

Coding Manual for “Wilder Interaction with Nature Predicts Deeper Presence: Toward a Human-Centered Sustainability Indicator Beyond Exposure”

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ABSTRACT

The coding manual in this report codes two separate dimensions of people’s accounts of an experience in nature: the depth of Presence they experienced, and the wildness of their interaction with nature. We developed it in a study of 44 adults interviewed about an experience of Presence in nature. Presence is a state of being in which conditioned thinking subsides and the mind becomes open, aware, non-reactive, and still (Kahn et al., 2026). The first part, Presence Levels Coding, describes ten ordered Levels of Presence, from thought-immersed distraction (Level 1) to states described in contemplative traditions (Levels 9 and 10), with definitions, prototypical examples, vignettes, explanatory factors, and a coder cheat-sheet. The second part, Wildness Levels Coding, specifies two measures grounded in the Interaction Pattern approach: the wildness of interaction an environment affords (Maximum IP Wildness) and the wildness of interaction a participant actually enacted (Enacted IP Wildness), together with contextual factors, decision rules, and exemplar cases. A final section explains how to construct the synthesis blocks, the narrative summaries of interview transcripts on which coding was based. Our goal is to make these methods available so that others can use, test, adapt, and build on them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction	
2. Presence Levels Coding	
2.1 The Coding Scale (L1–L10)	
2.1.1 Level 1: Thought-Immersed, Distracted, Instrumental (The "Busy Mind")	
2.1.2 Level 2: Thought-Led, Seeking, Fragmentary (The "Reaching Mind")	
2.1.3 Level 3: Thought-Mediated, Settling, Emerging (The "Contemplative Mind")	
2.1.4 Level 4: Awareness-Seized, Object-Bound, Stabilizing (The "Captured Mind")	
2.1.5 Level 5: Awareness-Opened, Self-Diminishing, Connected (The "Belonging Self")	
2.1.6 Level 6: Awareness-Widened, Receptive, Encompassing (The "Receptive Being")	
2.1.7 Level 7: Self-Porous, Absorbed, Attuned (The "Included Self")	
2.1.8 Level 8: Self-Dissolved, Subsumed, Functional (The "Subsumption")	
2.1.9 Level 9: Subject-Object Dissolved, Nondual, Unstructured (The "Not Two")	
2.1.10 Level 10: Awareness-Ceased, Absorptive, Complete (The "Formless")	
2.2 Explanatory Factors	
2.3 Coder Cheat-Sheet for Presence Coding	
3. Wildness Levels Coding	
3.1 Defining Wildness	
3.2 Maximum Affordances Available versus Affordances Realized by the Participant	
3.3 Operational Definitions of Maximum IP Wildness and Enacted IP Wildness	
3.4 MIPW and EIPW 1-10 Level Descriptions and Anchors	
3.4.1 Range 1-3: Domestic, Managed, Routinized	
3.4.2 Range 4-6: Mixed Managed and Self-Organizing	
3.4.3 Range 7-9: Unmanaged, Self-organizing, Deeply Engaged	
3.4.4 Range 9-10 Transition	
3.5 Contextual Factors	
3.6 Decision Rules for Ambiguous Cases and Edge Cases	

3.6.1 Ambiguous Coding Scenarios

3.6.2 Edge Cases

3.7 Exemplar Cases Spanning the Scale

3.7.1 Case 1: Participant 41

3.7.2 Case 2 Participant 22

3.7.3 Case 3: Participant 21

3.7.4 Case 4: Participant 45

3.7.5 Case 5: Participant 37

3.7.6 Case 6: Participant 7

3.7.7 Case 7: Participant 33

4. How to Construct a Synthesis Block

5. References

1. INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of landscapes is conventionally evaluated through ecological indicators such as biodiversity, carbon storage, and habitat condition. Its human-experience side is less developed, and depends on how deeply people engage with nature, not only on how much they are exposed to it. This technical report provides the coding manual from a study that took up that problem. The study asked whether the depth of people's experience in nature varies with the wildness of the nature they are in, and whether that variation is carried more by the wildness of the setting or by the wildness of how people engage with it. The study's analyses and findings are reported in the companion article. This report documents the coding manual itself, so that others can see in full how the coding was done, and use, test, adapt, and build on it.

The depth of experience we coded is Presence, a state of being in which conditioned thinking subsides and the mind becomes open, aware, non-reactive, and still (Kahn et al., 2026). Kahn et al. (2026) developed the Presence Scale, a self-report measure, across three studies, and found Presence to be a higher-order construct comprising three factors: Stillness of Mind, Present Moment Awareness, and Consciousness Beyond Self. Of the participants in their third study, drawn from a U.S. national sample, 162 described a Presence experience in nature and agreed to be contacted for follow-up. We interviewed 44 of them about that experience, a diverse but not nationally representative sample. Each interview transcript was then distilled into a synthesis block, a narrative summary that keeps participants' core quotations in context, and each synthesis block was coded on three ten-point scales. Global Presence captures the depth of Presence across the experience as a whole. The two wildness measures draw on the Interaction Pattern approach developed in our lab's earlier work (Kahn et al., 2019; Lam et al., 2021; Weiss et al., 2022; Dunker et al., 2025). Maximum IP Wildness captures the wildest interaction the environment afforded, and Enacted IP Wildness captures the wildness of the interaction the participant in fact realized. Presence and wildness were coded separately, each on its own scale.

The manual has two parts, followed by a section on method. Presence Levels Coding (Section 2) describes ten ordered Levels of Presence, from thought-immersed distraction (Level 1) to states described in contemplative traditions (Levels 9 and 10), each with a definition, a prototypical case, vignettes, and coding rationale, and closes with explanatory factors and a coder cheat-sheet. Wildness Levels Coding (Section 3) specifies the two wildness measures, the contextual factors that bear on them, decision rules, and exemplar cases. Section 4 explains how

to construct a synthesis block. Like the lab’s earlier coding manuals, this report makes the core qualitative work of a study openly available. We offer it as the manual stood at the close of this study: developed through sustained work with the interview data, applied by two coders within it, and open to extension and revision by others.

Three framing notes for readers. First, coders in this study scored Presence holistically. Prospective coders must therefore account for all aspects of a participant’s experience, since an account may contain a mix of deeper and shallower moments (for example, a participant might come to a profound realization but also engage in distracted phone scrolling over the course of the experience). A participant who exhibits only one or two characteristics of a given Level is not necessarily experiencing that Level of Presence. This is also why the coding rationale for the vignettes commonly contains “Pulling the rating up” and “Pulling the rating down” bullets, which attend to the complexity of each participant’s experience. The Levels could also be adapted to code Presence in other ways, for example “peak Presence,” the deepest moment of Presence a participant experienced.

Second, the wildness coding scheme as formalized here is a post-hoc specification. Coding protocols were agreed upon, learned, and implemented over the course of the project, while the present manual was produced later to document relevant decisions and processes. As a result, some of the scheme is more fully articulated here than it was in practice: certain decision rules and factor definitions were implicit during coding and have been made explicit through coder reflection. The wildness coding is intended for use by the HINTS Lab and collaborating researchers extending or applying this approach. It has not yet been tested beyond the present study, and its application and refinement across other contexts remain to be done.

Third, readers may notice seemingly causal language (e.g., that technology use “blocked” Presence) in the articulation of coding decisions. This language is not intended to make generalizable causal claims about the variables of interest, but to delimit the boundaries for scoring clearly so that future coders can apply these rules decisively.

2. PRESENCE LEVELS CODING

2.1 The Coding Scale (L1–L10)

2.1.1 Level 1: Thought-Immersed, Distracted, Instrumental (The "Busy Mind")

Definition: Thinking predominates. The mind is active, narrating, and task-oriented, pulled by instrumental goals and distractive thoughts. The environment functions as background, object, or obstacle. In some cases, rumination structures the experience. There is no movement toward settling or receptive attention because the stream of thought so fully occupies one's engagement that an alternative mode of attention does not arise. Presence is absent.

Prototypical Example: Participant 2 – Snorkeling in a Tropical Lagoon (Instrumental)

P2 Synthesis Block:

Setting the scene:

Participant 2's experience takes place while on a tropical vacation with his wife in June for their 25th anniversary: "We managed to stay on five islands...We would get up in the morning and jump in the water to snorkel a little, then go to breakfast. [On] [t]he second island...We took a trip to the main little town and fed the eels. ...[We] took a trip around the [third] island in a small car and took a lot of pictures. On the last day of our vacation, we took the Blue Lagoon Cruise" (pg 1). He describes the experience of being surrounded by water while on the cruise: "We were in the middle of a lagoon. I mean, and really, We're heading towards islands, but we weren't close to islands... beautiful, clear blue water all around us in a boat. Beautiful day, sunshine. Nice weather...absolutely gorgeous" (pg 4, Q2). Participant 2 frequently snorkeled on his vacation, and he elaborates on what he could see, hear, smell, touch, and taste: "We couldn't hear anything at all, you know and the other people around in the boat and around it's about it. Feeling anything? Yeah, I'm gonna get in the water quick. Take as many pictures as I could....Nothing to smell really, you know, the boat maybe" (pg 4, Q2).

The Presence experience and relevant IPs:

The Presence experience (if any) takes place when Participant 2 is snorkeling with the sharks. Throughout his vacation, he was focused on getting shark pictures and videos:

- **"I was determined to get pictures and videos. Finally after 27 years I would get my shark pictures.** The captain of the boat got to a certain place in the lagoon and announced to us 'The sharks are here'. Within 30 seconds I was in the water with [a] snorkel, mask and camera. I took many pictures and some pretty good videos. We ate a

meal on a deserted island and went back to the hotel, which was right on the water front. An experience of a lifetime” (pg 2, Q1).

- **“I was thinking about [how] I need to get in the water to take pictures. And everything else is, you know, everything else peripheral”** (pg 6, Q11).
- He enjoyed snorkeling, reporting, **“I feel like I belong in the water, you know.** When I'm in the water, it's not, well, you know. Discomfort or anything, oh, oh my gosh, what if this happens or that? I don't think about that. I'm in the water. I like it. I think that's the first thing I want to do somehow. Just get me in the water” (pg 14, Q20).

Analysis: Participant 2 describes an experience in which he attempts to take photos and videos of sharks while snorkeling. The participant does not describe a sense of physical or mental stillness, as his mind is continuously thinking about taking photos: “I was thinking about [how] I need to get in the water to take pictures. And everything else is... peripheral.” This description of “everything else” as “peripheral” suggests the participant’s awareness is not in the present moment, but is, again, revolving around the shark photos that he is pursuing.

Despite Participant 2’s statement that he feels “like I belong in the water,” which could initially suggest a low-level form of CBS or connection with the natural environment, the sentiment is expressed in a general and reflective manner rather than as a description of the immediate lived experience. The participant speaks broadly about how he feels in the water overall, rather than reporting a moment-specific sense of immersion or merging. Additionally, this feeling is not revisited or elaborated upon elsewhere in the interview. Thus, the statement is best understood as a generalized affinity for being in the water rather than evidence of CBS, and is not coded as such.

Finally, the participant’s language suggests a perceived ownership and dominance over the environment, which is observed in his description of “my shark pictures.” This pattern of language further indicates a mental and spiritual separation between the participant and his environment.

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating down (Toward L1):** The entire experience is framed by the 27-year goal of "getting the shot." The shark is an *object* to be captured. He explicitly states the environment ("everything else") is "peripheral" to his task.

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L2):** He describes it as an "experience of a lifetime," which suggests high emotional arousal, but this is excitement about *achievement*, not stillness.
- **Net Result: Level 1.** Instrumental goals related to the camera are paired with subtle domination over the environment without the clear phenomenological experience of being.

Vignette A: Participant 45 – Group Hike (Social Distraction)

Participant 45 recalls hiking with a local hiking club... “[T]here were **24 people on the hike... But this was a gabfest... And that kind of required an adjustment,**” (pg 1). He notes that knowing the park was once a military base diminished his perception of wildness: “Some of the original buildings from the military base were still there... It wasn’t really a wilderness area,” (pg 3, Q5).

Generally, participant 45 found that the presence of others made him nervous and hindered his experience—which is why he had been walking so far ahead of the group, which made him feel: “**pretty much self contained. I wasn't part of a larger feeling or experience,**” (pg 8, Q21).

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating down (Toward L1):** The social environment ("gabfest") prevents any settling of attention. The participant remains in a state of adjustment, irritation, and self-containment. Additionally, the participant describes not feeling “part of a larger feeling or experience,” suggesting that no mental or spiritual expansion of consciousness is taking place.
- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L2):** He mentions mountains "always calm me," but this is a general statement, not a specific description of this moment.
- **Net Result: Level 1.** Social annoyance and cognitive judgment of the "military base" prevented any Presence.

Vignette B: Participant 20 – Penguin Island (Rumination)

The participant recalls being unable to free his mind from inner dialogue, repeatedly thinking about the living situation of his nephews: “**I just kept thinking. At that time, there was a situation with my nephews and their father... So that got me... to think about them...**” (pg 7, Q18).

While he consciously tries to stay present... he reflects: “Yeah, like I said, it’s like, yeah, you’re in the moment, but you’re thinking, ‘Wow, look at these kids having the time of their life. Why did you not provide for them?’ So there’s a situation there... So **I had a bit of a hard time... just turning that off. I was already going in my mind,**” (pg 8, Q19).

At the same time, the participant notes that sharing the experience with family members enhanced the moment, framing it as a meaningful collective experience rather than a solitary one. He explains that being with his wife, children, and nephews was encouraging: **“just to be able to share it with someone is special,”** (pg 6, Q14e).

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating down (Toward L1):** The participant heavily ruminates on the living situation of his nephews throughout the experience, preventing any mental stillness from taking hold. Additionally, his awareness is focused more on this inward rumination as opposed to the present moment in the environment.
- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L2):** Sharing the experience with his family members encouraged his enjoyment of the trip.
- **Net Result: Level 1:** The positive impact of the social interaction is not enough to negate the rumination that detracts from ST and PMA during the experience. Additionally, we do not observe any expansion or merging of consciousness in this participant, suggesting little, if any, Presence.

2.1.2 Level 2: Thought-Led, Seeking, Fragmentary (The "Reaching Mind")

Definition: There is a desire or attempt to engage, relax, or be present, but the thinking mind remains the dominant mode. Brief moments of calm or connection may arise, but are minimal or fragmentary and do not stabilize, as the stream of thought reclaims attention before awareness can settle. Connection with the environment, when reported, remains primarily reflective rather than felt. Presence is nascent but does not take hold.

Prototypical Example: Participant 43 – Squirrel Watching (Feelings of Separation)

P43 Synthesis Block

Setting the scene:

Participant 43 recalls smoking outside near his home, “next to a yard with some grass and trees” (pg 1). He lives in “an apartment complex,” but his porch and the grassy area surrounding it is “relatively secluded” and green (pg 1, Q1). He could hear “road noise” that was more like “white noise,” and see “some evergreen trees...bushes...[and] one other building” (pg 1, Q2; pg 2, Q3). He felt relaxed during his experience (pg 2, Q4).

The Presence experience and relevant IPs:

The Presence experience takes place as Participant 43 is “admir[ing] the natural setting” and seeing “a squirrel moving around” (pg 1). He mentions feeling connected to nature—the wildlife in particular (“chipmunks, rabbits...skunks...possums...”)--while recognizing he’s “apart from it” (pg 2, Q5):

“I felt connected with nature even though I was apart from it. I felt a sense of freedom and enjoyed that” (pg 1)

“I don’t necessarily feel totally connected with [nature], but I know that I’m apart from it. But I am still...[participant trails off] it is still a part of me that I’m able to get out there and see things, even though I’m not necessarily going to be actively wandering around through the brush or anything like that” (pg 2, Q5)

“in general, when I was out there, I noticed that I’m basically within a natural area. And so that just kind of reminded me that I am, you know I don’t live indoors all the time” (pg 3, Q7)

“Most of my time is not spent outdoors, so I guess that would make me a little bit aware that even though I am a part of nature, I am actually different. I’m actually apart from it” (pg 5, Q20)

“I’m still a singular being and I don’t necessarily think that my thoughts were, you know, a part of the greater area that I was in” (pg 6, Q21)

Participant 43 also describes having a still mind, as he “wasn’t thinking about anything in particular” (pg 4, Q16). He believes this helped him connect to nature further:

“If anything, it probably helped me connect a little bit with nature to not really be thinking about anything in particular. If I happen to had been thinking about anything then I imagine that would have been a little distracting. So **since I wasn’t actively thinking about anything in particular, that helped me just kind of be and not really think about anything**” (pg 4, Q17)

He says he was **“helped that in this case I was alone,”** and that “[t]here weren’t any extraneous noises...other than what I was expecting” (pg 5, Q18)

Analysis: Participant 43 describes his experience of observing the wildlife in his yard from his porch. He describes that he “wasn’t actively thinking about anything in particular,” suggesting a

mental quietude that would indicate ST. The participant also describes that this stillness “helped me to just kind of be,” reflects a brief, passive settling into the moment rather than an immersive or embodied state, indicating mild present-moment awareness without the added depth or continuity required for a higher Presence score.

While the participant begins to articulate feelings of connection with the natural environment, he emphasizes feeling as though he were a “singular being” and “apart from [nature].” This eliminates all possibilities for an expansion or merging of consciousness into the natural environment. What we have instead, is a continuous cognitive processing that works to separate the participant from the natural environment. For this reason, we see the participant take on a passive, observer role, as opposed to an active, involved role in the environment; the latter of which we would expect in middle-to-high Presence accounts.

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L3):** The participant reports that slowed thinking and he describes feeling like he can “just kind of be,” suggesting present moment awareness.
- **Keeping it at Level 2:** The participant continues to rely on cognitive processing rather than the experiential “being” characteristic of Presence. This reliance shapes how he relates to the environment and limits his sense of connection, as reflected in his statement: “I don’t necessarily feel totally connected with [nature], but I know that I’m apart from it.”
- **Net Result: Level 2.** The participant expresses a weak connection to the natural environment and emphasizes separation through cognitive framing. While moments of mental stillness represent a slight step up from Level 1 language, they are not sustained or embodied enough to warrant a Level 3 rating, resulting in a low-level Presence experience.

Vignette A: Participant 8 – Stargazing (Inability to Settle)

The participant recalls it being a cool and clear night... “I walked to a dark field so I could look at the stars. I looked up and saw the most stars I had in years. I stayed that way for a long time,” (pg 1).

While the participant experienced a sense of peacefulness and serenity, she did not experience a slowing of thoughts or stillness of mind: **“I just, that's just not my natural state. There's always a thought running through my head whether I like it or not,”** (pg 7, Q18).

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L3):** She "stayed that way for a long time" and felt "somewhat peaceful." This suggests a sustained stillness, which we might expect in L3.
- **Keeping it at Level 2:** She explicitly denies the core factor of Stillness ("always a thought running... whether I like it or not"). The internal structure prevents the shift into Presence.
- **Net Result: Level 2.** A classic "Trying Mind"—the behavior is there (staring at stars), but the internal state is busy.

Vignette B: Participant 4 – Backpacking (Distracting the Mind)

Participant 4 describes backpacking through the Shenandoah mountains with his uncle and some friends, describing a very natural environment, with few distractions: "I like kinda just being out there kind of by ourselves and just not having I guess a lot of distractions...not being like on our phones all the time and just kinda just hearing sounds" (pg 3, Q5).

Despite not being on their phones, the participant recalls this stillness being occupied by ruminating thoughts and his personal struggles: "**I had a lot kinda going on in my mind that I've been dealing with prior to [the experience],**" (pg 5, Q11). To distract his mind, the participant and his group "**had music on playing not the whole time, but like in our ears, our earbuds. So that obviously kind of keeps us preoccupied mentally**" (pg 5, Q13a). This suggests that the participant deliberately took his attention out of the present moment, and instead focused on the music.

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L3):** The participant describes the experience as "the mental break I needed," (pg 1), suggesting a mental quietude that differs from baseline. He also mentions feeling grateful for the experience: "I was also just thinking about being in nature, how blessed my life was in general," (pg 7, Q17).
- **Keeping it at Level 2:** However, the participant admits that he had spent much of the experience ruminating, allowing us to infer that the mental stillness he may have had wasn't sustained. Additionally, the participant uses music to drown out his troubling thoughts, stating that this "keeps us preoccupied mentally" (pg 5, Q13a). Thus, preventing the shift into PMA and subsequently, Presence.
- **Net Result: Level 2.** The participant attempts to distract the mind from rumination, but as a result, also distracts himself from the natural environment and the Present moment. There

are elements of Presence in the participant's language, but since none of these factors are sustained, L2 is the most appropriate scoring.

2.1.3 Level 3: Thought-Mediated, Settling, Emerging (The "Contemplative Mind")

Definition: Rumination subsides and calm begins to take hold. Attention is no longer dominated by task-orientation or mental chatter, and awareness of the present moment becomes somewhat stable. However, engagement remains mediated through cognitive processes such as perspective-taking, imagination, interpretation, or narration, and may depend on external scaffolding such as activity or setting. The environment is appreciated but met through thought rather than direct perceptual contact. Presence is emerging but cognitively filtered.

Prototypical Participant: Participant 36 – National Park (Cognitive Play)

P36 Synthesis Block

Setting the Scene:

Participant 36 recalls walking through a national park with his friends: "I was walking through a national park, I was surrounded by nature, and the feeling of grass beneath my feet" (pg 1). He describes his surroundings: "there was a dog park, playground, and a lake. And then, like not too far, there were parking lots" (pg 1, Q1); "For nature...I did see some birds. I saw people were walking their dogs because there was a dog park...And then, yeah, just some plants like some trees...some areas were pretty grassy" (pg 2, Q3); "I could see for miles. I could see the mountains or the valleys in the distance. There weren't really any buildings or obstructions" (pg 4, Q10). Participant 36 elaborates on what he could see, hear, and smell: "I could see nature mostly, like the sound of, you know, birds and I could hear water running from the lake...Smell was just like warm, fresh air" (pg 2, Q2); "It wasn't too quiet. The sound and the environment, the atmosphere, was quiet, it wasn't really noisy. The weather was nice too. It was like a clear day. And it just felt like... I was at a beach or something" (pg 3, Q6). And he had been to this park before: "I was familiar with the area" (pg 4, Q9).

The Presence experience and relevant IPs:

The Presence experience takes place as Participant 36 is walking through the park. He felt relaxed and like he could enjoy the moment rather than worrying about other things:

“My mind felt peaceful and highly aware of what was going on, and I experienced a sense of freedom. I felt alive and receptive to the present moment, without judgment. I felt like I was part of something bigger, and I was able to enjoy the beauty around me in the present moment without worrying about the future or ruminating on the past” (pg 1)

“I was really at ease. I really felt like I could just forget about other things and de-stress...it was peaceful for me” (pg 2, Q4)

“It was quiet, so it would take me a moment to take a deep breath and just enjoy that moment.” (pg 3, Q6)

Interviewer: “And how did it feel to be aware of everything you noticed?”

Participant: **“it has cleared up my mind a bit, kind of like meditating. So I don't have a lot of things going on in my mind”** (pg 5, Q11)

“I was like aware of everything that was happening. So I yeah, I took some time to enjoy it” (pg 7, Q19)

Participant 36 imagined what it would be like to be a bird or another animal at the park, and feeling connected to them as they were enjoying themselves:

“I would say I was connected [with the natural surroundings]. It...felt nice that I could just...relate with nature like I did enjoy watching the birds and the dogs....And I could just forget about the other things that were going on in life” (pg 2, Q5)

“At that time, I tried to pretend like I was one of the birds or the animals who was enjoying being at the park. Cause **I could imagine like the birds were having fun too, and maybe the dogs when I saw them. But yeah, I...imagined what it would be like if I were in their shoes”** (pg 3, Q6)

“they don't have like any responsibilities, or like bills to pay or a job to work. So they don't have much of the stress that humans do. So **I just kind of wondered what it would be like for them”** (pg 3, Q7)

“there were groups of [birds], and like...they were...chasing each other around. They look like they were young birds... And they were like...how kids like would play tag” (pg 9)

“it's different from...entertainment, you would get like from TV...It's like something else like it's directly from nature” (pg 9)

“I could actually see it with my own eyes, and then just enjoying it at that moment” (pg 9)

Note: He states that for Question 20, when asked about the extent to which he felt himself merging with everything, he assumed “merging” meant “relating to”: “So when you said merging, I assume like how I would relate to them...Like...looking at dogs or birds or other animals, just kind of relating with them” (pg 8, Q20)

Participant 36 mentions taking pictures during his experience:

“we did take pictures with my phone” (pg 10, Q25)

“you see a really nice moment happening, and then you have to be quick to take a picture before it goes away” (pg 11, Q25)

He says that if he and his friends hadn't brought their phones, “we would spend more time enjoying the experience and less time trying to fumble with our phones... just for getting a good shot for Instagram” (pg 11, Q25)

Finally, Participant 36 was talking with his friends during his experience, and states that there were other people at the park:

“I would assume they were feeling the same way, but we were talking so I...wasn't quite sure how they were feeling” (pg 6, Q14c)

“there were families there...they were talking and enjoying themselves. Some people were on their phones. Some people were at the playgrounds and having fun” (pg 6, Q14c)

“if the people weren't there, then I think it would make it better, because like it would, it would be somewhat of a distraction” (pg 6, Q14d); but he expresses, “I would still notice, like the environment and everything that's occurring” (pg 7, Q14e)

Analysis: Participant 36 describes an experience walking through a national park with his friends. He mentions feeling a sense of bliss, freedom, and peace: “My mind felt peaceful and highly aware of what was going on, and I experienced a sense of freedom,” (pg 1). He further describes a strong alignment with the present moment: “I felt alive and receptive to the present moment, without judgment. I felt like I was part of something bigger, and I was able to enjoy the beauty around me

in the present moment without worrying about the future or ruminating on the past” (pg 1). This combination of mental stillness and present-focused awareness suggests mid-level PMA and ST.

The participant describes feeling connected to the wildlife by way of relating to them: “I could imagine like the birds were having fun too, and maybe the dogs when I saw them. But yeah, I...imagined what it would be like if I were in their shoes” (pg 3, Q6). While this reflects an emerging connection to the natural environment, it remains mediated by active cognition and imagination. Therefore, this experience suggests low-level CBS, as these cognitive processes interrupt mental stillness and move the participant away from a more direct, embodied sense of “being.”

Finally, the participant's social interaction and use of technology detracted from his ability to remain present: “if the people weren't there, then I think it would make it better, because like it would, it would be somewhat of a distraction” (pg 6, Q14d). In addition, the participant mentions that he had used his phone to take photos during the experience, which also took away from the natural environment: “[if he and his friends hadn’t brought their phones...] we would spend more time enjoying the experience and less time trying to fumble with our phones... just for getting a good shot for Instagram” (pg 11, Q25). These social and technological distractions work to erode the previously established ST and PMA, as they create mental noise that detracts from the present moment.

This participant receives a L3 score because of his mid-level PMA and ST, but low-level CBS. Additionally, the added technological and social distractions help to lower the score slightly. Therefore, Participant 36 would be considered on the higher end of L3.

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L4):** The participant displays a clear shift away from worry (“forget about other things”). He is attending to the environment, not his thoughts, and is focused on the present: “without worrying about the future or ruminating on the past.”
- **Keeping it at Level 3:** The connection is achieved through thinking about the animals (“I tried to pretend,” “I imagined”) rather than a direct, felt sense of oneness. It is an intellectual connection, rather than a spiritual oneness. The mind is cognitively working through this relation to the animals, weakening the stillness of mind that the participant previously

described. The participant's use of a cell phone and social interaction during the experience further fragment this stillness and present moment awareness.

- **Net Result: Level 3.** Enjoyment, relief, and awareness are present, indicating a meaningful shift away from baseline. However, the mind is actively telling a story, preventing the participant from settling into a direct, non-conceptual sense of connection and stillness. Due to the clear present-moment enjoyment and reduced rumination, this participant is a high-end L3.

Vignette A: Participant 15 – Coastal Drive (Cognitive Demands)

The participant recalls driving along the California coastline: “I was driving down the highway along the coast with the beautiful beach as my scenery,” (pg 1). The participant describes feeling relaxed, peaceful, and a mental stillness: “**I felt free and that my problems weren't relevant at the time...**Everything was perfect and I felt really content. I felt at peace, not a care in the world” (pg 1). The participant also reports her consciousness expanding outwards: “**me being one with nature...**Being able to see and smell and feel the environment,” (pg 6, Q21).

The participant also describes external factors that impacted her mental stillness and present moment awareness: “I'm always thinking about things... **just always paying attention to the road. So my mind's never just still**” (pg 5, Q16). P15 also listened to music throughout the experience, stating that without this, “I would have probably been bored... paying more attention to the sounds of the cars than the ocean,” (pg 7, Q25).

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L4):** The participant describes moments of reduced thought that differs from her baseline mental state, noting that her “problems weren't relevant” and that she felt “at peace.” She also reports a sense of expansion of consciousness: “being one with nature... being able to see and smell and feel the environment,” which suggests mid-level CBS and a brief softening of thought.
- **Keeping it at Level 3:** The participant's ST and PMA are not sustained. The cognitive demands of driving require “always paying attention to the road,” which limits PMA and interrupts ST. Additionally, listening to music functions as an attentional buffer against boredom, indicating that the experience relies, in part, on external stimulation rather than a self-sustaining Presence state.

- **Net Result: Level 3:** The participant experiences relaxation and moments of connection, but these are interrupted by attentional tasks. Presence is accessible yet fragile, placing this experience as a lower Level 3 rather than a more stable, immersive Level 4.

Vignette B: Participant 12: Walking on the Beach – (Nostalgia)

Participant 12 describes her mind becoming still while walking along the beach: “[My mind was] **much calmer. I was really honestly...just hearing everything and feeling everything and focusing on that...Very calm.** Almost like meditation in a way” (pg 8, Q16).

The participant describes multiple forms of connection, both to the natural environment and to the people with whom she shared the experience. She describes a connection to the natural environment that is mediated by nostalgia and familiarity: “between just... all the memories of being there and just the feeling of being there... I mean, there's times I've taken like a raft. On the ocean there and just like laid on the [raft] and just relaxed. **And I just feel like...I am a part of it.**” (pg 9, Q20). The environment also facilitates a connection between the participant and her husband: “I feel that I enjoy it when I'm by myself, but **a lot of times if he's with me and we're not talking and we're just both enjoying it. It makes me feel connected to that, but connected with him,**” (pg 7, Q14d).

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L4):** The participant is able to clearly articulate a still mind: “[My mind was] much calmer,” as well as present-moment awareness: “hearing everything and feeling everything and focusing on that.” These excerpts indicate strong, mid-level PMA and ST that we may expect to see in L4 or L5.
- **Keeping it at Level 3:** The connection to the natural environment and to those around her remains superficial and driven by cognition and nostalgia. This kind of low-level CBS is typical of levels 3 and below. Additionally, ST and PMA are not developed further in the interview, suggesting that these qualities are less robust than the above excerpts alone might imply.
- **Net Result: Level 3:** This interview would be considered a high L3 due to its mid-level PMA and ST, as well as weak CBS. While these elements are present, they are not sufficiently stable or expanded across the interview to justify a higher-level classification.

2.1.4 Level 4: Awareness-Seized, Object-Bound, Stabilizing (The "Captured Mind")

Definition: Something in the environment seizes attention and holds it. The thinking mind quiets, not so much through effort or intention, but because a captivating external event or stimulus has displaced it. The "rest of the world" falls away, and a stable calm, exhilaration, or alert focus takes hold. Present moment awareness is strong but object-dependent: consciousness is held by the event or stimulus rather than open to the wider field. The self remains a distinct observer of the experience rather than merged with it. Presence begins to stabilize but mostly by being tethered to its object.

Prototypical Participant: Participant 6 – Riding Bikes in New York (Freedom & Bliss)

P6 Synthesis Block

Setting the Scene:

Participant 6 recalls riding bikes with a close friend from college on Governor's Island, New York: "I like to visit New York City every year and always stay with a close friend from college...I wanted to visit Governor's Island just off lower Manhattan...We spent about 4 hours there and ate a lot of good food, enjoyed the sites, including fantastic views of the Statue of Liberty and also rented some bicycles to ride around the island" (pg 1). Describing his surroundings, he says, "I was surrounded by water. There was also, some artificial oyster like harvesting reefs or something like that...most of the buildings were rather colonial. Old buildings that work at least 150, 250 years old and...there were lots of, grassy expanses there where you could lie out and bring a blanket and just hang out and, I saw some people playing sports like soccer and such. It was just...very different than the hustle and bustle of Manhattan" (pg 2, Q1). Participant 6 elaborates on what he could see, smell, hear, etc.: "I could...smell like the sea breeze. It was just...visually...really pretty and appealing...it was very quiet also. We ate a lot. We had oysters...the bicycle ride was, especially, as I mentioned, great...the wind blowing through my hair, just a total sense of freedom...Kind of a transcendent experience" (pg 2, Q2).

While riding the bike, Participant 6 mentions that "part of the path was the perimeter of the island and so you got great views of the Manhattan skyline, also great views of the Statue of Liberty...And then some other trails went through the actual buildings on site...There were lots of tourists, not a ton, but, but a good number of them" (pg 2, Q3). He explains that he

could see “miles and miles” (pg 4, Q10) out onto the horizon: It's a great view. The Statue of Liberty was actually a lot closer than I thought it would be...but you could see...New Jersey on one side of the river and...the Manhattan Skyline on the other” (pg 4, Q10).

The Presence experience and relevant IPs:

The Presence experience takes place as Participant 6 and his friend are riding bikes together around the island: “That was the funnest part of that visit. I had not ridden a bicycle in at least 15 years and it was a revelation. **I was completely in the moment and not thinking about any of my concerns and having the time of my life. For a few hours I felt like a kid again and it brought back memories of getting a bicycle when I was young and the sense of freedom it gave me**” (pg 1).

Participant 6 describes feeling exhilarated, free, and relaxed, and that he enjoyed sharing this experience with his friend:

“it was just...wonderful, exhilarating and I was... riding along with...one of my closest friends. So, you know that made it also very memorable also” (pg 2, Q2)

Interviewer: “And how did your experience make you feel?”

Participant: “Definitely, made me feel, exhilarated, younger. You know... **it was kind of transcendent and I don't have those types of moments that often...I was just completely focused on having a good time and and enjoying the experience and not thinking about anything else**” (pg 3, Q4)

“a few minutes into the bike ride...I... just felt, you know, free, relaxed. Like I said, in the moment. You know....**sharing that experience with my buddy as well so...definitely a camaraderie there**” (pg 3, Q7)

Interviewer: “Do you think your experience would have been different if you were on your own?”

Participant: “I think it might have been little less joyful. Part of it was...riding side by side with my buddy” (pg 6, Q14e)

“I wasn't thinking about anything else. For the rest of the trip, or what we were gonna do, or what I had planned or anything like that. I was completely in the moment” (pg 7, Q16)

He repeatedly says that this experience was unexpectedly “transcendent”:

“I’m not a religious person, but...**it was transcendent almost. Like a religious experience and just...very joyful moment.** And you know, I’m a happy person, but I’m not overly joyful. Basically most of the time, and thankful for life and that kind of stuff” (pg 5, Q11)

“I knew we were, we were planning to ride a bike. I didn’t expect it to be as fun. And transcendent as it ended up being” (pg 8, Q23)

He expresses feeling most connected to the water during the bike ride, especially since they could see so much of it, but not necessarily “one with nature” (pg 8, Q11):

“I would say I was most connected to the water” (pg 3, Q5)

Interviewer: “And when asked to what extent you felt yourself merging with everything as though you were a wave that merged back into the ocean, you responded very much. Can you explain if anything we talked about influenced this?”

Participant: “Yeah, again, it was, it was the bike ride and especially the parts of the bike ride that were around the perimeter where I could see water and see the, you know, the Hudson River” (pg 8, Q20)

“I was joyful, but I never felt one with nature, with the water” (pg 8, Q21)

His body became still after the bike ride as he and his friend ate oysters and looked out at the water:

“Yeah, afterwards we were... eating small oysters...Looking out at the...water. It was very, very still, a happy moment and just I think...we were kind of beat...And just enjoying the moment...my legs were a little sore, so I was just completely chill” (pg 6, Q15)

However, he mentions that he and his friend had been using their phones during the bike ride and conversing with each other:

“we were also conversing along the way and...I shot some cool selfie videos as well during the ride” (pg 3, Q7)

“I shot several, videos during the bike ride of myself and my buddy. And I also shot a lot of photos of the island and the Statue of Liberty” (pg 9, Q25)

“I’m not one of those people who’s on their phone all the time. So, I just, you know, used it out of necessity to capture the videos and the photos that I wanted to, and then I

put it away. I wasn't checking email or calling anyone or anything like that" (pg 9, Q26)

Finally, Participant 6 mentions that he's had some (irregular) meditation experience:

"I've never done it regularly. But I... do it a few times, especially when I'm stressed. ...and they tend to be just very, short meditation sessions...where I just...close my eyes..." (pg 10, Q28)

Analysis: Participant 6 describes an experience in which he and a friend are biking around Governor's Island in New York. During this time, he reports an intense state of bliss, characterizing the experience as profoundly joyful and nearly spiritual: "I'm not a religious person, but...it was transcendent almost. Like a religious experience and just...very joyful moment" (pg 5, Q11). This joy is accompanied by a sense of freedom and a return to childhood memories, as he recalls: "For a few hours I felt like a kid again and it brought back memories of getting a bicycle when I was young and the sense of freedom it gave me" (pg 1).

This euphoric state also appears to facilitate a strong awareness of the present moment. The participant describes a suspension of future-oriented and task-related thinking: "I wasn't thinking about anything else. For the rest of the trip, or what we were gonna do, or what I had planned or anything like that. I was completely in the moment" (pg 7, Q16). He further emphasizes a sustained and intentional focus on the experience itself, stating: "I was just completely focused on having a good time and enjoying the experience and not thinking about anything else" (pg 3, Q4). Together, these excerpts suggest mid-to-high levels of present-moment awareness (PMA) and stillness of mind (ST), as the participant reports both a reduction in active cognition and a deliberate focus toward the immediate experience.

Despite this heightened enjoyment and presence, the participant explicitly denies any expansion or merging of consciousness with the environment: "I was joyful, but I never felt one with nature, with the water" (pg 8, Q21). This statement indicates low, if present, levels of connectedness beyond self (CBS). Additionally, the participant notes engaging with external factors, such as technology and social interactions during the experience, which may have disrupted the stability of the PMA described earlier: "I shot several videos during the bike ride of myself and my buddy. And I also shot a lot of photos of the island and the Statue of Liberty" (pg 9, Q25).

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L5):** The participant describes being captured by an incredibly deep, “transcendent” kind of present moment awareness. They describe that this is accompanied by a stillness of mind and an intense joy. This is a ST and PMA that we would expect to see in L5.
- **Keeping it at Level 4:** The participant reports being unable to feel connection to the natural environment: “I was joyful, but I never felt one with nature, with the water,” indicating low CBS, something we might expect to see closer to L1-L2. The participant’s experience is facilitated by outside factors, like their friend, as well as their phone usage which fragments PMA and diminishes its stability as a factor.
- **Net Result: Level 4.** The participant reports a joyful, and “transcendent” present-moment experience that differs from baseline. The participant makes an effort to remain present in the moment, and describes a decrease in rumination and thought. However, the participant explicitly denies feeling “one with nature,” and the experience remains partially mediated by social interaction and intermittent phone use, fragmenting continuous immersion seen in higher-level interviews. Therefore, taken holistically, this interview would land on the higher end of L4.

Vignette A: Participant 27 – A Deer Fight (High Drama Absorption)

Participant 27 and his wife were driving through a state park when they saw two bucks squaring off. He describes the scene vividly: “The original buck also appeared and headed straight for the second buck... with the larger one stomping and pawing the ground,” (pg 1).

The intensity of the event captured his attention completely: “My wife and I were both immersed in the experience... **It was like watching a play and being part of it,**” (pg 10, Q19). He continues: “It was like **the rest of what was going on was irrelevant, like gone... everything else just kind of faded out...** it was like you were seeing it with blinders,” (pg 7, Q8). He adds: “**I wasn’t thinking about anything else in my life... No other distractions in my mind,**” (pg 10, Q18). However, the participant does mention that he remained in a state of alertness: “**I was nervous in a way, but not a bad nervousness. It kind of felt like wow we’re in this moment here. I was still calm but in an alert state,**” (pg 10, Q16).

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L5):** The participant describes a state of intense focus; the background world "faded out." He explicitly says there were: "no other distractions in my mind." This suggests a mid/high level of PMA and ST.
- **Keeping it at Level 4:** The participant mentions that, despite his intense focus in the moment, he was in a state of alertness, fragmenting the ST. Additionally, the participant explains his role as an observer as an active one; he feels as though he was "a part of it." This suggests low-level CBS that we could expect in a L3-L4.
- **Net Result: Level 4:** With mid-level strength across PMA and ST, as well as low CBS, Participant 27 demonstrates a clear Presence state that exceeds cognitive appreciation alone, yet stops short of the sustained stillness and self-transcendence characteristic of Level 5. The experience reflects a somewhat stable but alert form of Presence, resulting in an overall Level 4 rating.

Vignette B: Participant 21 – Admiring the Sky (Auditory Distraction)

The participant describes a Presence experience that occurs as she notices how pretty the sky was: "I don't know why it was different that day. Just the weather, I guess, or the humidity level that day, or the pollution level. But it was much prettier than usual," (Q7, pg 3). In this moment, the participant recalls feeling connected to her natural surroundings, almost as though she is merging with them: "**Feeling more as a part of nature, as opposed to just sitting in the house and looking at it. It's actually being there, more of a physical feeling that would help you connect more because you're actually in it at the time, and not just thinking about it or looking at it,**" (Q5, pg 2).

While the participant reports that her body became still, she had trouble remaining in the present moment and quieting her mind due to the noise of car traffic in her external environment: "It would've been nice if [the traffic] wouldn't have been there. But I didn't allow it to ruin everything," (Q13, pg 4), and "I just thought in my mind that [the traffic's] going to be there. There's nothing I can do about it, so I just ignored it the best you can," (Q14, pg 4).

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L5):** The participant's clear merging of consciousness demonstrates a mid-level of CBS. She describes feeling "a part of nature," and can clearly differentiate this sensation from looking at, or thinking about her environment.

Additionally, the participant can pinpoint the moment her body became still, embodying the physical component of stillness.

- **Keeping it at Level 4:** The participant is unable to drown out the noise of the traffic around her, disrupting any ST or PMA that is attempting to take shape. She makes attempts to “tune it out and just relax,” but the interview suggests that these attempts are unsuccessful and there is a lack of stability in these factors.
- **Net Result: Level 4:** The participant experiences mid-level CBS and lower level PMA and ST due to the influence of disrupting external factors. She is also very articulate with the onset of stillness and CBS. Taken holistically, P21 is a good interview to represent the lower end of L4.

2.1.5 Level 5: Awareness-Opened, Self-Diminishing, Connected (The "Belonging Self")

Definition: Awareness is less tethered to a single captivating object and opens to the wider field. The thinking mind is substantially quiet. As awareness opens and self-preoccupation diminishes, a felt sense of connection or belonging to something larger arises for the first time: consciousness begins to extend beyond the boundaries of self. However, the self remains a distinct vantage point, observing or appreciating this connection rather than absorbed into it. Presence deepens, and consciousness beyond self emerges, though still witnessed from within a localized self-perspective.

Prototypical Example: Participant 39 – Fishing Trip with Wife (Physical Belonging)

P39 Synthesis Block

Setting the scene:

Participant 39’s experience takes place while going on a fishing trip to the lake with his wife: “I was at the lake, sitting on my camping chair. I had my sun visor and sunglasses on. The weather was almost picture perfect with a light breeze. Was actually enjoying the warm sun on my face...I remember looking up and the sky was cloud free. I could hear a bird in the distance. I was just really kicking back and taking in the peaceful moment” (pg 1). He elaborates on what he could see and hear: “it’s very quiet, the only thing you might hear is a boat going by with some other fisherman out there in the lake...it’s just you and the fish and the water and the sky and when you look across the lake it’s maybe two football fields long

before you hit the other side it's a forest...you have the birds, you can hear those noises every now and then you'll hear a fish jump out of the water" (pg 1-2, Q2).

The Presence experience and relevant IPs:

The Presence experience takes place when Participant 39 is sitting and looking out at the lake and sky. The experience primarily made him feel relaxed:

"Kind of clears my mind and then keeps me focused on why I'm there the just do some fishing and kick back and just forget about everything cuz that that's what I do" (pg 2, Q4)

"the part that's closest to the water is where I'm more relaxed" (pg 3, Q6)

"there wasn't really anything that got on my nerves or distracted me or anything like that you know or I was thinking you know I don't wanna be here...nothing disturbed me" (pg 5, Q13)

"you got to sit there and be still so you don't scare the fish...you're so relaxed...you could nod off" (pg 6, Q15).

Participant 39 describes feeling not only connected to his natural surroundings, but *part* of them:

"Okay, I actually felt like I was maybe a piece of the place, like maybe a finger or, you know, a limb or something. I actually felt part of the place. I don't know how else to explain it. But I mean, like if you're there and you're sitting there, you're gonna feel like you actually belong and you're a part of the place, you know?" (pg 7, Q19)

"And I was totally conscious of it, thinking, wow, like, like **I'll feel like I know the place, you know, maybe the place knows me**" (pg 8, Q19)

"no noise in the background, no cars, no sirens, no anything, you know, just sitting there. And then all of a sudden you feel like you're a piece of nature" (pg 8, Q20).

He mentions that he and his wife have "been going there for 17 years," which might contribute to the depth of his connection (pg 2, Q5).

Participant 39 also notes that his experience would be different without his wife there, as her presence is important to him:

“if I go there without her, the first thing I'm gonna do is look for her...And then my mind won't be on fishing; I'll be wanting to know what's she doing at the house or how she's feeling” (pg 6, Q14e).

Analysis: Participant 39 describes a state of relaxation and calm while on a fishing trip with his wife. Particularly, looking out at the lake and sky helped him clear his mind and focus on fishing. Alongside the vastness of the scenery, his mental stillness was highly supported by his physically still, sitting body.

Participant 39 also describes feeling like “a piece of the place, like maybe a finger or...a limb,” which indicates a higher level of CBS than simply feeling “connected” to the place. He articulates instead feeling one with the place, and further, a sense of mutual understanding and knowing: “I know the place...[and] maybe the place knows me.” Like Participant 39’s mental stillness, his deeper CBS emerges from his physically still body, since he says “if you’re...sitting there, you’re gonna feel like you actually belong.”

Despite Participant 39’s higher level CBS, his description of feeling part of/one with the place isn’t quite framed as a dissolution of self/other. His sense of belonging is centered on himself (“I know the place...[and] maybe the place knows *me*”), an exchange between him and the place, maintaining a distinct separation between himself (the observer) and the place as he reflects on his connection.

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L6/7):** A stronger felt sense of belonging ("limb," "finger").
- **Keeping it at Level 5:** While he feels "like a limb," the description is framed as a simile/metaphor ("maybe a finger") and he remains in the role of the fisherman "focused on why I'm there." The "self" is still the reference point feeling the belonging.
- **Net Result: Level 5.** Deep belonging and perspective, but the "self" remains the central anchor.

Vignette A: Participant 1 – Walking Dog and Watching Sunset (Visual/Intellectual Perspective)

Participant 1 recalls walking her dog in the woods near her apartment. The Presence experience takes place when she watches the sunset from a vantage point in the woods: “I can see

down towards the lake... I can see a few miles worth of the county, and even though there's like 100,000 people that live there, it looks very small in that moment...they're really pretty sunsets...very poetic and artful. So it gives you a lot to think about...It was nice to see the...intrinsic beauty in it. Something that maybe happens every day, but it's still really cool to see."

She reflects: "Just the understanding I guess that life is intrinsically connected. Like grass growing... It requires rain, it requires participation by all kinds of forms of life... I guess there's a beauty in it." The participant felt "kind of like a relief, like taking a deep breath and feeling like there wasn't anything dragging me down... a moment of contentness...I was not worried about stressful or material things. I felt liberated."

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L6):** The vast view creates a sense of scale ("it looks very small"), reducing the weight of daily life. She understands the "intrinsic connection" of life.
- **Keeping it at Level 5:** The connection is still conceptual/analytical ("it gives you a lot to think about," "I guess there's a beauty in it"). The "self" is observing the connection rather than dissolving into it. Vigilance remains regarding her dog (about poison ivy, cars, etc.), which prevents total stillness of mind.
- **Net Result: Level 5.** A stable, connected state where the "self" feels small but remains distinct and reflective.

Vignette B: Participant 31 – Animal Watching (Contented Observation)

Participant 31 experiences Presence while watching animals in her front yard: "I reveled in the simple joy of these tiny creatures in my front yard...I felt thankful for these small creatures doing simple things...I felt happy and content watching them."

She mentions feeling like "a quiet observer": "I was just sitting and being, so there was no inner dialogue. I was just an observer and I got out of my own head and into the natural world around me. My thoughts just stopped."

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L6):** Complete cessation of internal dialogue. Simply "being."

- **Keeping it at Level 5:** Self-focused experience: “*I was just an observer,*” “*I felt happy and content watching them.*” Feelings of contentness and appreciation watching the world around her.
- **Net Result: Level 5.** A mellow experience of absorbed and calm observation, but self/other distinctions remain intact.

2.1.6 Level 6: Awareness-Widened, Receptive, Encompassing (The "Receptive Being")

Definition: Awareness widens beyond specific objects into a diffuse, non-focal field. The thinking mind has largely quieted, and a sense of mental spaciousness and relief takes its place. Engagement with the environment shifts from something observed or appreciated to something simply experienced. The scope of what awareness can hold expands beyond the immediate setting to encompass abstract or universal wholes: the interconnectedness of life, creation, the span of existence. The self is no longer an active observer but a receptive presence. Presence deepens into embodied witnessing, and consciousness beyond self extends toward the encompassing.

Prototypical Example: Participant 29 – Sitting On Porch (Internal Shift)

P29 Synthesis Block

Setting the scene:

Participant 29’s experience takes place while she’s sitting on her front porch, doing nothing in particular, while observing her lawn and the urban environment around her: “A few days ago, I was sitting outside facing the bird feeder...There was plenty of housekeeping for me to attend to. I could have checked my work email, but now I was sitting outside...Traffic was quiet. I could hear people talking in the parking lot across the street. I was doing nothing...It was sunny and cold” (pg 1). She elaborates that during her experience, she could smell “City smells,” “Car exhaust,” and “Possibly [her] cigarette smoke,” and hear the “constant traffic,” which sometimes “sounds like the ocean” (pg 3, Q2). She could see “the lawn,” “the rental house directly across from [her],” and “the alley,” and looking up, the “cell phone towers that are probably three...,four miles away” (pg 4, Q2; pg 6, Q10).

The Presence experience and relevant IPs:

The Presence experience takes place as Participant 29 is sitting on her porch and just looking out at her lawn and the area beyond it. She describes how her mind became still and calm:

“It didn’t take me long to sit without actively thinking. Before I came to the gentle, fluid, realization that, this is it. This is nice that this is all there is and that’s okay. My brain had a spa day moment...nothing happened and it was lovely...I’m not sure how long I was doing nothing before my brain felt floaty. It was startling because it was so languid compared to the constant activity that goes on...I felt safe and warm and at ease and comfortable and it was a jumble of inactive goodness” (pgs 1-2).

She agrees that she felt connected to her natural surroundings:

“I want to say yeah, yeah, because you know, the trees and the thing, you know, the two trees have always been there and we’ve watched them grow bigger, and so they’re part of their part of the routine, they’re part of my routine and they’re part of you know, they’re part of that, they’re part of my landscape. Because I live in the middle of the city, traffic... is part of my environment. It’s an urban environment, but cars and pedestrians, that’s part of my environment” (pg 5, Q5).

And in comparison to the parts of her lawn and the trees she could see from where she was sitting, she says she felt “lighter”:

“I want to say lighter. I want to say unencumbered, you know, because...even if I’m looking down...the gangway and can see the alley...that takes focus. You know, and if I’m looking at...the birds flying in and out of the magnolia trees, that takes focus. So if I’m there and I get to that moment of - it’s just so, it’s light and fluffy and... [participant trails off] I apologize for being so, so inarticulate...Right now I can’t describe it, but it was a good thing” (pg 6, Q10).

She also explains that while feeling aware of everything she noticed, she discovered something of a “superpower”:

“The superpower is being aware without focusing. Like a wide peripheral awareness. Just...allowing, without...pinpointing or focusing or, just being expansive” (pg 7, Q12)

“I see, without focusing on anything. You know, so everything within my field of vision is fair game and...it's all processed the same, and it doesn't matter if it's big or small or shiny or dull or light or dark it's it all gets the same, it all gets the same value because...It's all there” (pg 10, Q21).

Throughout the interview, Participant 29 mentions making a deliberate choice to be still and allowing time for stillness:

“I can be still, deliberately still. Again, I've got to focus on being still. It's like, “no, I'm not moving.” And then after I focused on - or just decided I'm going to be still, physically then you know it takes a while for the brain chatter to die down, where I'm just...a receptive vessel. And I don't get to be there long” (pg 9, Q18)

“Being still. Taking the time to make an agreement with myself that just for a little while we're not going to do anything. And it starts by, you know, just sitting down...Until that becomes so, you know, routine that I don't have to pay attention to that...And that's when I'm physically still and my brain is still and open and receptive” (pg 9, Q19)

“I intentionally sat down doing nothing. I intentionally decided to be still. If I get to the point where the chatter dies down and I get to just be like a witness, an observer, that's coincidental” (pg 11, Q23).

Analysis: Participant 29 describes sitting on her porch in the city. She smells “[c]ar exhaust” and hears “constant traffic.” Despite this, she achieves a profound internal shift: “It didn't take me long to sit without actively thinking. Before I came to the gentle, fluid, realization that, this is it... My brain had a spa day moment... nothing happened and it was lovely... I’m not sure how long I was doing nothing before my brain felt floaty.” She indicates having a calm mind, which she achieves by intentionally entering a state of stillness: “I can be still, deliberately still. Again, I've got to focus on being still.” This inner quietude becomes the gateway to her Presence experience.

Participant 29 is also aware of the environmental stimuli, stating that she has a “wide peripheral awareness” which is something of a “superpower”: “The superpower is being aware without focusing...Just... allowing, without... pinpointing or focusing or, just being expansive.” This awareness allows her to be truly immersed in the present moment.

Participant 29 expresses feeling connected to her surroundings as she describes watching two trees in her environment grow over time, saying “they’re part of my routine and...they’re part of my landscape.” Her strongest CBS language is when she calls herself a “receptive vessel,” suggesting greater unity with her natural surroundings. In her stillness and immersed observation, she begins to see herself as part of a larger whole, or at least open to receiving everything around her. She also calls herself “a witness” or “an observer.” In this way, Participant 29 remains rooted in “observer” language, which still erects a barrier between herself (the observer or self) and the environment.

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (from L5):** The “chatter dies down,” shifting from L5’s “thinking about connection” to simply experiencing it. She explicitly describes the cessation of active thought (“sit without actively thinking”).
- **The Witness:** She is a “receptive vessel,” witnessing the quiet. She is aware of the stillness.
- **Net Result: Level 6.** A clear, sustained shift into “Being” and stillness, independent of the environment (porch vs. wild). Hints of greater unity with the environment (“receptive vessel”), but mostly remains in the “observer” stance with the “self” as a notable anchor.

Vignette A: Participant 26 – Driving (Quiet Observation)

Participant 26’s Presence experience takes place on a road trip along the Delaware River and up into the Catskill Mountains: “There were times when we were just driving and not really talking anymore. We were just taking in the sights and quiet. That was when my mind was most still and at ease... [I] was really taking things in, just opening my eyes wide, using my peripheral vision, aware of things on both sides.”

He expresses that a combination of the view and existing familiarity with the area encouraged feelings of unity and spiritual connection: “being in nature and seeing all these things and feeling connected with the earth and the planet and God and you know the whole of creation with somebody that I care a lot about was an amazing experience...we became part of that horizon experience as we were driving and seeing everything.”

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (from L5):** The description of “opening eyes wide, using peripheral vision” indicates a shift to *panoramic/receptive awareness* rather than focal attention.

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L7):** Deeper merging/expansion of consciousness and softening of self/other boundaries: “we became part of that horizon experience”; connection with “the planet and God and...the whole of creation.”
- **Keeping it at Level 6:** It is a state of quiet observation and ease, but lacks the profound "reorganization of self" or "oneness" of L7.
- **Net Result: Level 6.** Sustained stillness and open awareness, approaching self/other dissolution.

Vignette B: Participant 11 – Hiking with Daughter (“Bigger Picture”)

Participant 11 went on a hike with her daughter, who she doesn’t see often. The experience of reconnecting with her strongly influenced her Presence experience: “I guess the whole thing of being a mom and childbirth and being part of the bigger scheme of life—like it’s all connected. It’s all connected from the ground to the sky to the birth, you know, that kind of thing.”

This perception of “the bigger picture” contributes to participant 11’s stillness of mind and absorption in the present moment: “when I have these little tiny glimpses of the bigger picture, it is very calming, and all the craziness stops.” The beauty around her and serendipitous moments in nature also have a similar effect: “I guess it’s that moment when you just stop the crazy thoughts. Not that I’m crazy, but when the inner voices that are telling you everything you have to do. When you finally look, or you look up and see the sun through the trees or see, you know, the beautiful surroundings, then it stops.”

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (from L6):** The repetition of “it all stops,” indicating a complete cessation of conditioned thinking; this leans towards L7.
- **Keeping it at Level 6.** While participant 11 articulates feeling part of “the bigger scheme of life” as a mother, she is still reflecting on this connection somewhat cognitively by abstracting her individual experience to think about what it means to be a mother and have a child more generally.
- **Net Result: Level 6.** With aspects of the experience that pull it towards L7 and also down from L6, the scoring settles on L6 Presence.

2.1.7 Level 7: Self-Porous, Absorbed, Attuned (The "Included Self")

Definition: The boundary between self and environment becomes porous. Connection is no longer something felt by a separate self but a condition one is included within. This may occur through two pathways: the self diminishes in the presence of something vast, becoming experientially insignificant in a way that opens rather than diminishes; or consciousness expands outward until the self begins to merge with its surroundings. In either case, self-other distinctions soften and absorption in the present moment is deep, though cognitive activity such as reflection, conversation, or deliberate maintenance of attention may still occur alongside the experience without dominating it. The experience often carries profound felt significance, whether as awe, reverence, bliss, or spiritual appreciation. Presence is substantial, and consciousness beyond self is no longer observed but inhabited.

Prototypical Example: Participant 35 – Solar Eclipse (Total Focus and Awe)

P35 Synthesis Block

Setting the scene:

Participant 35 recalls traveling to Kentucky to view the solar eclipse with their brother and friend: “we decided to spend the night at a rest stop for the big day...the next morning we woke up to a lot of people slowly gathering at the rest stop in anticipation of the eclipse” (pg 1). They describe their surroundings at the rest stop: “just beyond [us] was a highway that was running through. Otherwise it was really hard to tell, because there were trees that were blocking views. But I remember to the right, it was probably just some slight rolling hills, grassland” (pg 2, Q1). They elaborate on the changes to their environment as the eclipse began: “I could see on the ground how...the sun coming through the trees was making...crescent shadows...I could hear a bunch of chattering from people...But then that went away when the totality happened like. There were more like, some slight cheers, but also all of the like bird song, and everything. I remember it got like really unusually quiet for a few moments...And then, of course, when the totality happened, everything got darker, and I could see stars in the sky. Not necessarily like nighttime, but very close, like a deep twilight...It got noticeably colder” (pg 3, Q2).

The Presence experience and relevant IPs:

The Presence experience takes place as Participant 35 watches the eclipse approach totality. They describe feeling strongly connected to their natural surroundings, as well as to the people around them and across history and geography:

“It was thrilling and awesome, and a little scary. But in a way that somehow made me feel like I was a part of something bigger. Connecting me to not only those around me, but every human and creature in earth's history who had the privilege of experiencing what I was” (pg 1)

“everything around me, and the birdsong and the darkness and the cold. And the crescents on the ground, cicada shells. I felt connected to all of that, because I was noticing all of it. Because it was different than what I was used to” (pg 4, Q5)

“Yeah, that's kind of that connectedness. Being able to see stars, and having those thoughts of like, you know, **who in the past, or who right now is also seeing these?** And like **sharing the moment with the people that were around me, even though we were almost all complete strangers.**” (pg 10, Q20).

Participant 35 expresses feeling joy, wonder, and bliss as they recount their experience:

“At the point of totality there was almost a reverent cheering. I was absolutely overwhelmed. **Literally, nothing else mattered. All that mattered were those moments soaking them...feeling the energy of everyone around me who had traveled here to witness the same as me... I was elated. Reverent**” (pg 1)

“It was like. Like wonder and excitement. But on like some kind of cosmic scale.” (pg 4, Q4)

“Feeling kind of like elated. Like kind of almost changing, like my brain chemistry on how I view things and how I'm feeling them. And how I'm connected to them” (pg 5, Q7)

“I'm used to having like worries, or fears, or sadness or anger clouding other happy moments I have. But this was so unique, and I was so focused on it. It's just, it's all that it was. For, like those 3 or 4 minutes, that's all I was and all that was around me. And it was like— it was kind of blissful” (pgs 5-6, Q7).

They also talk about a sense of focus and stillness during the totality:

“I was so focused on it and like trying to soak it all in, because I knew it was only gonna last a few minutes. That I felt also completely separate and focused in a way that I almost never am otherwise” (pg 4, Q5)

“I felt very alive and awake. Not just attentive, like. I feel like it was turning on parts of my brain that are usually off” (pg 7, Q11)

“that was definitely the latter moments of the totality when I became still. That focus, that soaking things in. When my mind wanders, I tend– Things tend to pop out that I don’t like thinking about. And I was so determined for that not to happen. I like. The strength of that desire, I think, kept my mind pretty clear” (pg 10, Q18).

Participant 35 mentions using a camera to take photos during the eclipse, but they don’t believe this impaired their experience:

“I don’t think it affected me that badly cause a lot of those pictures were being taken while it was still partially and like kind of creeping towards it. But I think I did consciously make sure to not hide behind my camera during the totality, because I wanted to be present and connected in that moment, and not behind my camera” (pg 11-12, Q25).

Analysis: Participant 35 describes watching the totality of a solar eclipse. They experience a profound connection to their natural surroundings, the other people around them, and across time and space: “It was thrilling and awesome, and a little scary. But in a way that somehow made me feel like I was a part of something bigger. Connecting me to not only those around me, but every human and creature in earth’s history who had the privilege of experiencing what I was.” They express intense feelings of bliss and total focus as “[l]iterally, nothing else mattered. All that mattered were those moments soaking them...feeling the energy of everyone around me who had traveled here to witness the same as me... I was elated.”

Participant 35 talks about having a uniquely still mind, which contrasts to their typical experience of “having...worries, or fears, or sadness or anger clouding other happy moments.” They focus on maintaining mental stillness and total immersion in the moment—“I was...trying to soak it all in, because I knew [the eclipse] was only gonna last a few minutes”—which included putting down their camera when the eclipse approached totality. They experience a deep shift in their consciousness, like they were “turning on parts of [their] brain that are usually off.”

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (Toward L8):** Intense emotions (bliss, elation, reverence). Feelings of connection not constrained by time/history or geographic barriers. Marked shift in consciousness (“Not just attentive, like...turning on parts of my brain that are usually off”).
- **Pulling the rating down (Toward L5/6):** Cognitive/deliberate maintenance of stillness of mind and focus on the present moment. Feelings of connection are still attached to “the self.”
- **Net Result: Level 7.** Feelings of bliss and expansive connection coupled with deliberate and constant maintenance of mental stillness and immersion in the present moment—an experience characteristic of both L8 and L5/6, settling at a L7 scoring. Notable shift in perspective; heightened conscious experience.

Vignette A: Participant 3 – Hiking in a Redwood Forest (Reorganization of Self)

Participant 3 went hiking in a redwood forest. She describes the shift in her conscious experience during Presence: “I felt oddly calm and peaceful... my mind was more clear. It wasn’t...filled with worries or other thoughts... [Being surrounded by redwoods] kind of makes you feel like your own problems are more insignificant. ...It makes you kind of feel small, not in a bad way, but just in the sense of like you’re in this large kind of natural environment... I kind of feel like I’m...one with the environment a little bit more than I would typically.” The participant defines this oneness: “being at one with my surroundings means I’m just kind of experiencing the moment... and not actively thinking about it. So it’s just kind of like I’m letting myself be.”

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (from L6):** Explicitly states “[I] feel like I’m...one with the environment,” which indicates feeling a porous boundary between self/other.
- **Reorganization:** Problems feel “insignificant” (not just forgotten, but re-contextualized by the scale of nature). “Oddly calm and peaceful” suggests a depth beyond simple relaxation.
- **Net Result: Level 7.** The experience moves beyond stillness (L6) into a felt sense of integration (“oneness”) and deep perspective.

Vignette B: Participant 30 – Cabin in the Woods (Absorption in the Moment, Larger Sense of Connection)

Participant 30 recalls spending time at her cabin; her Presence experience takes place as she’s walking through the surrounding forest: “I felt vigorous and didn’t have a care in the world.

I wasn't thinking of the past or the future. I was in the moment of enjoying peace and quiet and doing whatever I wanted to do...when you're out in nature, your mind is totally focused on where you're at...you become somebody else that you don't have the worries of everyday life...you just become like a whole different existence...you're able to relax and your mind becomes separated from your daily life..."

She expands on her feelings of connection to nature and its beauty: "I felt connected because I was connected to the beauty of it all... Like seeing a newborn baby. How excited one gets, the softness of the touch and everything. And just the idea that things are new and growing...being out on the path and feeling part of it, it makes you feel like you're like one and the same. You feel like you're, maybe not a tree, but a leaf blowing, you know, carefree"

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating down (Toward L6):** Participant 30 exhibits the diffuse, non-focal awareness and abstract impressions (i.e. "the interconnectedness of life, creation, the span of existence") characteristic of L6.
- **Keeping it at Level 7:** Total absorption in the present moment. Softening self-other distinctions, incorporating one's sense of self in the larger surroundings; hint of self diminishing in the presence of the greater forest ("being out on the path and feeling part of it"; "feel like you're, maybe not a tree, but a leaf blowing"). Tranquil mind ("didn't have a care in the world; "mind becomes separated from daily life").
- **Net Result: Level 7.** A mellower Presence experience characterized by deep absorption in the moment, a peaceful and carefree mind, and a blending of the participant's self-concept with their larger forested surroundings.

2.1.8 Level 8: Self-Dissolved, Subsumed, Functional (The "Subsumption")

Definition: The self-boundary dramatically softens or dissolves, and the feeling of a separate self is temporarily suspended. This may manifest through two pathways: an explosive peak experience of euphoria, tears, or felt union with the infinite; or a vast, quiet dissolution in which life narrative, identity, and separateness simply fall away. The past and future lose their hold, and events or concerns outside the experience cease to register. The thinking mind is silent, or if a thought arises, it passes without engagement. Yet a paradox defines this level: though the self-construct has dissolved, the capacity to function in the world remains. Consciousness has not withdrawn from

reality but is no longer organized around a separate self within it. Presence is profound, and consciousness beyond self has shifted from something inhabited to something one is subsumed by.

Prototypical Example: Participant 33 – Skydiving (High Arousal)

P33 Synthesis Block

Setting the Scene:

Participant 33 recalls skydiving with a friend: “We went skydiving for the 1st time” (pg 1); “I was in the mountains of like North Carolina...it was a Saturday morning...I was with one of my best friends, who I pretty much do everything with...it was a sunny day. There was a little bit of a wind” (pg 2, Q1). He describes what he could see from the plane: “the other director who had gone with us, he told us we're gonna land over there, and where he pointed... It seemed like it was miles away. It was like a big, open green field. It almost looked like a football field. And we were pretty far away from it...there was this big green pasture of land, like in the middle of these mountains that surrounded it...sure enough...we came right down in the middle of that green grass” (pg 3, Q3); “I could see the city off in the distance, maybe 15 or 20 miles away from where we were. I could see buildings off in the distance, and then they faded into a forest, and eventually into the field we were in. I saw the field over the mountains” (pg 5, Q10); “it was very early in the morning when we jumped...I could see... the sun coming up” (pg 11, Q21).

Participant 33 elaborates on what he could smell, hear, etc. before the jump: “I could smell fresh air. I mean, that's all I smelled really...with the exception of the airplanes taking off and a few people talking, that's all I really heard...I heard the wind probably more than anything...just anticipating the jump. So I was real aware of everything that was going on around me...even though the wind wasn't that strong, I could still hear the wind...blowing” (pg 2, Q2). Then, he states: “When I first jumped, as soon as I got out of the plane, I heard absolutely nothing. It went completely silent...I couldn't even hear myself falling...All I could see was white because I was falling through the clouds, and then once I came out of the clouds...I could hear a slight, like swoosh of wind, but...it was much quieter than I thought it would be” (pg 2, Q2). He continues: “Everything was white, and I was in the most perfect place I'd ever been” (pg 1); “I had air rushing through my body...And everything was

extremely small...but then, as I got closer, [everything below me] started to come into focus” (pg 3, Q2).

The Presence experience and relevant IPs:

The Presence experience takes place as Participant 33 is falling through the sky and clouds. He expresses feeling a profound sense of smallness:

Interviewer: “And how did your experience make you feel?”

Participant: “small. Muted everything else in the world. It was—I—I just felt... **It kind of put everything in perspective...I had no control over what happened...and I—I definitely felt that. I felt that...[participant trails off] The presence of something kind of higher, be it a god or something else.** I mean, I had the opportunity to see everything and just realize... I've never seen it from that point of view before...just made me think about my beliefs and my religion” (pg 3, Q4)

“when I came out of the clouds...I just felt like... [participant trails off] like this speck of dust...on the planet” (pg 4, Q7)

“I was able to see people on the ground, who I generally wouldn't be able to see, and I only knew they were people because when we took off... I made like a mental note of where they were at...It made me feel kind of insignificant...I felt like everything was so big, and I was so little. Even looking at those people, it made me feel like all of us are so little compared to the bigger picture” (pg 5, Q8)

He focuses heavily on the clouds, as that is where he felt still:

“When I was in the clouds...I just felt like. I was just laying there...Just the clouds are moving around me. I was still” (pg 8, Q15)

Participant 33 describes feeling extreme “bliss” or “high”:

“No drug I ever took compared to this high I experience[d] doing this” (pg 1)

“My mind was clear, my thoughts were 100% bliss...10 min earlier, we were climbing altitude to jump. I was petrified and literally scared out of my mind, but once I had nothing holding me to the earth, everything became euphoric” (pg 1)

“It was frightening, but once I had exited the plane, it was pure heaven, completely silent, although I was falling hundreds of feet per minute” (pg 1).

“I was falling out of the sky, you know. That in itself was kind of overwhelming...as soon as I jumped out, I'm like, why did I just do this...before everything hit me. And then once everything hit me, I was like, this is the most incredible high. I've never experienced anything like it before in my life” (pg 4, Q6)

He also talks about acknowledging how the wind around him would determine his path and fall, and surrendering a sense of control:

Interviewer: “And did you feel connected to your natural surroundings or not? And in what way?”

Participant: “I did...I would think more so with the wind, because I knew based on what it did naturally, that would determine where I went, where I landed...and how fast or how slow I felt” (pg 4, Q5)

“...I was like a speck of dust in the air. So whatever happened to me was gonna be controlled by the environment and what was around me, be it the clouds, the wind, the rain. You know I had no control over those things” (pg 10, Q20)

To that point, once Participant 33 started falling, all his worries about the logistics behind his experience melted away:

Interviewer: “How did it feel to be aware of everything you noticed?”

Participant: “Enlightened I guess. I had so many thoughts going through my head when I first jumped...and couldn't really focus on one thing...I was thinking about...my family, my life insurance, who was there to call my parents. And then **once I did it, like every single thought went away...it was just about taking it in and enjoying what I was experiencing**” (pg 6, Q11)

Interviewer: “Did you experience fear?”

Participant: “A lot of it in the beginning...I had someone talking to me in an earpiece. And once I knew that we were falling at the right speed that we're supposed to, that we were on target to hit the mark...nothing. I think even before...when I got in the clouds, I just stopped worrying about everything” (pg 6, Q13)

“Initially...it's all very scary because I wasn't in control of whether or not I flipped upside down, or...if I was jumping in rain...But once I realized...”“You know the wind's perfect...I'm falling at the right speed. The temperature is perfect. There's no

rain...Everything's good." ...once I like reiterated that stuff to myself, at that point I knew it was gonna be alright" (pg 10, Q20)

Participant 33 felt one with the sky and wind around him, notably in a spiritual manner:

"I felt like...I was one with the plane, the sky, and the clouds" (pg 1)

"when your feet are planted on the ground and you look at the clouds in the sky...You're saying, "Oh, that's pretty cool the way that happens..." When you're...actually in the clouds, and you're actually in that gust of wind...You feel that somebody else, be it God or something else, a higher being, is in control of all those things going on around you... I'm not a very religious person by any means. But it made me really think and rethink all those things..." (pg 9-10, Q19)

"being in the sky and seeing the sun where it was, I sort of felt like I was more of a part of it than being on the ground...Because I wasn't attached to the earth anymore. Yeah, maybe by gravity, but that was the only thing" (pg 11, Q21)

He mentions that he was mic'd up and made sound-bites during his experience:

"I was mic'd up and had a Lavalier microphone on also. [...] I was talking a lot of the time when I was coming down.... I did a couple of short sound bites when I was coming down that were being recorded on a recorder that I had inside of my jumpsuit" (pg 12, Q25)

"There were only 2 times that I did sound bites. The first one was right when I was jumping out of the plane. And then the second one was when I came out of the clouds" (pg 12, Q25)

"I knew I had to say it right...and to make it short and concise, because there was no chance for, you know, a second take...I probably think my fall would have been the same way. I just wouldn't have had that additional thought in my mind about making sure...whatever you're saying, you say it correctly" (pg 12, Q25)

Even though Participant 33 went skydiving with his friend, he was falling solo:

"I could see my friend...He was about 500 or 600 feet away from me. He jumped right after I did...he was the only other person I could see" (pg 7, Q14)

"it being the first time I was able to go solo, I just wanted to do everything right" (pg 8, Q14a)

He states that if he was with people, such as falling in tandem with someone, “I might have worried about like someone falling at a faster speed than I was, and maybe getting tangled up with them” (pg 8, Q14b)

Analysis: Participant 33 describes his experience skydiving, recalling the shift in his consciousness from before vs. after jumping out of the plane: “I was thinking about... my family, my life insurance... And then once I did it [jumped], like every single thought went away...it was just about taking it in and enjoying what I was experiencing.”

He expresses a humbling sense of smallness (“I just felt like... like this speck of dust... on the planet”; “It made me feel kind of insignificant...I felt like everything was so big, and I was so little”), being at the mercy of the weather and wind (“whatever happened to me was gonna be controlled by the environment and what was around me, be it the clouds, the wind, the rain...I had no control over those things”). As he yielded to the experience, his fear gave way to euphoria (“My mind was clear, my thoughts were 100% bliss,” “pure heaven, completely silent,” “the most incredible high”).

Participant 33 explains that the experience inspired a spiritual connection with “presence of something kind of higher, be it a god or something else,” and “put everything in perspective.” He felt a profound sense of oneness, with a dissolution of self/other boundaries: “I felt like...I was one with the plane, the sky, and the clouds...being in the sky and seeing the sun where it was, I sort of felt like I was more of a part of it than being on the ground...Because I wasn't attached to the earth anymore.”

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (from L7):** While the experience starts with mental noise (L1/2), it shifts *instantly* to “every single thought went away.”
- **Merging:** “One with the plane, the sky, and the clouds”; “speck of dust.”
- **Affective Intensity:** “Euphoric,” “100% bliss,” “pure heaven.” This is a peak state, not just “oddly calm.”
- **Net Result: Level 8.** A peak experience where the self-construct dissolves into the sensation of the infinite.

Vignette A: Participant 38 – Sailing in the Gulf of Mexico (Low Arousal)

Participant 38 recalls sailing on a yacht: “The elements of the story faded away, and I was just sailing...towards a point on the horizon. And I felt joyful.” She elaborates: “so I’ve been telling you this story...about, you know, the boat, and... I’ve been through this terrible thing...so that's what I mean by the elements of the story fell away. Like, there's no more... explanation. Now, I'm just in this place, moving through the water, gazing at the horizon.”

The participant describes inner stillness and a sense of merging and alignment with the water around her: “I'm not thinking anything at all...I remember just kind of falling into that whole environmental space...I was perfectly aligned with everything that was going on...like a wave going back to the ocean.” *[Note: the language of “like a wave going back to the ocean” was the participant restating part of an interview question in her response]*

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (from L7):** Total cessation of internal/personal narrative ("elements of the story faded away," "not thinking anything at all").
- **Merging:** “falling into that whole environmental space,” “perfectly aligned.”
- **Dissolution:** Unlike Participant 33’s high intensity experience, Participant 38 experiences a mellow “fade” into Presence as her self-construct evaporates.
- **Net Result: Level 8.** A profound union and dissolution of the separate self.

Vignette B: Participant 7 – Viewing the Grand Tetons (Intense Emotion in Low-Action Setting)

While traveling to Yellowstone National Park with her family, Participant 7’s Presence experience takes place as she exits the car to view the Grand Tetons: “I had never seen anything so beautiful...I wasn't aware of other people...I sat upon the grass and just allowed the beauty of the place to consume me...I was entranced to the point of being immobile...I felt peaceful and calm. Wished I could stay in that spot, gazing at the mountains for hours...[my mind] was just absorbed by what I was looking at...it just took up my whole consciousness at that point...”

She describes feeling a deep sense of belonging, appreciation, and awe: “I felt like I belong here, I'm part of this, you know, like child of the universe kind of thing. So I felt a lot of...appreciation for the natural beauty that I was looking at and I think that's what helped me feel like a participant...I was just in awe...Like something greater than me did all this stuff and I get to look at it now...and eventually I...felt very like...content that I had seen something that beautiful”

Coding Rationale:

- **Pulling the rating up (from L7):** Feelings of being “consumed” and “entranced” so thoroughly that one becomes “immobile” (which points to L10 language). Extreme absorption in the experience (“it just took up my whole consciousness at that point”) and spiritual appreciation (“something greater than me did all this stuff and I get to look at it now”).
- **Net Result: Level 8.** Intense burgeoning awe with total absorption in the moment, receptivity, and frozenness.

Levels 1 through 8 were derived from and grounded in participant interview data. No participants in the current sample exhibited Presence beyond Level 8. Levels 9 and 10 are included as theoretical anchors to bracket the upper range of the Presence continuum. Their definitions draw on established contemplative literature rather than empirical data from this study. Canonical accounts from contemplative traditions serve as reference points in place of illustrative snapshots.

2.1.9 Level 9: Subject-Object Dissolved, Nondual, Unstructured (The “Not Two”)

Definition: The subject-object structure of experience is seen through or ceases to organize awareness. This may occur as a sudden breakthrough in which the center of experience drops out entirely, or as a gradual ripening in which the distinction between self and world quietly becomes transparent. In either case, the defining feature is structural rather than emotional: there is no longer an internal “me” relating to an external “world.” This differs from lower levels where the self, however diminished or subsumed, remained the implicit reference point for experience. Ordinary functioning may or may not continue; what has changed is not the content of experience but its architecture. Presence is no longer a state one is in but the unconditioned ground of awareness itself.

Canonical Accounts:

Breakthrough (Rinzai pathway): Hakuin’s initial kensho: hearing the boom of a distant temple bell, “suddenly, my body and mind dropped completely away” (Hakuin, 1768/2010, p. 26).

Ripening (Sōtō pathway): Dōgen's Genjōkōan: "To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things" (Dōgen, 1985, p. 70).

2.1.10 Level 10: Awareness-Ceased, Absorptive, Complete (The "Formless")

Definition: The deepest state of Presence, characterized by complete and sustained cessation of conditioned thinking, self-construct, and sensory perception of the external world. The mind is so fully absorbed that responsiveness to external stimuli is suspended, and physical immobility may persist for days or longer. Upon emergence, practitioners consistently report an inability to describe the state in discursive terms, suggesting experience beyond the reach of thought and language. What distinguishes this level is not merely depth of experience but a fundamental shift in the underlying architecture of consciousness itself: the very structures through which experience is ordinarily organized, including subject, object, time, and perception, have temporarily and entirely dissolved. Presence and the one who is present are no longer distinguishable, which is why the state all but resists description.

Differentiation (illustrative paraphrases, not quotations):

- **L8:** "I felt one with the sky while skydiving." (Functioning + High Affect).
- **L9:** "There was no 'me' walking, just the walking." (Functioning + No Self).
- **L10:** "The world vanished. Time vanished. I did not move for hours." (Cessation).

Canonical Account:

Bhaiji (1937/2004) describes the state of Anandamayi Ma: "She often appeared to have lost all signs of life during samadhi and passed four or five days together without any response to any outside stimulus. . . . After recovering Her full consciousness when She was asked how She had felt during samadhi, She would only reply, "It is a state beyond all conscious and supra-conscious planes - a state of complete immobilization of all thoughts, emotions and activities, both physical and mental - a state that transcends all the phases of life here below.'"" (p. 34).

2.2 Explanatory Factors

Explanatory factors are individual differences or external influences that might help explain a predisposition towards deeper or shallower Presence experiences not stemming from the natural environment. Each factor is noted as encouraging to (+) or detracting from (-) the

Presence experience. They are not assigned numerical values, since these factors are already embedded in the participant's unfolding experience and reflected in the Global Presence score. In other words, the explanatory factors help constitute the participant's experience, and identifying them allows coders to name influences alongside the participant's interactions with their surroundings that may have supported or hindered their Presence experience. The explanatory factors are the following.

1. Domination/control mentality. A mindset of conquering or controlling one's environment and experience, typically fueled by preexisting expectations of what one "is going to do."
2. Relational mentality. Releasing such expectations and being open to "what comes"; no longer resisting the affordances of the environment, allowing oneself to explore and "just be."
3. Technology. While technology is a contextual factor, it can also be an explanatory factor if the participant states that it encouraged or harmed their Presence experience.
4. Social Interaction. Social interaction becomes an explanatory factor when the participant says the presence of others encouraged or limited aspects of their Presence experience.
5. Intentionality/capacity. Intentionality is the act of engaging with purpose, attentiveness, and/or reverence, but without rigid expectations or specific outcomes. This can encourage a deeper experience by enhancing the participant's capacity for Presence.
 - a. Intoxication via drugs or alcohol is considered to affect the participant's capacity to experience the present moment, heightening or dulling certain aspects of their awareness.

2.3 Coder Cheat-Sheet for Presence Coding

Levels 1–3: The Thought Arc

The first descriptor across L1–L3 tracks thought's changing grip on experience. This is your primary coding dimension for these levels.

- **L1: Thought-Immersed** — The person is fully inside the stream of thought. They don't recognize an alternative mode is available. Look for: instrumental language ("getting the shot," "finishing the hike"), rumination about life outside the walk, environment treated as backdrop. No reaching toward settling. Key test: does the person show ANY movement toward a different mode of attention? If not, it's L1.

- **L2: Thought-Led** — The person wants to settle or be present, but thought keeps winning. Look for: expressed desire to relax or connect, brief flickers of calm that don't hold, language like "I tried to" or "I wanted to but." Key test: is there reaching toward presence that fails? If yes, it's L2.
- **L3: Thought-Mediated** — Calm has arrived but the experience is still routed through thinking. Look for: imagination ("I wondered what it would be like to be that bird"), narration ("I was thinking about how beautiful it was"), dependence on music or conversation to maintain the state. Key test: is the person appreciating the environment through thought rather than direct sensory contact? If yes, it's L3.

Level 4: The Threshold

L4 is where something qualitatively shifts. The label changes from "Thought-X" to "Awareness-X." This signals that thought is no longer the main story.

- **L4: Awareness-Seized** — Something in the environment has grabbed attention and displaced thought. The person isn't trying to be present; something has made them present. Look for: a specific captivating event or stimulus, "everything else faded," strong focus on one thing, but no felt connection beyond that thing. Key test: is the person's presence tethered to a specific object or event? Would removing that stimulus end the state? If yes, it's L4.

Level 5: Awareness Opens; Connection Arrives

- **L5: Awareness-Opened, Self-Diminishing, Connected** — Awareness has untethered from a single object and opened to the wider field. For the first time, there is a felt sense of being part of something larger. Look for: language of connection or belonging ("I felt like a piece of the place"), diminished self-importance ("my problems didn't matter"), the person as observer of this connection rather than merged with it. Key test: does the person describe feeling connected while still clearly occupying a separate vantage point? If yes, it's L5.

Levels 6–8: Deepening Beyond Self

These levels track the progressive softening and dissolution of the self-boundary.

- **L6: Awareness-Widened, Receptive, Encompassing** — Awareness is diffuse and non-focal. The person has shifted from observing to simply receiving. The scope of what awareness holds may expand to universal or abstract wholes ("God," "all of creation,"

"the bigger picture of life"). Look for: "wide peripheral awareness," mental spaciousness, language of receiving rather than watching. Key test: has the person shifted from observing connection to simply being in it?

- **L7: Self-Porous, Absorbed, Attuned** — The boundary between self and environment has become permeable. The person feels included within something larger, not just connected to it. Look for: "one with the environment," feeling small in a positive way, profound emotion (awe, reverence, bliss). Note: cognitive activity can still occur at L7; what matters is that it doesn't dominate. Key test: has the self-boundary become porous? Is the person included rather than connected?
- **L8: Self-Dissolved, Subsumed, Functional** — The self-construct dissolves. This can be explosive (euphoria, peak experience) or quiet (narrative and identity simply fall away). The person can still function. Look for: "every thought went away," merging language, euphoria or profound stillness. Key test: has the separate self temporarily disappeared while the person remains functional?

Levels 9–10: Theoretical Anchors

Depending on your sample, these levels will likely not appear. They exist to bracket the upper end of the scale. Be cautious coding anything as L9 or L10.

3. WILDNESS LEVELS CODING

3.1 Defining Wildness

Wildness, as we use the term, refers to a property of landscapes and of human engagement with them. It is not a geographically bounded category of place. Wildness is associated with vastness, self-organization, unmanaged complexity, and the capacity of nature to surprise and challenge those who encounter it. Kahn and Hasbach (2013) describe wildness as big, vast, untamed, unmanaged, not encompassed, and mysterious. Turner (1996) writes of wildness as keenly sensual, alert, and full of care, marked by the heightened awareness that arises in true wilderness. These descriptions converge on a common set of qualities: self-organization, multisensory complexity, lack of human control, and the capacity to evoke states of attention not available in managed environments. Landscapes vary along this dimension, from heavily domestic and managed at one end, to relatively wild and self-organizing at the other. Most landscapes people inhabit fall somewhere along this gradient rather than at its extremes.

3.2 Maximum Affordances Available versus Affordances Realized by the Participant: Distinguishing Between Maximum IP Wildness and Enacted IP Wildness

Hypothesizing that wildness matters for Presence is one thing. Operationalizing wildness for analysis is another. The difficulty is that wildness can be characterized at two distinct levels, and these levels can come apart. The first is the wildness of the setting: what the landscape offers, what its affordances are, how unmanaged and self-organizing it is. The second is the wildness of the engagement: how a person actually takes up those affordances during the experience. A wild setting can be experienced through a phone screen, with the participant attending to social media rather than to the landscape around them. A more managed setting can be engaged with deep, embodied attention. The two levels are correlated, because wilder settings invite wilder engagement, but they are not identical.

To operationalize this distinction, we draw on the framework of Interaction Patterns developed by Kahn and colleagues (Kahn et al., 2010; Kahn et al., 2012; Lam et al., 2023). Interaction Patterns (IPs) describe the meaningful engagements humans have with nature. Examples include sleeping under the night sky, being moved by water, traveling a winding and contoured path, and recognition by the nonhuman other. Patterns rarely occur in isolation; they combine into multisensory, embodied experiences. Patterns also exist along a wild-domestic gradient. The wilder patterns engage the senses in endlessly compelling combinations and sequences. The more domestic patterns trace back to agricultural and settled life and tend to reduce in sensory range and complexity as they become further removed from their wild instantiations.

The Interaction Patterns framework gives us a vocabulary for distinguishing what a landscape affords from what a person actually does within it. We use this distinction to construct two coding variables: Maximum IP Wildness, which characterizes the most profound wildness interaction the surrounding environment could afford, and Enacted IP Wildness, which characterizes the actual depth of wildness interaction the participant realized during their experience. The two variables let us ask not only whether Presence is associated with wildness, but whether it is more strongly associated with the wildness of the setting or with the depth of engagement within it.

3.3 Operational Definitions of Maximum IP Wildness and Enacted IP Wildness

Two variables operationalize the wildness dimension introduced above:

- Maximum IP Wildness (MIPW) characterizes the most profound wildness interaction afforded by the surrounding environment, drawing on both the proximal nature setting (immediate surroundings) and the distal nature setting (the broader landscape context). MIPW is scored on a 10-point scale, ranging from highly domestic (1) to relatively wild (10), with 0.5-point increments permitted.
- Enacted IP Wildness (EIPW) characterizes the actual depth of wildness interaction realized by the participant during their experience, accounting for environmental affordances together with the internal and external factors that shaped engagement (e.g. social interaction, technology use). EIPW is scored on the same 10-point scale used for MIPW, with 0.5-point increments permitted.

To give a feel for the scale, the wildness gradient ranges from heavily domestic landscapes and engagements at the low end to relatively wild ones at the high end. At the low end (around 1–3), settings are managed, predictable, and largely human-controlled, and engagements are routinized. An example would be a participant on a familiar suburban walking path attending mainly to phone notifications. The middle range (around 4–6) includes settings and engagements that combine managed and self-organizing features, such as a participant on a national park trail with consistent foot traffic and a developed path, attending to the surroundings but within a structured visit. The high end (around 7–9) includes settings whose key features are unmanaged and self-organizing and engagements that take up those affordances directly. An example would be a participant in a relatively pristine wilderness or coastal area, immersed in conditions they neither control nor can fully predict, with senses open to weather, water, and the agency of the place. Importantly, the EIPW score for the same setting can fall well below the MIPW score when factors such as social interaction or technology use limit how deeply the participant engaged with what the setting afforded.

3.4 MIPW and EIPW 1-10 Level Descriptions and Anchors

3.4.1 Range 1-3: Domestic, Managed, Routinized

Maximum IP Wildness (MIPW) Range 1-3.

In the lowest range of the wildness gradient, the setting (MIPW) is characterized by urban environments or familiar and domestic spaces, such as one's own house or front yard. These settings often prioritize human accessibility and offer control over the immediate surroundings. For example, Participant 22 describes a Presence experience that takes place

entirely within their backyard. The backyard serves as a container, where greenery is maintained and regulated and grants the participant increased control over manipulating the space.

For MIPW, a level one is distinguished by a completely manicured and controlled environment with little to no natural spaces, both in the proximal and distal space. Participant 41 shares an experience that takes place in New York City, in a fully urban area surrounded by concrete and only a few planted trees. A level two is characterized by a setting that, despite continuing to be highly managed and manicured, does contain some natural elements. At level two MIPW, the distal environment continues to be urban, for example, a front yard in a suburban area, with manicured grass and planted greenery. Finally, a level three MIPW begins to introduce a greater diversity in natural elements in both the proximal and distal environment, such as water or wild animals. Here, the environment continues to be managed and controlled, and the distal environment remains urban, but may contain a greater variety of nature. This level can be illustrated by Participant 6, who recalls riding bikes on a paved path near the ocean, the setting containing both the urban elements of the managed, urban settlement, and also the natural elements of the ocean.

Across levels one through three MIPW, any natural aspects of the environment are contained within, or around larger, often distal urban spaces. The natural elements of the environment tend to be managed and controlled, and wild animals may be present within the context of this manicured nature. The lives of these animals may revolve around human infrastructure, such as relying on human trash for food, or concrete structures for habitat. This is in contrast with levels four through six MIPW, where the proximal and distal environment shift to become a mix of urban and natural elements. Here, there remains the human influence of tended lands and manicured land, but the environment will include natural elements such as forested lands or stretches of rural countryside. This marks the introduction of rural nature, such as farmland, where the distal and proximal are managed, but consist of mostly natural elements. Wild animals in this MIPW range live in the context of a mixed environment and are less reliant on human infrastructure, such as Participant 45's sight of wild buffalo in a natural area, as opposed to Participant 22's observing of birds in his backyard birdfeeder.

Enacted IP Wildness (EIPW) Range 1-3.

Engagement with the natural environment (EIPW) in this range is passive, with participants experiencing limited involvement with their surroundings. For example, Participant

22 describes birdwatching from inside the home, without entering the environment. By remaining indoors, the participant is unaffected by the affordances of the natural environment, such as weather, noise, and proximity, and thus, interaction is less embodied. Often, engagement is directed elsewhere, away from the natural environment of the participant. In these cases, the interaction may be tethered to man-made objects or to other humans in the environment, such as Participant 13, who claims their marathon experience to be driven by the surrounding music, cheering, and the camaraderie amongst other runners.

For EIPW, a level one is characterized by interactions in which participants do not engage with the natural surroundings whatsoever, or if engagement is centered around non-nature-related elements. Often, this occurs when participant awareness is directed towards items such as technology, social interaction, or introspection. At level two EIPW, participants engage with the natural environment in a passive, often superficial manner, often by observing the natural environment from a distance. Participants at this level will often engage in only one or two sensory channels, such as simply focusing on their observing of the environment. Finally, participants exhibiting level three EIPW will often attend to a diverse set of sensory experiences, though their interactions with the natural environment remains passive. For example, Participant 31 shares their awareness of multiple experiences, including the warmth of the sun, the smell of a rosemary plant, and the sound of wild animals. Despite attending to these sensory experiences, the participant continues to engage with the environment in just one, passive activity (watching the animals). Sometimes, instead of experiencing diverse sensory experiences, participants at level three EIPW may display a shift in the passivity of their interactions to become more involved with their surroundings. For example, Participant 44 describes cycling through the countryside, taking part in a more active and embodied role in moving himself through a space.

Throughout levels one through three EIPW, interaction patterns are either separate from the natural environment, or represent passive behaviors, such as observing. Participants may often interact with the environment across great distances (i.e., observing from afar), or from within containers that separate themselves from the environment (i.e., from within a car, house). Participants may begin to display a diversification in the sensory channels in which they experience the affordances of the environment. On the contrary, participants falling under an EIPW of four through six fully move away from passive interaction and enter the environment

wholly and through embodied interaction. Participants in this EIPW stage also recount a greater diversity of sensory experiences across multiple sensory channels.

Illustrative Examples

Participant 22

MIPW: 2

EIPW: 1.75

Participant 22 recounts a Presence experience in which they birdwatch from their kitchen into their backyard. This participant scored a 2 in MIPW due to the proximal environment being entirely domestic; the participant is sitting at his kitchen table. The distal environment is slightly more wild, as there is active wildlife in their backyard, and the backyard contains natural elements, such as trees, grass, and water features. Still, these natural elements are heavily landscaped and ultimately controlled by the participant and contained within the limits of the backyard. EIPW is scored slightly lower, at 1.75 as the participant does not enter the environment, simply observing the scene from within his house. In addition, the participant engages in one sensory outlet (observing) and their participation in the experience is done in an entirely passive manner.

Participant 13

MIPW: 1.5

EIPW: 1

Participant 13's Presence experience takes place while running a marathon in New York City. The MIPW is scored a 1.5 due to the distal environment being an entirely urban cityscape. However, the proximal environment contains slightly more wild elements, as the peak of the experience occurred in Central Park, which contains trees, wildlife, and serves as a greenspace within New York. The participant's EIPW scored a 1 since the participant's awareness is completely directed at the infrastructure around the marathon, such as the crowd cheering, the music playing, and the finish line up ahead. Therefore, the participant's engagement in the environment is not attached whatsoever to its natural elements, and the participant's awareness is more closely tied to the marathon itself.

3.4.2 Range 4-6: Mixed Managed and Self-Organizing

Maximum IP Wildness (MIPW) Range 4-6.

In the mid-range, MIPW often consists of a mixed environment that contains aspects of both urban and rural environments. For example, Participant 45 describes hiking near American bison, but is walking through an area with remnants of old military infrastructure. In many cases, the continuity of wild elements in the environment is disrupted by urban aspects that can reach the participant via sensory channels. As is the case with Participant 21, who is walking in a wooded area, but brought back to her distal, urban surroundings when they notice the sound of traffic nearby. Sometimes, the environment is better characterized by human-led organization, such as rural farmland that may not represent the typical urban aspects of human settlements, but is organized in such a way that denotes human control over a rural environment.

At a level four MIPW, the environment shifts from being dominated by human-centered infrastructure, to one that is more mixed between managed and wild elements. The environment may be considered rural and is often organized and easily accessible by road for use in agriculture, forestry, or general countryside. Participant 21 shares an experience in which they walk in a wooded area that is contained within a neighborhood and are exposed to the noises of surrounding traffic. From the participant's description, it sounds as though the wild elements of the environment (the wooded area) are organized and contained around human infrastructure (roads, noise, housing developments). A level five MIPW is characterized by a rural setting with greater diversity of natural elements in the environment, including viewpoints, water features, and wild animals. Urban elements also begin to have less of an impact on the natural setting, granting more affordances of nature with which the participant can engage with. For example, Participant 1 mentions a similar experience of walking their dog in a wooded area within a neighborhood, but describes a much greater diversity of natural elements that work to enhance the MIPW, such as the sunset, the smell of fresh air, hearing birds chirping, and seeing wild animals. At an MIPW of six, both the proximal and distal environment no longer contain urban elements and become mixed between rural and wild landscapes. At this level, the wildness of a landscape can also be enhanced by the novelty of other factors relating to the environment. Participant 28 shares an experience of walking in the woods near her residence at nighttime. Experiences that occur at night tend to appear wilder according to our MIPW framework, as they break the participant's typical sleep-wake cycles and operate in an environment that the participant cannot control through measures such as turning on a light.

Levels four through six MIPW are distinguished from low-range MIPW because urban elements no longer dominate both the proximal or distal environments. In mid-range experiences, the environment is clearly mixed between wild and managed/rural environments. On the other hand, high-level MIPW experiences consist of environments that are both proximally and distally dominated by wild elements. Environments may still be considered mixed between wild and rural elements, but the rural features that define mid-range MIPW are often dominated by wild ones.

Enacted IP Wildness (EIPW) Range 4-6.

In levels four through six EIPW, the experience becomes more embodied, meaning that physical sensations and environments work to shape the participant's awareness and experience. Participants often begin to engage in a greater diversity of sensory experiences through various sensory outlets. Finally, participants enter the environment and play an active role in engaging or moving themselves through the space. For example, Participant 44 describes an experience in which they cycle through the countryside with a group of friends. The participant is in a relatively rural environment and is actively moving themselves through the space via the act of cycling. This active participation allows for a more embodied experience than passively moving through the same environment, such as within the confines of a car.

At level four EIPW, IPs are both centered around nature (e.g., hiking, cooking outdoors, observing wildlife) and distracting stimuli (e.g., hearing vehicles, nearby people speaking). IPs at this level feature diverse sensory experiences, but the engagement of participants may be more passive, or limited to a single sensory channel. For instance, Participant 34 shares an experience consisting in a wide variety of IPs, including cooking outdoors, camping, hiking, and seeing waterfalls and wildlife. However, the participant describes engaging in other IPs that detract their awareness from the natural environment, such as hearing vehicles driving hereby, and feeling distracted by activities of nearby campers. When EIPW reaches level five, participants continue to describe IPs that are similarly mixed between wild and domestic, but move to become dominated by natural elements. Participants may describe urban noises as "distant," or "fleeting." Once reaching an EIPW of level six, IPs are almost entirely focused on natural elements and participants engage in holistic and rich sensory experiences that appeal to nearly all of the senses. Participant 37 describes an experience that takes place in a coastal environment,

and shares a great diversity of sensory experiences, including seeing and smelling the ocean, feeling sand underfoot, tasting the salt air, and hearing the waves of the ocean.

Across levels four through six EIPW, IPs remain mixed between active and passive engagement with the environment, and are both influenced by wild and domestic elements of the environment. This is in contrast to levels one through three EIPW, which consist in more passive engagement, where the participant doesn't investigate or consider the environment beyond an initial perception. Often, participants will describe higher level engagement or diverse sensory experiences, but their EIPW score will be lowered due to contextual factors, features in the environment that pull awareness away from the natural environment. These include items like cell phones, music, and social interaction. Alternatively, level seven EIPW and above demonstrate a greater diversity in activities (pausing, switching activities, and changes in movement and intensity) and IPs within a single experience. These high-level EIPW experiences are characterized by a greater absorption in the sensory experience, completely active engagement in the environment, and little detracting effects from contextual factors.

Illustrative Examples

Participant 45

MIPW: 5

EIPW: 4

Participant 45 recalls hiking with a local hiking group in a wildlife area that was previously an abandoned military site. The MIPW is scored a 5, as the proximal and distal environment were a mixed setting, containing both wild and urban elements. These included the proximal environment consisting of military infrastructure alongside wildlife and trees, and the distal environment being the prairie environment in which the park is located and a view of a city in the distance. The participant's EIPW scored a 4 because the participant engaged in some active engagement in the environment (hiking), but most IPs remained passive (watching the buffalo and other wildlife). The participant's awareness is also affected by contextual factors, as the other hikers in the group notably distracted the participant from the surrounding environment.

Participant 39

MIPW: 6

EIPW: 5

Participant 39 shares a Presence experience that takes place on a fishing trip alongside his wife. The participant's MIPW scored a 6 because the environment contains a great diversity of wild elements (water, wildlife, forest), but continues to maintain some domestic elements in the proximal environment (parking lot, car, other groups of people nearby). The EIPW is rated a five due to the participant engaging with the environment via both active and passive IPs (fishing, hearing birds, watching the sky), but maintaining a low diversity of interactions, mostly limited to observing the environment from afar and fishing.

3.4.3 Range 7-9: Unmanaged, Self-organizing, Deeply Engaged

Maximum IP Wildness (MIPW): Levels 7-9.

In the highest range of our dataset, MIPW is characterized by sensory experiences that are diverse and dominated completely by natural elements, as opposed to urban and domestic stimuli. Participants may describe feeling enveloped by nature around them, as both the proximal and distal environments are too dominated by wild features. Because of this, the natural environment tends to be the only factor making up the awareness of participants in this range, creating the space for much richer interactions with nature.

At level seven MIPW, the proximal and distal environments begin to lean towards being more wild than urban, and while the setting may continue to be semi-managed, this tends to be to a lesser extent. For example, Participant 14 shares an experience that takes place at a ski resort. The ski resort is heavily managed, with infrastructure such as pre-determined ski courses, but these adhere to the natural shape of the mountain. Ski resorts are also exposed to weather elements and can be dangerous if a person is unable to maneuver through their surroundings safely – all features that add to the wildness of the environment. Upon reaching level eight MIPW, there is very little management of the environment, and the proximal and distal environments are considered mostly wild. What sets this apart from a level seven MIPW may be the presence of a dirt road, rather than a paved one. This feature is not only a change in accessibility for vehicles, but ushers in a feeling of being further from urban infrastructure and a sense of greater isolation. Finally, a level nine MIPW consists of almost entirely wild proximal and distal environments. At this level, management is less involved with the environment itself and more so concerned with determining how participants navigate and maneuver through an environment. For example, participants may experience management through tourism services, including experiences such as skydiving or scuba diving tours.

Overall, level seven and above MIPW can be distinguished by level six through a proximal and distal environment that lean more heavily towards wild features than managed and rural ones. Mid-range MIPW environments often contain salient urban features, such as a cityscape in the distal environment, whereas higher MIPW environments are usually overwhelmingly wild, such as a forest inside of a protected reserve. High-range MIPW may contain elements of management, but unlike mid-range MIPW, this management is not built around infrastructure that is overwhelmingly driven by human needs.

Enacted IP Wildness (EIPW): Levels 7-9.

In levels seven through nine EIPW, engagement with the natural environment becomes much more diverse, active, and increasingly embodied. Participants are immersed in the environment through a variety of IPs that help to promote active participation with wild features. For instance, Participant 9 recounts a variety of activities that they engaged in, including touching tree trunks, turning over logs, and walking off-trail. This curiosity and diversity of IPs creates space for increased embodiment and attunement with the natural environment. High-level interaction with the environment also occurs when participants pay greater attention to their surroundings, affording them greater awareness of the elements that compose their experience. For example, Participant 38 shares an experience in which they are aboard a sailboat, but recounts being aware of a multitude of natural elements, such as the rocking of the boat, the sound of the wind, the smell of the ocean, and the beauty of the horizon.

At a level seven EIPW, IPs are focused on natural elements, multi-sensory attunement, and greater active engagement with the environment. It's important to note that, at this level, engagement with the environment continues to be done via conscious decision-making. Participant 19 shares an experience of walking along a trail and hearing woodpeckers in nearby trees, then stopping to search for them. This account not only demonstrates multiple IPs that appeal to multiple senses (walking, hearing, and searching), but also facilitates active participation and curiosity in engaging with the natural environment. Level eight EIPW is also characterized by a focus around natural elements and multi-sensory engagement, but active engagement in the environment is defined by a greater variety and wildness in behavior. For example, Participant 9 shares their active engagement with the environment through turning over logs, feeling tree trunks, and walking off-trail. The behavior of venturing off-trail and scouring the natural environment through sensory modes, such as touch, work to enhance the wildness of

the participant's engagement with their surroundings. Finally, a level nine EIPW continues to include a focus on natural elements and multi-sensory attunement, but shifts towards near-complete sensory absorption and unavoidable sensory experiences created by way of extreme active participation in the environment. Participants at this stage may feel that they are at the mercy of the environment, with their experience being heavily dictated by seemingly unpredictable, natural features, such as inclement weather or serendipitous features.

EIPW at level seven is distinct from EIPW scoring six or below as the IPs are more focused on natural elements and no longer involve engagement with domestic or urban environments that offer limited novelty to the experience. Participants at this level display active engagement with nature and diverse sensory attunement, whereas experiences of mid-level EIPW consist nearly completely of passive engagement in the environment and affordances that appeal to a single sensory channel. IPs are not only more active in nature, but also contain features defining more wild behavior. Additionally, in high-level EIPW accounts, we begin to see participants who engage in IPs that offer unavoidable sensory experiences that don't require conscious decision-making, such as experiencing ocean waves through the rocking of a boat, or being sprayed by mist as a result of altered wind patterns.

Illustrative Examples.

Participant 9

MIPW: 7.5

EIPW: 7.5

Participant 9 details an account of geocaching in a forest reserve, leading them to engage in a variety of scavenging behaviors, such as turning over logs, inspecting tree trunks, and hiking off-trail. The MIPW is rated a 7.5 between coders, as the proximal environment contains a variety of wild features, such as wildlife and dense forests, while also being minimally organized by a small dirt trail system. The participant shared that the distal environment was a mix of both wild and rural elements, with the forest reserve being bordered by some houses, but otherwise in a rural region. The EIPW scored a 7.5 because the participant engaged in the maximum possible wild affordances that the environment had to offer, including venturing off-trail, and a diverse set of multi-sensorial IPs.

Participant 18

MIPW: 8.5

EIPW: 7.5

Participant 18 shared an experience that takes place while on a boat tour of a waterfall in a remote jungle. The MIPW is rated an 8.5 as a result of the extreme remoteness of the distal environment, coupled with the extreme wild elements of the proximal environment, including the jungle ecosystem, wildlife, such as tropical birds, and the waterfall and its associated features, such as mist and noise. The participant moves through the environment by way of the boat, and becomes a piece of the environment when they become drenched under the spray of the waterfall. The EIPW is rated a 7.5 due to the participant experiencing a diverse sensorial attunement that is mostly unavoidable and does not require conscious decision-making to experience. The EIPW is also affected by the lack of diverse movement or behaviors, as the participant's experience takes place entirely while on board the boat.

3.4.4 Range 9-10 Transition

In our study, scores at the high end of the scale were rare or absent. We include this range to inform future coders that the upper end of the scale is theoretically possible but empirically uncommon in retrospective interview data.

Experiences falling in the 9-10 transition range may take place in an environment that is impossible to manage or control, affording possible maximum IP wildness. Spaces that may be conducive to this type of wilderness may include environments existing in the sky, underwater, or in remote areas lacking human-oriented infrastructure. EIPW at this range is shaped by extreme shifts in the sensory experience, exemplifying the lack of agency over the natural environment. Here, participants are only able to absorb the experience, as they lack control over the where, when, and whom of the experience, leaving them with no choice but to become immersed in their surroundings.

Illustrative Example***Participant 33******MIPW: 9.5******EIPW: 9***

Participant 33 describes an experience that takes place while skydiving for the first time with a friend. The MIPW is scored a 9.5 as the proximal and distal environment itself are completely out of the participant's control, given they are falling through midair. Despite this, the participant still maintains some mechanisms to control their own movement through the environment, such

as steering the parachute. The participant shares that this was an entirely novel experience, and underwent a strong sensorial shift upon leaping out of the plane, including a drastic shift in temperature, smell, sound, and sight. The EIPW scored a nine due to the participant's occasional utilization of recording technology during the experience, which detracted awareness from the natural environment.

3.5 Contextual Factors

While developing the Presence and wildness coding, we also documented factors that appeared to affect participants' engagement (IPs) during their experience. Some of these we had explicitly asked about (e.g. technology) while others emerged across interviews (e.g. familiarity with the environment). As we collected specific examples of such factors (headphones, camera, cell phone), we began to group them into broader categories ("technology").

Contextual factors are the internal or external influences that detract from Maximum IP Wildness and are considered in the Enacted IP Wildness score. These factors are considered to influence the depth of a participant's engagement in the natural environment in ways that are not accounted for by the environment itself. In many cases, they provide reasoning for a participant having lower engagement with the natural setting than the setting is thought to offer. In other cases, they are thought to have no effect on the participant's engagement with the environment. However, they are not given numerical subtractive values, but rather are noted as they appear. They are categorized as follow:

1. **Technology.** Technology can capture a participant's awareness and distract from engagement with the environment's wild affordances. Sources of technology in the dataset include, but are not limited to phone usage, music and audio, camera, GPS or navigation technology, or vehicles and other artificial containers. For example, in a forest, one might be busy taking photos and videos of their surroundings or with something unrelated on their phone, as opposed to viewing the individual trees, smelling the earth, touching bark and foliage, etc.

Illustrative Example: Participant 2.

MIPW: 8.5

EIPW: 7.5

Participant 2 shares an experience on a snorkeling tour in a lagoon with sharks. The MIPW is rated an 8.5, whereas the EIPW is rated a 7.5. This discrepancy has been

attributed to the participant's reliance on a camera to take photos during the experience. As a result, the participant's account contains little language surrounding their IPs with the environment and sensory experience, and is more focused around their use of the camera.

2. ***Social Interaction.*** When there are other people present during the Presence experience, social interaction automatically acts as a contextual factor. However, the degree to which it detracts from Maximum IP Wildness depends on the amount of people present during the experience and how intently the participant is interacting with them. In the dataset, social interaction included participant experiences containing extensive conversation, group activity orientation, or human-populated surroundings. For example, a participant who is hiking in a large group of people, may be more focused on maintaining conversation with others, than they are in maintaining awareness of their natural surroundings.

Illustrative Example: Participant 45.

MIPW: 5

EIPW: 4

Participant 45 recalls hiking with a local hiking group in a wildlife area that was previously an abandoned military site. The discrepancy between the MIPW (5) and the EIPW (4) can be accounted for by the participant's discomfort in the hiking group setting. The participant shares that the hiking group talked incessantly, pushing the participant to self-isolate and become focused on walking ahead of the group. This focus on maintaining separation serves as a contextual factor that mediates the participant's engagement with the natural environment.

3. ***Familiarity with the Environment.*** Familiarity is defined by how well a participant knows the setting, including what they expect to find and how habituated they may be to it or other similar environments. Being familiar with one's environment can lessen attentiveness to its affordances as they have already been experienced or anticipated. This reduces Enacted IP Wildness since the environment's wild qualities may have become predictable and may no longer provide novelty to the participant. In our dataset, this is taken into account when a participant regularly visits a space, such as a nearby park, or a backyard.

Illustrative Example: Participant 39

MIPW: 6

EIPW: 5

Participant 39's experience takes place while on a fishing trip with his wife. The participant shares that they have been visiting this exact fishing spot regularly for 17 years. This added familiarity with the environment suggests that the participant may enter the environment with expectations about the type of wildlife they may interact with, and the sensorial affordances (smell, sight, sound) that they may experience. While the participant expresses that this familiarity creates a sense of nostalgia upon returning to the same spot each year, it does decrease the novelty with which the participant interacts with the setting. Therefore, the MIPW scored a six and the EIPW a five.

3.6 Decision Rules for Ambiguous Cases and Edge Cases

3.6.1 Ambiguous Coding Scenarios

Multi-Setting Experiences

When a participant's experience spans multiple settings, coders should score MIPW and EIPW with focus on the setting that the participant states as most relevant to their Presence experience during their interview. This assumes that the interviewer asked the participant to narrow down their setting, and generally should ensure the participant does so before proceeding with further questions. Examples from the present study in which this arose as a problem are Participant 5, who describes two different Presence experiences and settings, and Participant 32, who recalls a vacation with family in which they stayed at a luxury condo, but whose Presence arises while running alone on the beach. In the former case, the primary and secondary coders scored different experiences, resulting in a 5-point discrepancy for both MIPW and EIPW, whereas in the latter case, there was confusion about which setting to account for in the MIPW score.

Proximal versus Distal Environment Divergence

When the immediate surroundings and the broader landscape are different on the domestic/wild continuum, MIPW is scored by accounting for both proximal and distal, while EIPW is scored based on which space the participant is attending to most during their Presence experience. For EIPW, the participant's attention determines their interactions with their surroundings and their conscious experience. With that said, an environment is something one is

in, so the bounds of the proximal/distal environment extend beyond a single object of attention; for example, if someone is enraptured by a leaf on a busy street they are on, their proximal environment is the busy street (not just the leaf), while their distal environment is the larger city and aerospace around them. An example from the present study is Participant 35 who viewed a solar eclipse from a gas station in a relatively rural area; while the gas station and rurality are accounted for in the MIPW score, the EIPW focuses on the participant's interactions with the celestial space/event and fellow watchers rather than the parking lot concrete or the green space around them.

Solo versus Social Experiences

When a participant is with other people during their experience, the degree to which social interaction is factored into the EIPW score depends on 1) the amount of people present during the experience and 2) how intently the participant is interacting with and/or in proximity to them. For example, social presence/interaction can vary from the mere presence of other people (e.g. Participant 3) to active interaction and conversation (e.g. Participant 45), which shows a difference in distracting magnitude. Whether the social interaction is encouraging to vs. detracting from the participant's Presence experience is accounted for by the explanatory factors which relate to the Global Presence score, not MIPW or EIPW.

Weighting Technology Use

Participants' technology use is accounted for in their EIPW scores, depending on the degree to which their use dominated or framed their interactions with their surroundings. For example, Participant 2's Presence experience takes place while snorkeling with sharks on a tropical vacation, and throughout the entire experience, he is only concerned with getting shark pictures and videos. His testimony revolves around this media capture rather than other sensory, emotional, mental, or social descriptions; this is a case of substantial technology use that significantly impacted a participant's EIPW score. Meanwhile, Participant 9's Presence experience takes place while geocaching in a forest reserve, which includes the use of a GPS device. However, his use is limited, doesn't constrain his explorations of the forest, and takes a marginal spot in his interview testimony of his experience.

Recall Quality in Interviews

When a participant's account was vague or sparse about the setting or engagement, coding was admittedly more difficult. Since participants were discussing past experiences, some

offered more detail than others based on individual differences in how long ago the experience had occurred, recall ability, emotional salience, and so forth. Keeping this in mind, the coders standardized coding rules by collaboratively analyzing Group 1 participants, refined rules through independent coding of Group 2 participants, and discussed any discrepancies (but didn't revise decisions). Such standardization helped to combat the effects of variability in interview testimony detail and participant memory accuracy, which is evident in the achieved interrater reliability.

3.6.2 Edge Cases

The following edge cases arose after all participants had been coded and interrater reliability had been assessed. These cases required group discussion and brought challenges to the coding framework which had to be addressed; as such, they are valuable to document precisely because they reveal the framework's limits.

Case 1: Does a car fit under the “technology” category?

Technology is a broad category in our study, encompassing anything from phones, cameras, and headphones to car radios, GPS, and so forth. However, the particular question that arose is whether a car counts as a technological container, affecting the framing of the participant's experience and therefore their MIPW and/or EIPW scores. Relevant instances included Participant 27 watching deer fight from inside their car, Participant 15 listening to music in the car, and Participant 26 on a road trip along the Delaware River and into the Catskill Mountains. We debated whether the car might also constitute the proximal environment, regarded similarly to a house. However, we determined that a car differs from a house as it diverts attention to be used in ways that a house does not. Therefore, a car should be coded as a technological container, i.e. as a contextual factor accounted for in the EIPW score, while a house helps form one's (proximal) surroundings and is captured in the MIPW scoring. Future directions may include expanding and/or refining the category of “technology” as it is a quickly shifting one.

Case 2: What bounds of the proximal versus distal environment are included in the MIPW and EIPW scoring?

The primary and secondary coders had a 2.5 difference between MIPW and EIPW for Participant 17, whose Presence experience takes place in a wooded area behind his home. This brought up the discussion of whether the proximal (wooded area) or distal environment (larger

property) should be the focus of this coding. Ultimately, coders had different understandings of what scope of the environment was salient to the experience. Through discussion, the coders clarified that MIPW scoring considers both the wooded area and larger property, and EIPW scoring centers the interactions the participant had in the wooded area while also accounting for the contextual factor of familiarity with place. Similar issues arose and were resolved regarding Participant 3 (hiking in the redwoods) and Participant 8 (stargazing at a farm), who also had around 2-point discrepancies in the MIPW scoring between coders.

3.7 Exemplar Cases Spanning the Scale

The following worked examples demonstrate how the coding framework can be used in practice, while also providing the grounding to extrapolate the framework to new cases. These examples span the wildness range of the larger study sample.

3.7.1 Case 1: Participant 41

Setting description: Participant 41's experience takes place at the 9/11 memorial in New York City in the early morning. He describes visiting the memorial alone, and the area was cold, quiet, and lacking substantial greenery.

MIPW score and reasoning: Both coders scored 1 for MIPW. This is because the participant's experience occurs in an extremely urban environment, both proximally and distally.

EIPW score and reasoning: Both coders scored 1 for EIPW. This is because the participant's interactions with the environment were detracted only minimally by technology use (taking one photo).

Notes about scoring and uncertainty: The coders had exact agreement for MIPW and EIPW scoring and identified the same contextual factor. There was no uncertainty.

3.7.2 Case 2: Participant 22

Setting description: Participant 22's experience takes place inside his house while watching a group of birds in his yard through the window. He describes the many trees surrounding his house, a man-made koi pond, and the diverse wildlife that come to visit.

MIPW score and reasoning: Both coders scored 2 for MIPW. This is because the participant's experience occurs in a very domestic setting, and being inside allows him a sense of separation and safety from the outside. However, the participant is wholly focused on the nature and bird behavior unfolding in the yard, which is why his MIPW is a 2 and not a 1.

EIPW score and reasoning: The primary coder scored 1.5 for EIPW and the secondary coder scored 2 for EIPW. This discrepancy is because the primary coder noted “familiarity with place” as a contextual factor, since the participant is inside his home, as well as binoculars as a potential technology factor (but this wasn’t weighted as heavily). The secondary coder noted no contextual factors. All in all, the participant’s interactions with the environment were affected little-to-moderately by these contextual factors.

Notes about rating and uncertainty: The coders had exact agreement for MIPW and relative agreement for EIPW, attributed to their varied identification of contextual factors. There was minor uncertainty.

3.7.3 Case 3: Participant 21

Setting description: Participant 21’s experience takes place while walking her dog in a wooded area by her neighborhood community garden. She describes hearing both the sounds of birds chirping and the city traffic, seeing alternating grassy areas and rented land for gardens, as well as the “beautiful” sky.

MIPW score and reasoning: This participant was single-coded by the primary coder, who scored 4 for MIPW. This is because the participant’s experience occurs in a green space that experiences some human influence (e.g. managed for gardens), and straddles the urban and natural settings surrounding her neighborhood. The score is not a 5 because there are less diverse and less wild natural elements to engage with since the environment is fairly mixed between urban and managed/rural.

EIPW score and reasoning: The primary coder scored 4 for EIPW. This is because the participant’s interactions with her environment were not detracted by any contextual factors.

Notes about rating and uncertainty: The primary coder would also accept a 3 for the participant’s MIPW score, since the proximal environment is nestled in a larger suburban environment—one that has a greater variety of nature than an urban city, but still shares urban elements (i.e. traffic noise, roads).

3.7.4 Case 4: Participant 45

Setting description: Participant 45’s experience takes place while hiking in the winter in a park-like setting; he describes his settings as a flat “prairie” which used to be a military base, as well as old trees, mountains, buffalo, a strong wind, and intermittent snow. He mentions that he could see city skyscrapers in the distance.

MIPW score and reasoning: This participant was single-coded by the primary coder, who scored 5 for MIPW. This is because the participant's experience occurs in an unfamiliar environment that has diverse and wilder natural elements to engage with, such as the smell of buffalo, the cold wind and snow, and the view of the mountains. However, the remnants of the military base and the visible city detract from the wildness of the setting, and the participant even notes this perception: "It wasn't really a wilderness area; you knew that it had been converted and turned into something other than it was" (P45, p. 3, Q5).

EIPW score and reasoning: The primary coder scored 4 for EIPW. This is because the participant explains being significantly disturbed by the chatter of other hikers, causing him to walk ahead of the group, and being nervous about not knowing anyone. As such, the contextual factor of social interaction largely detracted from the participant's interactions with his environment. Technology was also noted as a factor, albeit a minor one, as the participant briefly used his phone to take a picture.

Notes about rating and uncertainty: N/A.

3.7.5 Case 5: Participant 37

Setting description: Participant 37's experience takes place on a beach in Cancun, Mexico while watching the sunset with her husband. She explains that they had walked down to a more private area, and describes hearing and smelling the ocean, feeling the sand and mist, and seeing the rocks and boats.

MIPW score and reasoning: The primary coder scored 7 for MIPW and the secondary coder scored 6 for MIPW. Both scores point to the wildness of the vast and unpredictable ocean, while also accounting for more domestic elements like the boats, being in a resort/tourist area, and sitting on a lounge chair. The primary coder scored the MIPW higher because besides the presence of many people on other parts of the beach, the "resort area" leans wilder by lacking any extensive amenities (other than a bathroom) or infrastructure; however, the primary coder would also accept the secondary coder's score, which views the proximal and distal environments as more evenly mixed between managed/rural and wilder elements.

EIPW score and reasoning: The primary coder scored 6 for EIPW and the secondary coder scored 5.5 for EIPW. Both coders noted the contextual factor of social interaction, as the participant was talking to her husband throughout the experience. The discrepancy in detractive

magnitude is because the factor was weighted more heavily by the primary coder (minus 1) than the secondary coder (minus 0.5).

Notes about rating and uncertainty: The coders had adequate agreement on MIPW and EIPW—for the latter, identifying the same contextual factor but having varying slightly in the interpretation of its impact. There was medium uncertainty.

3.7.6 Case 6: Participant 7

Setting description: Participant 7's experience takes place while viewing the Grand Tetons at Yellowstone National Park. She recalls asking her son to stop the car, then walking onto the field and sitting in the grass, simply viewing the mountains.

MIPW score and reasoning: This participant was single-coded by the primary coder, who scored 7 for MIPW. This is because the environment features wilder elements like the vast mountains, with the extent of land management being the road and configuration of the park. However, the park exists within a wild distal environment, with managed elements largely adhering to the contours of the terrain.

EIPW score and reasoning: The primary coder scored 7 for EIPW. While the participant visited the park with her family (social interaction), she physically separated herself from them by exiting the car; from then on, they were not mentioned at all. As such, the presence of others did not detract from the participant's interactions with her environment whatsoever.

Notes about rating and uncertainty: N/A.

3.7.7 Case 7: Participant 33

Setting description: Participant 33's experience takes place as he's falling through the sky and clouds while skydiving for the first time. He explains that he was in the mountains of North Carolina, seeing the city, forest, mountains, and field way into the distance, as well as the sun rising. He could hear the wind, but when he jumped it became silent. Everything was very small, growing larger as he descended, and he could feel the air rushing through his body.

MIPW score and reasoning: This primary coder scored 9 for MIPW and the secondary coder scored 10 for MIPW. Both scores point to the extreme wildness of being suspended in the atmosphere, surrounded by clouds, winds, and the expansive scenery of varying landscapes (city, forest, mountains, field). The participant is at the complete mercy of the weather, only able to deploy their parachute and maneuver items close to their body; the larger surroundings cannot be controlled, including how the participant's body falls, what he can see, and so forth. This

participant was the highest scoring on MIPW in the study sample, which is why the secondary coder scored him a 10, while the primary coder scored him a 9 to leave space for a theoretically wilder scenario that may exist.

EIPW score and reasoning: The primary coder scored 8.5 for EIPW and the secondary coder scored 9.5 for EIPW. Both coders noted the contextual factor of technology, since the participant was mic'd up during his experience to record a few short sound bites. Both coders weighted this as similarly detrimental to the participant's interactions with their environment (minus 0.5). The primary coder also noted the contextual factor of social interaction since the participant had been accompanied by his friend, but since his experience of falling occurred alone, this had no impact on his EIPW score. The secondary coder did not count social interaction as a contextual factor, but still mentioned this exact detail in the "Notes" section during coding.

Notes about rating and uncertainty: While the primary and secondary coder rated MIPW slightly differently (and by extension, EIPW), in either case, both agree that this participant falls in the upper range for MIPW. There was minor uncertainty.

4. HOW TO CONSTRUCT A SYNTHESIS BLOCK

What is a synthesis block? A synthesis block is a narrative summary of a participant's interview, created *before* coding begins. Its purpose is to distill the raw, messy transcript into a coherent phenomenological account. These syntheses remove extraneous/redundant information while retaining the context of core participant quotes and the larger narrative of their experience. The synthesis blocks are used to code Global Presence, Maximum IP Wildness, and Enacted IP Wildness, as well as to identify any Contextual and Explanatory factors.

Synthesis block structure: Each synthesis block has two parts: "Setting the Scene" (the backdrop) and "The Presence experience and relevant IPs." IPs, or interaction patterns, characterize meaningful human–nature engagements along a wild/domestic continuum.

"Setting the Scene": This section provides a brief overview of the participant's experience (what they were doing, why, and with whom) and natural surroundings.

"The Presence experience and relevant IPs": This section is a synthesis of the participant's Presence passages and relevant IPs. Using Participant 35 (our L7 prototype) as example this section begins by stating the particular moment at which the participant enters Presence (e.g. watching the eclipse approach totality), whereas "Setting the scene"

describes the general experience (e.g. traveling to Kentucky with their brother and friend). Quotes are grouped by common topics and bulleted chronologically as they are said in the interview. For participant 35, those topics were 1) “feeling strongly connected to their natural surroundings and the people around them,” 2) “feeling joy, wonder, and bliss,” and 3) “a sense of focus and stillness.” These topics are not preemptively decided, instead formalized through careful analysis of the main themes comprising the participant’s experience—a flexible but consolidative approach to organizing interview testimony. The headings for each topic aim to describe rather than analyze, and are corroborated by the quotes below them. The last few paragraphs of a synthesis block typically concern relevant technology use, social interactions, meditation experience, and any other information that might be important for a coder to know; in this case, the fourth paragraph of P35’s synthesis is about “using a camera to take photos.

Generally, throughout the synthesis block, all quotes are cited with the page number and interview question they are sourced from. The exception is that quotes from participants’ re-reading of their written survey responses—which occurs at the very beginning of the interview, before any questions are asked—are only noted with a page number. The synthesis block primarily consists of participant language, with the exception of sentences and sentence fragments to introduce the quotes for narrative continuity and grammatical flow. For the same reason, ellipses are used to string together participant’s statements while omitting stutters and false starts without manipulating meaning. Ellipses that denote the participant trailing off are marked as such in-text (e.g. “and I was... [participant trails off]”).

How to create a synthesis block:

1. **Read the entire interview transcript.** Since synthesis blocks are meant to provide a holistic, accurate summary of both the participant’s surroundings and their Presence experience, readers should become familiar with the entire transcript and the trajectory of the participant’s experience. It’s important to identify both the “peak” Presence *and* how it develops before and after this peak—both aspects must be accounted for in the syntheses.
2. **Identify the important passages and “plot points” in the narrative.**
 - a. For “Setting the Scene,” keep in mind the following questions while re-reading the transcript: Where was the participant? What did the area look/smell/sound/etc.

like? Why was the participant there? What was the participant doing? Who were they with (if anyone, including nonhuman creatures)? What was their immediate setting vs. the larger area that setting was situated in?

- b. For the “The Presence experience and relevant IPs,” first mark and collect all passages describing Presence and/or that are explicitly related to the participant’s Presence experience (i.e. technology use, social interaction, and other relevant information). Then, eliminate any redundant passages (i.e. passages saying similar things with different wording) in favor of the more detailed, specific, and elaborative version of the duplicates. Examine and categorize the passages to identify common themes/topics that link certain ones together. Group the passages based on these themes, and determine how to transition into each collection in a logical, fluid manner.
3. **Filter the noise.** Ignore travel logistics, gear details, and social drama *unless* they directly blocked or enhanced the mental state.
4. **Draft the synthesis block.**
 - a. *Setting the Scene:* Briefly describe the participant’s surroundings, paying attention to the wild vs. urban nature, and sensory inputs. Include important IPs. If a participant mentions the particular geographic location they were in, make sure to include this information.
 - b. *The Shift:* Begin “The Presence experience and relevant IPs” with a sentence of the specific moment at which the participant begins experiencing Presence (e.g. “The Presence experience takes place as Participant 35 watches the eclipse approach totality”). This is typically the moment their internal state changed (if it did). From there, continue elaborating on the participant’s Presence experience with passages grouped by common themes/topics. Use verbatim quotes, especially for mental states (“my mind went blank,” “I was worrying”).
 - c. *The Outcome:* How did the participant feel at their peak Presence (if any)? How did they feel after (note any epiphanies, spiritual reflections, transformations in worldview, etc.)?
 - d. *The Obstacles/Distractors:* Note any factors that either encouraged or detracted from the participant’s Presence experience. Examples may include excessive use

of technology that distracted the participant from interacting with/noticing their surroundings; the participant being with someone important to them that made the experience more special; surrounding chatter that frustrated the participant; discomfort from extremely cold weather, etc. Especially note factors that the participant consciously identifies and elaborates upon as affecting (positively or negatively) their experience.

5. **Refine.** Re-read the entire synthesis block and delete any other redundant quotes. For “Setting the Scene,” ensure concision in the general overview of the experience and the participant’s surroundings (keep in mind that not every single description of the environment has to be included, but pay attention to diverse sensory descriptions/interactions). For “The Presence experience and relevant IPs,” move quotes to better-fitting subsections if applicable. Ensure headers for each subsection provide enough context.

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