

Ecophenomenology as Ecosophical Education: The Liminality of Swamps

Abstract

Edmund Husserl, oft described father of phenomenology, issued forth a call over 100 years ago to "return to the things themselves" in an attempt to combat the prevailing and dominating tendency of philosophy over-theorizing the world. True to his call, this paper illustrates a phenomenological investigation into the author's relationship with a fifth generation family farm in southwestern Ontario. Specially, direct and immediate encounters within a swamp as margin/al land will be explored in an attempt to characterize liminal experience as a rich site for phenomenological exploration. Revelings of the general character of liminality shed further insights into ecophenomenology as a philosophy attempting to abridge the philosophical movements of naturalism and intentionality; to more adequately pursue the relationalities between humans and their world. In the end, such a philosophy exemplifies how meditative thinking and language create the House-of-our-Being, a powerful and necessary antidote to human rootlessness and homelessness, in turn, the key to ecosophical education.

Truly understanding the Earth requires a delicacy of discourse that has a kinship with the Earth. The Earth is not simply and straightforwardly our *object*. It is also our *home*. It *sustains* us, *surrounds* us; we are *not* worldless spectators who have the Earth as that which must simply answer questions of Reason's own determining. We are human, full of *humus*. Truly *human* understanding must have a certain *humility*, a certain aspect of not being the centre of everything and the only voice worth heeding. It must orient to an ongoing conversation with the Earth, a conversation that *must be sustained if life is to go on*. (Jardine, 1998, p. 28).

Home

I live on a fifth generation family farm in southwestern Grey County, in the province of Ontario, Canada. My great-grandfather, along with countless other immigrants during the 1860's came to this area, what was known at the time as *The Queen's Bush*. Unlike more southern climes within Ontario around the mid-nineteenth century, this region was largely remote, unsettled, and *wild*. Local historian and resident Campbell Cork describes the region

during this time as a: “. . . trackless forest. . . a dangerous place. Women did not often go out alone, and men generally carried a gun” (2000, p. 175).

Early surveyors of the area named the region *The Queen's Bush* because of the vast expanse of forest that became the bane of the pioneer's existence. However, like most wild territories surveyed, to be sold, cleared and farmed, the forest became an invaluable resource for the monarchy. The infamous trees of the forest could be used to provide some of the best maple, cherry, oak, walnut, butternut, ash and pine lumber for furniture, building, and fuel. *Queen's Bush* became a rural agrarian society toward the latter part of the nineteenth century. Pockets of the dense forest were opened, cleared, and settled. These small irruptions in the landscape became thriving villages and towns strategically located along the clear, clean alkaline streams intersecting the land. A drive up *King's Highway* north of Guelph (Highway 6) formerly an Ojibwa trail, provides an interesting lesson in topography and patterns of settlement. Most pioneer towns along this corridor were situated along river valleys where watercourses flow south and south-west toward Lake Huron. These rivers provided hydro-power for grist, flour, and lumber mills all vital to early human settlement. To this day Grey County has remained, largely, an agrarian society with small pockets of industry.

My great-grandfather, his wife and growing family claimed a piece of remote and densely forested land, what eventually became a homestead for them and several successive generations to follow. He spent the majority of his life clearing the land of the forest to create arable land suitable for agriculture and in the process the *wild* was tamed through *agri-culture* (from the Latin *ager*—meaning the field, and *colere* to till), (Collins, 1986, p. 29, 379). Literally establishing itself as a clearing amidst the density of the forest canopy, the small homestead gradually became a farm. It wasn't until almost a hundred years later that my grandfather named this farm and its landscape *Brookhaven*.

Brook as a noun means a natural freshwater stream smaller than a river, derived from the Old High German *bruoh* for swamp. Numerous meandering artesian springs bubble up through the limestone-rich topography of our land supplying us with life-giving water. A pocket of this wet-land rests to the north of our house its surplus water converging into the many "brooks" traversing the land. Impenetrable, it remains largely untouched by the hand and tools of my forefathers. *Brook* has another meaning. As a verb, from the Latin *frui* to enjoy, it perfectly describes the relationship we share with Brookhaven. For my grandmother who was born here, my grandparents who eventually retired here, and we who presently live here, Brookhaven has served as a place of *enjoyment*. When combined with *haven* a place of safety, shelter or sanctuary the meaning becomes complete—*enjoyment through sanctuary*. And it is through its naming that Brookhaven enacts its most powerful effect upon those who utter its sound

and live by its precept. For this language, as the House-of-my-Being, I am thankful.

I have been connected with this country all of my life. I know intimately its topographical features, sense the reaction of the surrounding countryside to the subtle yet unrelenting turns of the seasons, imagine the changes within the landscape as the land is *let be*, and recall the memories of our family relationships through the childhood stories of my grandmother--almost 50 years in one place! When living in one place for such a long time, one would expect to be nonplused by the surroundings. It is true that familiarity can take its foothold and blunt the senses and thinking, but it does provide an excellent opportunity to confront familiarity in a different way. In a response to such "familiarity" I want to explore a little known area on the farm, one, according to common vernacular, known as "the swamp".

Margin/al Land

A swamp, according to my ancestors and the farming families who surround us, is beyond the reach of a plough. And because it cannot be cultivated by plough it is viewed as *marginal land*. Written herein as *margin/al land* to emphasize visually and structurally the "margin" it signifies between land that can be cultivated from areas that can not. Land that can be cultivated is land that is, with the hand of humanity, made arable for crops. Of course the criterion for cultivatability is a complex of factors including soil--clay, sand, silt, organic material--topography (how hilly the land is), elevation (feet above sea level), temperature, latitude and degree of moisture (how wet the land is), among other things. Land that cannot be cultivated is land unsuitable for growing crops because of an imbalance between "the factors". Usually too much water is the definitive factor. Margin/al land, in this case our "swamp", rests between a large stream to the north and more arable land to the south. Throughout this "margin" several artesian springs bubble fresh cold water to the surface adding to the quagmire effect. Situated between the two extremes of water *and* arable land is margin/al land. Klaver (2007) refers to this as an *ecotone*, "where different natural habitats meet. . . the interface between two ecosystems, and is often a more complex ecosystem, with its own processes and species" (p. 120). Arguably, cultivated land is not a natural habitat, but there is a region along the perimeter of the swamp that has been left for three-quarters of a century with little if any change. Although a workable field at one time, this boundary marks the transition between present-day grassland and swamp.

Swamp

A swamp is one of many geographical features, for example, a *marsh*, *glade*, *dell*, *dale*, *estuary*, classified as a *wetland*. The *land* is bona fide *wet*.

But it is not a body of water. I cannot submerge my body in clear, cool water. I cannot float in the brook that transects this swamp—I can partially, but not completely because it is so narrow and shallow. Yet numerous tributaries transect this land. But in calling it 'land' I am overextending myself. It is not 'land' as we know it. The ground will not support my weight without giving way. In most places it is spongy, springy, a lunar surface pot-marked with depressions, rotting tree trunks, meandering springs, thick moss. The land is silt-like--thick, black and mucky. When one's legs fall through the precarious moss-like netting, the thick density of the subterranean becomes obvious. Most trees growing in this area are cedar. And when the wind overturns them, their shallow and spreading root masses reveal the subterranean growing conditions--a close water table, flooding springs and brooks drown shallow-rooted trees. The soil is alkaline-rich making it difficult for some plants to survive, although ferns and orchids prosper in number and variety, particularly in dimly lit regions.

Difficult to traverse, one's body becomes enveloped by its erratic topography. It is neither here, nor there. Neither land, nor water, but some complex, some hybrid of both. It is the proximity of water around, beneath, and above that determines a swamp's swampiness. Without water, the swamp becomes land--dry, arable, friable land, suitable for cultivation, growing crops and pasturing livestock. And the presence of water yields clues about the land's history and its elevation. We live in a glacial river valley. Our house sits on a ridge of ancient cobble-stone river extending to the south-west. Just fifty feet to our north is our artesian spring producing a steady and dependable flow of water possibly since last ice age. You can see the clear water bubble up from the gravel bed nine or ten feet below ground level. Once it overflows our well, it runs out into a concrete pool and then out into a small brook. These naturally flowing springs dot the landscape around the swamp. The water table is just beneath the surface. When it rains and when snow melts, water pools at the surface slowly running westward toward collecting brooks and larger streams. The land falls ever so slightly to the west, eventually making its way to Lake Huron. The altitude is high, our growing days short, and our soil more suited to aggregate than crops leading to the familiar yet exasperated expression by farmers, "Stones are the only reliable crop in these lands!" Land that cannot be "cultured" is deemed marginal—beyond the purposes of cultivation. Of our many tracts of marginal land, it is the swamp that provides a rich opportunity for exploration. Because it is so inhabitable for humans, and difficult to navigate within/across, it provides a perfect cite to explore, in many cases for the first time. Such an encounter is fitting for a branch of philosophy known as phenomenology. In the next section I provide some background on phenomenology and its project, suggesting that it is a well-suited philosophy to consider humanity's relationship with nature. The essence of this work will be to demonstrate how

doing phenomenology (there is no one way of "doing" or "arriving" at a phenomenology) is another way of becoming ecosophically educated.

Phenomenology as a Philosophy to Express and Respond to Natural Experiences

Our present day engagement with "nature"¹ reflects, more or less, the contemporary metaphysical movement hinted at by Heidegger (1953/2000) and Nietzsche (1883-85/1993) as *Technicity*.² Technicity is a pernicious and insidious metaphysical epoch reinforcing a relationship with nature expressed through the philosophical movement of *naturalism* and its central tenet of causality. Hence, nature comes to be viewed increasingly in utilitarian and instrumental ways. Likewise, our engagement with nature, increasingly, takes on a character of instrumentality--a *cause* to produce some *effect*.

Such a view of nature, and the philosophy that under-girds it emphasizes a dualistic ontology involving a host of binary oppositions such as: mind/body, subject/object, human/nonhuman, activity/passivity, form/matter, being/nonbeing, and man/woman. In each case the first binary term is emphasized over and above the second. The binary distinctions are further based on the following assumptions where absolute boundaries maintain the binaries, time is linear, the self is given as suprasensible mind, clarity and distinctiveness are equated with Truth, and furthermore, Truth is objective, timeless, permanent, unconditional, universally valid and absolute. Such an ontology posits philosophy as the discovery of such Truth where a "philosopher must turn away from concrete immediate experience in favour of solitary abstract reflection." (Langer, 2003, p. 107).

As a response to this, phenomenology seeks to interrogate causality with *intentionality*—the intentionality *of* or *about* experience. According to Brown and Toadvine (2003), intentionality is both:

. . . those acts we might describe as intentional rather than accidental or unintended (the key issue in deciding whether an incident on the sports field was a foul), . . . [and] the space of human meaning opened

¹ The term "nature" appears in quotation denoting its contingency. For instance, some such as Bill McKibben (1999) argues nature as a pure unadulterated concept is dead. Few if any reaches of the earth are untouched by human effect.

² Heidegger's (1977) word for this metaphysical epoch is the *Gestell*, translated into English meaning *enframing*, denoting its effect upon our consciousness. To differentiate between Nietzsche's Will to Power and Heidegger's reinterpretation of that metaphysical period in light of his analysis of technology and to simplify the language barrier, I have coined the expression, metaphysics as Technicity, a synonym for Gestell. Coincidentally, Technicity is a term also used by Carol Steiner (1999).

up by the fundamental 'aboutness' of our conscious experience. Consciousness always exhibits the structure of being 'about', or 'of' something. These intentional relations of 'aboutness' seem quite different from causal connectedness. (p. 2)

From this we take the fundamental principle of phenomenology to be consciousness—all consciousness is consciousness of *something*. And this consciousness is *relational* in the sense that when I am conscious of that bird at my bird feeder, a certain relationship develops. Seeing, fearing, hoping, admiring--is not a causal relation, not a physical relation, but an intentional one. When I admire the bird, the bird is not affected, and even if rays of light passing from its glistening feathers are necessary for this admiration to take place, the admiration is something of a different order. "To understand intentionality to be opposed to causality is important if we associate causality with determinacy, with linearity, and with a certain kind of automatism" (Brown & Toadvine, 2003, p. 12). Specifically, "phenomenology takes its starting point in a return to the 'things' or 'matters' themselves. . . the world as we experience it" (p. xi). *Experience is the starting point and arbitrator for all philosophical evidence*. Phenomenologists, despite varying approaches to characterizing and describing experience as, according to Stefanovic (1994) perpetually beginning or "on the way" (p. 58), agree that the prevailing tendency of scientific naturalism toward increasing abstraction cannot claim epistemological privilege over experience-based understandings of reality.

Phenomenology opens a space for the interdisciplinary examination of our relation with nature, for a scrutiny of the historical and institutional construction of the 'natural,' and even of the role this concept plays in the formation of our cultural and self-identities. . . . Phenomenology provides an open horizon for the exploration of all facets of our relation with nature outside of narrowly prescribed disciplinary boundaries. . . mak[ing] possible perhaps for the first time, for philosophical thinking to express and respond to the full range of our natural experiences. (Brown & Toadvine, 2003, p. xii)

Phenomenology's consistent gravitation toward the question of nature begs questions about the relationship between environmental thought and phenomenology as a philosophy. The merging of these two lines of thought has resulted in a further evolution of phenomenology referred to as *ecophenomenology*.

What then of Ecophenomenology?

This gap between causality and intentionality, of which phenomenology sought to interrogate, could be brought together through what Brown & Toadvine (2003) refer to as a future phenomenology, an *ecophenomenology*, or "the pursuit of the relationalities of worldly engagement, both human and those of other creatures" (p. 3).

Ecophenomenology is a recent movement reaching back only a couple of decades. The seminal contributions of Erazim Kozak--*The Embers in the Stars* (1984)--and Neil Evernden's *The Natural Alien* (1985) are commonly referred to as inaugural works. For both these philosophers, phenomenology represents more than an alternative: it is a required response to the western preoccupation with *techne* (instrumentality), to reductively quantitative accounts of nature, and to utility-based valuations of the natural world (Harris, 2004, retrieved from <http://www>. On May 14, 2010).

Two claims are foundational for ecophenomenology: (a) that an adequate account of our ecological condition would benefit from the methods and insights of phenomenology; and (b) that phenomenology, led by its own momentum, becomes a philosophical ecology--the study of the interrelationship between organism and world in its metaphysical and axiological dimensions (Brown & Toadvine, 2003).

It should be emphasized again, that phenomenological method resists generalizing (Harris, 2004). However, it is possible to discern some constitutive and methodological commonalities among ecophenomenological enquiries. One set, of which I subscribe to, is grounded in Martin Heidegger's ontological phenomenology rooted in the question of the meaning of Being. This involves considering that human Being perceives and interprets entities, e.g., swamps, "within a web of relations in which they are primordially situated." (Stefanovic, 1994, p. 67), in which our environs are intelligible as environs. Possible meanings and relations may be discerned among entities as elements within a whole not generally fully revealed but nonetheless always already present and understood. A useful analogy to think about this unfamiliar brand of phenomenology is to think about being in a room with a lens focusing and refocusing objects in the room, exposing to light not only various aspects of their existence and their relatedness to one another, but illuminating our own primordial Being amidst them. This immersion in the world is such that perception is accompanied by memory, imagination, emotion, and understanding (p. 69), which, together, constitute the basis of meaning. Henceforth, our direct experiences of the world are shown to emerge, "within a horizon of interpretation" (p. 70), in which we are always already present in the world³ oriented in a temporal fashion. Phenomenology and Beings are "on the way" (Harris, 2004).

Relationalities, Thing-hood, and Boundaries

Returning to ecophenomenology's "pursuit of the relationalities of worldly engagement. . ." a dimension of such "engagement" includes the boundary of *thing-hood*. Things are what we experience within our world. And while it may be possible to imagine no-things, these do not typically characterize the world in which we live. Things come and go--are an

³ Heidegger's (1962) term for "being-in-the-world" was *Being-there* or *Dasein*.

organized integrity with many forms whose unity depends on a relationship of parts to the whole. The boundaries beyond entities are part of the processes that maintain them. And the relationship between an entity and its boundaries could be sensitive or resistant to disruption. Add Brown and Toadvine (2003):

Such boundaries are, in part, the products of the very processes that maintain them. Boundaries are the way stations between insides and outsides, the sites of negotiation, of transformation, of sustenance, of protection. Boundaries are real, and yet they are often recessive and ambiguous. Boundaries are not at first things, but they arise in and for certain things, and they may even turn into things. (Think of the Berlin Wall, think of the line we must not cross in a relationship.) But for our purposes, what is especially important is that boundaries are the sites of a special kind of phenomena – limina – and a whole new opening for phenomenology. (p. 11)

Dempster (2007) balances the discussion on boundaries and boundary formation by outlining the following concerns: [boundaries] (a) tend to maintain binary oppositions and thus a false sense of certainty; (b) create categorical opposition where differences become centrally important and relations are problematic; and (c) tend to disregard the environment as background enabling reduction and selective attention ignoring the complexity of interactions, interrelations, and interdependencies making up an environment (p. 99). It will be important to keep these in the back of our mind as we examine the liminality of the swamp and the regions on either side of the in-between.

Summary

To bring these threads together, the project at hand will be to investigate what margin/al land, e.g., a swamp, can reveal about liminality; the in between. In a similar way, as previously noted, there exists a "gap", a space between the philosophical movement of naturalism and its claim over causality *and* phenomenology with its focus upon intentionality. In what ways do liminal revealings of margin/al land provide insight into ecophenomenology also as a liminal phenomenon? Finally, a better understanding of the character of ecophenomenology can help us begin to understand how such a philosophy can contribute to ecosophical education.

Phenomenology of a Swamp

Five generations of my family have lived beside what has commonly been referred to a *swamp*—a permanently waterlogged ground usually overgrown and sometimes partly forested (Hanks, 1979, p. 1536). My grandparents always referred to it as such; I too adopted its name. But to my younger mind such a naming did not seem apt. As a child, a swamp was a remote, humid, and inhospitable waterway “swamping” islets of land. Exotic

flora and fauna occupied these inaccessible regions navigable only by boat or marsh-craft. These romantic and idealized “swamps” existed elsewhere beyond the reach of our existence--somewhere in the Florida everglades or the jungles of the Amazon. But as time wore on, I gradually learned that our swamp was not that different from these. Although located in a northern clime, the intersection of our land and water quickly gave way to a spongy, mucky subterranean world with a water table at or near the surface. Permeating this floating terrain are several artesian springs, a brook, a river flanking the north, and a pond nestled to the south. The terrain is riddled with various species of trees, varieties of bulrushes, flowering plants, ferns, mosses, fungi, and a variety of species of animal, reptile, amphibian, bird, fish and insect. But when I say, “swamp” I still think its naming refers to something else beyond where we live. What is the meaning of this swamp we have lived beside for so many years--neither land nor water; its indeterminable mass neither here nor there? Between land and water, culture and nature, how do the edges and boundaries of a swamp, with its eruptions and containments characterize what we commonly refer to as the *in-between*?

Sponge, Spongy, Sponginess

Of course, in beginning to describe our swamp, I am initially resorting to a geographical discourse. *Swamp* as a noun is vested with meaning drawn from the Old Norse *svoppr* meaning sponge, and Greek *somphos* meaning spongy (Hanks, 1979, p. 1536). Yes, our swamp is certainly this. Walk into it and one becomes quickly “swamped”-- physically and psychically overwhelmed. Dawning anything less than rubber boots courts disaster. Even with these, legs invariably sink to knees exceeding the protection of “high-cut” boots, leaving feet floundering aimlessly for solid ground. Extracting submerged limbs is no easy feat. It requires reaching out to a neighbouring tree, pulling the body frantically from the thick, cold and black muck. A sponge has the capacity to absorb water and moisture. It has an equal proclivity to absorb soil—the muck-like substance comprising the subterranean mass. There are places within a swamp where a being--human or other--could succumb to the quagmire. Where the complex physical forces of our world do not exhibit their more predicable effects. Where one's body becomes engulfed in the subterranean non-Newtonian mass. Where solid, liquid and slurry suspend the body.

What is the character of this sponginess? Where does it reside and what does it consist of? I step off the laneway and make my way toward its western edge. The ground is uneven, deep depressions undulate across its surface making walking difficult, awkward, and cumbersome. I loose my balance several times making my way. As a child, I don't remember such difficulty. I cross over the small brook emptying the pond lying to my south. Its edges are thick with silt, the sediment settling out as the water moves along.

Bulrushes reach up intermittently along its edge, thick and plentiful in places. It is difficult to determine where the ground is more solid. I cross over but to do so step down into silt. The tops of my boots allow black mud to flow in. The black slurry is ice cold, causing my socks to cling to the inside of my boots. My socks swell causing my foot to feel as if it is expanding beyond the boot's walls. This is just what a sponge does—absorbs a slurry of moisture and small dark particles. Sponges expand and then contract. They have the capacity to hold and then release; to conceal and reveal. Walking onward, the slurping sound of my boots announces my way.

The ground begins to change. Its surface becomes thick and moss covered. This bright-green moss covers just about everything—the ground, the base of trees, rabbit runways, stumps and rocks. The sponginess increases. I sink down with each step making recovery difficult, involving some energy to retrieve, place, and re-position my body. With exception, the ground I walk upon initially reveals the depressions of my footsteps, filling in with dark liquid. Slowly, in time, these disappear. The thick sphagnum moss, many inches deep, absorbs my body's weight. The mosses' sponginess allows water and fine particles to be absorbed or released when a heavy object, such as myself, travels over it.

Sphagnum moss is sponge-like. I grab a handful and examine its structure. The mass consists of thousands of tiny branch-like structures, meshed and interwoven together. Belonging to a family of plants—*bryophyta*—having stems and leaves, but lacking a true vascular tissue and roots and reproducing by spores, moss proliferates within our swamp. The smell is earthy; the touch--damp, moist, soft, pliable. My ancestors used this material to fill their mattresses. Below the surface, beyond exposure to the sunlight, the moss is pale-green, almost light brown. Its capacity to photosynthesize has been reduced. Only a few inches below the surface, the moss looks dead. While it may be, its structure remains, providing an essential element to the character of any swamp. I can see David Bohm's implicate within the explicate order here (Miller, 1994). The fine, delicate, and infinite interconnected structure of the moss, almost invisible to the human eye, *the stratum* covering just about everything my feet come in contact with, characterizes the overall, or explicit structure of the swamp. The swamp is not impervious to water or land, it intimately and infinitely meshes land with water. It is a living entity making vital connections between life-giving source water and the humus of the earth.

The character of the moss and the more explicate structure of our swamp does not seem to characterize a *margin*, from the Latin meaning *margo*, *margin* meaning 'edge'. This speaks to who and when swamps and wetlands in general were viewed as *marginal lands*. Of course, from the standpoint of my ancestors land that could not be made arable, was less than adequate, not up to margin, and below the standard of acceptability. Such land was associated with uncultured land. A beautiful example of what David

Abrams observes when he says, language is written *into* the landscape, a testimony to the power and effect language can have on a civilization. But questioning of these names, the label our forefathers used to describe their world, opens further opportunities for the flux of language. With this in mind, I can no longer view a swamp as *margin/al land*, rather it is more like a living membrane that had great powers of resiliency, permeability, and interconnectivity.

Moss and other swamp vegetation reproduce by spores, a unique way of guaranteeing another generation. Spores are the single celled structures produced by the parent. Ferns, moss, and fungi, and a host of other organisms depend upon this method of reproduction. Its simplicity should be apparent—as the process is asexual, no fusion of parent gametes is necessary.

Within a swamp, the peculiar and distinct characteristics that provide for capacity, buffering, equilibrium, are somewhat of a liability when reproduction is facilitated through pollination. I notice this in several ways. Within the density of the swamp, the air is relatively still. During summer, although generally cooler within the swamp, the humidity can be stifling. Many plants depend upon wind for pollination. Insects too are a major pollinator but as the temperature within a swamp is generally more moderate, and certainly more moist, while insects are present, winged insects, major vectors of pollen, are not as plentiful. For certain wing-born insects it is much more difficult to navigate the density of a swamp. The density of the flora, cooler spring temperatures, and excessive moisture, would work against many winged insects. The evolutionary process reflects this dependency. As a result, many plants did not further develop into pollinators. Instead, spore-bearing plants came to proliferate. Even the etymology of spore, reveals this biological process. From the Greek, *spora* meaning 'sowing seed', any plant bearing a spore can independently reproduce itself. In this way, there is something self-sustaining about a swamp. Many of its living beings are able to procreate within the self-contained system. A swamp is resilient, self-reliant, self-determining, an autonomous being unto itself.

Equilibrium and Buffering

This capacity of the moss to absorb moisture reveals much about the swamp. Our swamp is always the last area for snow to disappear in the spring. As late as May, we can enter our swamp and find remnants of snow. The ground and surrounding waterways swell with spring thaws, surface water appearing, brooks overflowing and flooding the surrounding land. The swamp becomes a reservoir absorbing surplus water, releasing it gradually when flora have satisfied their needs. This capacity to resist extremes—drought and flooding—a natural buffer between the wild and cultivated lands attests to the demand we place upon our land. Beyond the swamp most of the land is cultivated. As the soil is a coarse and stony loam, our land dries

extremely quickly. Lands downstream benefit through the swamp's buffering effect. It has the capacity to release moisture slowly and gradually during summer and fall months, typically our drier seasons. Conversely, during the winter and spring, when rain is more plentiful, our swamp stores this moisture, saving it for dryer seasons.

The capacity of the swamp to maintain equilibrium is significant. It moderates extremes of reality through this buffering effect. Equilibrium—a stable condition, where forces cancel one another—the extremes of the sun, precipitation, and wind are each moderated by the swamp's capacity for equilibrium.

In a fascinating turn of geography, low-lying land floods with water. This water is amenable to certain plants succeeding others. The right growing conditions prevail for moss, fungi, cedar, bulrushes, cattails, ferns and orchids, to name a few. These coverings further transform the landscape into a mass capable of absorbing and releasing surplus moisture depending on surrounding conditions. This "marginal" land, while beyond the reach of cultivation, serves an important function. It sequesters groundwater, holds it, and then releases it when surrounding dry lands require it.

Temporality

During the winter, snow accumulates in great quantities within our swamp. The great number of trees, bushes, and plants capture and shelter this snow. As well, the undulating topography of the land traps snow, protecting it somewhat from direct sun and wind. These features of the swamp work in tandem, contributing to its buffering and equilibrium capabilities. Moss, because it has no true root system, absorbs moisture readily through its branches and leaves. Its dense, mat-like structure helps capture and absorb moisture in its various forms. Vast quantities of snow accumulate within the swamp making navigate almost impossible. When we were children, our favourite time for exploring was late spring, just after the snow had melted, but well before the blackflies and mosquitoes announced their arrival. A narrow window of opportunity presented itself for us to travel along well-trodden rabbit trails toward darker, remote sections. Here light became muted, mixed, softer, colours blended, and the air temperature cooler. An occasional warm spring day was always cooler within the swamp, isolated bodies of snow radiating their cold. Its capacity to store water and shield warm air had a remarkable cooling effect on the surrounding air.

With a slightly cooler air temperature, animals would seek shelter here during the heat of summer. During our excursions within we frequently stirred deer, rabbits, weasel, partridge, mink, otter, fox, raccoon, skunk, and possum. I remember one warm March day, my brother and I catching a nap in the branches of a wind-blown cedar. After awakening, to our surprise we noticed a large porcupine, doing the same only a few feet above our heads.

The cool and damp conditions seem to attract many unique flowering plants. At least two types of orchid proliferate now that livestock no longer roam freely—since the 1940's fences have kept them out. The pink and yellow lady slippers thrive. The former prefer slightly shaded more damp areas, the latter, slightly more sunlight. Over the years, these clumps of orchid have spread to other areas in the swamp.

Trying to navigate the swamp in late spring or summer is virtually impossible as insects such as black flies and mosquitoes reproduce by the tens of thousands. Only during an occasionally cool evening can one venture into its depths during late spring.

Come fall, navigating again becomes possible. Although at times, very wet, one can walk through the swamp, picking their way carefully. Leaves from a few deciduous trees die back and fall, but for all intents and purposes, the swamp undergoes few obvious changes. Again, this unique capacity to moderate extremes, to resist intense and sudden seasonal changes, characterizes the swamp as a stable system.

On the whole, a swamp is not a place easy to traverse. Its unique yet challenging topography discourages even the most ambitious of visitors. But once inside a swamp, the challenge of navigation is oft rewarded by the uniqueness of its topography and the diversity and rarity of plants and animal species. These plants have adapted to the growing conditions of a swamp with its great abundance of water, its moderating temperatures, and highly alkaline soils. It is a place, according to Heidegger (1962), where things as they, *are let be*. We do not impose our humanness upon these entities, nor do we dictate how they are to be revealed.

Edges of the Swamp

Several features frame our wetland. To the south an artesian spring, supplying water to our family, flows west into a large pond. From there, the pond empties into a small brook running north and then west across a build-up laneway. A couple of culverts allow water to move through this swamp onward toward a stream. To the north, a county highway bisects the swamp. Beyond this paved road, the swamp extends north toward a large river flowing from the north-east to the south-west; the same river the north running brook eventually makes its way toward. Beyond our property line, toward the east, a fence marks the eastern boundary of "our" swamp. It extends further east, establishing the frontage of our neighbour's farm. Beyond that, the elevation rises slightly, departing the ancient glacial valley where remnants of the Beatty-Saugeen river meanders. The swamp is somewhat contained by these artificial and natural boundaries—a spring, pond, brook, laneway, highway, river, and fence. While the swamp has always existed, at least in human history, its appearance has changed over the years. During colonization, the grazing of livestock deforested much of

the area. My grandfather stopped this practise by restricting livestock from what farmers commonly referred to as “marginal land.”

Marginal, the root margin, from the Latin *margo* meaning border. Land on the “margin” of cultivated zones. Land beyond cultivation because of its saturation with water. And until recently, and still more commonly, lands which succumb to drainage tile—a subterranean network of perforated tile--ridding the land of its moisture, making it arable and useable by farmers.

In places the swamp erupts beyond these edges. Some of these places of eruption have been provided, others occur more naturally. The built-up laneway has several culverts allowing surplus water to drain away into adjacent fields or brooks emptying into streams. The artesian spring carries surplus water from our well into a pond that eventually drains along the western edge of the swamp leading into the culvert and into the stream. During the spring, or summer, and occasionally during a mild winter, surplus run-off can be seen pooling downstream in flat-lying stretches. These areas back up because of ice-jams or log-jams forcing water to spill out into adjacent fields. The water slowly backs-up to the headland where the swamp quickly reaches its storage capacity. Temporal and spatial elements seem suspended.

Sparing a Swamp

Aerial photographs from the early 1950’s demonstrate our swamp was a nuisance to my forefathers. Livestock were allowed to roam freely within its bounds grazing on grasses, seedlings, and mature trees. They plodded along banks of brooks creating a barren wasteland. Several generations of flora and fauna were robbed. It was not until the 1940’s when livestock were prevented from roaming freely within its bounds, that the swamp was allowed to approximate its former glory. Another set of aerial photographs taken twenty-five years later demonstrate the swamp’s recuperative capacity as trees can be seen to grow along the north and western reaches of its boundary. Today, this area has become thick and dense. Older trees provide shade for younger ones. The canopy grows denser creating more shade. The occasional glade appears where an upturned cedar has succumbed to high wind. The root mass exposes a shallow but broad mass of fibrous root. Masses of muck cling to these root balls, eventually falling off, returning to the ground.

The Liminality of Swamps

An ecophenomenology of the swamp reveals several characteristics of liminality. Liminal, from the Latin *limen* meaning threshold has two significant meanings for this discussion: the starting point of an experience, event or venture; and/or a level or point at which something would, or would cease to happen, or would take effect, become true (Collins, 1979, p. 1587).

In what way(s) might these two meanings, and my first hand and immediate experiences within the swamp inform the character of liminality? According to the first meaning a liminal space is the starting point of an experience, event or venture. As I walk into the swamp I am thrown immediately into a strange and unfamiliar terrain. The land is uneven, punctuated and transected by small brooks, the ground infirm, undulating, unstable, a precarious stratum for my body. It is the starting point of my departure from the solidity of land, the culture of the fields, a traversal into something strange and foreign to me. My foundation is no longer certain. My balance had been put off. It is an entranceway to unfamiliarity, the mystery about that which surrounds us. This is not unlike the call by Sandilands (1994), urging us to "undertake a discursive construction of nature that opens up spaces in which 'the wild strangeness of nature' can be experienced": She adds:

. . . it is impossible to capture in language nature's alterity; and that human identity itself defies closure because this alterity is both in and beyond ourselves. The mysterious, wonderful wildness of nature overflows all our constructions and resists description--for [t]he rational is always already pierced by mystery, showing the necessity of wonder (Sandilands, 1994, quoted in Langer, 2003, p. 105).

Language does seem inadequate at capturing the meaning of the swamp. I can feel my body's reaction as I enter its damp and dark region, but words escape me. There is a loss of perspective, certainty, and foundation, almost a loss of language.

The second meaning of liminal-- a level or point at which something would, or would cease to happen, or would take effect, become true, can also be expanded upon. My excursions into the swamp certainly corroborate this meaning. Not unlike a threshold, the swamp arbitrates between events. It has unique capacities of dispersion and coalescence. Water, moisture, air, and temperature, extremes of all the physical elements are moderated by the swamp's unique topography and flora. After a heavy and sustained rainfall, flooded fields allow surface rainfall to run off. The swamp, its stratum of moss, soaks this up releasing it slowly over time. At the other end of the spectrum, during a drought, moisture is gradually released through the arterial network of small brooks. To the untrained eye, the swamp appears unaltered by these two extremes. It is the point--threshold--where flooding and drought occur at the edges; events are *about to* or *not* about to take effect. This liminal space is a place where the topology of the land, the proximity of the water, the consistency of the humus, and all the other complex interactions between living and non-living entities, together moderate extremes. The swamp is neither completely flooded nor stark and in this way protects waterways from drying up and lands from flooding. This protective character, because of unique geology and geography, is the first

essence revealed through the phenomenology of our swamp. Liminal spaces, such as that provided by a swamp, are protective spaces. They moderate, tolerate, and absolve.

Recall at the outset liminality was equated with "in between". We have a sense of what is "between" but little of the "in". Edward Casey provides a lovely interpretation of Heidegger's reminder:

Heidegger reminds us that an ancient root of "in" is *innan*, which connotes dwelling (as we see in the cognate word "inn").⁴ We cannot help but hear here a sense of interiority or inwardness – not of persons but of a given place: their domestic interior, which we can know only *from within* by residing there for some significant stretch of time. The "with" of "within" acts to intensify the "in" itself by lending to it an important nuance of *intimacy* (another "in" word). This is not precisely the same as knowing a place "inside out" – which means in considerable detail – but, instead, a matter of knowing it by direct acquaintance, by our bodily being there. (Casey, 2008, p. 7).

Traversing the swamp, coming to know the "in" of the "between", its liminal character, my body experiences the nuance of its terrain, lighting, temperature, and geography. I come to know this place by being there.

To summarize briefly, the general character of liminality can be corroborated and strengthened through my excursions within/throughout our swamp. Liminality (in between) circumscribes two extremes or boundaries. Note, I use the word "boundary" and not border as the former suggests permeability, more inline with the character of our swamp. There are no rigid structures separating our swamp from water and land. The edges of the swamp clearly exhibit eruptions where small brooks transect and permeate the interior carrying fresh water out onto surrounding fields. Even the water table is close to the surface allowing the saturation of land with the subterranean water. It is a permeable membrane.

In the next section, I shall explore in what ways liminality might share some characteristics with ecophenomenology, as a philosophical movement aiming to abridge naturalism with phenomenology.

The General Character of Liminality: What this Reveals about Ecophenomenology

In many ways, ecophenomenology as a philosophy, abridging the philosophical movements of naturalism with phenomenology, demonstrates a liminal character. In what ways does the general character of liminality inform our rudimentary understanding of ecophenomenology? The question has

⁴ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. J. MacQuarrie & E. Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 80.

merit because ecophenomenology is a relatively new philosophy and any understanding of the general character of liminality may go some way toward a more adequate understanding of the middle ground between traditional anthropocentric and ecocentric metaphysics, which ecophenomenology attempts to abridge.

We discovered through an ecophenomenology of our swamp that liminality demonstrates the character: of departure, threshold, mediation/maintenance of boundaries, and interiority. So too, ecophenomenology as a philosophy in search of the relationship humans share with their world is a *point of departure*. Points of departure represent possibilities. As such, possibility is expansive, original, open, becoming; all characteristics of a philosophy vital to future understandings between humans and their world. It is not conclusive, explanative, or reductionist, but rather imaginative and expansive. Ecophenomenology also demonstrates the character of a *threshold* where an event or action may or may not occur. Thresholds imply capacity for tolerance, flexibility, revealings/concealings, ruptures/containments; in sum, the general holding together of binary structures in a more nuanced and subtle fashion. As a philosophy, ecophenomenology attends also to boundary mediation/maintenance. Boundaries, as opposed to borders are more flexible and permeable. Ecophenomenology strives to bring together the intentionality of phenomenology with the causality of naturalism--a conscious attention to human relationships with the world. And finally, as liminality is synonymous with the in between, ecophenomenology as an abridgement between these two philosophies is further characterized by *interiority*. Ecophenomenology as the *in between* harkens an association with intimacy, dwelling, living, and bodily being there.

Ecophenomenology as a liminal experience brings together the traditional philosophies of naturalism and phenomenology. In doing so, the strict adherence to causality of which naturalism prescribes is moderated by human consciousness. But such human consciousness is decentred from anthropocentric concerns to a metaphysics more ecocentrically focused.

In the remaining section, I shall conclude by making the case that ecophenomenology is the undergirding philosophy to ecosophical education.

Ecosophical Education

"Eco", meaning *home*, and "sophical" meaning *wisdom*, or home wisdom, is not something acquired within traditional classroom settings. It is something accrued through the immediate and participating body within the lifeworld. We believe *the task of philosophy is the task of thinking in an attempt to recover that original "giving" of being, that original happening of "place"* (author & Fazio, in press). Thinking is thus essentially a form of returning home--a homecoming of sorts. It is not the type of thinking that defines modern ways of being. Such thinking, characterized by Heidegger

(1962) as calculative thought, is a direct expression of naturalism's causality. The reduction of things to simple causative relations instrumentally configured. The kind of thinking such *home wisdom* implies is meditative thinking. Langer (2003), commenting on Heidegger adds:

"Calculative thinking" is actually thoughtless and oblivious of Being-- which withdraws, leaving humans "rootless" and "homeless". By contrast "meditative thinking" is profoundly thoughtful and receptive to Being. It dwells in the nearness of Being, where humans are truly "rooted" and "at home". . . . It lets Being and being be; and this "letting be" involves profound care and concern. Such thinking is not a matter of having ideas or constructing theories-- nor is it a particular act or series of acts. Rather, it is an entire disposition and way of living which, full of thought and heart, heeds Being's call. Such heart-full, thought-full thinking cannot, of course, be coerced or willfully begun, because it is itself non-coercive. Ultimately, it comes to us as a gift from Being. It is up to us to "step back" from our thoughtless ways of thinking so as to "prepare the ground" for this gift, just as a farmer prepares the soil but cannot force the seed to grow. Such receptivity opens us to nature's meaning and mystery. Meditative thinking lets the unspoken Truth of Being come to language; and "language is the house of Being insofar as it shelters the Truth which Being discloses. Such authentic language is the "home" in which we thoughtfully dwell (p. 113-114).

The wisdom of home is acquired over time. It is not forced, does not exert itself upon others, but is gentle, receptive, empathetic, attuned, and authentic to the call of Being. It is revealed through a language that constitutes the Being of things adding to the mystery and wonder that surround such Beings.

Ecophenomenology is in many ways as I have tried to demonstrate a liminal phenomenon. *In between* the philosophical traditions of naturalism and phenomenology, ecophenomenology "exhibits possibilities as possibilities any human being could undergo" (Stefanic, 2000, p. 11). Ecophenomenology uncovers the taken-for-granted origins and grounds within which calculative [causative] paradigms are rooted. Such meditative thinking is creative and open; calling for holism is not intended to be thought of as emotional or "wildly intuitive", but rather to evoke an awareness of meaningful connections and interrelationships between and among humans and their environments. Living in one place for almost fifty years is certainly a gift. The enjoyment we experience through sanctuary is a type of meditative thought we become attuned to. The discovery of a commonplace swamp near our home provides a rich opportunity to consider the phenomenon of liminality and how such an in between might contribute to imaginative, original, and open possibilities for language as the house of our Being. Ecophenomenology as liminality provides the journey thought requires to imagine possibilities, entertain departures, discover the complexity of

thresholds, and experience interiority. Such interiority is our dwelling place. Liminality = *in* between = *intimate*, *intuitive*, *interdependent*, and *interconnected*. Ecophenomenology nurtures the type of thought that originates as beings come to be in place. The gradual and accrued receptivity it provides becomes, for the individual or community, an ecosophical education--that which we can know only *from within* by residing in one place for many years.

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