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Nature-based relational peace cultivation in Northern Ireland and South Africa

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This article offers practitioner reflections on a continuous, nature-based thread of relational peace building, over more than two decades on the island of Ireland and in South Africa. This nature-based thread included multi-day journeys into the Scottish Highlands and into the iMfolozi wilderness area in South Africa, as well as the deliberate use of workshop venues in relatively remote, beautiful natural settings. The author revisits earlier reflections with two Northern Ireland-based co-facilitators (2018) and draws on the last decade of faith-inspired racial conflict transformation experience in 'post-apartheid' South Africa, including 'white work' within the Dutch Reformed Church and the 'deepening' of higher education transformation at Stellenbosch University. Having clarified the meanings of key concepts such as 'relational peace cultivation', 'nature-based' and 'social restitution', the author locates his peace work within a typology that distinguishes between instrumental, intrinsic and relational ways that people value nature. The author presents the peace cultivation potential of nature-based relational work through an integrated '6 P's' framework. This framework draws attention to the importance of combining physiological, place-sensitive, psychological, poetic, political, and 'pneumatic' (spiritual) aspects in pursuit of sustainable peace. The relevance of this '6 P's' framework for socio-economic transformation, especially in post-1994 South Africa, is spelled out in terms of the conceptual, instrumental and ontological contributions of nature-based relational peace cultivation. The article highlights the profound challenge of implementing the 'holistic trinity' of 'Soil, Soul, Society' (Kumar), the 'interconnectedness of humanity, spirit and nature' (Wilderness Leadership School) in the quest for embodied, restitutional reconciliation in, for example, post-1994 South Africa.

Contribution: This practice-based article argues for an ecologically informed, spiritually grounded, politically aware approach to relational peace cultivation. It contributes to public and practical theology, (eco)spirituality, peace and conflict, and critical whiteness studies, trauma healing and fits the interdisciplinary, hermeneutical scope of HTS.

Keywords: relational peace cultivation; social restitution; nature-based; wilderness; spirituality; transforming apartheid; reconciliation; trauma healing.

Introduction

Beyond the 'troubles' and apartheid? Fruitful encounters in wild places

It started in a pub, in the summer of 2001, at the northern foot of the Wicklow Mountains. A few participants in a Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation's conference were taking a break.[1] Alistair Little and I ended up having a deep conversation about the journeys that brought us to this place. His journey included joining, at the age of 14 years, a loyalist paramilitary group (Ulster Volunteer Force), spending 13 years in jail, and afterwards becoming a peacemaker with survivors and former combatants from all sides of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland (Little & Scott 2009). Mine from a strong white, Afrikaner Christian Nationalist background to joining Nelson Mandela's African National Congress and working in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (Verwoerd 2019). While sharing some of the challenges of real reconciliation after 'the Troubles' and in post-1994 South Africa, his eyes lit up when I began talking about how powerful I found a recent iMfolozi wilderness trail in northern KwaZulu-Natal.[2]

'One of the few places where I find some inner peace is when I go for a walk in the woods or on the beach', he said. He went on to tell me that for a long time he had been interested in the

1.Glencree is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation founded in 1974 as a response to violent conflict in and about Northern Ireland (often euphemistically referred to as 'the Troubles'). It conducts peacebuilding and reconciliation work in Ireland, north and south, Britain and internationally, see www.glencree.ie.

2.This trail in 2000 was guided by Bruce Dell from the WLS (https://wildernesstrails.org.za). For more on the complex story of the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Nature Reserve, see Turner (2013).

therapeutic potential of nature – including, while still in prison, corresponding with Native American people and exploring their use of wilderness for vision quest work. After release from prison and as he worked to live with the legacy of violence in his own life, he particularly loved to visit the Lake District. Gradually, he started to weave nature-based activities into the workshops he was developing during the 1990s. I mentioned the work of the National Peace Accord Trust, which uses vision quest-type journeys into South African wilderness areas to reconcile opposing black youth activists in the Johannesburg area (Nell & Shapiro 2012). We began to dream of bringing former political enemies together through nature-based activities, such as a wilderness trail in South Africa.

Over the next 10 years, this dream took the (non-linear) shape of the Sustainable Peace Network project (SPN). This challenging project involved more than a hundred people from diverse survivor, former combatant and wider society (church, business, youth worker, party political) backgrounds from the island of Ireland and England. Brandon Hamber, a Northern Ireland-based South African, became a co-facilitator and led the SPN capturing of learning working group (Hamber, Little & Verwoerd 2018). A *Journey through Conflict* (JtC) process, led by Alistair Little, eventually involved groups of about 15 SPN participants in annual cycles of storytelling, dialogue and relationship-cultivation workshops, both before and after their visit to South Africa (Little & Verwoerd 2013).[3]

A distinguishing feature of SPN and JtC was the weaving of nature-based places and activities into the complex process of cultivating relationships between participants divided by deeply rooted violent political conflict. These nature-based activities on the island of Ireland included joint walks and outdoor solo time before and after intense indoor sessions at venues in beautiful natural settings, such as Glencree and Corrymeela.[4] Relatively unspoiled 'wild' nature featured most prominently during multi-day journeys into the Scottish Highlands, using a remote hunting lodge or walkers' hut as a base, as well as 5-day wilderness trails in iMfolozi.[5]

After returning to South Africa at the end of 2012, I became involved, in stages, with the work of the Restitution Foundation,[6] with 'white work' in the Dutch Reformed Church (Van der Riet & Verwoerd 2022) and with transformation at Stellenbosch University (SU). Along the way, I drew on my experience in facilitating storytelling and dialogue within JtC and SPN. While it has not been possible to include multi-day journeys into wild places, the choices of workshop venues, such as Volmoed, Goedgedacht, Noordhoek[7] and the inclusion of some outdoor walk-and-talk activities continued the 'wild nature' strand of JtC.

In this article, I reflect on the continuous nature-based thread of my co-facilitated peace cultivation over more than 2 decades, on the island of Ireland and in South Africa. I revisit initial reflections with Alistair Little and Brandon Hamber (Hamber, Little & Verwoerd 2018), based on the capturing of learning process within SPN. This process included written questionnaires at the start and end of the 12-month workshop cycle for each participant group, qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted by an independent researcher (Markieta Domecka), and reflective small-group sessions led by the facilitators.[8] Drawing on my South African experience since 2013, I continue by fleshing out the peace cultivation potential of nature-based relational work. I sketch a '6 P's' framework by differentiating between physiological, place-sensitive, psychological, poetic, political and pneumatic[9] aspects. I conclude by returning to the relevance of this type of relational peace cultivation for socio-economic transformation, especially in 'post-apartheid' South Africa (Verwoerd, Little & Hamber 2024). But first of all, there is a need for some clarification of key concepts such as 'peacebuilding', 'reconciliation', 'nature-based' peace 'cultivation'.

'Nature-based relational peace cultivation'

The peace work that I have been involved in falls within the field of 'relational peacebuilding'. In reflective writing with Alistair Little and Brandon Hamber (Verwoerd, Little & Hamber 2024), we used this term to refer to civil society-driven, grassroots-level work with groups in divided societies, specifically aimed at building or rebuilding relationships fractured by political conflict. This understanding of relational peacebuilding has elements of what others have termed 'people-to-people peacebuilding' (Gawerc 2006) and contrasts with approaches that focus more on macro-level structural and institutional forms of peacebuilding linked to state-building.[10]

We also accepted that 'reconciliation' can be narrowly defined as the *goal* of all forms of peacebuilding that seek

3.Using a wilderness trail as guiding metaphor we distinguished between three stages of JtC. The first stage ('Starting the Journey') included the careful selection of participants as well as individual and group preparation; the second stage ('Journeying Together') included three main strands: the sharing of 'Life Histories' (storytelling), 'Deep Dialogue', 'Wild Nature' (nature-based activities); and the third stage ('Returning Home') included individual and group follow-up (Little & Verwoerd 2013).

4.To get a sense of the natural settings of these meeting places, see https://glencree.ie/; https://www.corrymeela.org.

5.To assist the transition to and from the wilderness experience, time was also typically spent 1 day before and 1 day after the trail in Twinstreams (https://www.wessa.org.za/twinstreams), an environmental education centre in a coastal forest setting, halfway between Durban and iMfolozi. Prior to the trail, participants also spent time at the SI, a social justice oriented eco-centre near Stellenbosch (www.sustainabilityinstitute.net). Here some initial dialogue work took place as well as briefings on the 'post-apartheid', post-TRC transition process.

6.See https://www.restitution.org.za/.

7.See https://www.volmoed.co.za/; https://www.goedgedacht.org/; https://www.facebook.com/story.php/?story_fbid=3294209697322491&id=100078099475568.

8.All quotes in this article are from participants in this capturing of learning process. For more methodological detail, see Hamber et al. (2018:4–5).

9.'Pneuma' is an ancient Greek word for 'breath' and, in a religious context, for 'spirit' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pneuma).

10.In contrast to 'peace making' (including ceasefires, peace agreements and political settlements) and 'peace keeping' (including the presence of military force to back up fragile settlements, to keep recently warring factions apart), 'peacebuilding' is the internationally accepted, UN sponsored shorthand for a whole range of state and civil society activities to help 'close the gap between immediate post-conflict efforts, on the one hand, and long term recovery and development efforts on the other' (see http://www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding).

'transformed social identity' (Mitchell 2023) and improved intergroup relationships where shared beliefs, attitudes and emotions maintain conflict (Bar-Tal & Bennink 2004). However, given the strong relational nature of this goal, we argued that any progress towards it requires protection. To this end, reconciliation, although a goal or desired outcome, is simultaneously a non-linear and arguably continuous process as a society seeks to redefine relations (eds. Nadler, Malloy & Fisher 2008). We broadly defined relational peacebuilding as an approach that supports the ongoing process of sustaining reconciliation. This conceptualisation allowed us to avoid the problematic, often religious conflation of reconciliation with forgiveness and apology (Mitchell 2023; Verwoerd & Little 2018).

More specifically, our relational peacebuilding can be understood to support 'socioemotional' reconciliation, which directly confronts 'the emotional and perceptual legacies of past conflict' such as 'existing feelings of victimisation, guilt, distrust and fear between groups' (Aiken 2010:170). This kind of 'social learning' can be distinguished from 'distributive' reconciliation, which involves 'sustained attempts to reduce structural and material inequalities and limit perceptions of inequitable power relations between former antagonists' (Aiken 2010:171).

My understanding of relational peacebuilding, especially in the so-called 'post-apartheid' context, also has a strong affinity with Swartz's (2016) focus on citizen-driven 'everyday social restitution', which informs the Restitution Foundation's work.[11] She stresses that this relational, dialogical addressing of racialised historical injustices requires both an attitudinal shift away from a charity mindset and a commitment to practical redress (including sharing of time, networks, income and inherited wealth). She distinguishes this bottom-up social restitution from legal redress or top-down, state-sponsored forms of restitution.

The use of relational peace 'cultivation' rather than 'building' emerged in the early 2000s, alongside the increasing use of nature-based activities and places. Prominent connotations of the 'building' metaphor include control by the builder, detailed plans, a linear process and working with inanimate objects. These connotations did not fit the messy, unpredictable, humbling realities of facilitating dialogue and enduring relationships between politically wounded human beings. More organic, relational and delicate metaphors of 'growing', 'nurturing' and 'cultivation', therefore, started to feel more appropriate (Verwoerd 2021).

As far as the term 'nature-based' is concerned, Brandon Hamber et al. (2018) recognised that terms such as 'nature', 'wild nature' and 'wilderness' are contested (Vannini & Vannini 2016). We opposed the simplistic romanticisation of the 'healing power of nature' or the 'beauty of wilderness' (Fisher & Abram 2013; Hartig et al. 2014).[12] While we were drawn to remote, relatively unspoiled areas to do some of our work, we recognised that these wild places can be deadly and unforgiving.[13] We also remained aware that these 'wild' environments are not places without history, unmarked by human conflict and pain (Mdiniso 2017; Richards 2020).[14]

To locate my involvement in 'nature-based' peace cultivation, I find a recent typology helpful. Based on an extensive overview of existing research, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services observes three distinctive values people give to nature: (1) instrumental, when nature is valued as an instrument or means to an end; (2) intrinsic, when nature is valued in itself; and (3) relational, when nature is valued as the social-ecological relations that it nurtures among people and people and nature (in Nardi & Kasznar 2025).

Looking back at more than 20 years of peace cultivation, the *instrumental* use of nature-based activities and places to bring people divided by violent conflict together features throughout. This instrumental approach was complemented, especially during the iMfolozi wilderness trails, with the aim of increasing respect for the *intrinsic* value of nature beyond a sensationalist, touristy focus on the 'Big Five' (elephant, lion, leopard, rhinoceros, buffalo). Some progress towards this aim is reflected in this kind of feedback from SPN participants:

> The care and consideration that the guides took that we didn't interfere too much with the wilderness was the first thing that struck me; their thoughtfulness for the animals, birds, insects, plants etc. was very commendable and they carry out this process with great passion. This made me think about how we treat our environment and encouraged me to be even more active in preserving it when I go home. (Hamber et al. 2018:15)

Along the way, we were also inspired by the *relational* vision of the Wilderness Leadership School (WLS). Founded in 1957 by Ian Player and Magqubu Ntombela, this organisation aims to increase environmental care and wilderness awareness. The WLS symbol, selected by Ntombela, was the trifoliate coral tree leaf, symbolising 'interconnectedness of humanity, spirit and nature' (Dawson & Hendee 2025:51; Turner 2013). This relational vision is also present in the 'Earth Charter': '… peace is the wholeness created by right

11.I resonate with the Restitution Foundation's focus on 'social restitution' when faced with transgenerational historical injustices: 'When considering historical injustice, thinking about restitution forces us to recognise that loss includes both tangibles – such as land – and intangibles – like dignity, a sense of safety or self, and opportunity – compounded over generations. For this reason, we speak about 'social restitution' as a project encompassing more than just legal redress' (https://www.restitution.org.za/). See also Rassool and Gibbon (2024).

12.I agree with Vannini & Vannini's (2016) understanding of 'wilderness' as a 'relational and process-based concept that involves how humans conceptualize, experience, interact with, and imagine natural environments that are relatively undisturbed by human activity'.

13.Once you have witnessed a graceful impala being torn to shreds by wild dogs in iMfolozi or experienced a bitterly cold April in the Scottish Highlands – with rotting carcasses of deer strewn across the landscape as sobering reminders of an exceptionally harsh winter – the temptation is lessened to become 'fluffy' about nature (as one sceptical participant put it).

14.On a walkabout in the Scottish Highlands, standing among the ruins of a shepherd's cottage, the history of the Highland Clearances became visible (Richards 2020). In iMfolozi, the local Zulu guides, including Mandla Buthelezi and Sicelo Mbatha, often told stories of King Shaka's former hunting grounds, or they picked up pottery shards or grinding stones and looked to the human settlements on the horizon – reminders of a history of black South Africans forcibly removed to make space for 'game reserves', still visited mostly by white tourists (Mdiniso 2017). And many isolated places in Ireland, such as the Wicklow Mountains, carry associations with recent violent conflict, or historic battles and evictions, which can make it difficult for some participants to appreciate the beauty of the natural surroundings.

relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are part'.[15] This vision informs the deepest, radically inclusive meaning of the phrase 'relational peace cultivation' used in the title of this article.

With the above conceptual clarifications in mind, I can continue to make sense of some of the ways that I have experienced nature-based places and activities as a 'co-facilitator'.

On the six P's of relational peace

Physicality of peace cultivation

An obvious, though often underestimated, factor highlighted by SPN and JtC is the significance of the literal, *physical* journeying involved. To reach remote, wild places such as the Scottish Highlands or the iMfolozi wilderness, participants (from the island of Ireland) must literally cross oceans, spend hours travelling together and walk for several kilometres.[16] We have found that the time-consuming process of physically moving away from 'home' – detaching from the reminders of conflict and other distractions of daily life – helped many participants to be more open and ready for the challenges of metaphoric, inner and interpersonal journeying through conflict:

> I remember vividly that I'd been through a really stressful time before we had come away to Scotland. So, I was kind of looking forward to it, but a bit apprehensive about what I was leaving behind me at the same time. Getting dropped off in the minibus and being allowed to walk in (to the Glen) – with every step that I was taking, I was leaving a part of home, back home. It allowed me to focus. (Hamber et al. 2018:10)

Furthermore, the sheer physicality of peace cultivation is powerfully illustrated on an iMfolozi trail. Even though this is not an endurance trail, entering and surviving for 5 days in the iMfolozi wilderness becomes a vivid reminder of what is often taken for granted in typical workshop settings: meeting basic needs for enough, clean drinking water, having a safe enough place to rest during the day and sleep at night, being protected against heat, rain and insect bites, among other things and creatures.

The typically underestimated physicality of deep relational transformation was also brought home to me during a 2022–2023 pilot 'Realising the Restitution Statement' process at SU, co-facilitated by Ayanda Nyoka.[17] Frustratingly, the only time available to bring participants together was after hours on weekdays. Physical tiredness and work stress thus became significant constraints. This required extra attention to the provision of food and drinks and some physical activity, such as a few minutes of breathing practice and/or humorous 'shaking and dancing' to drum music.[18] This kind of welcoming process helped participants to be as awake and present as possible.

Working in challenging, unfamiliar wild nature spaces during SPN also underscored a primary kind of physicality: the visceral presence of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) and its evolutionary, neurobiological prioritisation of safety (Porges 2022; Van der Kolk 2015). The primal power of the ANS manifested most clearly in the instinctive fears typically evoked by darkness, noises and torch-lit animal eyes while doing solitary night watch duty on an iMfolozi wilderness trail.

On the other hand, there were also many examples of participants experiencing the calming effect of the natural environment:

> The wild setting created a helpful contrast for the tough emotionally challenging work that went on within the house. Tensions were defused as soon as you walked outside.
>
> I felt heavy after this morning's session and was really glad to get the solo time on the grassy bank by the river … it brought me tranquillity.
>
> It was after the (deep dialogue) questions, and I remember going out of the room thinking 'oh, I just want to get out of here' – that really overwhelming kind of feeling. If it was in a hotel and the only place I had to go was my room, I probably would have come to the facilitators and said, 'Look, I don't think I can cope here, can I go home?' Having that kind of free space, having the freedom to go outside and take a breather, helped to facilitate that process. (Hamber et al. 2018:10)

My recent exposure to the neurobiological, trauma-informed research and teaching practice of Professor Mays Imad has deepened my understanding of both the fear-inducing and the calming potential of a place such as the iMfolozi wilderness. In my current work with students and colleagues at SU, I have found it very helpful to invite her to give non-judgemental, neuroscientific inputs on how to understand the physiology of (racial) trauma or extreme stress in terms of the 'chronic dysregulation of the ANS', followed by evidence-based strategies for the regulation and co-regulation of the ANS, such as breathing, mindfulness, empathetic support from friends, daily 'awe' practice and time in nature (Imad 2022; Monroy & Keltner 2023; Porges 2022).

A promising, ANS-friendly way to encourage the 'response-able' transformation rather than the reactive transmission of (historical) trauma is, I believe, offered by JtC-type relational journeys. From an ANS perspective, these challenging, counter-instinctive journeys *through* painful conflict include non-judgemental, (re)humanising, regulating storytelling in preparation for more confronting 'deep dialogue'.

15.Principle 16 (f), see www.earthcharter.org.

16.See Aguilar Umaña and Suarez Trueba (2023) and Phan (2025) for supporting literature on the specific potential of walking together as an embodied, relational peace practice.

17.Following an ugly racist 'incident' in May 2022 and subsequent protests by mostly black students (see https://www.su.ac.za/en/CIRCoRe), I was asked by Dr. Zethu Mkhize, head of the Transformation Office, to become involved in the relational 'deepening' of SU transformation, with the 2018 Restitution Statement as the point of entry (https://www.su.ac.za/en/about/strategy). Over a 4-month period in 2022 and 2023, Ayanda Nyoka and I designed and co-facilitated a 'journey' of six 3 hour sessions with a diverse group of 15 staff and students. We are currently co-writing and co-editing a book with Rabia Abba Omar and Zethu Mkhize, inspired by this pilot.

18.On 'shaking and dancing' see https://cmbm.org/self-care-resources/resource/shaking-and-dancing/.

And nature-based places and activities are always present as a potential co-regulator. This kind of nature-based 'co-facilitation' can support participants (and facilitators) to work through unavoidable neurophysiological reactivity towards a sufficiently regulated nervous system state. The latter state is a vital precondition for peace cultivation capacities, such as curiosity, compassion and self-critical thinking.

The physicality of nature-based peace work also draws attention to the importance of places where nature – 'the earth and skies, the winds and rocks' – can become an 'active participant in conflict transformation and peacebuilding' (Westlund 2010:n.p.).

Place appreciation

A general appreciation of nature-based places can be found in this feedback from a SPN participant: 'Being in this place, and such other places, are critical in our journey of appreciating what we have in ourselves, around us, and where we are going'. This appreciation was fleshed out during an evaluation session, held in a (London) Derry hotel:

> If the group was based in a hotel anywhere in Northern Ireland or even in the south of Ireland or wherever, it would never have been as successful as what it was (in Scotland). Out in the wilderness or nature, the beauty and the noise of the deer all helped. It took me about 2 days to settle down in it, but after those 2 days, I felt really at peace and felt I could really trust anybody in the group.
>
> Where we were in Scotland had a lot of character … we developed the character there as well. This room (in the hotel) doesn't have the same character … everything is delivered to us. There's no fire, we're not sitting around in armchairs, getting a coffee, or making dinner, washing up … we're not sharing the physical experiences of everyday life, that might not have been seen then as sharing and bonding relationships. (Hamber et al. 2018:10–11)

Over the last decade of peace work in South Africa, it has unfortunately not been possible to secure funding for multi-day journeys into wild places. Still, choosing retreat centres not within easy reach and/or with access to relatively wild nature (such as Volmoed, Goedgedacht, Noordhoek) confirmed, in my experience, not only the benefits of physical distancing from 'home', of literally journeying together, but the importance of choosing nature-based places to do the demanding work of relational peace cultivation. In the process, wild or nature-based places can help to make closely linked *psychological* inner and interpersonal journeys possible (Fisher & Abram 2013).

Psychological journeying through wild places

The SPN capturing of learning process confirmed our belief, as facilitators, that this type of journey tends to open new possibilities in participants' relationships with themselves, with others in the group, and with wild nature. The three of us have witnessed on many occasions how overcoming physical challenges and fears of 'wild nature' have encouraged participants to face emotional and other challenges within the group journey and in life in general. Many participants have consistently found that the unfamiliarity of wild nature settings and the accompanying need to face fears and take risks, encouraged a creative, shared vulnerability and mutual interdependence.

Being taken outside one's comfort zone and feeling vulnerable were usually most pronounced in the South African wilderness. Crossing a muddy river that is home to crocodiles, digging a small hole behind a bush to 'go to the toilet', with no fences to keep predators, insects or snakes away, being alone at night – everywhere, no matter how important or powerful someone is 'back home', one is surrounded by the raw reality of risk and the need to face fears, together. Thus, the presence of lions, elephants, rhinos, snakes, stormy winds and heavy rain tended to relativise conflict labels such as 'Loyalist' or 'Republican', 'Protestant' or 'Catholic', or any other terms conflicting groups tend to attach to 'them' and 'us':

> It didn't matter to me from what grouping in society the person sleeping inches from me was from – I met them as human beings with the same hopes and fears as myself … there were more fears to be overcome in the bush than fears of each other. (Hamber et al. 2018:11)

In the process, these journeys into wild places helped to create an equality among participants, which in turn facilitated a level playing field in terms of group discussion: 'Wild is basic – everybody is equal in our natural world. Diversity can be accommodated in nature' (Hamber et al. 2018:11).

This kind of nature-based journeying highlights that, in the discourse of peace building, there is a need to complement the language of 'safe spaces' with 'risk-accommodation' (Davis & Steyn 2012; Jansen 2009:275–276). Whether one's peace work involves wild nature or not, dealing with risk and supporting others in doing so is central to the task of relational peace cultivation. Wild nature, as part of a carefully designed and facilitated process, can help maintain a healthy balance between safety and risk, between facing fears and defusing tension, between physical and psychological challenges, and provide space to breathe deeply, literally and figuratively (Westlund 2010).

I also continue to resonate with Brandon Hamber's additional psychological interpretation of wild nature as offering a kind of 'transitional space'. A wild nature setting, such as the Scottish Highlands, creates a place that is very real in many senses, yet also a space removed from so-called normal reality. In this sense, the space is neither part of the person's real world nor completely imagined, but somewhere between fantasy and reality. This space, which approximates to a degree what psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1971) calls 'transitional space', is associated with creativity, much like the spaces that children inhabit when they play, and provides a new frame of reference for considering everyday problems (Hamber et al. 2018:13–14).

This interpretation of wilderness as a 'transitional space' is alluded to in a participant's feedback: 'It has been many, many years since I got such excitement from seeing a frog. Wilderness has brought out the child in me'.

Over the years, the three of us have also experienced how being together in spaces like iMfolozi or the Scottish Highlands can often provide nature-based metaphors that enable insight into inner and interpersonal journeying.

Poetic invitations: Nature-based mirrors and metaphors

The potential for wild places to provide a new set of words and language to express inner thoughts and feelings is clearly expressed in this feedback from a SPN participant[19]:

> The animals were just awesome for me, but in particular, the elephant – it radiates power and strength, as I sometimes feel, and yet other times I am as vulnerable as the ants below our feet as we walked. The owl that flew by gave me a reminder of wisdom; the whole wilderness is a wealth of knowledge, and I love learning and growing just like the new plant growth. However, many times we get knockdowns in life just as the elephant does (with trees) in the wilderness. We can learn from these experiences and grow just as the new growth in the wilderness. The day we had to change course twice because of the animals taught me that, in life, when things don't go according to plan, instead of getting anxious and stressed out about it, we just need to accept it and change course. (Hamber et al. 2018:14)

During my recent involvement in the 'deepening' of transformation at SU, I again experienced the promise of nature-inspired metaphors. In mid-2022, while going for a regular walk in the foothills of Stellenbosch Mountain and pondering how to design a JtC-type process to support the realisation of the SU Restitution Statement, my eye was caught by a warning sign next to SU's Ertjieskloof dam. Walking to the dam and reflecting together on the 'Swimming Extremely Dangerous' sign was eventually woven into the first session of this pilot process.[20]

Since then, I have become increasingly drawn to the metaphor of (restitutional) transformation as 'deep-water territory'. Some of the meanings surfaced by participants and facilitators during evaluation interviews include associations between deep water and danger (risk of drowning), darkness (a lack of visibility) and uncertainty (no ground to stand on).

The deep-water metaphor brings to the surface some of the underlying tensions between a 'deepening' theory of change and the dominant, linear, forward-looking and upward-looking approaches to 'higher' education transformation, including at SU (Lederach & Lederach 2011). These 'mainstream' approaches, I would argue, work against the risky, limited visibility, uncertain, downward 'diving' required to enter the deep-water territory of racial repair 'in the wake' (Sharpe 2016) of apartheid, colonialism and slavery.

Further guidance offered by the deep-water metaphor (and that scary warning sign) points to the vital importance of giving very serious attention to capacitation (Steyn & Vanyoro 2024). Safely entering deep water requires a certain level of swimming experience and fitness; the greater the depth, the more experience is needed. It is not safe to swim alone or without proper equipment, nor for too long, especially in cold water. Each of these aspects of deep-water swimming – levels of ability linked to levels of depth, necessary support, appropriate equipment, duration and temperature – will strengthen, in my experience, an emerging theory of how to 'deepen' transformation at, for example, SU.

Taking 'deepening' seriously also opens up the terrestrial, decolonising metaphor of 'uprooting' apartheid and colonialism, especially in a place that combines a Dutch colonial governor (Simon van der *Stel*) and forest ('bosch') in its name.[21]

Political challenge: Towards decolonising peace cultivation, in 'Stellenbosch'

One of the lead guides for some of the earlier iMfolozi trails was Paul Cryer, who has since become a close friend. I will never forget him sharing on one trail his experience of growing up in apartheid South Africa during the 1970s as a member of the white ruling elite; how long it took him to 'see the right' (Cryer 2004), given the wide range of benefits associated with being white and given his connection with many people who were part of the system. He described his gradual realisation that the Apartheid system was one in which the resources, wealth and opportunities were reserved for white people, and everyone else was exploited to serve the needs of people classified as 'white'. He then extracted 'two fundamental principles':

- A small part of a community cannot attain dominance of the whole community to control, regulate and increasingly exploit the majority for its own benefit because ultimately the majority will voluntarily or involuntarily cease to co-operate.
- If a small part of a community sets up an exploitative system for its own growth, then it does so with disregard for the well-being and the intrinsic rights of the greater community in which it is situated.

For him, these principles meant that 'to wittingly dominate a community is logically unsustainable and morally irreconcilable'. I whole-heartedly agreed with the anti-apartheid logic and morality of what he came to realise.

19.See Aguilar Umaña and Suarez Trueba (2023) and Phan (2025) on walking together as a metaphor, a symbolic practice in addition to being a practical method of peace cultivation.

20.Facing mountainward, looking at the dam and the warning sign of 'Swimming Extremely Dangerous', we introduced ourselves by also telling stories of our relationships to deep water. We then invited participants to turn around and look out over Stellenbosch, locating the 'deep water' challenge of restitutional transformation within the context of the still highly visible separation between white, 'coloured' and black neighbourhoods.

21.In the Dictionary of South African place names, the 'Stellenbosch' entry reads:

> Town in the Eerste River Valley, 48 km east of Cape Town. Named in 1679 by Simon van der Stel after himself and the Wilde Bosch or 'wild forest' there. (Raper & Raper 2004:416)

But then came the unexpected punch line. In an 'unnerving extrapolation of these principles', he applied them to humanity's relationship with nature.

Drawing on conversations with Thomas Berry (1999) and training by Joanna Macy, he thus highlighted, in an embodied, self-critical way, the parallels between the racialised separatism and superiority at the heart of the South African system of Apartheid and the global 'apartheid' of ecological human minority domination and exploitation of the 'more than human' community (Abraham 1996).

I have come to understand that the similarity between the logic and morality of South African apartheid and the extractive anthropocentrism of ecological 'apartheid' is rooted, as argued by Melissa Steyn, in 'whiteness', in the 500-year story of 'colonialist modernity'.[22] This means that weaving a 'social-ecological' relational nature-based strand (Nardi & Kasznar 2025) into peace cultivation is *part of* transforming apartheid, of uprooting colonialist modernity.

In my current (racial) transformation work at SU, this has become a major challenge: how to develop relational processes that not only draw on the psychological, place-sensitive and poetic potential of nature-based journeys, but also help to highlight the comprehensive political call to transform apartheid type relations of separatist superiority between humans and nature, *as part of* sustainable decolonisation. Given the counter-productive reactivity of the ANS that, in my experience, is typically evoked by a direct confrontation with persistent racism, especially among young South Africans racialised as white, I am exploring the possibility of reversing Paul Cryer's steps.

I am considering using an indirect, nature-based point of entry rather than, as he does, starting with a personalised perspective on apartheid and its afterlife. A promising first step, especially given the prominence of 'forest' ('bosch') in the name 'Stellenbosch', could be experiential exposure to forest ecology, guided by Simard's (2021) groundbreaking research on the awe-inspiring underground mycorrhizal networks within healthy forests. This 'wood wide web' paradigm shift from competitive survival of the fittest to mutualist, cooperative flourishing needs to be followed by some preparatory training in 'critical diversity literacy' to make the present-day meaning and colonial implication of the 'Stel' in 'Stellenbosch' visible and digestible (Davis & Steyn 2012; Steyn & Vanyoro 2024). Both these lenses are needed, I would argue, to invite a hopefully 'unnerving' comparative pondering of one's place in Stellenbosch, especially for transgenerational beneficiaries of apartheid.

22.At an October 2025 'global anti-racism summit' in Stellenbosch, Steyn challenged those present to locate our social justice activism within the deep water, 500-year story of 'colonial-modernity'. In one slide, summarising a lifetime of work, she helpfully presented an overview of the 'bedded down ideological relations of domination in colonial modernity's social fabric'. According to her, this multi-stranded domination is '(West)Eurocentric, white supremacist, colonial, heteropatriarchal, Christonormative, capital(abl)ist, anthropocentric' (see Davis & Steyn 2012; Steyn & Vanyoro 2024). See also Mbembe (2017).

I am intrigued by how a relational vision of complex, interdependent diversity and inseparable mutuality in a flourishing forest can serve as an inspiring mirror for confronting the entangled, localised afterlives of slavery, colonialism and apartheid. I am keen to creatively explore how the 'wood wide web' can become a poetic invitation, a contrasting metaphor to encourage deeper and deeper 'uprooting' of whiteness – the persistent separate-and-superior colonialist racial dynamics in, for example, Stellenbosch (Van der Riet & Verwoerd 2022).

I am also increasingly drawn to the spiritual dimension of a politically and positionally aware relational valuing of nature (Nardi & Kasznar 2025). I appreciate that a commitment to decolonisation includes not only a rejection of whitened, colonialist Christianity, but also opposition to the widespread secularist tendency in, for example, Western trauma theory (Visser 2015). The need to reclaim (indigenous) spirituality offers a pneumatic perspective on the importance of cultivating relational, nature-based peace.

Pneumatic promise: Integrating 'soil, soul, society'

From the start, there was for me a faith-based motivation to include nature-based places and activities in peace work. Following a journey of political 'conversion', from the mid-1980s, away from rather zealous Afrikaner 'Christian' Nationalism and Dutch Reformed Church-inspired Apartheid, I became very cautious about the political uses and abuses of institutional Christianity (and religion). During the 1990s, I gradually found a new home in politically engaged, ecumenical, interfaith contemplative spirituality, thanks to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, among others (Verwoerd 2019, 2024a, 2024b). Along this route, from the early 2000s, I also became re-grounded in creation-centred Celtic and Franciscan spiritualities and started to explore similarities with indigenous African spiritualities (Ó Duinn 2000; Somé 1999).

However, as a facilitator on an island marred by sectarian violence between 'Catholics' and 'Protestants', it was inappropriate to explicitly bring in religious language or symbols or spiritual practices. For example, some participants culturally shaped as 'Protestants' were even resisting the use of 'Catholic' candles during storytelling workshops. In this context, nature-based places and activities, especially the extended wilderness trails, offered precious, indirect opportunities to weave the spiritual dimension of peace cultivation into the experience. In my own experience and through conversations with participants, it became clear that a wilderness trail, especially night watch duty, could also be a spiritual experience. This quality was sometimes explicitly named in the capturing of learning process:

> Words to describe my experience fail me at this moment, only to say that it helped me bring issues in perspective, choices I needed to make suddenly became easy, it made me look deeper at my spiritual side, it took me back to the positive, playful childhood experiences. (Hamber et al. 2018:14)

Other times, journeys into places such as iMfolozi and the Scottish Highlands were reflected on in spiritually related language of awe, beauty and being humbled:

> This place has a real sense of peace and nature – unspoiled beauty. Great place to get away from the distractions of a busy lifestyle and find 'oneself'. In this environment, people are in perspective – passing through, tiny specks on a big horizon. (Hamber et al. 2018:13)

This sense of nature-evoked smallness stands in stark contrast to being made 'to feel small' by another human being or group. Alistair Little, Brandon Hamber, and I know from our experience of (violent) conflict how feeling belittled or shamed can often cause great anger; we know how these feelings can resist uprooting and often be transmitted across generations; we understand something about their destructive potential in human relationships (Scheff, Reginald Daniel & Sterphone 2018).

Thus, we have learned how walking, eating, sleeping and being in places such as the Scottish Highlands or the South African wilderness can not only help keep everyone's feet on the ground but also place conflict-related aspects of existence in a wider perspective. Places such as these can typically inspire awe and, especially for men in powerful positions 'back home', a healthy sense of insignificance (Ashley 2007; Monroy & Keltner 2023).

The profound challenge is to integrate this spiritual potential with the ecological and sociopolitical dimensions of sustainable peace. The call for this integration is contained in the symbol of the WLS, the trifoliate leaf of the choral tree. I find it deeply significant that the choice of this symbol was inspired by Magqubu Ntombela's traditional Zulu wisdom and Shembe spirituality (Peta 2021; Turner 2013:17–19). The interconnectedness of humanity, spirit and nature is clearly expressed in the aim of the Magqubu Ntombela Foundation:

> To increase conservation awareness amongst all the peoples of Southern Africa, to exemplify how one can live harmoniously, practically, and spiritually with our land, with each other, and within ourselves. (Turner 2013:2022)

Ntombela's integrated approach was embodied on SPN iMfolozi trails by Zulu guides, such as Mandla Buthelezi and Sicelo Mbatha (Mbatha & Pitt 2021). More broadly, I am keen to deepen my understanding of a similar, more intersectionally aware relational world view expressed in feminist African 'eco-spiritualities' (Juma 2025) as well as in the decolonising inclusion of human-nature relationships in ubuntu philosophy (Carstens & Preiser 2024).

A related 'Soil, Soul, Society' vision, developed by Satish Kumar, inspired the founding of the Sustainability Institute (SI). Exposure to this holistic vision was one of the reasons SPN participants were based at SI, before and after iMfolozi trails. For Kumar, the 'social trinity' of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' of the French Revolution, the similar American 'trinity of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', and the New Age movement's 'personal trinity' of 'Mind, Body, Spirit' are too limited. He advocates for a 'holistic trinity':

> Soil represents the natural world: we come from the earth and return to the earth … While we respect soil, we also take care of the soul, which is the vessel for mind, body, and spirit. (Social stands for) social justice, restrained consumption, sustainable economics, a sense of community, and the diversity of cultures … This trinity of Soil, Soul, Society is one single reality, for each is always implicit in the other. (Kumar 2000, 2012)

Kumar's 'holistic trinity' influenced my decision to settle in the Lynedoch ecovillage, which emerged from SI's vision.[23] But 13 years of living in this ambitious, socially diverse community has made me painfully aware of how difficult it is to translate 'soil, soul, society' into practice. Especially when 'society' is understood as 'social justice' and 'soil' as 'land'.

Facing the unsettled elephant in the South African room, together

On the iMfolozi trails, we had to exercise extra caution with the elephants because some were behaving in unpredictable ways following their relocation from the Kruger National Park, preceded by traumatising (conservationist) culling of family members. I now see this part of the wilderness experience as another poetic invitation to face the large, unsettled elephant in the South African room: deep racial transformation that includes the sustainable addressing of the land question (Cundill et al. 2017; Plaatjie 1916).

On the way to and from iMfolozi, we drove through urban townships and impoverished rural communities. This journey also served as a stark reminder of the persistence of spatial apartheid and extreme racialised socio-economic inequality. One of the ways we responded was to introduce SPN participants to a promising example of deep, land-based apartheid transformation at the Solms-Delta wine farm, near our base at SI in Lynedoch (Solms 2015).

I cannot do justice here to the full, up-and-down Solms-Delta story.[24] But this example of a localised 'pursuit of truth and reconciliation on a South African farm' – combining sharing of land, proper workers' housing, inclusive recognition of deep history and revival of marginalised culture[25] – does bring me back to the initial conceptual differentiations between 'relational' peace cultivation and

23. See https://lynedochecovillage.wordpress.com/.

24. Over time Solms-Delta faced many challenges, with commercial constraints leading to the farm being sold to new (African-American) owners, who have vowed to keep the Solms-Delta vision alive, see https://solmsdelta.co. See also Gobodo-Madikizela's (2017) appreciation of the significance of this example. On a theoretical note, I am intrigued by the extent to which this example can be interpreted as a confirmation of Fraser's (2008) theory that social justice requires a combination of (economic) 'redistribution', (sociocultural) 'recognition' and (political/decision-making) 'representation'.

25. Mark Solms' 'pursuit of truth and reconciliation' included archaeological excavations on the farm, surfacing deep pre-colonial history and unnerving, implicating footprints of slavery. Oral history research complemented this reconciliatory digging into the past: gathering and sharing generational life stories of the farm workers – who include descendants of enslaved people, with lived experiences of apartheid – and of the farmer, a white South African beneficiary of apartheid and descendant of original colonial settlers and slave owners. Along this route a restitutional museum was created on the farm, including in the heart of the

'structural' peacebuilding and between 'socioemotional' and 'distributive' reconciliation. The kind of nature-based relational peace cultivation I have practiced over the last few decades is clearly not enough to *remove* the elephant in the room in post-1994 South Africa. However, I believe this relational work can support, in at least three ways, the necessary step of constructively *facing* this elephant, together.

The first contribution, on a conceptual level, is that the six P's that emerged from practitioners' reflections on nature-based peace cultivation can provide a useful, non-exhaustive diagnostic and facilitative framework for key dimensions of relational peace practice in general. Furthermore, this conceptual framework underscores that, although relational peace cultivation and structural peace building, as well as socioemotional and distributive reconciliation, can be conceptually differentiated, in practice, they are interdependent. Without directly dealing with racialised material realities, especially the land question, relational peace cultivation smells of superficial, protection-of-unjust-white-privilege 'reconciliation'. Particularly if facilitated by someone with my white, Afrikaner, middle-aged embodiment. On the other hand, place attachment research confirms that returning to land, including in places such as iMfolozi, is about much more than the return of property or money. Profound cultural and spiritual meanings, linked to burial sites and traditional rituals, are at stake (Cundill et al. 2017). Sustainable land distribution, therefore, also requires relational, justice and healing-oriented 'restitutionary work' (Rassool & Gibbon 2024).

A second potential contribution of nature-based peace cultivation to structural peacebuilding and distributive reconciliation is *instrumental*. Based on my growing co-facilitation experience with transformation at SU, and drawing on SPN and JtC experience, I am convinced that the careful weaving of nature-based places and activities into relational questing can support the much-needed deepening of transformation, beyond assimilationist 'inclusion and diversity'. I believe that patient nature-based peace cultivation in 'Stellenbosch' can encourage restitutional transformation. For example, by helping to cultivate diverse networks among staff and students to highlight the roots and address the fruits of racialised inequities, such as patterns of hunger and access to accommodation that continue to mostly disadvantage black students, especially those from less well-off backgrounds.

A third contribution is the *ontological* challenge presented by non-anthropocentric peace cultivation. It took a long time for me to realise that taking survivors, former combatants and representatives of wider society from the Troubles into the Wicklow hills, the Scottish Highlands or a South African wilderness was not only a *means* to cultivate peace, a *means* to encourage the healing of fractured *interhuman* relationships. Cultivating less violent, gentler relationships *between humans and nature* became the taproot of sustainable peace. In other words, over time, the 'foundations' of my understanding of what peacebuilding is about were shaken to the core. I came to understand that transforming violent conflict between people needed to be *rooted* in a more holistic understanding of peace.

(footnote 25 continues...)

exhibit a wall of granite plaques, with one plaque to remember by name each of the slaves who had given their lives, against their will, to the establishment and development of this farm (Solms 2015:1151). The pursuit of localised truth and reconciliation also led to the revival of marginalised cultural traditions of music, dancing and food, as well as the provision of proper housing. And last but certainly not least, this pursuit was grounded in an innovative `win-win' type of land redistribution. By using his beloved family farm as collateral and inviting a wealthy friend to join he could buy the farm next door, place it in a trust with farm workers and their families as beneficiaries, and in partnership begin to run the two farms together.

Conclusion

This comprehensive understanding of nature-based relational peace cultivation has 'deep-lighted' for me the anthropocentric bias in much of the mainstream (Western, Global North-dominated) literature in trauma theory, memory studies, peace studies, conflict transformation and transitional justice that I am familiar with. The transgenerational uprooting of this bias on the island of Ireland (among many other Northern and Southern places) needs to be guided, I believe, by the 'holistic trinity' of Soil, Soul, Society. And I have found renewed inspiration for radically inclusive, restitutional reconciliation in South Africa in the trifoliate WLS symbol.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Wilhelm Verwoerd: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the SPN qualitative research are openly available at https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3121690.

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