans, Alberta is one of only two Canadian provinces worthy of the adjective, "Land-locked"; the other being Saskatchewan. All other provinces share in kind a proximity to major waterways and their shore lines. Three oceans, Hudson Bay, and the Great Lakes provide a maritime escape for all other Canadians. This, in addition to our higher elevation, manifests in our dry air that, although not difficult to breathe, takes some getting used to. Based on Rupert Brooke's assessment, perhaps Alberta represents the root source of Canada's soullessness.

It is the position of this thesis that there is a soul and furthermore, that the soul of Alberta is reflection of its unique factors. Because we are considering

the soul of a country, a province, we wish to assess it naturally. Therefore, it is important that we consider the organic factors of this province as this represents the origin of uniqueness. It is prudent that we not begin by assuming that the post-modern, cosmopolitan spaces of Alberta today exist in isolation from the rest of our history. By focusing on Alberta's wilderness we are intending to deconstruct our present psyche to its natural, and therefore, unique state.

From a Eurocentric point of view, Alberta is new province. Its entrance into confederation in 1905 represents a time when homesteading and life on the range accounted for more of the population than did its urban centers. To be sure, the collective unconscious of this province is rooted deeply to the land. An analysis of historical maps reveals an historical consciousness, an evolution of sorts. The first sites – Fort Chipewyan and Fort Vermillion – represented the route by which Europeans entered during the fur trade. (Adams 1998, 5) From these points, extensive representation of the northwest's river systems point to a time when transportation was about the canoe; paddle and portage.

Today, Alberta extends north to south, from the 60th, down to the 49th parallel, and west to east from the Rocky Mountains to the Cypress Hills, from the Peace Country to Lake Athabasca. Within these boundaries therein lay a consciousness, a people's history that is reflected by this unique expanse. To unearth this consciousness is to consider the natural factors that apply universally to those who identify as Albertan. Thus, in order to consider the

collective spirit of a people, we depart with the question, “What is true of the Alberta experience?”

Upon contemplating the geography of Alberta and reading about the regional history around the province, two factors stand out especially; they are *elevation* and *latitude*. From these natural factors we can begin to consider the authentic uniqueness of the Alberta experience. Thus, we begin by understanding where we are in the world.

Alberta is high, and yes, the air is thin. If we were to subscribe to the Hebrew-Ptolemaic vision of the cosmos, Albertans would be much closer to God than others. Initially, this lends itself to images of snow-peaked mountain crowning both tree line and clouds. However, a broader perspective includes a province that rests on a continental plateau, where deceivingly flat prairies still sit half a mile above sea level. How this translates to a daily, personal experience is in several ways. For one, not only is the air thinner, it’s also bluer. The mountains in the west untangle the clouds such that Albertans ponder a bigger, clearer sky than those in other parts of the world.[2] This is significant when we consider the role that the sun has played in shaping human consciousness for eons. From Stonehenge to the Great Pyramids, to the Mayan temples to the Medicine Wheel, sun observance, if not worship, is found all over the world, throughout history. What Albertans lack in the opportunity to ponder the infinite while staring beyond the wave-crested horizon, we make up for in our

uninhibited, heavenward gaze. From the Chinook arch to the Aurora Borealis and the storm's anvil, there is much to revere about the view above.

Thin air is also dry air. In the summer this translates to a stage set for the dramatic interplay between warm ground temperatures and cooling aloft; prairie thunderstorms are almost a nightly occurrence during the summer. To this end, Albertans who have experienced violent weather have a healthy fear of the air above. In combination, both dry air and lightning strikes manifest as forest fires; an event that if not seen, can be smelled hundreds of kilometers away.

The second factor is latitude. Kroetsch writes: "Spring is not seen, but heard, in Alberta." (1993, 51) In other words, in addition to the forthcoming creatures of a changing season, there is also a stark contrast from winter's silence; snow falls without a sound and remains silent until it melts.

Relatively speaking, we are a northern people. We experience many hours of sunlight in the summer while very few in the winter. Spring is felt with exuberance; it is an awakening on the scale of coming out of hibernation. The summer growing season is short and intense. From backyard gardeners to established farmers there is a tendency to receive the elements as a curse or a blessing. Here farming is all or nothing; bumper crop or bust. This is due to the fact that much of the produce grown in this province has a growth cycle on par with the growing season itself. There is very little room for surprises, though

they happen. The days we spend under snow are longer than most in the country and certainly around the world.

The Northern Lights – the Aurora Borealis, have captured the imagination of Albertans, long before we knew ourselves as such. In his book, *Walking in the Woods*, Metis author Herb Belcourt describes the tradition of watching and celebrating the northern lights while growing up in Alberta's hinterland. (2006, 42) It seems ironic that our place in the world, one blessed with more sunlight hours than most others on the planet, identifies more with a nocturnal phenomenon than something by daylight.

Of our northern position, Albertans are aware, sometimes even self conscious. The northern boreal forest encroaches from above, a reminder of the homesteader's land-clearing plight. The expanse of cloudless skies over this province is why aviation has a rich history here. Accordingly, when a large jet is seen above us, at a cruising height of 38 000 feet, flying due north, we might ask ourselves: where is it going? Are we (in Edmonton) not the last stop for any large airliner? At this point we remember that although this is true, it is also true that north of us is the short cut to Europe; the other side of the world is just over the North-pole. This is the same North Pole that sends us some of its cruelest winds, the proverbial Arctic front. With no protection from above, the wind chill of the Arctic front can quickly send the temperature on a plummet to minus fifty degrees Celsius. Thus, in Alberta, unlike most places in the world, given our

latitude and land-locked status, we experience an eighty degree range of dry temperatures every six months; from January to July and back, Albertans know seasonal change like few others.

When we stop to consider the geography of Alberta, we might imagine badlands, prairie grassland, aspen parkland, foothills, mountains, glacial lakes, meandering rivers, and boreal forest. Taken as a whole, this places Alberta, as a region, in company with few other locations in the world. However, what can be ascribed to the whole of Alberta cannot, at one moment in time, be the experience of the Albertan. The Albertan could live in any one of these regions, without intimate knowledge of the other. Thus, in order to consider the geographic factors which affect the Albertan in Kitscoty and the Albertan in Grande Prairie, we look for the universal amongst the unique. Here we find that Albertans, universally, experience natural phenomena according to our altitude and latitude. On both accounts we are relatively high on the scale.

Chapter 2: God Blessed Alberta

"This part of the country seems to have all hell for a basement and the only trapdoor appears to be in Medicine Hat." Rudyard Kipling in 1907, during his third visit to Alberta. (Brennan 2003, 43)

Alberta's human history can be recalled chronologically according to the resources that drew people to the region; from bison and fur to grass and grain, gas and coal, and oil through to wind, Alberta's is a history of human geography as it relates to natural resources. Part of this thesis' purpose is to consider if – and how – such a reality affects the collective awareness, furthermore theologically.

According to Jared Diamond in his work, *Guns Germs and Steel*, the Russian-North American land bridge provided the Mongolian race with an opportunity to migrate down the west coast of North America, through to Patagonia at the tip of South America. (1999, 45) This transcontinental migration is thought to have occurred sometime between ten and fifteen thousand years ago. What we know of these people is that they were hunter-gatherers who migrated according to the grazing patterns of their prey. Today's bison offers a vestige for us to imagine what these people were hunting. Of course, the species' population was exponentially larger than that which is observed today, given the effect that economics and modern firepower would have on the bison.

Nevertheless, what is argued here is that even the first nations of this region were resource-conscious, albeit from within an early paradigm whereby resources closely resemble the most basic of needs. What lured the aboriginals by way of bison meat ten thousand years ago is quite similar to the draw that grain had on the European imagination. Both of these resources are food commodities and therefore much lower on the hierarchy of basic needs when compared to the attraction of today's hydrocarbon industries. With regard to employment, "In 2009, about 136,200 people were directly employed in the mining, oil and gas extraction sector, including the oil sands. In 2008, the energy sector accounted for 30.8 % of Alberta's GDP." (Energy Alberta) These resources, and their availability, as concepts, have an effect on consciousness. The fact that Alberta's is a history wherein people have been drawn by these (resource-based) factors makes the Albertan experience very different from the experience in the Homeland. It is necessary to contextualize this in order to understand something about the demographics of this province, and the respective paradigms herewith.

If we take into consideration, something like the Palestinian question, we can step back and imagine how two different concepts of homeland emerge in consciousness. In Alberta, we can trace our ancestry back to any given resource that drew our families here. Although this is similar for many people in the New World, it is something that ought to be remembered nonetheless. (Especially when so much of our Western Canon takes its theological departure from the

story out of Israel.) The Middle East offers a glimpse into a very different situation: when home is associated with the birth rite of deities and prophets who represent three different world religions. As a Westerner it is sometimes difficult to imagine how such a paradigm permeates a collective awareness, a sense of self-as-place. For people who identify with home as the holiest place on earth, the experience of place must be different than for those of us who from time to time remind outsiders that they are now "In Oil Country!"[3] To be forthcoming, my bias is that I wonder if we reflect a theology of thanksgiving amidst our resources. To be sure, this would exist in contrast to those places in the world where theological assumptions reflect something different, geographically and historically. In the case of Palestine (where natural resources are not *de rigeur*), we imagine a theology of space that is sympathetic to Zionism or, in the American paradigm, Manifest Destiny. Here, in a resource-based economy, the thing represents the place, not the other way around. Either we are aware of (and grateful for) this or we are not. Regarding such gratitude, we ought to consider such resources at this point.

There is something anthropocentric about the term natural resources. We are educated from a young age on the difference between renewable and non-renewable energy sources, and those which are natural, from those otherwise humanly contrived. Regardless, when we speak of natural resources, seldom do we bracket the presumption which lay beneath; these are the elements and events of this world that can be used by humans for energy

transfer and trade. Here, wind has a price relative to coal, wheat, and bitumen, and all of these are natural. However, if we adopt an eco-theological perspective: that the biosphere, in balance with itself, is a spiritual organism comprised of many states and stages of consciousness (Wilber 2000, 8), then the term 'natural resources' becomes somewhat of a non-sequitur; no matter how much we celebrate the adjective, *natural*, we are still speaking of human resource consumption and not net-zero efficiency. This has implications for the way in which we imagine our trees, rivers, fossils, minerals and sunshine. Viewed as a commodity, a tree is merely a fraction of the forest, the fossil points to the next drilling operation, and the river is valued for its hydro-electric potential. Furthermore, the valuation that we assign to each of these creates an illusion of separateness. As a commodity, timber represents its own industry with its unique history which is separate from the fossil fuel industry. The eco-theological paradigm runs counterpoint to such an industrial model. At the risk of simplifying this, James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis speaks to the notion that the Earth ought to be viewed as an intricate, autonomous system; an organism that intentionally achieves homeostasis across all of its systems. (2006, 19) Homeostasis, or the balance, of Earth's biosphere has suffered human threat since the dawn of scarcity. (This is the law that unlimited wants are met with limited resources). Prior to the agricultural revolution, the Earth could sustain itself with no threat to the state of the biosphere itself. However, since this shift, our history as a species-in-place has been a story of resource valuation,

(mis)management, and obsolescence. The question is: are we willing to step back and consider exactly how this has come to shape our image of God?

Chapter 3: Growing Pains

> The exhibition reflects the diversity of the Alberta landscape, where the spaces can be measured in geological, durational and cultural timeframes…. The theme Timeland also engages the heightened sensitivity to time that has shaped the first years of the 21st century.
>
> (Richard Rhodes, Curator, Alberta Gallery of Art.)

Latitude and altitude manifest revealed two emergent factors from Alberta's geography. Both of these spatial references exist interdependently with the subject time. On August 20th, 2010, I went to the Alberta Gallery of Art to take in the exhibit, *Timeland.* Of the 24 artists featured, the work of Rita McKeough resonated most for me. McKeough's piece, the title image for the exhibition, appeals to me for several reasons. For one, it is aesthetically accessible. My experience in visual art is removed by one degree of separation; my brother is the Fine Arts graduate, I am not. Nevertheless, I wonder if Alberta's spirit is something that can be appreciated through the eyes of some of this province's artists. Stated another way, is there a visual subtext of sorts that also reveals the effect of Alberta's wilderness on spirit-in-art?

McKeough's work is an engaging 3 dimensional grassland landscape, composed however of construction cranes of varying heights. The image is provocative, the message clear: humankind's physical spaces continually

encroach on the natural landscape at a pace still known as suburban progress. To be sure this is the cultural time frame manifest.

In the cultural timeframe, we value new as something counterpoint to obsolete. Thriving Albertan cities are marked by the amount of new buildings, both commercial and residential, that push perimeters outward. Decades are marked by suburban sprawl not unlike the way that tree rings mark each passing season. In this space, ten years is another subdivision; complete with parking lots, strip malls, big box stores and playgrounds. Is this the norm for cities elsewhere?

The reality of urban and suburban sprawl manifests at a different pace in Alberta due to two factors especially. First, Alberta's economy is linked strongly to oil and the commodities markets. This translates to a boom-bust colloquialism, always near the surface of a collective unconscious. Second is geography, again. Alberta's geography, and specifically the geography of it two major cities, is somewhat limitless as regards area. Neither Calgary nor Edmonton is bound by impermeable coastline mountains, or other topographical limitations. What Lake Ontario presents by way of a city limit for Toronto, the Pacific Ocean – as well as the Coast Mountains – presents a similar limit on Vancouver's orientation. Montreal is still an island in the St. Lawrence, and the Capital is still across the Ottawa River from Quebec. Other large cities in Canada are limited in their outward sprawl in one or sometimes several directions. McKeough's exhibit reminds us that this is not the reality in Alberta. As a result,

inner city revitalization occurs at a slower pace in Calgary (and certainly Edmonton) than compared to Vancouver. Over the last twenty years, Calgary has added much density to its downtown core. Homes, businesses and infrastructure present a symbiosis in this dimension. The result is an upward move. Edmonton, by contrast, has been much slower in the density race. Some people in Edmonton point to the commercialization of the West End in the early 1980's as the reason for stunted core growth. Also, the presence of its municipal airport limits the height of the buildings in its center. As a result of these factors, Edmontonians have been encouraged outward into the suburbs as fast as developers can create new outlying communities.

The other factor which affects the choice to push back the natural boundaries of our city limits is the concept space itself. Albertans have become accustomed to space. This can be seen by the size of houses and the cultural value placed on the status of acreage living. The value of space is seen in our proximity to one another in our restaurants, stores, and movie theaters. Even on the highway, there seems a sense of space greater than that which is experienced in denser global centers. McKeough's work points to this and adds entitlement to her subtext. Are we entitled to this sort of space? On the other hand, are we to be blamed for a grand sense of space? We tend to laugh at ourselves on this point: our apparent flatness; the fact that, often, land is to behold as far as the eye can see. Is there a consciousness about us that reflects the outward orientation by which our urban awareness sprawls?

At this point, we wish to consider the theological implications this has for our Albertan psyche. What is outward in theological space? (To be sure, it is unlikely that one answer offered by one person will suffice. We will wish to bracket this assumption thus and consider this perspective when co-researchers are interviewed later in this project.) Outward, from a classical theological perspective, might be gospel. Paul followed the teaching that it was upon us to go into the world, in twos and share the word of God with all who would listen. Outward, then is a sort of Christian manifest destiny. From a different perspective, outward might carry a liberal, post-modern theological bias. We move out into the spaces that might offer respite for our disillusionment. We move out into a *midgaard*, a middle space tethered by city taxes and amenities on one end and the illusion of the natural, the unexplored on the other. For suburbanites, this is a time of middle space, of adolescent citizenry. Here we see the ecclesial parallel occurring with the emergence of more and larger churches from the protestant right. On one end of the suburban dichotomy, we fill out questionnaires that point to minimal religious affiliation though renewed spiritual fervor, and on the other: the largest churches yet mark the landscape in a way that replaces the steeple of old. The church also knows that in suburbia, the people look outward not up. From an eco-theological point of view, we look out with an awareness of the natural, collateral damage. This is the space of Rita McKeough's artwork. To Brooke's assertion that we are without a soul we suggest instead our soul is in evolution. Like the Buddha, we are children of

privilege though we suffer thus. Alberta's material wealth is resource-based. To this end, Alberta is very aware of the collateral damage incurred upon its wilderness. Albertans today struggle from within this middle space; our resources are demanded as much as they are damned.

Timeland seems to point out this dichotomy. Our sense of time transcends all facets. We understand years as a succession of cyclical seasons. Each season – by linkage to our commodities – has a value. We read about the value of our growing season according to the balance of rainfall and dry sunshine. When we participate with the producers during this ritual, we assign a value that cannot exist separate from time. Necessarily, each year is held in comparison to the previous and then to an average. Similarly, our sense of time affects the way that we look forward in our private affairs. Furthermore, time as a concept can effect change in the theological worldview.

When we consider how the concept of time permeates the theological realm, we need to apply something by way of mediation; otherwise we risk dissonance between two abstract concepts: Time and Theology. Thus, we consider how time manifests within a theological worldview. In researching this, one point is striking – that time (and our intimate awareness of time as such) is a factor of human resilience.

> The metaphor of a soul yearning to connect with its home base has been a repetitive theme in conceptualizing human spirituality….Resilience comes across as a spirituality of courage in spite of the boundaries of life.
>
> (VanKatwyk, 2003)

Resilience appears as one of three factors (following reconciliation and restoration) in VanKatwyk's model of pastoral theology that is necessary in the process of homecoming. He further articulates that the theological dialectic herein is one characterized by suffering and endurance. Thus, resilience understood in this way lends itself as a mediator between time and theology. The Albertan experience, as depicted in the artwork of the *Timeland* exhibit, is related to resilience in that is actually the result of our natural, intimate awareness of time's passage. Our resilience is a manifestation of our geographic factors. We understand our hardships according to our hope. Hence we are a hardy people, according to one of my co-researchers. Our sense of warmer, brighter days; of days filled with meaningful work and fellowship afford us strength from which we draw upon both memory and hope in order to endure the hardships of seasonal isolation, drought and loss. As such, this way of thinking is something that is self-reinforcing. As our consciousness becomes attuned to both time's arrow and cycles, we become increasingly aware of its implications for our lives spiritually. The art of McKeough serves as a reminder

that our presence in time as not passive only. We act and effect change upon our wilderness; the nature from which our consciousness has emerged. As we do so, the rings of our growth can be seen from a bird's eye as crop circles in negative space. Towns and cities, suburbs and ring-roads subtract from the sum total of wheat fields and parkland; once considered infinite by the earth-bound gaze of younger, naïve eyes. At such a juncture we hope that resilience here will be characterized by a mature perspective on what it means to exist with a sense of progress and a sense of ecology.

Part Two:

Opportunity: The Idea of Alberta.

When we consider the idea of Alberta, migration, and the push/pull factor paradigm, we appreciate that opportunity plays a huge role in the decision to move "Out West." How does this manifest theologically, in faith? If this was the settlers' experience, then what of the aboriginal experience? Further development will occur with chapters on some of the historical homilies that speak to this, on the aboriginal spiritual experience in wilderness, the settlers' experience, and the modern experience in Alberta's backyard.

Chapter 4: How did the Western Archetype Manifest as Faith?

As I survey the literature – people's experiences, impressions, responses – both artistic and literary - I notice several patterns begin to emerge. First, Alberta (my Alberta) is a projection of my family's *selfobject* (Schlauch 1995, 62[4]). Essentially, *out west* is something I associate closely with Alberta's relative geography.[5] My extended family has its roots in New Brunswick, prior to this, the United Kingdom. Necessarily, from this perspective, Alberta is *out west*. I believe also that this is a media-inspired term. We take our lead from the Euro-American experience of human geography which saw people land on the east coast of the continent and, for many, move westward in time.(Ahler et al. 1992, 115) Many of the people who moved onto the prairies represented the homesteading movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For these people, "Out west" was pragmatic; land was the motivator.[6] The second pattern related to this concept of geographic frontiers – though not mutually exclusive – is the existence of an optimistic spirit. We will see how optimism transcends both social class and time period as we consider the experiences documented by men and women who moved "Out West" for various reasons.

The story of the homesteader offers a glimpse into how the idea of faith must have evolved in relationship to this historic period. During this time, a family moved away from the familiar and into a place where at once the wildlife, other humans, the elements, and fertility of the soil were threatening forces thus. What follows is a conversation on three themes: opportunity, salvation,

and humility, and how they seemed to permeate the theological consciousness of Alberta both as cause and effect.

> Its wealth of natural resources – a pessimist could not live in this country a year. Every man has a future, every man has an ideal, even if not very high, so different from the lethargy of the average Englishman, who seems to have lost the power of dreaming dreams and seeing visions.
>
> (Holdom 1996, 37)

Rev. Martin Holdom wrote about practical life, as he experienced it, over a three year period by way of letters back to his parents, in England. His experience reflected the interesting times that encompassed life in a new booming town in a new province. In his letters we appreciate exuberance, evolution, and obsolescence. Holdom appeared pragmatic as a young minister; sometimes his writing revealed an opportunistic side – a man obsessed with the real estate investment opportunities in Alberta[7]. He was very aware of the boom if only naïve of its duration. (Whether this was an enduring character defect or a mere flaw of his youth at the time of writing we do not know.) Much of Holdom's time was spent learning about co-existence in a newly formed town and surrounding region. His ideals were reflected in a decision to remain in Castor despite several opportunities to relocate, including to Edmonton and Calgary. Ultimately, his decision to remain and invest in Castor yielded a loss unforeseen by this young, wide-eyed migrant minister. In the end, the town of

Castor, from which he wrote and experienced, stalled and contracted on the part of the Canadian Pacific Railway deciding upon Coronation as the next big hub along the line.

As an Englishman, Holdom was aware of his station in society; he was aware of the perception people had of the English and other immigrant nationalities. On this, he wrote as a man of his time. Certainly, his views on *Yankees, Chinamen*, and *Indians* are regarded today as ethnocentric, even hypocritical considering his title, *Reverend*. However, given the spirit of colonialism that persisted into the early 20th century, he appears almost insightful as he offered reflection on the shortcomings of his own nationality. To this end, what Holdom apparently understood about himself and his national identity reflected his ignorance on this new land[8].

Essentially, Holdom's perspective was from that of an English, Christian missionary. Much of the positions at this time were missionary posts by nature. It seems, however, that unlike the time of Father Albert Lacombe (fifty years previous to this) Holdom's missionary ministry represented the inter-denominational fault lines of this era. While the Catholics, Scandinavian Lutherans, and Mennonites were well represented even by this time, other mainline Protestant denominations such as Holdom's Church of England were still defining themselves according to their demographics in Alberta. As such, Holdom's parish was vast in its area, though paltry in its population.

Holdom's theology is revealed in several places throughout the collection of letters. The following quote offers a point of departure for certain theological discussion:

"Out here, we have what I consider is true socialism; each person, whatever his bringing up, has an equal opportunity, but it rests with him to work out his own salvation." (1996, 128).

Holdom was reconciling some of his experiences from the English-European paradigm and that of the new country. Here we note that in places throughout his letters he spoke of his disdain for the lethargy that betrayed the sense of entitlement found amongst the immigrants who represented the English middle class. Though not to be held in the same pejorative light as the infamous *remittance men*[9], the middle class still reflected a carry-over, wherein empirical values and worldviews were regarded as incongruous to frontier life by most hardy Canadians. As counterpoint to his middle class background, Holdom was aware of the new field of play; one leveled by the rules of both nature and the invisible hand. For Holdom, the new Eden was salvation manifest: the rigid tiers of European society no longer existed in this Darwinian Utopia; where only the strong will prosper. Thus Alberta for Martin Holdom, in its raw landscape of both danger and opportunity, was both a means and an end to the New Jerusalem. This is interesting in that it resonates with both earlier Protestantism and material offered decades later by another Albertan Church leader.

In the 1930's Bill Aberhart preached according to an eschatological agenda. At a time of drought dictated destitution, Aberhart's was a message rife with apocalyptic fervor. For followers of Bible Bill, the future was full of promise. To be sure, the departure platform for such a message was the bleak period of the dustbowl. Like Holdom's paradigm, Aberhart's was formed out of reverence for a God who was capable of deliverance through natural crises. The theology herein can be paralleled to the Genesis account of the flood (while the irony is noted). In such case, the Patriarch draws strength from a God against the threatening force of the elements. Noah's flood is analogous to Aberhart's drought and Holdom's bust. Thus, salvation is understood according to the good times (or flip side) of those recognized for desperation and tragedy. How we attend to our spiritual lives will manifest in our material, physical lives, lest Heaven is realized as our ultimate reward. In the interim, Alberta, for its pioneers, offered a heaven by way of bountiful resources combined with opportune weather conditions. For new Albertans such as Martin Holdom, this alone was salvation from the abstract, caste-like hierarchies anchored deep within the imperial psyche. In a sense, for the European immigrant of even modest means, Alberta's opportunity was salvation in itself. In several of Holdom's letters, he mentioned his observation on capital and what a person could do with an extra thousand dollars. Even still, he noted that perhaps three years would be as long as it might take to save this sort and money, in order to begin some serious investments. The European imagination reflected a respect

for capitalism embedded in a socialist ideal. To be sure, Alberta represented new ground and new hope at a time when theology was emerging from 19th century Protestantism. Nonetheless, this lends itself to an observation: Must analogies for salvation be intrinsically bound to economic prosperity, or is this still a Western way of thinking?

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In another book, at another time, Peter Christensen wrote,

> Someone said the definition of wilderness was a place where you could get eaten. It is also a place where nature humbles us, a place where we humans are not in control, a place where feelings and reactions that have been dormant for a long time area intensely evoked….. My anger was driven by insult, by the fact that an animal would dare to attack me, a human! There was that arrogance again that I had so carefully buried and rationalized – the arrogance of assumed control over nature. (2006, 84)

According to both of these observations, there is no greater equalizer than the reality of nature. Whereas Holdom reveals his humility as an awareness of English elitism and how it runs anathema to the organic way in which prosperity is realized in Alberta, Christensen reflects a coming of age whereby arrogance is shed for humility; we are not in control of nature.

It would seem that this observation occurs often as a result of living in Alberta. On this, Christensen offers another perspective – one that turns this assumption on its head:

> Maybe to live and work in the bush you need by nature to be satisfied with silence or the sound of a river. Some say you need to be at peace with yourself, especially since you and your "self" are going to be spending so much uninterrupted time together. I do know that you had to be intensely interested by your surroundings to enjoy the back country. (2006, 15)

This changes the how I understand the relationship of cause and effect within the paradigm of eco-theology. According to this, self-acceptance does not follow time in the wilderness, but however, it is necessary antecedent to the process of wilderness co-existence. Again, the implications are far reaching. However, if we limit the possibilities to a place where we consider wilderness theology, then what we realize is another moment of cause and effect confusion.

To reflect personally, I must admit that my interpretation of the wilderness experience of Jesus in the desert was understood in this way: Jesus went into the desert, fasted, faced temptation, and returned stronger.[10] The assumption, nonetheless, is that "to find God" follows the part whence we "go into the desert." However, what Christensen's quote implies is the opposite: that we have found God, now we can go into the wilderness. Applied as a hermeneutic, this allows us to imagine the Christ, a grounded being, or someone who appears to have transcended his/her ego and, consequent to this,

understands the importance of wilderness in spiritual process. What I like about this interpretation on wilderness salvation is that has nothing to do with the Kipling-esque paradigm wherefrom Holdom wrote; that Alberta is an investment opportunity as long as men and women are willing to negotiate nature on her terms. The salvation of Christensen's perspective is found in the process of realizing our fleeting presence – something that an untamed wilderness helps us arrive at sooner than later. Thought of Biblically, I imagine Christensen's Alberta as analogous to the raging sea in the Gospel account of the Disciples at sea, fearful for their lives. (Mark 4: 35-41)

It seems that there are different ways of understanding what "Out West" means and how it translates theologically. First, there is the longitudinal-geographic perspective. This is how I understand Martin Holdom's experience. This is also how I understand my early images of Alberta, related to my familial experience. The *Out West* of this perspective is a spatial reference which implies an easterly origin. How far east of Alberta is a function of time, however ultimately according to European colonialism. This in turn manifests theologically in the way that "The West" is understood. From this perspective, Alberta – and The West – is something new along a westward trajectory of expansion. Taken this way, it is difficult to separate the intentions of the faithful from the origin of this process. Holdom saw Alberta through the lens of an English Missionary. The Alberta he saw contained opportunities, pitfalls, Indians, and immigrants. In

other words, everything was in its right place for the European mind to understand – even if only through the capitalist paradigm.

The other *Out West* is revealed in the experiences of Peter Christenson's writing. This place seems to emphasize the word "Out" much like the Australian outback, or like outer space. Although it is still spatial of course, it does not lend itself to the right-left, east-west horizontal, longitudinal trajectory that we have adopted from capitalism's geo-political orientation. Instead, an emphasis on "Out" holds something that is "In-ward" in contrast. That is, the Out West of Holdom's geography is a place in contrast to an eastward homeland and the Out West of Christensen's geography is place – or state – in contrast to the inwardness of something familiar. It is in this place whence we are confronted by the sublime. For Christenson, it is the recognition of "arrogance of assumed control over nature." Hence out west is regarding something as wild in the same way that outer space is speaking of a region – no matter the direction – that is simply far from home. From this perspective, it is of ultimate interest that this state of unfamiliarity avails to us a new sense of being. One way of considering this theologically then, is to continue forth with the personification that Christenson provides in his wilderness testimony. From such a perspective, the inward gaze that is realized in the presence of nature is a moment not unlike during the return of the prodigal son. We realize the beauty in the relationship and this runs much deeper than the triviality of hierarchies or the misgivings of inheritances squandered. We see the "Outer" wilderness with the eyes of the

father looking upon his once estranged son: through a tearful love embrace. From this place, the struggling boundary between outward and inward, we have the opportunity to recognize who we really are and what we have. Too often, however, we have made it ours to meditate on the resource riches of the moment than to consider that which spiritually endures both boom and bust.

In the Promised Land of Alberta's North is a collection of journal entries made by provincial archivist, Katherine Hughes, in the summer of 1909. Originally a journalist from Prince Edward Island then Montreal, Hughes moved west and took a job in Edmonton with the new provincial government. During the period of June to August 1909, she left Edmonton and travelled the north on wagon and York boat, from Slave Lake to Dunvegan to Fort Chipewyan and back. It was at the trading post at Fort Chipewyan where she offers an entry on a Sunday morning:

> Sunday, August 1st – Went to mass at 9:30. Fine singing by children: priests and brothers good voices joining in liturgical chant, sermon in French on Christ driving the traders from the temple. (2006, 86)

Like the material from Martin Holdom's experience this text provides for us a glimpse into the relationship between geographic, historical context, and its contemporary theology. Similar to Holdom's perspective, there is pragmatism in the message above. In addition to Hughes' apparent value for good liturgical music, this vignette offers us an historical reminder of the situation in the North.

In 1909, northern Alberta still offered a vestige of the trap and trade of the fur industry. Missions were still inhabited and influenced by Catholic Francophones and treaty was *de rigeur* between native trappers and their European contacts.[11] Accordingly, the experience as documented by Hughes points clearly to this recent, philosophical metaphor. In the space of our Metis heritage, there exists a hermeneutic that betrays our theological pragmatism. In the same way that an Albertan might claim their dominion over nature as a right of Genesis, they are able to articulate their economic prosperity with Gospel acumen. It is tempting to speculate and tease out the intention of this message. Did the church use this sort of interpretation of scripture as a means for economic justification? Or, was this a deliberate – and effective – method of communicating across two different cultures in the spirit of Christianization? On the one hand it is a theological apology for the fur trade that emerges, on the other it is a missionary polemic on the white man's burden. In this observation, it is important to assume that regardless of the intended theological message, the ethic point of departure was such that those involved with the missions in the days of Alberta's trading posts came from a place of good intentions.[12] What's important however, is that we acknowledge that it was a value of the Church that it interpreted itself according to the context of the Metis plight. Historically speaking, this is a modernist agenda – one that considers the priority of one faith over another. Furthermore, this is proof of contemporary sensitivity. If the messages of a sermon at this time was intended to speak to the Metis, then

(unlike Europe –pre Reformation – where illiterate peasants were admonished and advised by Latin tongues) there exists not only evidence of conciliatory relations between the parties but also that this was a value recognized by higher authorities. From Hughes accounts of her personal insights, we read: “The north country is the most restful place in the world. Nobody up there worries about anything.” (2006, 163). I believe that for Hughes, not unlike Martin Holdom, the experience in Alberta’s frontier spaces reflected a theology of hope that permeated widely. The opportunities that Hughes documented were about experimental farming, tarsands exploration, and improved infrastructure. Despite the details that otherwise betray the period and circumstance from which she wrote, the essence of her hope appears extemporaneous – at least within several centuries. Coupled with Holdom’s CPR-inspired vision for rural property values to the south, the images offered by these persons help to articulate that the idea of Alberta – according to the immigrants- was one of hope as evidenced by the word opportunity. Alberta provided for these people a physical space in order to move conceptually into a place of abundance and promise. Hindsight will inform us that as the booms are checked by busts, the Badlands cannot be seen from even the tallest peaks of the Rockies.

Counterpoint to Martin Holdom and Katherine Hughes, there is a dimension to our Metis history that represents in inversion to this blooming Exodus analogue. What happens if the Promised Land is something that is not ventured toward, but however, a place that we are expelled from?

Chapter 5:

The Aboriginal Experience

"Cree spirituality emphasizes harmony between people and nature. It recognizes that harmony sometimes can only be achieved through conflict, struggle, and self sacrifice."

– Provincial Museum of Alberta

> They talked about the northern lights, for instance, saying you had better not whistle at the northern lights because they are the dead, and the spirits will come down to you. You know, we were kids, so we were tempted. We would go outside in the night and whistle in the darkness, and sure enough the waves of light and different colours in the sky would come and dance closer and closer. Let me tell you – we were scared! – (Belcourt 2006, 42)

> A few days later though tired Kane sat up to watch the Northern lights – he recorded it as – "one of the most splendid meteoric phenomena I have ever witnessed." In its center immediately overhead appeared a blood-red ball of fire of greater diameter than the moon, rising in a misty horizon; from the ball emanated rays of crimson light, merging into a brilliant yellow at the northern edges. The snow and every object around us was tinted by the same hue. I continued lost in admiration of this splendid phenomena til past one in the morning. The Indians have a poetic superstition – these are the spirits of the dead dancing before the Great Spirit.
>
> (*Pioneering the Parkland* 1967, 12)

At this point, it would be prudent to note that it is not the purpose of this thesis to explore the nuance that would become the history of Canada's First Nations People. Notwithstanding, it is this author's belief that a brief exploration into the paradigmatic nature of the aboriginal experience would benefit the quality of the research herewith. Furthermore, it is most interesting that what I am learning to articulate through the process of this thesis is apparently the very essence of native spirituality.

"The reason things live is because when you remove the spirit, they die."

(Gordon Raine, Plains Cree Elder.)[13]

In some ways, the experience documented by 19th century Europeans and those transmitted orally by the Cree are strikingly similar: both serve as a vestige of description prior to modern scientific understanding. When we consider the creation myths at large, they serve to explain that which is experienced at even the celestial levels. The Northern Lights are antithetical to traditional symbols in our experience of nature. Historically speaking, the Western canon owes much to the rainbow; it was there for Noah after forty days and nights of rain. Similarly thunder and lightning exist in the pantheon of Greek mythology hence evidence that natural phenomena of such a magnitude require historic explanation, rationalization. However, unlike the rainbow, the northern lights are more dynamic; an ethereal grandstaff where silent melody lines ring in

our imagination, the Aurora Borealis leap vertically as they simultaneously shift horizontally. They are nocturnal[14] and, unlike the bow that follows the rain, they come without warning; they are as peaceful as they are frightening. Moreover, unlike the zealous Zeus, the Northern Lights appear in silence – as to stir a sense of doubt within the observer: am I actually seeing this? Despite our modern rationalizations, there still seems something other-worldly thus about this phenomenon.

Another dimension of the Aurora Borealis emerges as something almost conceptual for me. It is with a combined sense of shame and wonder that I consider the orientation of the aboriginal perspective. I can only imagine what it must be like to experience my world according to my immediate senses. I believe that a significant dimension of my worldview comes from the cartographic domain. From early childhood my geographic experience has been shaped by the reality of movement. As such, I can recall early exposure to maps and the sense of orientation. It is only now that I have begun to question the false sense of security that this might have fostered in me and my sense of place in space. The aboriginal worldview seems to have been shaped significantly by geography, however not so much *cartographically*. To find evidence of aboriginal maps developed prior to European contact is difficult. Necessarily, it would seem as though cartography, as we understand it, is Western, modern. This makes sense as we consider that the experience in this region prior to the Europeans reflected a hunter-gatherer, tribal system. The people shared, orally, knowledge of the

buffalo hunt. For anyone to survive year-round in this region, while eating only food that grows in the immediate area, meat is a valuable resource; a basic need.

> When the Creator made the world, he showed people food for every season. The sweet sap inside polar bark in the spring. Turnip roots to cook in summer. Prairie-rose hips for chewing after their sweet petals fall. And berries, from early summer to late fall, buffalo beans, strawberries, blueberries, saskatoons, choke, and pincherries – that was very good. But the Creator knew winter snow was coming, and People would starve unless they had meat. (Wiebe 2008, 65)

The Cree, Blackfoot, and Assiniboine of this region had to co-exist always in a space between economy and warfare – largely because of the subject meat. Knowledge of the climate - its weather systems, the river systems, the grassland, and proximity to other tribes, and the oral transmission of this awareness would have formed the canon (at least geographically speaking) of the worldview of the people who understood themselves according to their relationship to the land. Thus land was a spiritual medium and never a commodity.[15] A short meditation on this points us to the relationship between the means to a hunter's ends. Because the climate was in causal agreement with the mating and calving of the buffalo, the years were marked according to the annual calving season in August. Thus, from one year to the next, the rhythm of an ecosystem determined the immediate experiences of the people. In this paradigm, perspective begins with the person and extends outward.

By comparison, the modern, Western perspective includes in it a collective agreement upon how geography appears according to its cartographic representation. This translates to an experience wherein I may imagine the expanse of the prairie, my proximity to the river systems, while simultaneously

considering the border where one province ends and another begins. Essentially, the cartographic experience avails us to a bird's eye view of certain space.[16] I believe that this abets the commodity-based paradigm through which we understand space. In his book title, Big Bear, Albertan writer Rudy Weibe pays homage to Chief Big Bear of the plains Cree. Big Bear lived during the 19th century in the space we now know as Alberta and Saskatchewan. He lived during the tectonic shift of Confederation. A veteran writer, Weibe acknowledges the rift between our Western idea of historical accuracy in the face of oral knowledge. As such, Weibe reminds his readers that Chief Big Bear suffered character assassination in both the living and the post-humus experiences. Big Bear's reprisal to protagonist comes during a renaissance of post-modernist thought; Big Bear, not unlike Riel, was a hero. He had political savvy evidenced in the history of his diplomacy with his counterparts. The tragedy in the story of Big Bear was eerily biblical. Big Bear held out until the eleventh hour in signing treaty six. As a result, his people were relegated to wander the Albertan wilderness in attempt to harmonize tracks with an extirpated Buffalo population. At the same time other bands that had already made treaty were at least offered the security of space, money, and rations. Subsequent to this, the peoples' knowledge of this security ran counterpoint to the idea of following Big Bear's ideals. For Chief Big Bear the Promised Land was his life's story; it was his *raison d'etre*, his namesake.[17] His is the story of an Albertan Moses caught in the tragic chronology of wilderness itinerancy prior to an imposed, cultural diaspora.

To suggest that a 19th century Plains Cree chief represented a place named for a British Queen's daughter, only after his death is anachronistic to be sure. Nevertheless, in the spirit of spirit itself, we are in pursuit of essence. Big Bear represents a visceral, animate metaphor for this wilderness. His spirit was nomadic inasmuch as the space in which his basic needs dictated. Such a space in time becomes place. In this sense, Big Bear's place was authentic. From a contemporary paradigm, it is critical to reconsider the abstract condition that is our provincial or national boundaries. Too often a reflection of distant pragmatism premised upon the economy of foreign affairs, places inside the colonized spaces of post-European contact regions have suffered according to the very demarcation know today as political boundaries. What used to be known as the Medicine Line (the 49th parallel) was for a long time a non issue for natives and cowboys alike.[18] To be sure, the Alberta of my imagination – a large landmass; mountain-bitten rectangle – is far more an example of the European-cartographic paradigm than that of Big Bear's spirit world. Whereas Moses' trek would deliver a people into the *Promised Land*, Big Bear's, by contrast, ended in the tragedy still evidenced by today's reservations. Thus, it is imperative to this thesis that we return to the place in which Big Bear inhabited when his life was in harmony with the land.

"I find God more in nature, now, as our Native ancestors did." (Belcourt, 53) If we could laminate these conditions onto this thing we today call Alberta,

then Big Bear offers us a lens through which we might consider the aboriginal spiritual experience in Alberta's wilderness.

It is this author's belief that the aboriginal experience in and of wilderness is critical to the development of this thesis. What I've tried to discover about the articulation of Alberta's wilderness speaks always to the tension between metaphoric-conceptual wilderness and literal-experiential wilderness. Following a literature review, an interview, and museum research, it is my belief at this time that the primary difference in geographic paradigms here occurs at the presence or absence of the map. This is the genesis of the conceptual/experiential dyad. A sort of cartographic point of departure, I believe that the interaction – or collision – of two paradigms (and their differing cosmologies hitherto) where one understands space according to the removed or outside perspective offered through the presence of maps, compared with that of a subsistence society which understands place according to the observable spaces and effects accordingly, speaks to a fundamental split in worldviews. It is difficult to imagine the dialogue that did or did not occur on this topic. How my understanding has changed has less to do with the details of any paradigm that I think I've empathized with, but more as it pertains to the process in which I understand my own place in space.

In a fascinating lecture on the psychology of time perspectives, Philip Zimbardo demarcates between future focused, past oriented and present

oriented positions.[19] It would seem that the theology of hope and salvation that is evoked every time that someone feels that they are part of the last great West, a frontier of physical and spiritual experience – a sentiment that appears often in our Albertan canon – speaks to the future-oriented paradigm. That is, Alberta is not necessarily the future, but instead an ideal setting to ponder just that. Conversely, there is something about the relationship between memory and the rhythm of seasonal cycles that afford us in this part of the world the opportunity to sharpen our introspection. Here, a person – or people via a cultural practice – might value questions such as "What were things like for me in the past?" As we go deeper through the layers of our cycles so we go back into the past. I believe that the aboriginal experience is an admonishment that we consider our past, our roots.

Part III

What follows here is the product of dialogue. Through the discussions with these people, a sort of narrative began emerge around the theme, seasons. That is, although the method of selection was influenced primarily according to this ethno-demographic concept, it has become clearer – having completed the interviews – that beyond the ethnicity, there is a seasonal message from each person which resonated for me, the listener. Thus, what follows is the account of these interviews according to the season most evoked through their sharing and insights.

Chapter 6: Winter

(How Could *You* Love *Me*?)

As soon as Ben got off the plane upon arriving in Alberta for his second visit, he sensed something was quite different. His first visit to the Edmonton area was at the end of November, 2009 when he first came to be with his long distant girlfriend, Marlee. Ben, a native Australian, had met Marlee in Hawaii earlier that summer. What started as a chance encounter in a restaurant in Maui would become a global love story two years and counting.

Ben is one of our immigrant voices. He came to the province from a place that boasts many Canadian ex-pats to be sure. However, conventional wisdom informs us that "the girl always wins" and, as such, Ben's Australia would likely play second chair to Marlee's Alberta.

The account of a young Australian's experience in Alberta is important to our geographic psyche. For many Albertans, Australia is as much an idea as it is a destination – especially during our winter months. As a teacher, I have bid adieu to many students who have left for this destination for upwards of a month in order to escape the reality of winter. Thus, the idea of Australia is analogous to one of escapism for snowbound Albertans. From its hemispheric polarity and subsequent seasonal opposition, it serves as the conceptual counterpoint to the idea of spending another winter under the dormant blanket of Alberta's snow.

During this winter – a season of record swallowing La Nina driven snowfall – it is easy to imagine the benefits associated with migrating to the places furthest from the reaches of the frosted Albertan frontier. Despite the accounts of record fire and flood that continue to depress the Land Down Under during their summer of 2011, it is still tempting to envy anyone who shares with us news of upcoming vacation plans to Oz. This is where the geographic and conceptual – the realist and the idealist - reconcile if for only a moment. We say to those planning their departure, "Just stay clear of the floods this year," in a manner of admonishment, not unlike the usual fare: "watch out for spiders and snakes!" No matter snakes or floods there is something alluring about those places that represent the geographic frontiers of our imaginations. I [20]was curious to find out what – if anything – about Alberta could be loved by an ambassador to the paradise that is Australia. If there is pause to accept our geographic apology for loving Australia, then what of the theological implications of an Australian sharing his experience of Alberta?

Evidently, when Ben got off the plane last April he was made aware of something that many Albertans tend to overlook as perhaps a symptom of winter's myopic whiteouts: the smell of spring. When asked to describe what he sensed, Ben stated that it was basically a smell in the air. There was something other worldly about it: familiar yet foreign. Ben's account of the smell in the air is something that has kept me focused during the process of this writing. Not only have I become more aware of my latent, seasonal optimism, but also have I

taken notice of the antecedent to spring. In the urbanized centers around Alberta, the smell is contrived; it is human-made. In the dry cold of Alberta's winter air, one is sometimes limited to how much they might actually smell. The frigid air mass of winter's sleep renders many of the flora and fauna dormant. Furthermore, the experience of the cold, once breathed in, ushers a sense of efficiency, of survival; breathing is a means to an end. During a cold snap Albertans experience just that: cold, not smells. We experience numb lips and frosted nostrils. To this end, our breathing is efficient to the point of vindictiveness where each breathe that we exhale is warm enough only to be met by the cold stuff immediately in front of this. The effect is a sort of participatory microclimate where warm, moist air from our breath is supercooled by the arctic mass around us; this air is felt not smelled.[21]

Fortunately, the Arctic Front is not a constant throughout winter. Somewhere between this offensive, mercurial plummet and the Chinook phenomenon is the misleading concept of an average winter temperature. Elusive it may be but there are, in fact, many days and nights in the Alberta winter when the air is filled with the smell of wood-burning fireplaces and stoves, and - although this image speaks to a more human, populated experience than what the concept wilderness otherwise conjures - in any event it is certainly a reality and a reminder of being outdoors in the winter.

Ben noticed this smell, “Yeah, I definitely found a difference from when I got straight off the plane. I’ve noticed lately, this fall, that certain smells and feelings are coming back. Maybe that’s the artificial heating in the houses.[22] But I’m getting some flashbacks from last winter. Well, anyway, when I got off the plane the second time, it was as though I knew where I was, but it felt quite different. Just because of the scenery was so difference. It felt the same, but different.”

“Is there such a marked shift in Australia from one season to the next?” I asked Ben.

“I’m feeling it a lot more here.” Ben responded. “I think that here because the seasons are more distinctive, it is easier to remember – I don’t know. You can see that winter – it’s white, cold and clear. In Australia, winter is greyer. In Australia, the seasons are more condensed – you don’t notice the change from one to the next as dramatically; yours are very definite.”

This is the point that, taken from an outsider’s perspective, truly has me pondering something unique about the Albertan experience. It would seem that Albertans (and even visitors to Alberta) have a sense of time that is affected by the seasonal rhythms that dictate our present conditions. This sense of time is likely linked to the dramatic differences from one season to the next. Essentially, we are simultaneously aware of the linear chronology of time (the experience of age and novelty; the manifestation of time’s arrow of direction) and the circular

nature thus (the sense that with each season are a host of familiar smells, sounds, and sights that take us back to previous experiences in these seemingly similar contexts). Stated another way, what we have here is a profound opportunity to experience and embrace the novelty of the outside world, while – at the same time – we can also contemplate the patterns of our interior worlds, our memories and our feelings. We are optimistic without being naïve. On this, I have heard many people over the past year – when asked to describe something about the Albertan spirit in its people – describe us as a people of spiritual hardiness.[23]

I asked the Australian what he thought, "If you don't mind talking about work for a bit…. Could you share what you've noticed about the people you've worked with?"

"I found them to be very intense…" Ben started, "we would work rain, hail or shine, mud whatever. In Australia we wouldn't have worked in those conditions. But with the Albertans it was like…this is our summer, we've got to work now and get it done before winter arrives.

"That's an interesting conclusion to arrive at on your own. You seemed to reveal a carry-over from the earlier days of this province." I said (as I thought about Martin Holdom's entries on the efficiency with which the homesteaders worked in order to build house - even a town - prior to winter setting in.)[24]

I often wonder about how a people are perceived by someone from the outside. I'm sure that this is a personality quirk; a line of thinking that I've developed over the years as a bit of a wanderer myself. While in Alberta, Ben took a construction job with a local contractor. On several occasions he mentioned how surprised – if not sometimes frustrated – with the work ethic he saw in the people with whom he worked. On this, an outsider might quickly qualify this with the adjective: *Protestant*. We would argue that the instinct runs deeper than any denominational allegiance, even influence. Instead, our sense of urgency is precisely what Ben observed: seasonally determined. It's not that we want to hibernate necessarily; it's just part of this thing that emerges between the spaces of environment, climate, and consciousness. Spirit is the word we return to again and again in this thesis. We are stoic not because we are self righteous but because the same climate that invigorates our zeal by summer is cause for extended bouts of frozen introspection throughout the long winter. What Ben saw during two visits at two very opposite seasons here in Alberta was the duality that occurs within Albertans' spirit.

Although Ben would go on to share more on the wilderness he experienced (and I appreciate his observations on Alberta's rugged, even unforgiving beauty)[25] it is with hindsight that I revere most his thoughts on the seasonal shifts. Several times he was able to share his spiritual shifts here in Alberta. Although he did not explicitly ascribe the feelings to a summer or winter sense of self he did, however, talk about seasonal smells and the different

feelings that occurred as he experienced air temperatures different by 80 degrees that year. Thus, listening to Ben helped me to understand how real circular time is for us Albertans. For an Alberta who is a long-term insider, it may be tempting to take for granted this unique climatic and geographic phenomenon. However, to hear the account from someone as removed as an Australian, it brings to the surface for me, the reality of my spirit in this place. It's tempting to compartmentalize Ben's interview according to one season. To be sure, Ben's account of winter is nothing short of some of our greatest material on the subject: Prairie Winter Bragging Rights. However, this would be a little myopic again as I consider that most important to this account of winter – for me – is that which follows, like clockwork, every twelve months. What Ben noticed first when he got off the plane that April, in Edmonton, was our spiritual renaissance; the smell of spring.

"Did you experience any profound memories or impressions as the seasons changed?" I would ask Ben.

"Right, as your autumn approaches, I'm reminded of this time last year. I think about how this person whom I'm completely in love with is the same person that I would talk to on the phone everyday when I was back in Australia. It feels familiar and new at the same time. It's like she's somehow the girl from the summer, in Hawaii, and yet in some ways she's this completely other person."

"And you believe that weather - the season - helps you to better feel those memories, those impressions?"

"Exactly, and I think: I can't believe that I actually found this girl."

Chapter 7: Spring

On the first Sunday in 2011, I was able to sit with Richard and hear him share on this topic.

"But what do you mean by wilderness?" He continued…"I consider wilderness as a metaphor. It's all about a space where my spirit is uncompromised. For example, I walked into a little goat trail on the way up to Marmot Basin, (The End of the World) In a sense it was wilderness – however, as I walked around inside this space, I was aware that it was less wilderness now that I was there inside it."

This is the essence of Richard, theologian and naturalist. A Metis Albertan in his third decade of addiction recovery, he is an "old-timer" in the truest sense. According to his account, his path to God exists because someone many years ago insisted that he find and come to know his higher power. As stubborn as he is sardonic, Richard chose the first animate creature he saw beyond the window of his recovery house: a rabbit. "There," thought Richard, "Clearly Thumper can go for a day without using drugs."

To be clear, if it were not for Richard's candor, it is difficult to imagine him the drug addicted criminal he insists he was in his earlier life. There is a twinkle in his brown eyes; they mesmerize and are accented by smile lines. The Richard I wanted to interview is a man I've known for a few years. Perhaps because of my proximity to Richard, I had not considered him for an interview before this date. In hindsight, it was a case of not seeing the obvious that was clearly before me all along. My attention was directed to Richard the interviewee when I heard someone mention his love for the bush; his wilderness faith. How had I missed this before today?

Richard got me thinking about the metaphor that is wilderness. There is something elusive about what I'm chasing here. As a metaphor, the realization of wilderness is not unlike the trail of discovering Alberta's archetypal cattlemen. Somewhere between the word and the interpretation exists a space for doubt: did it ever exist? According to Sid Marty – Southern Alberta was never meant for wheat –"The good topsoil ends up in North Dakota." Ian Tyson alluded to the idea that the homesteaders were lied to by the CPR. The cowboys of the true cattle drive came up from Texas and ranched *free-range* style where they raised the cattle according to the rhythm of the grassland. Yet we assure ourselves during our contemporary plight that all of these things in fact are ascribed to our collective sense of self.

Richard had asked me about what I meant about wilderness.

"I guess it has changed since I began with this question." I answered. "Originally I was thinking about what we as individuals consider as wilderness. My thesis proposal provided a broad concession for various interpretations on the word itself. Whether wilderness is a space for back country skiing or backyard gardening, its authenticity manifests from our acknowledgement that this is in fact the wilderness."

"I agree, and that sounds a lot like how I understand it."

When I turned the conversation to sacred spaces, Richard offered an anecdote from central Alberta.

"Because I do a lot of driving with my job, I make a point of stopping midday, usually at the same location. There's a bench down in a small ravine in the Rotary Park in Red Deer. That's where I begin my walk."

"That's hilarious!" I started. "I lived in Red Deer for a couple of years and actually spent some time doing sketches in that park, likely from the same bench."

"Wow." Richard responded. "I like that space because it's in the middle of town, close to downtown, and yet it offers solitude and some quiet. In fact, I remember sitting there on my bench back in the spring time, when the most amazing scene unfolded. As the snow was melting all around and birds were singing, this fir tree suddenly shot upwards, free from the snow that had just

fallen off. It appeared to just shake off the snow, like the whole tree woke up and went 'whuuummff…' This sent a ripple through the woods: a bird jumped off the branch of the fir, a squirrel ran down another tree causing another branch to kick off its snow…it was like the whole forest was waking up."

"What did you do after this?"

"I got up and started walking." Richard replied. "This is what I've learned over the years…is that for me, walking requires that I get into the rhythm of nature around me. Sometimes I feel this and I walk – other times I run."

It was at this point in my conversation with Richard that I realized how the seasons were dictating the narrative of this portion of research. It wasn't Richard's ethnic status that required my attention. Instead, it was his interpretation of spring that informed my sense of kin. I felt bound to his account by my own passion for this time of year in Alberta.

Springtime in Alberta starts as a tease amid winter's intermittent deep freeze. For two days at a time we might smell Chinook-thawed manure drift through a suddenly warmer February air. In this moment, we are reminded of how we will feel when spring is 'really' here. At such a time, the daylight spills over the equinox; we eat dinner while geese fly above a later setting sun. Richard reminded me of the essence if this thesis when he turned my question on its head:

"I don't know if there is something Unique about Alberta for my spirituality. I do believe that Alberta has a spirit of its own."

I liked this. *What is the experience of God in Alberta's wilderness* had become a simpler question: What is Alberta's spirit? I believe that I acknowledged this earlier when I posed the idea that an investigation into the people (as a reflection of geography) would speak to the spirit of the source: Alberta. Richard's spirituality however presented for me a minor crisis: had I not taken into account the idea that a leap of faith could work in this case? I had worked so hard in wording this in such a manner that the sublime might be quantified that I had forgotten to acknowledge; to embrace my intuition? Thus, when Richard stated that he believed Alberta has a spirit of its own – I felt ashamed. I envisioned the moment when Peter heard the third crowing of the cock. Had I denied Alberta's spirit for mine?

Spring is overwhelming. During this time Alberta is marked by the arrival of the snowbirds. In addition to the birds are the mammals that emerge from their hibernation. Given this awakening about Alberta, there exists a moment whence not only the woods shake off old snow, moreover, entire communities of species enter – collectively - into a higher state of consciousness. Although we cannot measure this and its effects on our human experience, it is the belief of Richard and myself that such a change in the natural rhythm is not only felt

physically, but of course (and by this very nature) emotionally also. On this, we might present a counterpoint.

A reductionist approach might only consider the role that vitamin D plays in concert with dopamine: we are not happy *per se*; we experience epiphenomena according to the modulation of neurotransmitters and their feedback processes accordingly. An extension of this challenge would be the assertion that: therefore "we" as Albertans share by proximity the increased probability that a rush of vitamin D in the face of higher prevalence of seasonal affective disorder presents for us an illusion of shared experience, shared spirit. To take this further, however, we ought to consider the essence of the fundamental forces of which we are beginning to consider and speak to. Is it not the truth that when we reduce the experience of interaction between two or more entities in nature the result is binary: either attraction or repulsion? Is it fair to associate the migratory behaviors and destinations of waterfowl with the force of gravity or the strong nuclear force? Is Alberta to the Goose the same as Newton's head to the apple? To this end, there are other destinations in this country to which the goose returns; it is not the Canada Goose without national justification after all. Thus, when we embark on a reductionist deconstruction of our station, we lose the poetry, the spirit. Not least, we lose the authenticity too. That is, when we re-introduce conscious experience to our Albertan experience (and Albertan spirit) we ought to consider our context, our plight.

When we see and hear the geese in the spring we are not unique in our geographic plight. However, when we recall what the goose represents (spring) we acknowledge too our prior position (winter). At this point, our experience is narrowed down to something closer to that which is uniquely Albertan. That is, we are now in a place where we experience the dialectic between anticipation for spring and memory of winter. Moreover, both anticipation and recollection draw from both memory and hope. We remember both the reality of a cold, dark winter and that of warmer days to come. We recall the solitude and introspection that characterize a space whence we are often conscious of survival. Our passage from winter into spring is tantamount to transcending the summit of Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs. A pyramid (or mountain) is comprised of lower tiers, our basic needs. As winter relaxes its grip, we are escorted upwards on this mountain – to a place where food, clothing and shelter are less of a concern. In Alberta, this happens quickly. In Chinook country it is instant. The spiritual experience of spring is a movement upward to higher needs. When we are less concerned with shelter and food (something that ought to concern even the most urbane of Albertans in a January deep freeze) we transcend this stage and experience the next: love. Richard's description of Alberta resonates for me as a love song. Alberta's spirit is here in this song as it is the abundance, the optimism, the resilience that manifests as a most potent spring fever for its flora and fauna.

Chapter 8: Summer

Our summer is our mania. We live according to our daylight. We work hard, we play hard. We endure the heat, we wait for rain. There is drought. We smell forests ablaze. We reconnect with the sun.

"I've read it many times over that nary is there an atheist in a foxhole." Winston smiled as he regaled me with some of the details that made his career in Alberta as a Lineman profoundly memorable. Winston was a descendant of Alberta's homesteaders. Like Sid Marty, Winston's family came northwest by North Dakota (prior to this, Ireland) in the hope that what the CPR was the genuine article. Winston was born in Portland, Oregon immediately after WWII. His father was a WWII veteran who would later join the police force and assume the position of Chief at High Level, AB. Growing up in Alberta's north, Winston learned the value of hard work.

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"Have you experienced spirit, or God, in the wilderness, here in Alberta? What was this like?" I asked Winston.

"I can recall vividly one time we are out repairing a downed line, north of Redwater. Back in those days, you relied on the rubber handles and paper towel…."

"Paper towel?" I interrupted.

"The roll of paper towel was a sort of joke as we would bring it along in order to wipe down our rubber handles as often, it would still be raining hard when we got to the wreckage. Anyway, this job in Redwater was remarkable. We got there as the remains of the pole was still smoldering. When I say remains, I mean there was about 2 feet only that remained above ground – the rest of that pole had exploded under the lightening strike."

"It sounds like something that would test your faith –or, at least your wits." I mused.

"Oh it was a test alright. And, yet, it was fascinating because despite the immanence of death, it was with awe that I recognized the beauty around me. That energy is absolutely humbling and it's a reminder that we are not very significant under God's hands."

As Winston shared his story, I thought about an experience I had in the storm last July.[26] I find it interesting that both he and I experienced the moment whence there is tension between fear and awe, when we question our sanity in the face of our (absurd) indecision. To contemplate the virtue of remaining in the

eye of a prairie thunderstorm is to consider the possibility of a world less said observer. Alternatively, to leave this moment is to retreat into whatever our older patterns and behaviours might dictate. The storm's violence is a centering force: we become aware of immediacy and nothing else. In a sense, the storm offers a place of intense meditation – a Gethsemane within which we are remiss to lower our guard.

"How do you picture, or understand, Alberta in your mind?" I asked.

"There's a bridge near Dunvegan, a beautiful bridge that spans the Peace. I can recall, as a child, driving with my family across the bridge. I remember looking back as the car climbed the other side of the valley. The bridge remained in view for a while, it was surreal."

"I think I read about that bridge last summer," I interjected.

"Maybe," considered Winston. "Anyway, the image of that bridge has remained with me for all these years later. I think that it served as a statement for me: that we had arrived as a province, that we had become open for rapid development."

Winston had mentioned something about time spent in the U.S. Specifically in New Orleans and Denver respectively, at the end of his career in the power industry.

"You left New Orleans only one year before Hurricane Katrina…What was it like living in a place where that sort of devastation is always on the horizon, the periphery?" I asked.

"Well I have to say that people of New Orleans have accepted their location. The power companies and the emergency response teams were well trained in the event of a Katrina-sized catastrophe." Winston paused thoughtfully, then continued, "I'm sure it affected the way people went about things…"I thought about Ben's observation on the Albertan work ethic. I interrupted Winston:

"I wonder if there is a difference between the work ethic of two places like Alberta and Louisiana…"

"I'm sure of it." Offered Winston.

I continued: "Here in Alberta, we strive to get the job done during the days of maximum light and warmth – it has been that way, it's deep in our consciousness. When I think about New Orleans – and Hurricane Katrina – I have to imagine that for people who live in regions for natural disasters are common, there is an effect on how the end product is understood – with respect to both what that product is and when it gets done."

"That's very interesting. I can remember going out sometimes in minus 40 in Alberta. When I told that to our friends in New Orleans they couldn't even imagine."

"It's funny how adaptable we are."

In your opinion, what role might nature play in the church, in this next century?

"I think that this is the way we are going. Winston started. I've seen all sorts of movements, all kinds of faiths in fact. I feel that within the realm of the moderate, all religions are striving for the same thing – they even have a common message. I think that if we can identify with nature – our nature – we will be able to build on our similarities."

Chapter 9: Autumn

Our Autumn is short, golden, unpredictable, windy, the last of the season's noises and smells prior to winter's sleep.

> *"I think that the transition from winter to spring in Alberta is difficult. There is so much build-up to the Christmas season and then we have so long before spring comes. I mean the transition from Summer to Fall is totally different – it's beautiful and there's that renewal that characterizes that time of year."*
>
> – Interview with Christy.

In much of my reading, reflections and interviews I experienced affirmations that what I was in search of (an authentically Albertan spiritual experience) was real. My interview with Christy would challenge this notion. Christy's message occasionally offered a counterpoint to any premature conclusions I might have had on the subject: original idea. When I asked her about prairie, she crooned for Manitoba. Her thoughts on the mountains were that they were indeed majestic, however not wholly dependent on the subject, Alberta.

I knew that Christy was originally from Saskatchewan, with earlier Manitoban roots. Nonetheless, I wanted to engage someone who offered another "outsider's" perspective on this thing called Alberta. Furthermore, her connection to Manitoba-Saskatchewan lay in a rich Mennonite history (something that I hoped would contribute to the discussion on the nature's role

for the Church in the 21st century.) The turning point in our conversation occurred at the question on behavioral changes made as a result of a spiritual experience. For the adult Christy, avid gardener, the cause would also be the effect. As I listened to Christy discuss gardening, I became aware that the contextual malaise of our winter setting for this interview was – although not a contrived depression – at least a factor on the difference between the Christy of December and the same woman, only three months earlier. I thought about her allusions to family history and stories of harvest. There seemed to be something autumnal in her spirit.

"Gardening…I love it. I love seeing the fruits of my labours. …The idea that I can provide for my family; that I can connect to the land. It's definitely spiritual….It probably started that way when I was a kid. I don't feel as strongly her but I'm starting to. Now that we are landscaping, input, the aesthetic quality of this. – That's how I appreciate things…is through that aesthetic dimension."

"How does that change for you with the winter months?"

"Oh, Winter's hard! I mean, I love winter. I love the clean snow…hoar frost on the trees in the park."

"Spiritually, I feel that there is almost a disconnected connection during the Winter….The artificial interaction/recreational activities that we participate in during the winter: tobogganing, building a snow man…these things are temporary. They're man made because we feel that we have to interact.

Whereas, with gardening – growing…We went on to discuss winter's short daylight hours here – how this is difficult, depressing. Christy added:

"There's no sense of triumph here either! We don't get hammered with the snow like they do in the East. We get cold and snow – but it just doesn't get THAT cold. When you live in a place like Winnipeg, you feel like you've conquered something after winter."

This triumph she spoke of points us to the notion of epiphenomena, by-products. More and more, the research is revealing that the truth is in the byproducts of our Alberta. What started as a superficial consideration of place – analyzed according to compartmentalized features: mountains, prairie, parkland, badlands…evolved into the consideration of corollaries. Here, we consider latitude, elevation, and weather systems begin to converge on something unique thus. Now, while holding to these possibilities at the same time that they are challenged by this interview, we consider the third stage in the Albertan evolution: its effect on its people. Hence, we consider seasonal daylight and its epiphenomenon: *Seasonal Affective Disorder*, as yet another factor of the Albertan experience. For every event or thing that we observe or participate in, there follows our process of internalization. In the example of triumph through winter's teeth, we adopt our past-oriented time perspective. Spirit is engaged as we consider our cohort – the people who experienced too this thing we (necessarily) shared. Alternatively, we engage our future-oriented time

perspective when we allow the premature titillation during an Albertan Chinook; the misplaced spring fever that accompanies thawing temperatures despite a mid-winter calendar date reminder us that this too shall pass before we can consider this a true evocation of a springtime memory. Regardless, the irony of this reflection – in its solitary introspection – is such that it points toward a need for more dialogue. Perhaps it is a dialogue on these epiphenomena that might solidify an honest sense of self-in-place.

"When I look around, I don't see Albertans; I see a transient population of Easterners and Westerners due to economic prosperity."

I thought about this. It reminded me of my own cynicism given the right mood. Furthermore, this statement reminded me of the search for the historical Albertan, the archetypal character of our history and how tempting it is to retro-ject a sort of simple caricature onto a historical context. Christy's frustration with disconnectedness reminded me of my own plight as the alienated one. My World One Theologian was taking stock as I considered a viable path to *epiphania*. Evidently we were lacking in our dialogical institutions; or, our dialogical institutions were eschewing the Albertan quality of our spirit.

What role does nature play in the Church, in this century?

"I think as people are becoming more aware of the environment - and our role in the environment – the church will definitely play a more important role. We're talking about a values shift – and as much as we may dismiss the

church's relevance nowadays, it still has deep roots in our value system. I don't attend church today – largely because I don't feel that sort of connection here – however, if I could find one or something that kind of hit those ideals for me – cause that's where my spirituality lies – I would definitely go. At the risk of becoming obsolete, the church needs to go that way!

"I think we are in the peak of the cycle right now. I don't know that this is working out for everyone. I know that a lot of people are doing Yoga or trying meditation because Oprah tells them that it's a good thing to do…but I don't think that it's sustainable – the way we are living outside of spirit as a postmodern society."

"Nature allows us out from this digital world. That's how I need to relax – and I notice that it's getting harder over the last few years even."

Chapter 10: Seasonal Transcendence

In the Rockies, by Sangmok Lee

In a conifer forest where everything is alive
With rising clouds wrapped around the mountain colours
Blessed mountains approach me and open their eyes thus for
Six years.
In every detail looking back to the splendid green summer,
There is the sound of the wind sawing the winter tree branches
I still couldn't finish painting the white smile of winter.

(Goyette, 91)

"My most vivid memory of a spiritual experience in Alberta would've been the time I was hiking in Kananaskis in '97." Recalled Phong. "It was one of those days…we started out in Peter Lougheed Park when the sun was shining bright. There's something about the mountains though…I mean, it's true what they say about dressing in layers – no matter the season. On this occasion, I remember we experienced all four seasons in the span of fifteen minutes. It was crazy – the clouds were moving very quickly. What began with blue skies turned

overcast, then heavier clouds followed. The wind and sun together really made it feel like we were over-dressed for the occasion – but then…it started to snow. I guess I didn't think we were that high up. I should have known though….I wiped out several times on a few slopes before we got back to parking lot." Phong trailed off, it seemed like his recollection had become even more tangible for him.

"I remember walking through the trees to a clearing, maybe a cirque or some kind of mountain term… I told my friends to wait up for me – that I had to go back and just sit down at one of the trees."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Oh nothing much," Phong continued. "It was just a perfect moment – something that I wasn't expecting."Phong went on to share that prior to this outing, he and his friend had moved to Calgary together, to go to school. Part of this transition would include a search for new places: restaurants, coffee shops, music stores, and churches.

Phong, a Lao Buddhist by descent, grew up in amongst friends in the miniature enclave that was Wainwright's Southeast Asian community. These were a group of first and second generation immigrants who had a hand in several of the small businesses and restaurants in Eastern Alberta's bible belt. As such, Phong and friends were socialized according to not only contemporary popular culture (albeit according to a rural twist) but also, they were influenced

by the variations on the Protestant theme that characterized this part of the province. “The Asians” - as they would come to refer to themselves as – were Evangelical Free, Nazarene, Lutheran, even Mormon. Phong was of the Lutheran ilk; as such, his post-secondary career began in Camrose, at Augustana (formerly a Lutheran college). In his second year of university, Phong moved to Calgary where he lived with a friend and a third roommate, a Korean man on exchange through the Engineering faculty.

“I had just joined a young adult group through the Lutheran church. Before this, my friend had introduced me to the whole Baptist thing…I wasn’t feeling it. Anyway…what is it here…oh yeah, the church group was great, as was the new city, but it wasn’t until that moment in the mountains that afternoon when I finally felt what I think I was searching for – peace.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Peace. I felt like everything was fine…perfect – and not because I had any new answers or direction. Instead, I just felt secure about how things were, before me, at that time.”

“And you attribute that to the wilderness?”

“Definitely,” Phong continued. The wilderness on that day completely shook my senses if you know what I mean. I sort of lost touch with my usual sense of time and place….I’m sure the crazy four-seasons-weather played a part

in that. But also…the setting itself – it's so different from the city. Each place as a setting offers a sense of threat and – at the same time – majesty. It's like I had to be taken out of my element to realize more about myself."

"I think I can relate to what you're saying… I wonder if you see a place for nature in the Church in the 21st century."

"I think that it's important that everyone has a sense of place. One of the most spiritual places I've been to is in Cambodia. I've wondered about the accessibility to these spiritual places here in Canada. Here, for a connection to be spiritual, it's harder to rely on the relics of a civilization. I think that what the natives have with the earth is beautiful."

"So do you think that earth-spirituality is something that might take form in the church of the 21st century?"

"I hope so."

Part IV: Pilgrimmage

Chapter 11

"You want to know where weather comes from? I can tell you – it's the Columbia Icefields…I can literally watch the systems emerge from there and know that it will be cloudy at home tomorrow." – Richard

The view through the rear window of our minivan betrayed the truth and scope about this city and its rapid growth. As we were pointed south to Fort MacLeod and beyond, Calgary receded, shrank. On that scorching day in July, 1991, as I sat in the backseat of the family's Mazda MPV that was headed to Ontario via a scenic, southern route, I felt the foundational impressions of the grieving process deep in my soul. I recall watching the Calgary Tower and the Petro Canada building sinking in prairie quick sand as I resolved to return to this place.

For some time now – years even – I have experienced a recurring dream. I digress. Perhaps it is more of a recurring motif than a dream: I'm driving my car, often alone. In the dream there is a landscape and there is an impression. The landscape is Albertan: sometimes I'm in the mountains, other times I'm on the prairie. The impression represents a tension between space and place. Often I am of the impression in the dream that I know where exactly I am. Sometimes the narrator of the dream tells me that it is south western Alberta – the front range of the Rockies near Pincher Creek; other times I'll be driving through the Peace Country, en route to Grande Prairie. In each dream, although I have knowledge of space, there is a longing for place: even though there is familiarity,

there is also xenophobia; there is a profound sense of loss as I feel far from home.

Part of the experience for someone whose formative years is defined by regular, cross country moves comes from a need to make sense of loss. I can recall many weeks after our move in that summer of 1991, when I would dream about mundane details of life in Calgary, life before Ottawa. I associate this phenomenon to the grieving experience: we dream about those people who have departed in death. We desire closure, reason. As such, our mind conjures the sublime; details that, hitherto, we have been unconscious of. In this experience, there is a tendency to defer to magic. We attribute impressions and messages to some other-worldly sense or power. In recent decades, during the second period of the search for the historical Jesus, there has emerged a suggestion that perhaps what the disciples experienced after Jesus' death was not resurrection, but instead, a collective hallucination, a shared dream. What I don't like about this is the narrowing of scope. I believe there comes a point when analysis enters into the realm of shameless self-promotion: a place where reason eschews context, where evidence is devoid of myth. Meaning requires myth as this is the middle space between phenomena and its interpretation. When the pursuit of evidence shifts into a celebration of an isolated truth, we embrace cowardice. We reveal a fear to embark upon a much deeper investigation of meaning and the experience of its interpretation and communication. To reduce the resurrection to binary logic: it did or did not

happen is to deny the history of a myth that runs deeper and longer than a single point, just two thousand years ago. Out of this observation is the acknowledgement of the Post-Modern plight. I feel that in this period, marked by the infinite regress of subjectivity and interpretation, there exists a desire for authenticity.

In the same way that a paper about the historical Jesus during the *Schweitzer era* may have suffered from a sort of myopia in the face of facts, a similarly *modern* paper on the Albertan experience may have ignored the contrived nature of borders, treaties, and other proper nouns. I believe that at this point in history, we are interested in authenticity; our values have shifted thus.

The authentic Alberta (the truth and reality about a place that does exist and would have existed separate from the neighboring eco-system known today as British Columbia) starts with a trickle of water, under a mass of ice, on the back of the continental divide. Robert Kroetsch wrote about Alberta's postcard beauty as it exists, specifically in the mountains and Badlands. I agree with Kroetsch on this. In isolation, the mountains of Alberta risk the fate of all roadside attractions: an inevitable deflation under the weight of their own mythology.

In the summer of 1991, we made a point of visiting Mount Rushmore, South Dakota. The faces of the presidents – although a marvel to behold – were,

in fact, much smaller than I had imagined. I imagine that this is true for many wonders once experienced in the flesh: there is a moment of reconciliation between what was held in anticipation in the mind, and what is experienced by the senses.

Today, as I climb the Ice fields with my family. One generation's removal is marked by the fact that this ice sheet is receding – today it is smaller than it used to be, than I imagined it. Nonetheless, this is the peril of the exclusivity of postcard beauty: we assess the immediate as a whole without taking into account the periphery, the system, the implication, and the collective accordingly.

Today, it is the trickle that I have come to experience. Although this is merely a portion of my personal dreamscape, I must concede that any portion is just that, (a fraction is a division question frozen in time.) The glacier is a priori to the watersheds in which my entire dreamscape inhabits. I have chosen to come here as a result of chasing a dream. As such, I have been intentional about experiencing Alberta – as a place and a people – this year more than ever before. At the outset of this project, I had some ideas about a pilgrimage of sorts. I wanted to experience something real and Albertan. This took me all over the province in several different capacities: climber, storm chaser, gardener, photographer, and interviewer. To begin at the glacier is to play the tape in reverse as it were. From here, we can re-imagine the forces that worked against

those heading north and west. The glaciers at the Ice fields are the mirror through which the life giving forces of this place can gaze backward in space and time on those who would be known as discoverers. My search for the authentic has brought me to this place where I believe I can commune with nature and, moreover, ask myself: what happens when I play the tape in reverse? What is this place when I start from nature and move according to this rhythm, contrary to that of political and economic circumstances? Invariably, the former has become my authentic plight, the post modern essence of this thing.

At the outset of this project I intended to engage this forth part alone. Several times throughout the year I did just this. Late last fall, however, I found myself reflecting on the latest series of my driving dreams. I sought a remedy. Perhaps I needed to slow things down in my life, get out my car and embrace the pause that occurs when we suddenly, intentionally, move out of locomotion and into being. I suppose this is a relinquishing of control, en embrace of faith. Furthermore, I wondered if it was prudent that I reverse the solitude. I still believe that I ought to have solitary moments as per prayer and meditation. However, was I wrong about how long I needed to be alone? Was this a theme upon which years of recurring images would tease me? I use the word ‘tease’ here with much intention. Although these are not nightmares there is, however, something uncomfortable within the impression itself. Have I been afraid that I may never arrive at something I can call home? I sought to confront these impressions, fears, and questions. I decided to include my family.

This dream recurs based on the landscape – it is place, not people that make for the impression that I continue to return to this state in my consciousness. Here, in the twilight as I write this, less than twelve hours since my trek at Athabasca, I find myself contemplating the authenticity of the experience – this time, however, from a slightly different perspective. The context of the setting was such that I can hardly believe it unfolded the way it did.

Late in the morning on February 9th, 2011, I parked the family car, the Mazda Tribute, and asked my wife if she wanted to come with me.

"You go, I'll feed Rowan." She said.

Rowan, our second son, was three months old this day. Our other son, Haydn, was in the back, in his car seat, asleep.

"I wonder what he's dreaming about." I mused.

The day saw virtually no traffic on the parkway. Moreover, Angela and I had been surprised by how few people we had seen while in Jasper for two days previous. The reality is, however, it was during the middle of the week, in early February, after another fresh snowfall that found ourselves enjoying a mid-winter break. There were times in our past when we, like many others, made good on promises for warmer climates during this time of year. This was anything but. Nonetheless, there is a value in our society to "get away from"

when seeking vacationer status. Perhaps this was more of a get away to (Alberta.) Stress on the mountain roads is betrayed by the proportion to which we value the prevalence of passing lanes amidst the bother of the next vehicle inching toward our windshield. This week there was no stress. I got out of the car.

Something I started when I began this thesis was intentional listening while outdoors. As a musician I live in a loud environment. As an urbanized Canadian I live in a loud environment. When I walked up to the first snow-covered marker which used to indicate glacial recession, I listened: Silence.

Like many Albertans (and traveler alike) I have been to the Columbia Icefields in the spirit of postcard beauty. The glacier all the posterity desired for those of us wishing to conquer the world one quick photo at a time. (I'm thinking about the absurdity of the scene when in the Louvre, at the Mona Lisa, where I stood watching people, packed in the room, apparently happy to point only their cameras from raised hands in the general direction of the exhibit. It seems that the flipside of voyeurism's wanting-to-be-there is the unfettered desire to demonstrate, to prove to others that we-were-there, too.) The other cars, trucks, buses, and bikes were absent today. I could have been Jack Torrence staring back at the Overlook Hotel in The Shining according to this setting.

To the east, an eddy of wind found a spruce tree amongst many where the tree line meets the till. The upward spiral of wind made itself apparent, if

only for a moment, as it started from the bottom of the tree, working its way to the top, unwrapping the latest seasonal accent of white powder. A candy cane stripped of its stripes, one ascending revolution per second, bore witness to the otherwise absence of wind. No wind at this glacier is rare. This was the silence.

The midday sun was held in perfect southern balance between the two peaks that suspend the toe of the glacier. The clouds boiled over the top, rolling down the moraine, sometimes outlining the obscured sun before a moment of blue. In this moment a person is made aware of a 360 degree view. I wonder if Albertans otherwise take for granted the extent to which we can see around us – on or above the ground – given our normal geographic distribution. The view from the trailhead complements the Alberta experience in that the observer stands, elevated in relationship to the immediate surroundings – at a radius of several hundred meters. This forms a natural pedestal from which we can ponder the effects of decades of receding ice. Beyond this, however, in all direction, the elevation gains momentum in all directions. The surrounding mountain ranges offer a sense of both the immediate and the infinite. There is stability and assurance offered by the mountains. However, at the same time, there is also fear and doubt as one ponders the implications of infinite ice and rock. I believe that this is where the mountains offer a parallel spiritual experience to that of the ocean. Despite what we now know about geography, both features can be daunting in their apparent infinity; it is easy to forget that they too have an ending. In this space it is human to seek reassurance. I looked

back at my family. *My son has got to see this*, I thought. I went back to the truck and found that Haydn was awake. I bundled him according to his mother's wishes and asked him usual question given the occasion:

"Do you want to walk or Daddy to carry you?"

I carried my son beyond the deeper snow, the stuff which masks an otherwise uneven terrain. When we got to the first ridge, I let him – according to his insistence – walk on his own. As I watched Haydn walk before the glacier, I thought about my first time seeing this. It was different to be sure. When I was child, it was my parents' first time seeing this too. The experience thus was more of mutual exploration; we were all tourists. Today I felt proud about my prior experiences with and knowledge of this place. I was excited to be able to watch my son take this in without worrying about my own experience.

"What colour is that Haydn?" I asked him.

"It's blue." Haydn responded.

It was. This year there was a cross section I had never seen in the past. Perhaps it was new, perhaps I was just learning to better use my eyes.

There is much opinion shrouding the myth of the glacier – especially in the early 21st century. There is a tendency to use the glacier as a literal marker according to its recession. We observe the dramatic distances by which this juggernaut has retreated. On this, we ascribe human values and human folly. To

what effect has global warming influenced the rate of retreat? What will become of the watersheds in the next century? Will there be a time in the near future, as there was in the mid 1800's when the glacier pauses in its retreat for a few years?

The subtext in such rhetoric speaks to our values and our orientation in time. Are we future-oriented or past-oriented? Are we optimistic or pessimistic? Part of the Alberta experience is such that we might realize that the present is that which is both immanent and infinite. As in the moment when you can feel yourself blink as you anticipate that flash of lightening while in the eye of a summer thunderstorm, the spaces of rugged wilderness also offer refuge from past or future orientations. In his interview, Ben commented on this wilderness – its ruggedness and immediacy. Perhaps this is what he meant. The present moment of this glacier reveals that beyond the human-ascribed values and tangents, there is truth. What is real about the glacier today is the new cross section before us. To call it blue is to act out, to dismiss according to an inability to articulate what is really is. Haydn's recognition of colour – blue – is also my ignorance of description. I would have to simply take a picture instead. I took also, a picture of Haydn looking to the ground at his feet.

As the glacier retreats, what remains immediately is the till. Till of an outwash plane is not unlike sand on a beach. If we are dismissive, it is a by-product, a means to an end. As the beach is desired for the sake of the ocean,

the glacier is desired for its ice. Tourism here is not based on packing buses for people to drive through an open-air gravel mine. Is this the collateral damage of something otherwise beautiful?

Not according to my son. Haydn has a tendency at this age to refer to many things as beautiful and the rocks at his feet were no exception. I was hoping I wouldn't have to go into my national parks legal speech about removing even rocks from places like Jasper – (the boy is only two at this point…) Fortunately for me, a tantrum was averted as Haydn's young attention span was redirected to the snow around him. In a sense, the rocks of the till are very similar to those we might find in other, less desirable destinations. Similarly, the existence and colour of the sky, when applied as a backdrop to the jagged immediacy of a mountains thrust, is revered for its drama despite its being same sky we experience in our otherwise daily existence. Thus, we have the inverse of postcard beauty and its effect here is Alberta. It would seem that what these postcard destinations offer us above all else is the reminder that the wilderness elsewhere is also magnificent. The awe of the glacier offers affirmation for the till; these too have an incredible story.

My experience at the glacier in February was such that it was not a long hike as I've done in the past. Nor, was it aboard the diesel ice climbers as per my first time. Nonetheless, if I allow it, this time, a moment when I was able to take

a new generation of loved ones together and re-imagine witnessing this with new eyes, could be my most memorable.

Ian Tyson alluded to the last great west in his book, *The Long Trail*. I think about how I have engaged this line of thinking. To be sure, I could lament the retreating ice at the Columbia Ice fields for something that younger generations will otherwise never understand. The truth as I understand it is such that Alberta's spirit is best sought via its enclaves of authenticity. Here, there is evidence of a consciousness – a consciousness of seasonal resilience, climatic hardiness, and hibernatory introspection. Furthermore, when we find ourselves searching for the authentic, we experience the euphoria that is living in the moment.

Part V

It's March again. This year springtime appears hesitant in the face of an obstinate, cold, winter. Christianity's holiest season is nearing; Lent is upon us. Mindful of the posterity entailed in a New Year's resolution, I ponder the next forty days: is it about surrender or recommitment? In surrender I have accepted that certain things take a while to correct. Apathy isn't new to youth; nor is bias for the aged. The kids still have a hard time with attentiveness during the national anthem; but then, was I any better? On a ski hill, one week previous to this, I spoke with an elder who reminded me (after his teaching career) that: "They have always been the same way – they certainly haven't gotten worse."

I take solace in this. This reminds me that the status quo is ultimately for me to challenge; I can change. At this point in this project, I wish to consider the process of change, or evolution: who changes and how are we challenged to do so?

Chapter 12: Gethsemane

> Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "Are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak. Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning a third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"
>
> Mark 14: 37 – 42

The account of the Garden of Gethsemane is given Markan priority according to New Testament scholars. As such, it reflects a message of, first, urgency and secondly, admonishment. Mark is a brief Gospel, perhaps penned during a time of war in the mid-first century C.E.[27] Throughout this gospel, there is a tone of exasperation ascribed to Jesus toward the disciples. It is at this moment in Gethsemane when exasperation climaxes and gives way to the moment of surrender. To interpret this passage literally, the disciples are thrice victims of narcolepsy. However, it would appear that the repeated theme of Jesus' admonishment of his disciples is in fact congruent with the earlier parables herewith. There is much in Mark on vision, sight. Gethsemane follows both Bethsaida and Bartimaeus as yet another account whence vision – be it the absence of blindness or the opposite of sleep – serves as a motif. If we allow

vision to represent a higher state of consciousness, then it becomes clearer the message we are imparted: Jesus requires that we are elevated to a state in our consciousness wherein we all realize the immanence of God.

Jesus' message in Gethsemane is analogous to the wilderness experience afforded to us in Alberta. As people in a province, a region not unlike many others, we are, like the disciples, at risk of becoming ignorant. Our wealth by way of resources is the monetary, fleeting temptation that brings many to this place if only to realize a portion of an historic economic promise. To this end, we might insulate ourselves with material, tantamount to the objects of Rita McKeowan's *Wilderment* exhibit whereby fields and ecosystems are blended by compromise in the milieu of suburbs and infrastructure. Alternatively, if we listen to Christ's appeal we might realize Alberta's admonishment upon our collective consciousness. We do not exist apart from the setting within which we participate. In Alberta, our setting is unique according to the combination of its latitude, elevation, weather systems, and ecosystems. I believe that this was the essence of Rev. Martin Holdom's journal entries one hundred years previous when he infused many an anecdote with his enthusiastic fervor for this new-found, natural egalitarianism.

Like the gospel of Mark, there is a tone of immediacy in Alberta's wilderness. As Ben noted, "In Australia, you have to drive for a while to see a variety of wildlife; in Alberta, the wildlife is right there!"

It is a fact that the headwaters of our five major watersheds begin on the continental divide, and, by this right, flow east not west. Essentially, we are Alberta because the slopes also descend in the lee-ward direction out into the foothills, parkland, prairie, and forest. There is authenticity too in the temperatures that challenge us during any six month span in time. It is challenging to navigate the globe for other places where temperature predictably fluctuates upwards of 80 degrees Celsius from January to July. If this is only a by-product, then it is so because of the equally dramatic contrast of sunlight from one solstice to the next. What the elements offer by way of threatening temperatures (on both ends of the scale) and violent weather is the same immediacy as the bear in the tree, with her cubs nearby. We are fortunate that our ecosystem is such that we continually talk about it. It is through our dialogue with Alberta, with Albertans, that we become conscious to the truth of this space's ministry.

The combination of Alberta's seasons experienced and the vantage point we have here of the shifting sky alert us not only to the next profound weather system, but, more importantly, to the awareness that time is organic, precious. The elevated sense of time[28] that we come to embrace as Albertans is also a theological gift. As Jesus admonished the disciples against slumbering into temptation, Alberta is here to remind us – in our human experience and participation – that time is not as mechanical as that which is otherwise reflected through the lifeless face of the modern digital clock. Our Albertan dialogue is rich

with allusions and metaphor on the subject time; our theological departure accordingly is whence we discuss our relative position to living time, not mechanical time.

Living time is the cyclical element which keeps us optimistic during the extended deep-freeze well into March. Living time marks the resilience of the natural world as it shakes off the results of extreme weather conditions as would a child rub the sleep from his eye after a long, warm sleep. When we become attuned to this, we, like Richard indicated on his tendency to either walk or run, engage in the rhythm of our natural setting. The result thus is the act of living in the moment. When we live in the moment – each one to the next – we enter into a space beyond false deadlines, chronological demarcations, postcard destinations and temptation to adhere thus.

Our ecosystem, like any other is our kingdom. Furthermore, our ecosystem, like few others, provides an opportunity for the human awareness to realize the relationship between cyclical time and (what we as humans default to as we become more civilized) absolute time. It is in living time that the patterns of a spirit emerge. This is not to suggest that we as Albertans ought to only discuss the weather, bumper crops, and daylight hours. However, we discover something true about our spirit when we realize the meta-narrative: that these phenomena we are discussing, operate to take us out of ourselves and into a fellowship, a congregation.

Conclusion:

Alberta is a conflation of authentic factors, such as latitude, elevation, and natural features, and conceptual factors such as opportunity, hope, and freedom. The epiphenomenon then is this almost Markan immediacy that stirs us from our postmodern slumber; we realize our belief system, our theology in the reconciliation of previous ignorance. In a space whence absolutes are decried for archaic relics of a by-gone modern era, there is something authentic that challenges the temptation to relativism that otherwise characterizes our human, civilized experiences along the way. Until this project and the work entailed, I lacked a creed, a theology essentially. I was, in the Lacanian sense, an atheist seeking justification. I believe I needed to embrace something absolute, despite my sympathies for all that is relative and post-modern.

"So is ecology a *capital T* truth for you Andrew?" Asked Deborah as the last few students returned from another sun-drenched lunch hour that August afternoon at St. Stephen's College.

I hadn't discovered the term *Eco-theology* until I had read Sallie MacFague's book, *A New Climate for Theology.* Eco-theology has been my cornerstone for faith since experiencing the crisis which originally precipitated my entering this program. I suppose I can find at least humour in Lacan's words, "The only true atheists are the theologians." (Zizek, 60) This resonates for me as it has been a combination of unchecked questioning, curiosity, doubt, and the guilt that might accompany this awareness that brought me to this place. However, once in this place, I would discover that this pattern of thoughts and feelings is not unlike those of other *World One Theologians*, according to W. Paul Jones' work. Essentially, I was lost in an alienated universe until the point in which I could articulate a system of theology that worked for me.[29] As a result of this realization a new hermeneutic has emerged for me.

When John Ralston Saul penned, "We are Metis nation", I think that he was suggesting that our spirit is interdependent with the mix in which we participate. Tantamount to the role of multiculturalism in our province, our country, is the role we ascribe to our wilderness. Albertans – by nature – are the personification of a natural setting that links us to not an abstract group of "forefathers" but instead, an ongoing story, a heritage of men and women whose character is defined by the spirit of a land and the dynamism of the weather; much greater in God and wilderness than anything else. However, as this has taken this author considerable time to realize this for himself, we might

forgive Rupert Chawner Brooke for his first impressions, students for their apathetic innocence, and Mark's Disciples for their unconsciousness.

The spirit of Alberta can be missed if we fall for the temptations of postcard beauty or economic promises. The soul of this country is apparent when we realize that we not only participate in, but are also a product of our latitude, elevation, and the rhythm of the seasons; their expectation. Naturally, this will take time, and, although time is elusive as a concept unto itself, it is something that we can appreciate uniquely. That is our awakening. This too is received with awe and wonder.

Afterword

"Hold on to that Lariat!" Terry shouted.

There are moments in life when the immediacy of the situation betrays your sense of comfort and certainty; it points laughingly at what you were doing on moments prior to this, when *this* did not yet exist. Terry was a rancher in eastern Alberta. It was late in the spring of 1996 and I was about to participate in a western rite of passage.

Holding the lariat which was tied to the bull's leg was apparently my job. Only five minutes earlier I had simply agreed to eat a prairie oyster. However, given my naiveté at such a point, time, in minutes, is hardly a fair measure of *before* and *after*. In this case, five minutes meant innocence lost; the death knell of an entire paradigm. Who I would become, as a result of that day, would change profoundly, if only years later.

Because of the efficient design of this cattle squeeze, the bull was largely immobilized; still he moved. The whole contraption shook with the ground as this magnificent beast made every attempt to kick free. The effort was evident, not only in the resistance on my lariat, which could likely be played as a guitar string at that point, but also for the sake of the blood and mucous which poured from the distressed animal's nose. As I considered swatting at flies near my face, I watched the eyes of the bull as the rancher grabbed the scrotum with one gloved hand. The other hand held a knife that looked more like a box cutter:

small, yet devastatingly sharp. As Terry made the incision along the length of the scrotum, the animal snorted both violence and submission as the bloody testicles fell into the container below. I'm sure something else followed; something surgically necessary, between excision and release, between bull and steer. However, I recall preoccupations on commitment: would I still be able to eat the prairie oyster?

When I started this thesis, I chose to enter into a commitment to change. I have often reflected back on that castration. I took this as a point of departure. As an act of change, of eco-theological, personal action, I adopted a vegetarian diet. I say this not as vain-glory. I simply wanted to see if I could change in a way that would benefit not only the ecological realm of my children, but also the authenticity of my theological experience. For the sake of authenticity, my project needed to have a personal legacy – far greater than the results bound by posterity and pride. My eco-theology is linked to the earth I know, or thought I knew. It seems my childhood images – the snapshots of archetypes – were romanticized[30]. Thus, I want to participate today in the authenticity of a place that, by nature of latitude, elevation, proximity to the continental divide – and its watersheds – is unto itself a unique ecosystem with a spirit that can be reflected through its inhabitants. However, such participation will likely require a sacrifice on my part.

During my research at the beginning of this project, I discovered more information on the state of our food industry. I started to ask myself where my ethics were on this matter. What I chose was based on a cross section of theory and experiences. I decided that even if I were of the blessed minority of Albertan ranchers who embraced an organic approach to food production, I, based on prior experience, was incapable of pulling any more triggers or lariats. The idea of waking up, or becoming aware of my participation with this thing called wilderness, has become important.

This is where I live. In this space there are things that contribute to life and things that do not. I don't believe that it is morally superior to adopt a vegetarian diet for the sake of the environment. Instead, I believe that it is pertinent I become conscious of this space, Alberta. Moreover, we might base larger decisions, ethical ones, out of the impressions and experiences that are availed to us through our homeland – wherever that is. I suppose the Alberta advantage is such that we are given this opportunity to realize the nature of time as it is time in nature.

Appendix:

Theological Reflection on Chasing an Alberta Thunderstorm

July 30th, 2010:

I'm in the eye of a storm just north west of Spruce Grove, AB.

I'm trying to find a tornado. I remember this from my *Earth Sciences* course during my undergrad degree:

a) how to track a storm

b) remember to stay in the vehicle during lightning strikes

c) "Worst-last" storms - marked by hail and strong winds - tend to be more dangerous than those of the worst-first variety.

d) If you spot a tornado while driving, immediately drive at a right angle to the direction in which it is tracking.

I'm actually frightened. This would be one of those times when the theory of going after a storm – the daring image that I so badly want in the eyes of others – is squashed by another state of consciousness. Here, adrenaline sets the tone.

What am I doing? My wife and child are at home…I just drew a bath for my two-year old son. Luke-warm only, the bath water was infused with a lavender soap.

Calming for my little guy, who does not yet understand the consequence of letting mosquitoes suck from his precious flesh.

The mosquitoes are noteworthy this year. In fact, today, in the Journal, the political cartoon was by-passed for an image of a giant insect impaling a husband and wife: "See Honey, I told you they were bad this year!" Edmonton Journal, July 30th, 2010

We've had much rain this year, this season. It's been good for the garden, good for the farmers and good for the trees in the area. We have been dealing with drought conditions for the last ten years here in Alberta. Groundwater has reached a threateningly low level – critical mass to be sure. In any event, the mosquitoes are everywhere.

This past week, however, has seen the weather conditions that both the sun-bathers and the tomatoes have been waiting for: intense Alberta July heat. Days like this bring with them warm ground temperatures, one of the necessary conditions for violent weather. Any cooling aloft and the stage is set for what meteorologists refer to as "instability."

Here in Alberta, instability is marked by first, the high cirrus clouds that move in from the west. Next, beautiful, cotton-white clouds form, building on themselves like successive pots boiling over, one on top of the other until the system reaches the troposphere, almost 13 kilometers high. From a distance, the profile is stunning, tangible in its volume, and deceivingly benign looking.

Underneath this mass of pressure; below ten kilometers of swirling clouds is darkness. Here, at the leading edge of the storm, one experiences the sudden blast of the gust-front, followed immediately by the cool down draft. The down draft is that wall of cloud that can be seen in a distant storm, where it appears as though the sky and the ground are washed out in a dark grey mass; there is no separation between earth and sky here.

Upon feeling the cool air of the down draft, the rain follows seconds later. I've come to respect the storms where the rain falls in large, intermittent drops. Here is feels like nature toying with the earthbound, firing warning shots to the ground, little water balloons that explode on contact.

This is how it started today, only I sped things up by racing toward the eye as I could see it. Storms here usually track to the north of town through the Glory Hills. Today was no different –except this storm was strong, not tracking quickly. Smaller cells will bring the same phenomena, however with the promise of release by way of a blue sky that follows closely.

The strength of this storm was notable, the location of the lightning strikes kept occurring in what appeared to be the same spot, for minutes. This is where I was driving.

Tomorrow is my anniversary. I will have been married for six years at the time of writing this. Tomorrow is also the anniversary of Black Friday. July 31st 1987 saw an F4 tornado devastate Edmonton, Alberta. On the subject

anniversaries, this weekend, last year a violent storm blew a straight line through Stony Plain, AB, tracking southeast toward Camrose. Here, at the annual Big Valley Jamboree, darkness blew in faster than people could safely prepare for. Sadly, this event ended also in tragedy as one woman was killed by the collapse of the stage as a result of this wind.

Here in Alberta, in the mid summer, our weather can be frightfully violent.

I'm sitting in my truck, windshield wipers streaking the glass, my driver-side window now closed. I have a front seat view for this one. Often concerned about what others think, I am careful not to trespass on someone's property as I sit here, parked on the roadside. Instead of monopolizing a busy approach or sitting suspiciously on someone's driveway, I'm parked at a small turnout, marking a natural gas battery. Several vehicles race by me. My camera is out as to assuage any concerns that I am either stuck here against my will or, worse, that I might be one of those traffic cops, incognito. My laptop is open and sitting on the passenger seat. The water on the computer screen is why my window is now closed. I'm torn between listening to the storm and listening to the radio for any news on the severity of this system. Sometimes, given enough notice, Environment Canada will send forth a warning on the media.

Lightning is all around. Normally I count between flash and shockwave:

Flash! “One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand…..” Bang!

Three seconds is a mile.

This is instantaneous. I can see the white-hot forks contacting the ground just over the trees immediately ahead of me; now my concern is the telephone wires overhead.

Looking above through the sunroof, I’m both frightened and fascinated. I am afraid that one of the strikes will make contact with my truck’s antenna; that I’ll be blinded, but I’m curious about the swirling formation overhead. If a funnel forms, I will want to be aware of such a thing. The problem, however, is that in the eye of the storm, where it is this dark, and the straight-line wind gusts are this strong, “seeing” a tornado is not always possible.

Another car races by. I see the passengers looking my way. They’re gone.

Another strike, thunder shakes the truck.

“What am I doing here?” I ask myself aloud.

This must be how the Disciples felt in Matthew’s account of the storm at sea. This is genuine fear in the face of the elements. Here, faith in God, and a prior notion to go chase a storm, is shelved for a moment.

This is part of Alberta's wilderness that I find wholly intriguing. It doesn't matter if I'm deep in the woods of the Wilmore Wilderness region, northeast of Jasper, or in downtown Calgary. In a storm such as this, an entire spatial dimension vanishes; where the sky and the ground meet, there is no left or right. The details on the path, on the street, disappear. The normal plane of existence – those spaces we concern ourselves with as being ahead of us, behind us, left or right, give way the imminent threat from above.

There is a theory that people understand time according to three different paradigms: future, present, or past-oriented. This theory goes on to suggest that each orientation determines the way in which people understand some of the theological questions, such as: Who am I? What is life all about? I found it especially interesting to hear that geography can be factored into this. Here, it is suggested that people of more northerly latitudes – where seasons are marked by significant changes in temperature and daylight hours – tend to understand time according to the past. That is, seasons change, bringing with them familiar sensory stimuli: the smell of the spring thaw, summer forest fires, basil, lilacs, the chill of autumn morning frost, the sight of hoar frost on the trees; all of these examples offer a moment for sentiment, for reminiscence. Paul Tillich wrote of Kronos and Kairos as ways of understanding and demarcating time.

I have come to believe in my experiences that this is real.

In Alberta, summer is short. As I wrote above, the fact that the gestation of much of Alberta's staple crops is almost as long as the growing season itself, manifests as a very real, well articulated and provincial awareness of the weather. On this I ask: Is Alberta's actually "terrible" as some suggest, or, is it that we are influenced in our opinions by those (like farmers) who rely on weather as a primary factor in their livelihood. I believe that in my own experience, I have been influenced by what I hear – perhaps prior to understanding the context of the statement. One violent storm, that washes out this year's crop, will likely manifest as a memory of a bad year for weather when remembered by those, for whom it really matters – the farmers. Understanding how language, how sentiments form regionally, even spiritually is what this is about.

What I value about the violent storm is its ability to remove me from my own orientation of time. As a neurotic, I ponder where I am in life compared to where I was and where I should be far too often. I consume myself with memories of dates and events that suggest a narrative of my life. However, during the storm – the event whence the earthbound dimension vanishes – the temporal orientation becomes centered, present.

I find this interesting. First, it's interesting because it feels different. However, it is also interesting in that the weather event – something that is

seasonally determined – stands as an example of extreme events in our yearly memory (our past-orientation). To this end, the violent weather events we experience herein Alberta anchor us to a shared experience, a shared psyche – one that is past-oriented. Nonetheless, there is catharsis or liberation during the experience itself as it is extreme enough to take us out of ourselves, away from our contrived identities and into something in the moment, something present.

Here, in the present, I also experience presence. I understand this to be God's presence. I don't suggest this because of the immensity of the natural event. Although there is beauty in humility, I have a hard time proclaiming divinity onto something that is otherwise scientifically definable. Instead, the presence of God is such that something wholly natural, superior to me, timeless in its manifestation, can affect me in way that no amount of conscious preparation can otherwise do; I can't think myself out of neurosis. Nor can I think myself into a new orientation of time. Only something greater than I, something entirely transcendental can do this.

I have dreams about storms. I have dreams about driving alone, far from home, absent from family and friends. I have dreams about landscapes defined by wheat fields, and gravel roads. I understand that dreams could be justified through personal experience. I wonder, however, if there is point in which enough people – of common experience – begin to experience also similar dreams. At what point does the dream become an archetype? Is it not the case

that shared geography, shared weather, shared feelings, manifest as shared dreams?

I want to know if how I imagine things is determined by my geography. I don't mean how I imagine the New Jersey turnpike to appear compared to the Obed summit of the Yellowhead Trail. I mean, I wonder if the symbols that we take into our dreams, those things that reflect our spirit are also part of geographic identity.

On the drive home, I notice a car is stopped on the side of the road. There is a man bent over the front of the grille, under the hood. The rain is so strong that puddles have formed in ruts I didn't know existed in this pavement. In the oncoming traffic, vehicles are slow; people are cautious to avoid this stranded citizen.

I second-guess myself; my motives, the other guy's motives. I drive on. My experience in the present is over as I think about what I should do next.

The purpose of this reflection is to solidify something in this larger thesis about who I am as an Albertan, and how Alberta affects my spiritual experiences. I used to live near the ocean. Like many people I have talked with, I have associated the ocean with a part of my spirit. For my wife, it is the mountains. We have shared many moments wondering why we don't live in a place like Vancouver – it, after all, has both ocean and mountains. However, when I am

introspective about this matter, I discover that part of my physical orientation – where I am in the world – is reliant on my ability to see the sky.

Alberta's sky is my new ocean. Not only do I watch it with the vigilance of on old-time sailor, I keep it in my mind's eye when I imagine what a sky should look like. Alberta's sky is my sky. Accordingly, my wilderness is up (in the sky). In that sky I have ascribed place for people - our first (miscarried) child is grounded at Ursa Major. Through the sky, I embrace my naturalist side. I use an understanding of the sky to develop a better garden in my backyard. I think differently in Alberta because of the nature of the sky here. The big, blue sky is the blank slate from which all other events will come, announced.

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Endnotes:

[1] A hermeneutic that works for me, and forms much subtext in this project comes from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the evolution of consciousness in concert with complexity: The lithosphere cedes the atmosphere, then the hydrosphere, biosphere, and finally the noosphere. The noosphere is our zenith, our *omega point* in which the evolution of our humano-spiritual experience merges with that of each others'. Prior to this, we are members of the biosphere, the painfully fragile band of life that gives us the moniker, "Blue Planet." As long as there is a biosphere, there is an opportunity for the molecules and cells of my experience to continue to participate in various states ad infinitum. However, once the biosphere is compromised, destroyed, there exists no more opportunity to participate in the web of life. This web of life is tempting to disregard; we are busy people in an accelerated society. One of the things that offers transcendence from this human-made paradigm is its very foil; the natural one. Albertans are fortunate in that our setting often conjures the immediacy of nature, the vulnerability of the human state.

[2] When I was eight, I lived on Haida Gwaii, or the Queen Charlotte Islands. There, it rains an average two hundred days each year. I recall it cloudy most of the time. More than just a memory, this was a paradigm shift. I remember thinking that this was a new way of understanding cloudy days – they are only cloudy down here; above the clouds, during the daytime, it will always be sunny. After Haida Gwaii, our family moved to Calgary, Alberta. Here, in Alberta, I remember the sunshine.

[3] In fairness, we ought to not whitewash the entire Albertan experience according to one resource. Thus, as we embrace the phenomenological approach: "This use of methodology requires the ability to be reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience (van Manen, 1997)."(Laverty 2003, 16) Hence, we will laminate resources atop demographics to bracket some assumptions and minimize bias as regards spiritual experiences in Alberta's wilderness.

[4] Schlauch embraces the second-wave of psycho-analysis that was ushered in by Hienz Kohut. It was Kohut, in a most post-modern gesture, who conflated the concept of self and object in order to advance the Cartesian linguistics of psychoanalysis.

[5]Robert Kroetsch refers to "postcard beauty" – that is, we see images of the Rockies and the Badlands, but what of the rest?

[6] "I came to Fairview in a covered wagon, in the thirties. We lived fifteen miles as the crow flies away from the city when we made this move. There was nothing up there. It was pure bush country – not like today….a lot of changes. No, back in the thirties, much of the land up there hadn't yet been cleared." – Paul Olson, July, 2010

[7] Like many people of this time, Holdom would have experienced much propaganda by the Canadian Pacific Railway about land and opportunity in the West. Perhaps Ian Tyson captures the essence here when he simply dismissed this event: "Like how the railroad lied to all those poor homesteaders back at the turn of the century." –*The Long Trail*

[8]This combination of a Native population of oral culture, and a population boom of homesteaders would lead to what Robert Kroetsch would observe in a 2010 interview: "The

Athabasca River has a wonderful history of fur trade and exploration, but now we see it as a place to make money – we don't want to know about its history….We want it to be present and not past. We're not attuned to the mythos of a place." (Alberta Views, 30)

[9]The Remittance Men represented a cohort of the English Establishment. While it was common for the heir to remain with the Estate, in the old country, the other brother might choose a family-funded life of adventure in the New World. On the frontier, these men had a reputation for being incompetent squanderers.

[10] Consequently, if we allow desert to exist as a metaphor for a space in time that is remote, intimidating, then there are plenty of "desert opportunities" in the province of Alberta. According to one Australian interviewee, "Sure Australia has its outback – and I wouldn't want to be dropped in the middle of it – but there's something very savage and huge about Alberta's wilderness."

[11]This is a space from which John Raulston Saul has observed: "We are a Metis Nation."
[12] To be sure, this thesis is not questioning or researching the foresight of the Catholic church as regards its relationship with Canada's first nations.

[13] This quote was taken directly from the Aboriginal Exhibit featured in the Provincial Museum of Alberta, Edmonton, December, 2010.)
[14]Sid Marty elaborates beautifully the phenomenon of the moon-bow; the result of the ideal combination of mow pressure, air mass, proximity to the mountains, and enough clearing in the sky to avail to the observer a miraculously rare and truly Albertan effect.

[15] This can be understood anthropologically according to the notion of wealth. For the natives – at least during the epoch of the buffalo hunt – wealth was determined by measure such as the quantity of horses obtained.

[16] This seems analogous to post-modern theology where a contemporary point of departure is invited to consider the hermeneutic process according to the reconciliation of historicity and myth itself.

[17] According to Cree tradition, the initiate would venture into a place in the wilderness, a spiritual effigy, and fast in isolation until a hallucination would offer them with an image of their animal spirit; this experience would define the person with their new name.
[18] According to Sid Marty, in his book *Leaning on the Wind*, the border does not mean the same to ranchers between Pincher Creek AB and Picture Butte MT. From inside this society, place is determined by weather, grazing areas, trading histories, and the subsequent relationships formed therein; not unlike the experience of the aboriginal people.

[19] Zimbardo presents a cognitive-behavioral application of time perspective. On the website tedtalks.com, he elaborates upon this with a definition: "Time Perspective is the study of how individuals divide the flow of human experience into different time frames or time zones – automatically and non-consciously (sic)."

[20] The same could be said for the myriad Albertans who are either regular vacationers – or even property owners – in Mexico, during this, a year marked by increased violence amidst that country's escalating drug cartel wars.

[21] "Right, well when I first came here, people kept saying to me how it was really warm for that time of year. How warm the winter was so far. I was like, Are you serious? It was minus 12 and I kept thinking, How is this warm? And then it started to really drop. As it got below minus 30, 40 and even minus 50 with the windchill, I was like mentally I couldn't process this! I remember having to run down the street for something and my girlfriend asked if I was going to put on a jacket – I said no I'd be okay – it was just a couple of minutes. As soon as I got outside, the collagen in my ears froze! I'd never experienced anything like that. At home, I've had to go into freezers at work or something and I've never been this cold. That was interesting." – Interview with Ben

[22]Prior to this interview I had never thought about qualifying heating as such, let alone artificial. This comment had me reflect on the nature of necessity and its relationship with language. Are we aware that much of our winter heat is artificial? Left to the will of nature, heat – during the dark months – is something that exists inside the body. Beyond human contrivance and Chinook wind graces, Alberta's mammals hibernate. Maybe hibernation is why I tend to forget how invigorating spring will be in only a few short months. Is seasonal amnesia a carry-over from the hibernation experience of our mammalian brethren?

[23] During a summer course at St. Stephen's, I discussed with another student who grew up in Peace River, the subject of this thesis. Shakti shared with me her theory that Albertans have a spiritual hardiness. What manifests as resilience – as a result of our environmental interactions – is both mental and spiritual; the two cannot be separated. (Interview with Shakti, August, 2010)

[24] I found this interesting. Following a course on abnormal psychology, I had myself (self) diagnosed as a Bipolar Disorder –type II, given my predisposition to repeated seasonal depression followed by bouts of summertime hypomania. Often, my winter weight-gain and spiritual malaise is met with a seemingly inexplicable (though annual and therefore quite predictable) *joie de vive* that goes unchecked for several sleep-deprived months where long daylight hours scintillate my imagination with illusions of immortality, nay delusions of grandeur. Today, amidst the increased prevalence of self-diagnoses in the information age, the more I research this topic, the more I resign myself to the possibility that I am merely in touch with my Albertan, seasonal spirit.

[25] "In Australia right, the ocean is the way the wilderness moves. Our rivers are very slow – because Australia's very flat comparatively. So your rivers are fast and the sky is fast. I really noticed how different the sky is here. Here in Alberta, the wilderness seems to be no-man's land. At home, it seems a bit less raw."

[26] See appendix for the reflection on a storm chasing experience on July 30th, 2010.

[27] This observation is taken from the course notes from: Introduction to Christian Scriptures, taught by Bill Cantelon, Winter, 2005.

[28] "The theme *Timeland* also engages the heightened sensitivity to time that has shaped the first years of the 21st century, a period where the achievements and securities of established modernism are challenged by the new globalism that, via information technologies offers access to an expanded consciousness of world views, histories and cultures. The scale of this globalism subsumes the idea of the local but it thrives as the lifeblood in a world where provincialism dissipates and a new information-fed internationalism reflect the complexity a multi-dimensional world culture." – Richard Rhodes, guest curator, AGA, 2010.

[29] The reference to Theological Worlds speaks to the W. Paul Jones' book, *Theological Worlds, Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief. On a personal note, this book was used in my Intake collegium, 2005, in order to provide a framework for both written inventories and dialogue. The event was yet another "turning point" in this theological journey.*

[30] An example of such romance can be experienced through the work of Andy Russell: "If a man is lucky enough to find a woman who is willing to share his cabin and the adventure he is indeed fortunate. Furthermore, the environment is pure heaven for children trained to take care of themselves in the wilderness. A man who has lived this knows the full satisfaction of the primitive - the underlying characteristic latent in all of us – when he comes in off a long trail with a fine catch to find a warm cabin, supper on the stove, and a serene happy woman to exclaim over the rich silky furs." – (Russell, 195)