

Seminary of the wild research data

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SPEAKERS

Interviewee, Wanda Stahl

Wanda Stahl 00:01

Here we go. So, I will share my screen. Find the right green button here. Okay, let me get it on the presenter view here. There we go. Alright, so this first question is a lot regards to a response you made in the final online survey. We have described the following new ways of believing, being, and doing that you had gleaned from your participation in Seminary of the Wild. And as you had said in response to that: "My connection with the Earth was profound before, but I still felt separate. I cared for Mother Earth, but I didn't feel that I was an integrated part of nature. Reading the book *Matter and Desire* and the lecture from Andreas Weber profoundly changed my worldview. Now, I'm much more aware of how I am a part of everything, and everything is a part of me. I also love seeing and hearing from the wise woman, Joanna Macy, who was such an inspiration." So, I'm just curious as to how you would describe your current experience of what you've said here. And what aspects of Seminary of the Wild, in particular, might have been helpful in facilitating these?

Interviewee 01:29

Well, okay, that was two separate questions. One is, how is it still affecting me, or how long-lasting has it been? Okay, let's, yeah.

Wanda Stahl 01:39

What's your current experience?

Interviewee 01:43

You know, as with most things in human beings, we tend to sort of learn something and then forget or feel it and then, you know, it wanes. I do not believe that the connection and integration that I now feel with the Earth has done that (has waned). I think that, just as I wrote, reading the book *Matter and Desire* literally changed my worldview, my paradigm. I just [oops, yep, sorry], I felt like before I had a connection with the Earth and, actually, when I was in the Seminary of the Wild and I had moved, I found an essay I wrote in Seminary 25 years ago about the Earth and Mother Nature and how we needed to be reconnected. So that's something that I had been living with and a belief that I had. But, as I said, it was sort of me

here loving the Earth out there and nature. And then when I read the book, and not just Andreas Weber's book, but mostly that book. All of a sudden, I could see that, oh, it's not me and them or that. It's I am that. I am a part of nature. And the day that I take a walk, every time I take my grandkids out, every time I start, I mean, I feel that connection. And one of the images from the book that stuck with me is how he talks about how the air lifts the birds with love. And so, whenever I feel the wind, I feel reminded about my deep connection with all that is. So, that has been enduring, thank goodness. And I had been a follower of Joanna Macy before, and I had read her works and had done a workshop on the grief over the state of our world and environment. And so, for me, seeing and hearing her was like a reclamation of the things that I had been learning about and living with before, and also a reminder (because at her age and with the knowledge) that we're really heading for a disaster. Seeing her hopefulness and this sense that she has that this is the great turning, it is, yes, chaotic, and yes, we don't know what's going to happen, but we still have agency, and we still have hope, so, I think that has also been enduring. What was the second part?

Wanda Stahl 05:36

The second part, which you've hinted at a bit, but I'm wondering if there's more you want to add about what aspects of Seminary of the Wild were most helpful in facilitating some of these senses of new ways of believing, being, and doing.

Interviewee 05:53

I think the resources they chose were absolutely fabulous. The readings, every single one of them, had something for me to learn and process and integrate. And I'm 70 years old, Wanda. I've been learning and processing and integrating for a long time. And I've done a lot of therapy and a lot of CPE and a lot of, you know, spiritual reflection, meditation, whatever you name it. And some of these--the readings--were just, I mean, so very well curated. And the speakers were awesome, like, I can't, you know, they were awesome. Joanna Macy, I mean, she's a world-renowned environmentalist and teacher and writer, and we got to see her and hear from her, and same with Andreas Weber and so many of the others. I was enriched by the programmatic parts of what they chose. That's not all that enriched me or changed me, so did the clan meetings and the deep relationships that we built. But I think that's a different question that you're probably going to get to.

Wanda Stahl 07:40

Alright, so the second question is also one that relates to a response that you offered in the last online survey. You described the following life changes and growing edges that you'd experienced as a result of Seminary of the Wild. And what you would share in response to that was that "I'm much more in the moment, especially when I'm outdoors, I see everything differently as I am now connected with nature in a different way. I am more present when I'm with my grandkids, looking for opportunities to share wisdom with them as they grow. I need to remain faithful to the meditations, readings, and wanderings, even since the program has ended." And I would again ask you, what is your current experience of these life changes and growing edges, six months since the conclusion of the yearlong?

Interviewee 08:39

Once again, I think these aspects of that yearlong changed me in some pretty permanent and enduring ways. I still am seeing things differently and connecting with nature differently. I still have to remind myself to be present. But it comes much more naturally to me now than it did before. And I, you know, one of the things that at this age, I'm probably a little different than some of the younger folks that participated in that I'm not looking for a project to change the world or to start a Wild Church, or to develop something that is out there in the world. I am much more focused on my sphere of influence and in particular my grandkids. So, I am still looking for opportunities to share wisdom with them. The other day, Luca, who's not quite two, and I were looking at a mushroom in the yard, and it had little fluffy edges. And you know, and he was pointing, and I said, "Oh, it's so pretty. Look at how beautiful it is, and it's so important to the whole world because it's there for the birds, and we need them because it's part of everything," you know, giving him these lessons. He's two years old, and he's just looking at it, and he's reminding me, "Maga, just look at it. It's beautiful," you know, and he's touching, and I said, "you can touch it, we don't eat it, but you can touch it." And when he was satisfied that he'd looked at it long enough, he stood up, and he blew it a kiss and said, "bye, bye." And I thought, "Okay, that's it. Yeah, that's what I need to do." I mean, it was like, loving the Earth, you know, loving, you know, how Victoria talks, well, they all talked about how loving something particular helps you love everything, and that's what I'm trying to teach my grandkids. So yeah, I think these changes have also lasted.

Wanda Stahl 11:21

Great. Thank you. So, now we're going back to the first online survey. And there was a question there that asked you to describe the ways that you currently work on behalf of the planet, and that could include personal practices, public advocacy, etc. I'm curious about how you would answer this question today.

Interviewee 11:45

Well, given that there's been a pandemic, I haven't done much public advocacy, although I do write to my congressman. And right before I started the yearlong, I went to Washington, D.C. with a group called Elders for Climate Action and met with my representatives and in Congress. And we had a play-in where, instead of a sit-in, we weren't sitting, we were playing. And children were there, and balloons, and they had a clown. And we got on the local news because it was a different way of doing it. And we had three generations of people, mostly women, meeting with the representatives, so, grandmothers with their grandkids, mothers with their kids, you know, grandmothers with their daughters and their granddaughters or whatever. So, I was really glad to be a part of that. I haven't felt like doing anything, any community activism like that, but my personal practices are that I tried to be respectful of the Earth. I recycle. When I moved here with my son, I recycled so much he had to get a bigger recycling bin. And now that, you know, I sort of shamed them into recycling all the time. So, they do it now, too. And there is a bridge down the road, and every day I take a walk. And across this bridge, I mean, across this little creek, they built a bridge and put in a wood bridge that is covered with stain that is so toxic you can smell it from many feet away. I mean, and it's old, it's been there for years, and you can still smell this toxic stain. And you can see that it seeps into this little, tiny creek. So, every day when I go by it, I take weeds or flowers or seeds, and I place it on the middle post and ask for forgiveness from the creek for what we're doing to it.

And, you know, the Seminary of the Wild people would say that when I hear it bubbling, it's thanking me when I hear it gurgling, and I think that that may be true, but I don't know if it helps anything, but it helps me.

Wanda Stahl 15:02

Well, you know, just thinking of the whole emphasis on reciprocity that was part of our Seminary of the Wild experience, one would say that in some way your offering and your presence is help to the creek.

Interviewee 15:20

Yeah, that's what we learned and part of it is that the Earth does thank you, and the Earth is grateful for your offerings. And so, that's why I do it.

Wanda Stahl 15:37

Yeah. Thank you. Okay. And our last slide question refers to a statement on the Seminary of the Wild website, which offered the following aspiration for the yearlong that "through nature-based spiritual practices such as contemplative wanders, sacred council, facilitated group work, ceremony, dreamwork, imaginal journeys, embodied movement, writing, and eco-theological reflection and discussion, we will return to our original wholeness, our wildness, and our authentic service." I'm just curious, to what extent do you feel that you experienced this outcome, this return to original wholeness, wildness, authentic service.

Interviewee 16:29

I can't say enough how much I feel that I experienced that through all of those things that they listed: the wanders, the councils, the group work, dreamwork. Yeah, all of it. All of it allowed me to feel a sense of wholeness that, as I mentioned to you before, I've had a whole lot of therapy in my life, and none of it did what this did. I mean, six years of therapy, and I feel more whole after this year than I did or I have at any point in my life. And more in connection with my own sense of wildness, which I have always tried, or, you know, I've sort of always been the one that was toeing the line where I did what I was supposed to do, but I did it in a little different way. Do you know what I mean? Like, I was a good little girl because I was raised to be a good little girl, but I also had this other wild side to me, this artist, this creative person, this person that wants to blaze her own trail and, you know. If my parents had my way, I would have lived in Lowell my whole life, and there was just no freaking way I was going to do that. So, I blazed my own trail and found my way. And I think the authentic service part, I've been lucky enough to live out my authentic service piece in my life because I found my purpose in being a chaplain. I blazed that trail in my late 40s when I went back to school, and after I did my first unit of CPE, I said, oh, this is what I meant to do. And I went after it like a dog after a bone, and I had to do so many things, jumped through so many hoops with the church and with certification and all of that just to get to be able to do what I loved, which I did for the last 15 years of my career. And it makes me want to cry right now to think of how much I felt like that was my purpose on Earth, that I was living my authentic service by doing that. And I guess I think as an extension of that, my teaching chaplains to be chaplains now is a part of that.

Wanda Stahl 19:34

You mentioned as you were looking through this that all of the practices listed here were helpful but are there any that you would pull out as being most transformative for you and/or least helpful?

Interviewee 19:59

You know, I was just such a fan of all of it. I feel like there just wasn't much that I had to critique. I guess I would say if you take the word eco-theological reflection to mean what I learned in Seminary as theological reflection, some of the Christocentric reflections didn't resonate because I realized that the Seminary of the Wild is trying to reclaim Christianity and its nature-based roots, but that's not where I am. I still call myself a Christian and a follower of Christ, but I'm not theologically aligned with any religious tradition anymore. And maybe I would be if I could find a Wild Church to, you know, attend out here. But I just don't, and, you know, quite honestly, I don't really have a great desire to. So, I would say that piece for me was, and the other thing about that piece, Wanda, is that for many of the folks, they were just deconstructing their Christianity, their former belief system that they've been inculcated within their churches, and I'd already done that work. I already said, no, none of that works for me anymore and left the organized church, really, while I was a chaplain but certainly after I retired. While I was a chaplain, I had to pretend so that I could stay certified, you know.

Wanda Stahl 22:23

Yeah. Yeah, yep.

Interviewee 22:28

You do know, don't you?

Wanda Stahl 22:30

Yes, I do. All right. I think we are done with that. So, the next question. Each of the online surveys throughout the program asked you to identify one or two transformative experiences from each of the modules. As you look back over the whole year, could you name one or two transformative experiences that stand out from the program as a whole, and if you're willing to tell me a little bit about those and what made them significant?

Interviewee 23:08

Well, the first module about Wild Self was really transformative, and using the Plotkin book and the north, south, east, west aspects and the loyal soldier, you know, the helpers, the guardians, all of that stuff, was new to me, and really gave me a framework for what I felt in myself for a long time, you know. And so, that first module was, like, mind-blowing, you know. Really, really, really good. And I still use that. When I go on my walks, there's a sacred spot where I used to do my rituals when I did my wanders, and I stop there every time I take a walk and face north, south, east, and west and honor those aspects of myself and ask them to just stay with me and be present and teach me whatever it is they need to teach me. So, I would say that. And I don't know where Andreas Weber came along. Was he in the Wild...

Wanda Stahl 24:31

Wild Earth, he was in the second one, second module. Yeah.

Interviewee 24:36

I mean, I just can't even say enough about how that book changed my perspective. I wouldn't begin, you know, we'd have to talk the rest of the night. I am so glad I got to read that book and see his lecture and hear him talk about this philosophical, theological mind of his and how he perceives the world and how that changed me is, like, sort of indescribable. So, those two aspects, I think, were like the biggest for me. Probably, and maybe you're going to get to this, you know, the fourth section on, you know, your Wild Call, as I already mentioned, I'm sort of past that. I've sort of lived out my Wild Call by following my bliss and becoming a chaplain and doing that and having, you know, a career in it. So, for me, that was probably the least transformative, but that's just because of my age and life, you know, stage.

Wanda Stahl 26:04

Right, right. Yeah. Yep. I hear that. How would you say that your participation in Seminary of the Wild affected the ways in which you are being in the world since your completion of the experience?

Interviewee 26:22

I think I'm trying to be more gentle and tolerant. I've always been very even-tempered, and, you know, I'm not quick to anger. I'm trying to be less judgmental, I guess, I would say, which is hard in this particular climate that we live in right now. And it was particularly hard when our former President was in office, and it still is because of all of the, you know. I feel deeply enough about the issues of justice and poverty and particularly climate that it keeps me engaged in the political realm too much. I don't, I shouldn't, because it makes, in fact, I did a dream. This is kind of an aside. I did dreamwork with Brian when we were at Ghost Ranch when I got introduced to Seminary of the Wild. I went because of Richard Rohr. I went when he was the speaker and because I'm a big follower of his and I've read *Universal Christ*, [which] also changed me in profound ways. But I processed the dream with Brian Stafford (and that's when I knew he needed to be my guide) about I was being stalked by Donald Trump. And I (not going to go into the whole thing here with you), but just the realization that I made from that is that I gotta let that go. So, I stepped back from the daily drip of outrage or tried to. And also, there were other aspects of that dream that Brian pointed out to me that I, you know, that I never would have thought of. So yeah. I can't say enough about him, either. Like, I know, they're all wonderful. But because Brian was my guide, so I know him better than the others.

Wanda Stahl 28:55

Right. Yeah, that connection. Yep. So, in addition to the changes that you identified in the final survey that we've already discussed, what, if anything, have you felt more equipped or inspired to do as a result of your participation in Seminary of the Wild?

Interviewee 29:16

Oh, that's an easy one, Wanda. Even though I wasn't looking for a career change or, you know, a project or a life-changing or whatever, when I was at Ghost Ranch and the question was asked, What do you want? What are you going to do? What is it that you want to be or do with

what we've done in this [.....] I said I want to be an artist [to do?] oil paint. I have a studio upstairs that my beloved. Did I cut out?

Wanda Stahl 29:59

Yeah, you glitched for a second there, Patty. So, I heard you started responding to that question they'd asked about what you wanted to do as a result. So, if you wouldn't mind repeating that, just because you froze for a minute.

Interviewee 30:13

Okay, so I said, that's an easy one. Because what I had said when the weeklong was over, and they asked, What do you want to do with this? How are you going to change? I said I wanted to be able to call myself an artist because I do oil painting. And I always say, well, I just dabble in it, I'm not really an artist, not really, you know, ever. And over the yearlong, I was painting like a madwoman for survival because of the pandemic, because I needed to have an outlet for my fears and my emotions. And I was also painting my dreams for some of the work that we were doing in Seminary of the Wild. I painted 90 small paintings and about 40 large paintings. And three months ago, I submitted them to a local art gallery and long story short, I'm going to have an exhibit in January.

Wanda Stahl 31:31

Congratulations.

Interviewee 31:32

I mean, April. Yes. So, I am now, and I've sold works. I sold a couple of large ones and a few small ones. So, now I get to call myself an artist. That was one [thing?] that I wanted to be able to do. That's my Wild Self saying, yes, you can do this, not, no, you're not good enough, no one will ever look at your art or care about what you paint; you're just doing this for your own sake. And I was doing it for my own sake for survival, and the recognition is nice, but I really didn't do it for that. I did it because I wanted to create beauty in the world when it seemed like there wasn't anything but ugly.

Wanda Stahl 32:35

Yeah, I mean, just having seen some pictures of your paintings that you posted, like, on band, or that you showed us during the sessions, you know, it was clear that you brought such that gift to others as well as yourself.

Interviewee 32:51

Well, thank you. I hope so. Like I said, I just wanted, I wasn't really doing it to get famous or, you know, sell paintings, but I did really want to bring some beauty and use my creativity in ways that, now that I'm retired, and there was a pandemic, I had a lot of time to do. So, by golly, I did it. I did a lot of it.

Wanda Stahl 33:27

Okay, let's see. Make sure I'm not skipping a question here. Okay. So, what if anything has helped you sustain and or deepen the learnings from the Seminary of the Wild experience?

Interviewee 33:44

I'm considering my daily walk as a wander instead of just I am going for a walk to get exercise, or I need some fresh air, or it's good for me. I don't listen to podcasts. I don't try to think about solving the world's problems. I consider those walks to be wanders. And I look at the trees. And I listen to the birds, and I give my offering to the creek. So, what was the question again? Like I got lost.

Wanda Stahl 34:29

That's alright. So what, if anything, has helped you sustain or deepen things from Seminary of the Wild?

Interviewee 34:38

Yeah, so I think that's sustaining what I learned. I think that my continued artistic endeavors keep me grounded and connected with what we did and what I learned. I continue to look for readings that build on, you know, I'm still reading Bill Plotkin, and you know, Victoria's book is sitting over there. I got to read that one next. But I have like a stack of books, you know, like, there's only so much time in the day for my grandkids and my painting and the readings and whatever. But I do think that what I choose to put in my mind helps sustain the learning and the connections. And also, our group continued to meet.

Wanda Stahl 35:45

Your clan?

Interviewee 35:46

Our clan. We met monthly until October, and we made an agreement to meet until we got to go to Ghost Ranch, which we didn't get to do. So, we're going to meet again in a few months. We decided not monthly, but we're going to continue to meet. So, that's helped. And a few of the women have started a dreamwork group.

Wanda Stahl 36:23

Great.

Interviewee 36:23

Where we meet every two or three weeks to process our dreams together, and that's been very enriching.

Wanda Stahl 36:34

Great. So, what, if anything, would have deepened your experience of Seminary of the Wild?

Interviewee 36:47

You know, again, I'm such a fan, I really don't have much critique. I just don't. For what the program is trying to accomplish and, you know, their goals, their mission, if you will, I really don't have anything that I could say, you know, oh, if you did this it would be better or...I wanted more, I wanted it never to end. So, if they could make that happen, that'd be...Well, I think

they're looking at it, they're looking at a second year, which I definitely will take part in. So, I just think more of the, more, more, more, give me more.

Wanda Stahl 37:58

Oh, gosh. So, what do you believe...maybe you just answered this question but you can see if you want to add anything to it. What do you believe that you most need for your continued formation? And how are you seeking or might you seek to address those needs?

Interviewee 38:16

Well, yeah, I kind of did address that. I'm, you know, in this dreamwork group. Our clan continues to meet. I will do the second year if they offer it or when they offer it. And I like that they're offering these shorter-term programs, too. I don't know how much time I will have to be able to do that. I'd like to do the dreamwork one with Brian, but I don't know that I will be able to just because I'm getting ready for this exhibit, and I'm going to be busy, but yeah, just more.

Wanda Stahl 39:04

More. So, is there anything else you'd like to share? I'm done with my questions.

Interviewee 39:13

I really would like to just, on a personal level, say that, reiterate what I started with, which was it was life-sustaining to me to do this work during a pandemic. And it would have been life-sustaining regardless because I was also in grief over my divorce. But given those two convergences of really tough things to get through, it provided me with a lifeline. And I don't think it was an accident that I was involved in the group, that I felt called to go to Ghost Ranch. I didn't know what I was. I was going there to see Richard Rohr, basically.

Wanda Stahl 40:13

Yeah, I went to the Brian McLaren one, and there were a couple of people that went there to see Brian McLaren who got more than they bargained for, too.

Interviewee 40:20

Yeah, yeah, exactly. I got more than I bargained for, that's for sure. And then you know, when I got the information about the yearlong, I thought, is that really for me because I'm really not looking to develop myself or look for my call, you know, because I read that part of it and then I sort of waffled about it, but oh my goodness, am I glad that I decided to do it. I really am. I really loved it.

Wanda Stahl 40:59

So good to hear it, and thank you so much again, Patti, for taking the time. Really appreciate your reflections. I'll turn the recording off here.