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The Movie *Wild*: In Search of a Lost Soul

Introduction

The act of grieving is a necessary step every human being must take. There are no guidebooks or road maps to make the journey easy and successful. Individually, one must deal with the psychological components, sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly. Nevertheless, it is a complicated process that unravels the mind, body, soul, and spirit. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. In fact, the process will vary from culture to culture and person to person. The process of grieving can become so incredibly traumatic that some people will lose the will to live. Others will bury their feelings of hurt and hate and become self-destructive. Still others will seemingly go about their business, carrying the extra burden throughout life, until the pressure becomes too great and the valve sets off the steam burning inside them.

The reality is that the act of grieving is an important part of the life-cycle process, and which can come to each of us at a moment when we least expect it. Yet this precise moment has monumental consequences. For many, the moment becomes a fork in the road. For others, the moment becomes like quicksand, and the simple movement to continue life becomes difficult and lost. The psychological and physiological reactions of the body take over. One is merely at the mercy of the inner components of the body, which are acting and reacting to arguably the strongest environmental stimuli it will ever have to deal with. The impact of grieving can be life-changing and can shape, mold, and help define our identities. There are no boundaries to the grieving process, and the possibilities are endless.

Working from this framework and perspective, I will critically analyze the recently released movie *Wild*, based on the book *From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. The

author, Cheryl Strayed, wrote about her life while hiking the very difficult and lonely Pacific Crest Trail. The movie has multiple layers of meaning that are cleverly displayed with flashbacks and symbolism throughout the film. This movie conveys that grieving the loss of a parent can be extremely difficult, and experiencing the Pacific Crest Trail can be an effective therapeutic tool for dealing with such a loss (Vallee). In 1995, Cheryl Strayed, then only 26 years old, set out on a 1,100 mile journey along the Pacific Crest Trail. This trail involved 2,700 miles of dirt and rocks that cover Mexico, California, Oregon, and Washington. She had never hiked the trail before, but believed the enormous hardships from this simple proposition of walking from point A to point B would somehow help her find her way out of “the sick mire” her life had become (Neville 1). After the loss of her mother to cancer at age 45, she had fallen into a life of heroin use and adulterous affairs that ended her marriage.

I propose to conduct a critical analysis using close reading and ideological criticisms to explore the ways and means director Jean-Marc Vallee cleverly utilizes symbolism, metaphors, and ideographs as an effective source of communication. Additionally, I will use an auto ethnographic approach, which I believe will provide more insight as I draw from and weave in elements from my own current life story. The reason for doing this is it will allow me to draw upon personal tragedies that altered the course of my direction in life, which mirrors the grieving Strayed experienced. The side-by-side parallel stories reinforce my central ideas about the movie and Cheryl’s experiences. Through analyzing psychological research I will show the western traditional means of grieving are not always effective, and the unconventional process of natural healing in nature is alternative and effective means for grieving the loss of any loved one.

The rhetorical situation occurring *Wild* is the idea that grieving is a difficult and painful process. The Pacific Crest Trail is also painful, hard, and difficult to manage. The director was

introducing the trail as an effective tool to access when the loss of a loved one becomes immobilizing. The trail is also used to demonstrate the difficulty of conquering personality disorders like dissociative disorders which are linked to drug and alcohol abuse. Moreover, the trail paints the hard road of recovery from sex addiction and lost identity. The multiple complexities impacting a human being, from the tragic loss of a parent to the downward cycle of self-destruction, are endless. Confronting addictive behaviors often requires rehabilitation, detoxification, and self-reflection. The difficult road to recovery is exemplified with the trail. The trail is rugged, unforgiving, and extremely demanding. Drug rehabilitation is demanding, difficult, and requires an inner strength similar to the one needed to walk over 1,000 miles through all physical obstacles. Quitting heroin or alcohol cold turkey is extremely challenging to the physical makeup of any human being. Jean-Marc Vallee was very cleverly showing the extreme nature of the difficulties one encounters while attempting to heal oneself by going cold turkey.

Preview

Wild is about an inward journey to acceptance and self-discovery. The inward process is an outside job for most of us. There is simply no way of merely flipping a switch and the problem disappearing, as shown in this statement: “‘I was not meant to be this way, to live this way, to fail so darkly,’ Ms. Strayed wrote years later in her memoir,” (Neville 1). Understanding the complexities of grieving and its multiple ramifications, such as identity destruction and issues of authentic self, I will use close reading and ideological criticism to unveil the deep hidden messages of communication that get buried beneath the conscious mind and transcend subconsciously. There are many symbols and metaphors used throughout the film to communicate very simple ideas and principles. Each scene communicates and conveys

supporting messages to the central idea that The Pacific Crest Trail can be used as an effective form of therapy. Much like a jigsaw puzzle, the communicative messages are scattered in a box with no direction to the viewer of this film. Like a jigsaw puzzle, it is often easier to work from the outside borders first. When we slowly move with patience from the perimeter and let the process of building our life back together again unfold within its own time frame, we realize one cannot be successful at understanding and recapturing his or her life without taking the necessary steps needed to complete the task. There are no shortcuts to putting a 1,000 piece jigsaw puzzle together. It takes time and patience. The road to completion or the road to recovery becomes the inner reward to knowing one's self and is worth every painstaking, crucial step to get there. A puzzle is not complete until the last piece, somewhere in the center, is put into place. Much of recovery is like trying to find all the right pieces that make humans move towards acceptance.

I chose this particular film because of its relevancy to my recent life circumstances. The sudden death of a family member is extremely difficult and the pain can be excruciating. One is simply never prepared for that moment. Yet, such a moment happened to me very recently. My father of 86 years passed away on January 9th, 2015. My relationship with my father had many layers of complexities and complications. Life was never easy between the two of us. We were estranged for many years. Our bond was always there, yet there were forces that kept us apart. I have chosen to include the strategy of auto ethnography. A reason for including my story is to simply illustrate how a pattern in a story can develop a larger context in which all of the patterns are constructed forms of real lived experiences can symbolically converge (Goodall 40). My reasoning for using this strategy is to reinforce my analysis by demonstrating a parallel cause and effect comparison between Strayed's life and mine. Audiences read stories not simply because they identify with the conflict but also because they feel more at one with the process of self-

discovery and transformation caused by how the conflict is ultimately resolved (Goodall 41). My story on the peripheral suggests to the reader how I was processing and resolving as I wrote this paper. I believe this will allow for a richer and insightful analysis of the meaning of this film as I relate my own personal life experiences along the journey that we all must endure at one point in our lives. The role of this film is to help unleash emotions and invoke positive actions. I hope to unravel the hidden treasures of hope, recovery, identity, and the road to finding one's authentic self. On a human level, my work from this project will better help me understand my own journey, as the loss of my father continues to impact me in ways I am not fully aware of.

On a more traditionally scholarly level, I hope this project will invoke understanding about how effective communication through the subtle use of symbolism and metaphors in a major motion picture can adequately convey important messages and understanding with respect to grieving and finding one's identity. Additionally, I will explain the peripheral use of nonverbal communication as it relates to the drama unfolding with human relationships.

The film suggests there are alternative treatments for dealing with certain mental illnesses. Our main character expressed signs of distressed, dysfunctional, dangerous, and deviant behavior, which is the modern day clinical definition of mental illness (Sue 64). There is no question in my mind this film challenges the ethically and morally accepted treatment plans we have come to know through our academic world as standardized. The director, Jean-Marc Vallee, shows his audience the extreme hardships of hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, like fatigue, dehydration, hunger, severe snowstorms, male would-be predators, blistered feet, and the sounds of wild animals circling from the perimeter. By using the hard and difficult trail for his character to travel on, Vallee analogizes the idea of difficulty in the grieving process with the hardships of the trail. Additionally, the trail is used to show a means of going cold turkey for a heroin addict

who never attempted recovery. The uses of the trail as a metaphor for any form of recovery works adequately because the trail symbolizes the physical sweat, pain, and exhaustion one encounters during detoxification. It addresses both issues of grieving and addiction recovery, which are central to this film.

The Savannah Theory is introduced and examined to understand the genetic and biological coding that allows for a logical connection to the idea of bipedal locomotion which is inherent in every human being (Bowering). This particular predetermined trait has allowed humans to conquer and overcome obstacles throughout the history of mankind. Simply putting oneself on autopilot and moving naturally without thought to the forces on the periphery, is an inherited biological component that helps human beings thrive.

The Rhetorical Devices

The foundation of my critical analysis is close reading because I feel it will give me the most insight to unravel and understand the many hidden messages lodged beneath the surface of this text. In doing so I will reveal metaphors, signs, ideographs and symbols that are strategically and subtly placed and positioned beneath the surface. Close reading gives thorough investigation into hidden meanings, and allows for analysis of material presented below the surface. Moreover, the method involves carefully researching the context of the film while moving back and forth between the text and the analysis gathered from it. The method allows for a more complete understanding of the surface text. Close reading is most appropriate for my critical analysis because the subsurface story is hidden in signs, metaphors, and similarities. The author Stephen Lucas uses close reading to analyze *The Declaration of Independence*. For instance, he demonstrates this idea by layering messages beneath the surface. Compared to other forms of work such as documents, close examination is appreciated for its artistic style by adjusting the

lenses to see the manipulation of syllable, word, phrase, and sentence. By doing so, light is shed not only on the literary components but on the more powerful close reading analysis, uncovering the under-the-surface messages planted rhetorically, politically, and socially (Lucas 205). Close reading analysis, it can be said, uncovers the deeply rooted contextual messages conveyed below the waking state of conscious interpretation.

The Lincoln Gettysburg Address is a good example of a rhetorical artifact that detaches itself from its own grounding, ostensibly rejecting its own purpose, to create a power greater than utterance of alternatives and precedents, but which also relishes in a powerful posturing of quiet (Black 221). Analysis of intent is an interesting piece of close reading criticism. This type of criticism allows for digging beneath the surface text of printed words. The method works by carefully looking at all the possible meanings and bringing together the evidence to support some central theme or idea the artifact is expressing.

I will also inject the use of ideological criticism to expand on my analysis. Specifically, I will uncover the problems, issues and concerns with the accepted and popular modern day treatment of mental illness. Ideological criticism is an approach to rhetorical criticism aimed at looking beneath the surface message and structure of an artifact in order to uncover and unravel the underlying belief and values it promotes. Ideologies convey values, direct actions, behaviors and attitudes that support a doctrine of established beliefs. When an ideology becomes hegemonic, it naturalizes the socially constructed aspects of the world. Certain rhetorical devices are used to maintain dominance by privileged groups over others, which results in social control. However, rhetorical strategies can also be used to challenge dominant ideologies, such as the ideas presented in this film with respect to conventional therapy. Our culture identifies a

fundamental process for therapeutic treatment and care which doesn't include adjusting the lens, seeking another path, or finding one's purpose by challenging traditional methods of treatment.

It is difficult to know exactly from moment to moment how all the pieces of this film fit and come together. However, by illustrating the patience of putting together a complicated jigsaw puzzle, I intend to apply the critical approach of close reading to continuously extract the subtle meanings scattered in the signs, symbolism, and metaphors seen throughout the film. I intend to apply ideological criticism to my understanding of the issues raised by Vallee with respect to grieving, identity, addiction, and western conventional psychoanalytical therapy.

Communication, as I want to understand and define it here, is a way of knowing, understanding, and making sense out of a simple thought, idea or expression. The direct spoken word is not always the best channel. Depending on the subject matter, the peripheral or metaphoric expressions resonate and convey messages very effectively. Nonverbal communication allows the listener to grasp and unravel messages in his or her own time frame and provide emotions and free flowing thoughts to deal with the extreme issues of death.

The Persuasive Message

This film is worthy of submission to rhetorical criticism because every member of the audience who watches this film at some point in their life will need to deal with the issue of grieving. The loss of a parent is perhaps one of the most painful moments in life. This subject is extremely important because there is no avoiding the inevitable: death. More important, it's a topic we do not much think about or pay attention to. Yet, it is one of those moments that can change the course of our lives. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume anyone faced with the sudden loss of a parent can find himself or herself struggling through the grieving process. The main character in the film, Cheryl, was a prime example of an individual who struggled beyond

the normal six month grieving period. Her struggle consumed her and manifested itself in destructive behaviors like drug addiction, a failed marriage, and promiscuous relationships.

The persuasiveness of the rhetorical situation was twofold by expressing the timing of the release of the movie and the therapeutic value of the Pacific Crest Trail. This film was released on December 25th, 2014. Christmas is a time where hearts are open, and people are more inclined to listen and be touched by a story as personal as this. Presenting the trail as a therapeutic device at the time of Christmas, when many people are suffering throughout the world because of grief, speaks to this idea of reaching out to those who are in pain. The director's message is also found in the hard and narrow trail that one must walk in life to recognize the answers to the questions that are seemingly far away in the context of family loss. The quiet backdrop of Mother Nature surrounding the trail allows Cheryl to show how one can use the elements of the outdoors to find peace, harmony, and a sense of resolve.

The cultural implications from this film expand our understanding how the norms of American grieving unravel. In American culture, death is considered a reason for grieving rather than celebration. The American audience is the primary target because the significant elements of this film, like grieving, addiction, and identity, resonate within the American culture. An important reason for going to the movies is because they typically reflect something about our lives. Thus, because grieving is a prevalent process for humans, it is important to see it in real life situations on a big screen. Often times, communication works best when we can feel, see, experience, laugh, cry, ponder, and reflect as the movie helps us understand. As I watched this movie, my thoughts turned to my mother who passed away several years ago. My mind raced with childhood memories as though I had this internal movie occurring simultaneously. I subscribe to the belief that speech is silver and silence is golden as I take in as much text as

possible. I know my subconscious mind will layer and code, and sort out the complex communicative messages I need to draw upon when I am ready to access them.

The History of the Pacific Crest Trail

The Pacific Crest Trail, which is commonly referred to as the PCT, is a long distance hiking trail aligned with the highest portions of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade mountain ranges. The southern point is the United States / Mexico border, while to the north is the United States / Canadian border near the edge of Manning Park in British Columbia. The trail is 2,663 miles long, and the elevation ranges from sea level near the Oregon-Washington border to a magnificent, breathtaking 13,153 feet at the Forester Pass in Sierra Nevada. The trail passes through twenty-five national forests, and seven national parks (Schaffer 2).

Although the PCT was designated a National Scenic Trail in 1968, it wasn't until 1993 that it was officially completed. The pioneer behind the creation of the trail was a man named Clinton C. Clark of Pasadena, California who, in the early 1930's, was the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Mountain League of Los Angeles County. He proposed to the United States Forest and National Park Services a project of continuous wilderness trail from Mexico through the entire state of California up to the border of Canada. His initial proposal included leagues in the major cities of Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco, which would establish representatives of youth organizations and hiking and mountaineering clubs (Schaffer 2). Clark was interested in American youth and its lost connection to nature. He lived his life trying to bring the two together. Clark served as President of the Pacific Crest Trail System Conference for twenty-five years (Schaffer 7).

From 1935 to 1938, various YMCA groups explored 2,000 miles of potential trail from Mexico to Canada. The exploration was under the guidance of a YMCA secretary named Warren

L. Rogers. During World War II, the PCT was typically ignored, and its completion remained uncertain. This changed when in the 1960's backpacking began to appeal to a larger number of people as a recreational activity. In 1965, The U.S. Bureau of Outdoor Recreation appointed a commission to conduct a national trails study. The commission concluded from their research that walking for pleasure was only second to driving for pleasure and highly recommended creating a national system of hiking trails that were of two sorts: long National Scenic Trails in the unchartered forests and shorter National Recreation Trails near metropolitan areas (Schaffer 4). In 1968, President Johnson defined the PCT trail and the Appalachian Trail with the National Trails System Act. The PCT was constructed through the cooperation between the federal government and volunteers organized by the Pacific Crest Trail Association. In 1972, the Advisory Council agreed upon a specific route that the U.S. Forest Service used later. In 1973, the proposed route was sent to Washington and published in the Federal Register.

The biggest issue over the coming year was sorting out the details, like acquiring private land or securing easements for public use. Much consideration was given to the potential hikers and to making the journey less dangerous and strenuous on the body. Physical alterations were made, such as lengthening the trail to avoid steepness and creating switchbacks to help reduce the grade. Also, alterations were made to avoid wet areas that subjected hikers to mosquito bites and muddy boots. Furthermore, consideration was given to the hordes of hikers who might trample certain fragile wildflowers and other sacred jewels belonging to Mother Nature. Therefore, it was determined that the trail should be located away from lakes, meadows, and poorly drained soils.

Clinton Clark died before the PCT was officially finished in 1993. Clinton Clark saw the trail as a way to "lead people back to a simpler and more natural life and arouse a love for nature

and the outdoors” (Qtd.in Schaffer). Clark was a simple man who expressed a simple idea that has created an enormous effect for those lucky enough to engage with the Pacific Crest Trail. Like many other scenic trails, the PCT presents an opportunity for growth and change. Without knowing what he was proposing, Clinton Clark created a very special place for individuals to come and hopefully discover their place in the world. The hiker has a chance to see a world that has been largely forgotten by most of us, a world where nature exists as it was always meant to (Schaffer 6).

The Story

While sleeping with various men in the seedy sections of downtown Portland, the troubled heroin addict stumbles off the filthy mattress and wanders aimlessly in search of her next fix. Cheryl Strayed never understood what was happening to her. She only knew she would die if she continued to live the life she had. One day by happenstance, she stumbled across the book *The Pacific Crest Trail Volume 2* while strolling through a bookstore in Minnesota. She bought the book, and six months later, her life began to transform.

Shortly after Cheryl Strayed wrote her memoir, it became a motion picture. The film allows the audience to experience the main character’s struggles on The Pacific Crest Trail, an old established part of American history, which is exemplified by the use of her backpack as a symbol for difficulty. For most who travel this trail spanning over 2,600 miles, the purpose is usually associated with athletic hikers attempting to conquer their next conquest. Yet, as this film cleverly suggests the trail may be a road to personal recovery. The movie begins with our main character, portrayed by Reese Weatherspoon, spending her last night before embarking on her journey in a cheap hotel near a lonely town in the Mojave Desert of California. There is a symbolic scene the next morning when our main character struggles with her backpack. Her

backpack is huge, oversized, probably weighing about fifty pounds. In this particular scene, she struggles to get this pack on her back. She falls down several times, as her small body is not able to handle the heavy weight. Cheryl Strayed wrote in her book about this moment: “I squatted and grasped its frame more robustly and tried to lift it again. Again, it did not move. I then tried to lift it with both hands, with my legs braced beneath me, while attempting to wrap it in a bear hug, with all my breath and might and my will, with everything in me. And still it would not move” (3).

The audience in the theater laughed because they perceived this to be funny. However, Jean-Marc Vallee is trying to convey the idea that losing a mother to cancer and accepting her death is physically hard. Her manipulation of this very difficult weight on her shoulders demonstrated the severity of the death she is dealing with. In fact, throughout the movie, the pack was one of the more important metaphors used to help the audience understand the difficulties we carry as we try to move through our problems, especially during grieving. Strayed thinks to herself, “How could I carry a backpack more than a thousand miles over rugged mountains and waterless deserts if I couldn’t even budge it an inch in an air conditioned room?” (Strayed 42). The scene illustrates she didn’t have the strength in the beginning, but as she moved forward, she was able to acquire both mental and physical capacities.

The losses of my mother several years ago, and the recent loss of my father, have created a vacuum within me. My father’s death halted my forward movement. I would gesture and look to the peripheral as though something was waiting there for me. I didn’t need a fifty pound pack to stop my movement. I was paralyzed; the other part of me was dead. I lay stranded in isolation in a room of silence as I contemplated my next move. I literally could not move, cry or feel.

Looking at Strayed's journey, the audience begins to sense that her grieving process and physical challenge are running parallel. Her journey begins in the very lonely and sullen Desert of Mojave. The sky is dark, and there is little evidence of animal life as she settles into her new environment. The background music is reflective of each individual flashback and the emotions portrayed in them. The trail is narrow, only 24 inches wide, and surrounded by plants, bushes, and rocks. She is out in the middle of nowhere on her first night. She has a small tent with a lantern inside. This is the only visible image against the dark and starless night. There is howling from coyotes and scattered noises from different types of animals, which makes her feel uneasy as she takes pen to paper and begins to journal her thoughts. She is avid about documenting her hike. Field notes are about what you initially see and experience. They represent recorded observations and experiences (Goodall 87). She writes with interpretation as though her words reflect the process of making sense of each conveyed scenario. This scene is indicative of the acknowledgement of her troubled state. Her use of the journal is her protection; her journaling makes her focus on the now and eases her into a state of acceptance of the scary environment. She writes in her novel about her experiences: "I knew if I allowed fear to overtake me, my journey was doomed. Fear to a great extent, is born of a story from the one women are told. I decided I was safe. I was strong. I was brave" (Strayed 51). Her only company is her own voice speaking to her from the brutal and honest thoughts surfacing from her subconscious. This interaction gives her a sense of wellness and purpose, which was originally lost during the death of her mother.

Mother-blame, which varies from culture to culture, will ultimately nest in the female child's irrational sense of guilt, uncertainty, and ambivalence to create, develop, and sustain troubled communication between daughters and mothers. The mythical sacred framing of

mothers having superhuman maternal powers lends to the psychological difficulties between mothers and daughters (Kinser 113). The difficulty is rooted in understanding the ever-changing roles between mother and daughter. Mother and daughter relationships are complex and often times troubled by continuous role reversal. Daughters gain independence as they get older and mothers grow old and need more help. Mothers who are known as superhuman to their children often have difficulty fulfilling their roles later on in life, as the truth about the lack of super powers is learned. Often resentment develops between mothers and daughters as they begin to see each other as simply human beings. Daughters often develop resentments that can fester and volcano at any given moment. As the roles of daughters and mothers unfold, they are both faced with many challenges of acceptance. The emerging new person often is unwilling to let go of old expectations and therein lies the conflict. Strayed was in a state of role reversal as she watched her mother battle cancer and took on the role of the responsible child-parent at the tender age of twenty-one. She was not ready to accept all the responsibilities associated with the role of caretaker for a dying adult, and therefore rebelled by destroying her own life.

As Cheryl continues her hike, the blisters on her feet, the lack of warm food, and the unforgiving high temperatures of the Mojave Desert begin to take their toll. Feeling desperate, she spots an old man on a tractor working in the fields. She asks for help, and Vallee very cleverly gives the audience the feeling that she is possibly going to be raped from the slow and eerie music and her status as a singular woman travelling. Instead, the old man brings her home to his wife where she is given a hot meal, a shower, and encouragement. This scene depicts the uncertainty associated with her journey because her situation is constantly changing. The next day the old man gives her a ride back to the trail. Before stepping out of the truck, she asks the old man if he thinks she should quit. Without hesitation, he unequivocally said “yes,” which

suggests this idea that it is too difficult to deal with the hardships without the help of others. This notion is expressed with each grueling step and physical obstacle as she desperately tries to keep moving forward. Cheryl thinks about her journey, “I’d set out on this hike so that I could reflect upon my life, to think about everything that has broken me and make myself whole again. But the truth was, at least so far, I was consumed only with the most immediate and physical suffering.” (Strayed 84).

After walking 100 miles, she comes to a small town where she is greeted by a few male hikers who clap as she walks her final steps up to the table—just one representation of giving into the idea of accepting help. During this extended scene, our main character has a conversation with Albert, who asks her if she wants help with making the trip easier. This is a moment of importance because it illustrates the beginning of her recovery and the desire to finally accept help. Once she starts removing items from her backpack, the physical load is drastically reduced, and a bright smile appears. The smile is an affirmation of her participation in the recovery process. Albert also helps her order larger shoes that would be delivered at her next stop. By using the shoe as a metaphor, Vallee uses this scene as another step towards recovery and acceptance of help. She is now able to take suggestions, and suddenly, a gentle smile appears on her face.

The estranged husband Paul, who she is officially divorced from, is a symbolic figure of failures haunting her. She cheated on him. She chose heroin over him, and yet she loved him. Before leaving the small town of Kennedy Meadows, Cheryl telephones and speaks with her former husband who still occupies a special place in her heart. The willingness to forgive is one of the most important contributing factors to healing and restoring all damaged relationships. According to the Vulnerability-Adaption Model, certain stressors create changes in martial

satisfaction and relationship stability. Forgiveness in a broken marriage and the tendency to forgive anyone is significant to understanding the grieving process (Gilchrest-Petty 82). The confident look on her face after speaking with Paul exemplifies her understanding that she needs to keep moving forward. The movement of her steps along the 24-inch-wide PCT trail is her new best friend. She continues to move forward with the past trailing in her mind.

I was completely devastated when I learned from a Forrest Ranger while camping in Big Sur, California that my mother had passed away. The internal shock later manifested itself into a failed marriage, which ultimately resulted in an amicable divorce. At the time, I never realized that the loss of my mother was so deep and treacherous; it destroyed a very important component of my soul that was dead and I could no longer love. I had to forgive myself, my mother, and the unfair world before I could love again. I did the only thing I could think of doing and that was to move. Somehow, someway, I just continued to move and pretend as though it all would work out in the end. I had no other choice. I had no road map. I only had my instinct to keep moving.

Along her way, Cheryl continues to stumble across a lone fox that appears to have some hidden meaning. As she continues walking into the snowy Sierra Mountains, the scenery is full of wild life, thick brush, and is difficult to move through. There is a special scene that takes place the next morning when she steps out of her tent, and the fox reappears out of nowhere. The fox looks into her eyes as she stares back. After she kneels down to pick something up, the fox is gone. Strayed reflected while in the mountains, "Come back," I called lightly, and suddenly shouted, "MOM! MOM! MOM! MOM! I didn't know the word was going to come out of my mouth until it did" (Strayed, 144). That same fox appears several times throughout the movie. In particular, the eye contact between the fox and the main character gives the impression that they know one another. The fox, I argue, is representative of her protective mother guiding her

journey to recovery. Other signs of her mother manifest as certain brush and flowers like the Queen Anne's lace, Indian paintbrush, and lupine, which were all flowers that grew in Minnesota that her mother would often stop the car to pick for a bouquet (Strayed, 193). These images are symbolic of the mother because of her strong connection to her mother's interests. The fox continues to watch over her throughout the hike, like a mother who would watch over her child. She thinks of her mother when the flowers appear along the trail because of unforgotten memories from her childhood are embedded deeply, which created a lifelong attachment.

Thoughts of her past regarding relationships with abusive men are beginning to manifest in her mind because of the situation she encounters on the trail. She encounters a very scary moment after running out of water and finding no relief from a dried out water tank. After almost collapsing from dehydration, fatigue, and lack of food, Cheryl uses a water purifier to gather up filthy brown water from a dirty pond. Suddenly, out of nowhere, two male redneck hunters approach her for water and possibly more. Once again, Vallee gives the audience the feeling rape is going to occur because the actions of the strangers are overly flirtatious. The director is illustrating the scary thoughts running wild in her mind, which are also manifesting within her physical reality on the trail. Each word she chooses to speak to these potential perpetrators is carefully thought of as though she is beginning to tap into the repressed memories of her abusive stepfather lodged in the subconscious mind. In other words, she is beginning to trust her most inner instincts by associating the drawn memories from her childhood, which makes her cautious of men.

As she continues on the trail, her body begins to take its toll on her mind, which begins to wander in various directions and ends at an epiphany. The flashbacks become more intense, and there is a scene where she comes upon a high cliff and is resting. While reflecting back on life,

she accidentally drops her hiking shoes into the cracks and crevices down below. She screams with anger as the flashbacks of her mother, childhood, and abusive stepfather, drugs, sex, and ex-husband run through her mind. Suddenly, she then turns to look behind her and sees the same fox once again looking back at her. Her screams of grief come pouring out as the fox stares back, reflecting the fractured realities of her past. The background music becomes louder, suggesting the feeling of critical mass, which represents a defining moment. Her body is trembling as she loses control while becoming off balance. She is desperate in a moment of loud, resounding, and dissonant notes. She screams at the fox. The director uses this particular scene to illustrate a moment of clarity that is leading towards an epiphany. She realizes how much she depended on her mother for her own survival. Strayed recounted the day she and her brother had to kill their mother's horse who was suffering, "That's what the Indians believe—that when a great warrior dies you've got to kill their horse so he can cross over to the other side of the river. It's a way of showing respect. Maybe mom can ride away now" (Strayed, 162). This backyard scene lodges a memory of acceptance and progression in her mind, as she releases her tension by understanding that lost love was inevitable.

The loss of my second parent hit me like a ton of bricks. My father, who retired from his law practice at age 86, died on January 9th, 2015, fifteen days after the release of this film. Sitting in my car and hearing the words spoken to me from my older brother I could only think of nothing. I felt stiff, unmoving, as though something was wrong with me. I couldn't feel anything and yet I wanted to feel everything. Helpless, I could not touch or move. Uncontrollable past memories surfaced and raced through my mind. Bright images of a life I once had flashed before me. I could not feel the cold air from the ocean breeze, nor sense the fog so close to my body as I

opened the car door to reposition my body inside my house as I trembled into my living room as though part of a limb was missing. I was motionless as I stared into a state of bewilderment.

Several scenes later, the same fox appears near the border of Oregon and influences her healing process. This time, however, our main character chases the fox, but the fox suddenly, like always, disappears quickly. Our main character finally arrives at her destination: a place called “The Bridge of the Gods.” In this final scene, the fox reappears and can be vaguely seen on the other side of the bridge and quietly walking away. This moment of her coming to the final destination point and seeing the fox trot off on the other side represents the idea of healing and coming to terms with her mother’s loss. Vallee is making the point that our main character was never alone; that the thoughts we carry through the grieving process ultimately guide us to a place of better understanding. The process of grieving is difficult, and sweat, pain, exhaustion, tears, and obstacles have to be dealt with, much like the Pacific Crest Trail must be dealt with. Yet, allowing the help of others, like the old man on the trail, and the friends she made along the way, can ease the process and make the difficult journey to recovery less strenuous. Strayed, while coming to the end of her journey and seeing the “The Bridge of the Gods” reflected, “Thank you. I thought over and over again. Thank you. Not just for the walk, but for everything I could feel finally gathered up inside of me; for everything the trail had taught me and everything I couldn’t yet know, though I felt it somehow already contained within me” (Strayed, 310).

The use of certain rituals has been associated with coping during bereavement stages to help reconstruct meanings for stressful issues (Horton 3). The most popular themes tend to be remembering the deceased and providing closure, but rituals that are attached to some social theme like group prayer, and/ or doing activities together are seen as a more effective insight to the reconstructive meaning process (Horton 4). The simple idea of Adaptive Grieving is making

sense of a loss by finding something special, beneficial, and unique to reconstruct a world of new meaning (Horton 5).

Such a ritual is the one found in self-discovery on the Pacific Crest Trail. One ritual I will never forget was the burial of Ryan, a Filipino boy who died at age 17. While hovering over his grave site and looking at the casket below, I saw elderly women, relatives of the deceased, lunging forward to jump in and were only held back by their husbands in a struggle to cross over and join their beloved nephew. The screams, terror, and not wanting to let go are ingrained in Filipino culture. I watched in awe and stayed silent. By showing this dramatic ritual display, these brave women were better able to move quickly through the grieving process. Culturally divided, I stood in shock while the women were able, quite literally, to move out, or through, the pain. Self-awareness and cultural awareness are inseparable. This means in order to transcend unconscious culture, there has to be some degree of self-awareness. Used properly, intercultural experiences can become a huge eye opener (Hall 212). At this funeral, the cultural moment chose me. The way people move, their tempo, and rhythm, the way they use their senses, the proximity of their bodies, and the flow of information in social systems are deeply controlled and embedded in culture (Hall 212). Our lives and those who we encounter are a direct response to the comingling of cultural interactions. I was fully aware the behavior of the elderly women at this funeral was something unique, different, and culturally embedded in a belief system I did not understand. A way to experience another cultural group is to simply understand and accept the way their minds work (Hall 213). Knowledge is never a disadvantage and allowing all forms of information to be absorbed and processed seems like a natural order of the brain. Strayed's cultural ritual of using nature to grieve the loss of her mother and find peace, balance, and

identity worked just as effectively for her grieving process as it did for the traditional leap of the Filipino women into the grave of the young child.

Looking at different cultural methods for grieving, it becomes clear Vallee was taking us down an alternative way of looking at recovery. In other words, the use of challenging elements in nature is an alternative to paying psychiatrists \$150 per hour to talk to in a small dark room once a week. This idea of knowing something was wrong and wanting help was reflected in author Cheryl Strayed's words: "I was not meant to be this way, to live this way, to fail so deeply" (Strayed 33). Earlier in the film, there is a scene that shows her as a college student having a therapy session that is extremely unproductive, and she storms out of the session. Instead of using traditional therapy, then, the case is made that she uses the Pacific Crest Trail to guide her to recovery. The road to recovery has a beginning, which is largely unsuccessful for her, and typically an ending, in which she is able to come to terms with the loss of her mother. If we think in terms of the beginning of her hike on this very difficult trail as a starting point for her recovery, we then begin to understand the emotional, psychological, and physical obstacles each of us face when overcoming a huge setback in life.

The Psychological Components

One of the popular Neo-Freudian theorists was a man by the name of Erik Erikson, who expanded on Freud's theory of the ego to argue it's a very powerful, independent part of personality that ultimately works towards establishing one's identity and satisfying a desire for mastery over his or her environment. Erikson named this approach ego psychology (Burger 106). Accordingly, the primary function of the ego is to establish and maintain a sense of true identity. This involves a degree of awareness of our certainty, uniqueness, and purpose that is tied to our past and imagined future (Burger 108). Erikson developed eight stages of personality

development that ranged from infancy to old age. According to his theory, there are forks at every stage that represent turning points; simply put, two different directions to proceed. Erikson labeled these points as crises (Burger 111). The way we resolve each crisis determines the exact direction our personality develops, which then influences later crises.

In these terms, the main character in the movie, Cheryl, was transitioning from the young adulthood stage to the adulthood stage. The young adulthood stage is represented by the struggle involving intimacy versus isolation. Cheryl married at the tender age of 19. But, by 25 she was divorced and alone, and was now emotionally isolated and struggling to find happiness. The next stage in the Erikson's Eight Stages of Development is known as the adulthood stage (Burger 107). At this fork, she was confronted with generativity versus stagnation. Stagnation was winning as Cheryl was definitely feeling a sense of emptiness and questioning her own purpose in life. Moving through the personality stages allows one to answer the question: "Who am I?" (Burger 108). If answered successfully, one is able to attach a sense of identity, including values, beliefs, and direction. If not answered successfully, confusion, despair, depression, and uncertainty about your values may occur, leading to a term coined by Erikson as an Identity Crisis (Burger 106). These two stages, forks and turning points, were represented throughout the film with flashbacks and the human body movement through nature. Strayed recalls with emotion, "I'd think: this is not me. This is not the way I am. Stop it. No more. But in the afternoons I'd return with a wad of cash to buy another bit of heroin and I'd think: Yes, U get to do this. I get to waste my life. I get to be a junkie" (Strayed, 53). This exemplifies an acknowledgement of failure during this young adult stage.

This trail, then, was extremely hard to conquer, but served as the ideal psychological treatment center. Cheryl lingered for days in hot sweat as an addict trying to conquer heroin cold

turkey. She constantly experienced illusions and flashbacks that were representative of therapy. The treatment center, for Strayed, was the Pacific Crest Trail. Everything she needed was at her disposal as long as she continued to walk. The answers to the questions she longed for could only materialize at the right, precise moment. Thus, the use of this trail and its natural setting was the perfect backdrop for this idea of letting go and allowing nature to take its course. Throughout the movie, we see Cheryl giving into the elements of Mother Nature, like when confronted with a huge snowstorm and deciding to adjust accordingly, or changing her final destination to the “Bridge of the Gods.” The Pacific Crest Trail was precisely the right therapeutic tool necessary for recovery. In effect, she committed herself for treatment. It was a voluntary treatment plan for a mental illness, and a physical addiction, that was impacting her life. Throughout the movie, we see traces of therapy involving the sheer physical force of nature challenging her every step to recovery. We see traces of therapy with the meaningful encounter with the older gentleman at the rest stop and several other humans who reached out and offered friendship. She walked with acceptance. In therapy, it is important to be honest and deliberate. She was both. It is vitally important to let go and express inner, trapped, and buried feelings, which she did as evidenced by her flashbacks.

In many ways, she was experiencing elements of dissociation, which is the psychological term used to describe an individual who has experienced some form of a dissociative disorder. Dissociative amnesia, dissociative fugue, dissociative identity, and depersonalization are all in the family of dissociative disorders (Sue 87). She seemed to be experiencing all of these to some degree. Her flashbacks were an indication of dissociative amnesia. Dissociative fugue is seen with her loss of identity and bewildered wandering through life (Sue 87). Depersonalization is characterized by feelings of unreality as one moves through her environment. Dissociative

Identity disorder is illustrated with our main character becoming lost as a heroin addict and becoming sexually promiscuous. The movie captures the unique and complex mental difficulties occurring with our main character and blends them simultaneously with the physical hardships of the Pacific Crest Trail. The two situations, then, are working in unison.

The continuous rhetorical situation is the idea that grieving, for most of us, is a difficult and painful process. The Pacific Crest Trail is also hard, painful and difficult to manage. Vallee was showing this trail as an effective therapeutic tool for grieving. There is no right or wrong way to grieve but only a path we must all walk in our own time. Rhetorically, the film was showing how the grieving process works with the idea of taking one step at a time. The trail, with its various physically challenging obstacles, shows the audience the extreme difficulty one must endure to be able to overcome setbacks. Further, the loneliness associated with her walk exemplifies the idea of an interaction with nature as a means of self-reflection, which is often associated with therapy.

I had no idea why I decided to take my first backpacking trip two years ago on the Skypes trail in Big Sur, California. The idea sounded intriguing. I walked in nature 11 miles in blistering 99-degree heat with a backpack that weighed over 45 pounds. I negotiated myself up and down slippery mountains while always adjusting the weight of my heavy backpack away from my hips. The small pebbles created an almost impossible terrain to move on. My friend used hiking sticks, while I struggled to maneuver, like a beginning surfer ready to lose his balance on a four foot wave. Once we reached our campground after hiking for over seven hours, my backpack was removed and yet my legs were wobbly. I had to learn how to walk again. My hips screamed of pain. A few weeks later, when I returned to my home, I figured out why I needed to go on this grueling 22-mile backpacking journey. For years, I have been carrying the

weight of others on my back. I have been co-dependent most of my life and never really understood the impact of this mental condition. I had to suffer a physical beating of my body, which took two months to recover from, to understand this simple message: I can no longer carry the problems of others on my back. Humans were not made to carry that kind of additional weight. No sooner did I get rid of my backpack than I let go of those destructive relationships. No therapist could ever reach me like my overweight backpack did. The blisters, bruises, torn skin, and twisted ankle were necessary for my understanding of how the road I was previously on was hurting me not only physically, but, more importantly, psychologically.

The movie has many signs, symbols, and metaphors that are left for strategic interpretation. For example, the use of the heavy backpack that is seen throughout the movie suggests the extreme difficulty of dealing with the loss of a loved one. As the plot develops, the pack becomes lighter as Cheryl begins to unravel and deal with her pain. I interpret the wrong-sized shoes she wears at the beginning of the hike to be a fundamental lack of understanding of the therapy process. The new patient who comes to therapy for help has no idea what to expect or how to go about taking the appropriate steps to recovery. Therapy often does not feel right, like the undersized shoes suggests.

As individuals try to move forward through the grieving cycle, communication is imperative. Knowing the precise timing, appropriate words, delivery style, voice inflection, tone, and pitch is paramount. An effective and crucial role of communication is the tool of storytelling. This tool is often used for grieving the loss of a family member. Using stories to help understand past memories of loving relationships help foster and guide the process of dealing and coping with parental death and the many concerns of children (Bosttico 227).

The lone fox that is seen throughout the movie I interpret to be her mother. The first time she saw the fox, she merely stared at it as it stared back. The fox was significant from a therapeutic standpoint as she screamed at it on two different occasions. This is an approach reminiscent of scream therapy, which is often used to help victims of dissociative disorders deal with traumatic events that cause a distancing from the painful event, such as losing a parent. Scream therapy is a common therapeutic tool used with adolescents who are unable to effectively communicate and rationalize their deeply rooted problems, concerns and roadblocks.

Along the trail, our main character is challenged not by just the physical elements of the PCT, but also by the subtle mental and emotional obstacles as well. The encounter with the two possible rape situations expresses this idea of trusting your instincts and allowing the process of grieving to unfold without fear. Cheryl's agreement with herself with respect to not allowing fear to be part of her journey illustrates the necessary commitment one must establish for effective therapy. Vallee was extremely clever at showing the hardships and trust elements involved in true recovery.

The most important paradigms or set of rules guiding our behavior are the important ones that control humans, operate below the level of conscious awareness, and typically are not available for investigation and analysis. We live in a society where there are cultural, unconscious behaviors similar to Freud's unconscious theory whereby certain actions are controlled (Hall 43). The accepted way of responding to death is written out in prescribed messages ingrained within our culture. Thus, any man or woman whose behavior is not predictable is often seen as slightly out of their mind, irresponsible, and possibly psychopathic (Hall 43). It is easy to see how humans can become lost in their search for individual guidance and direction. There are certain roadblocks we encounter throughout our lives that take hold of

us and redirect our thinking. The Principle of Social Proof suggests humans determine what is correct by finding out what others think to be true. The principle illustrates the simple point that we view any particular behavior as correct in any particular situation to the degree that we see other people performing it (Cialdini 99). There is no question a blue print of acceptable shortcuts allows us to move quickly through somewhat complicated situations. Although this principle provides a convenient way to behave, there are always concerns for the unknown elements waiting (Cialdini 99). Strayed was no different than most individuals who are confronted with an untimely death. The socially accepted means for processing this journey created a state of confusion that lasted for five years. It wasn't until she opted out of this popular western societal grieving vehicle that she realized perhaps there was a better solution. It takes courage, determination, and conviction for humans to challenge the paradigms laid before them.

Savannah Theory

The road to recovery and the road to healing can be traced back to the Savannah theory. This theory suggests that all humans have genetic coding linking us to the lush green hills of North Africa where we long to be. The theory suggests that, while in nature, we become less stressed, have more clarity, and our minds are able to function at an optimum level (Gilford 433). If one accepts this theory, as I do, then it would stand to reason that one of the best methods of dealing with the loss of a loved one or sorting out problems and difficulties is to merely get back into nature where we seem to be at our best. One of the most widely held beliefs from the Savannah Theory holds that humans developed bipedal locomotion to deal with the grassland or Savannah that was spreading about millions of years ago. Essentially, our ancestors were exploiting the new opportunities in the grasslands. Some advantages came from adaptation to the grasslands, like the development of dexterity through a wide range of survival activities

involving hands. Our larger brains are the result of positive feedback between our nimble hands and a growing and emerging intelligence. In other words, our dexterity, improved diet, and developed brains improved our capacities (Bowering). Thus, for multiple reasons involving survival, it is commonly believed that hominids left the jungle to live in the open plains of Northern Africa (Moore). One advantage of the Savannah theory is that it is based on solid evidence, especially that which was gathered from fossils and which explains why humans adopted bipedalism as a means of locomotion (Bowering). Clearly, this evolutionary component explains why humans resort to basic survival instincts while engaged with nature. Perhaps, then, our number one goal while in nature is simply to survive. Much like our ancestors from North Africa, we have instincts of survival that are biologically code predetermined behavior.

The Savannah theory and its principles were visually demonstrated, I assert, by the actual filming on the trail. Throughout the film, Vallee engages his audience with the elements of nature and the uncertainty associated with it. The rhetorical choices and decisions made by the director were consistent from start to finish. The choices were subtle but still easy enough for a viewing audience to grasp. By using rhetorical choices that were relatable and identifiable, Vallee created a film that moves an audience in the direction he intended. The notion of movement cannot be overstated. Human beings were designed for movement. Our survival is essentially tied into this idea of moving forward in all aspects of life, including the grieving process. The consistent movement of simply walking and experiencing is the essence of this theory. Humans are the expression of nature, and the movement through it lends itself to self-reflection and provides a merging of forces that cannot be described with words but only felt and remembered.

Today there is significant evidence that nature can relieve stress, reduce mental fatigue, and aggression while increasing alertness, concentration, positive moods, life skills, and overall psychological wellbeing (Brymer 191). The interplay of nature with our physical being is an important component of our development as human beings. To deny this interplay is to deny entry into becoming fully self-actualized. Eco psychology is a branch of psychology that supports this idea that modern psychology cannot stand apart from the very intimate human connection with our natural environment (Brymer 194). There is a growing belief in the field of psychology that there ought to be greater inclusion for nature-based approaches into professional practices. Exposure to the environment impacts humans positively and restoratively (Greenleaf 162). Biophilia, which is defined as the love of life or living systems, is the subconscious urge to affiliate with the rest of life and the environment like plants, animals, and the elements of weather (Greenleaf 163). There has always been an unsystematic movement into nature as a way to reestablish oneself with guided instincts. However, today mental health professionals are introducing new types of treatments like horticultural therapy, which uses gardening to help create wellbeing (Greenleaf 165). Another type of therapy used is green exercise, which has shown to go beyond the obvious physical health benefits (Greenleaf 164). These types of exercises often involve walking, hiking, cycling, boating, fishing, horseback riding and farming and create the ideal conduit to Mother Nature.

Strayed instinctively knew her body needed to be in nature in order for her mind, heart, and soul to ever find peace again. Strayed, like all humans, is genetically hard wired to find mental balance while engaged with nature. Trusting our instincts to get back into nature is a force that the Savannah quietly resonates in all of us.

The Conclusion

In looking closely at *Wild*, there are multiple implications beyond its plot. The director's use of the Pacific Crest Trail was an effective rhetorical device that can open minds and explore new ways of looking at conventional therapy. The film quietly raises awareness about the idea of alternative means of treatment for individuals dealing with certain mental illnesses and/or with substance abuse issues. This film challenges the popular and morally accepted treatment plans we have come to know through our academic world as effective. This movie, *Wild*, clearly makes a valid point that a walk through nature, a walk on the Pacific Crest Trail, can be a very effective therapeutic tool for grieving the loss of a loved one while discovering one's authentic self.

The context of this movie is applicable to everyday life because ultimately everyone will have to deal with the grieving process. Furthermore, people can relate to the idea that grieving is an individual process, and that while there are no timetables, each individual must find his or her own way through it in their own time. This film connects to the audience by addressing repressed emotional feelings often buried in the subconscious mind during grieving. There is simply no right or wrong way to grieve, but only a path we must all walk in our own way, in our own time. But, it must be walked. This is a powerful message of self-help that is sprinkled in metaphors and symbolism that leaves an audience scratching at the surface looking for answers the same way our main character did throughout the movie.

Communication is commonly defined as the exchange of information or ideas between two or more people. Typically, it connects to the idea of words or a particular language used to convey desires, wishes, or certain messages. The common use of this vehicle is a shortcut to actual effective communication. Communication is understanding and making sense of a message. Thus, words alone are not always effective. Depending on the circumstances, variables,

and participants involved, effective communication will evolve in the form that is best understood. Famous people in history like Shakespeare and Leonardo Da Vinci often used the phrase the eyes are the windows to the soul. The intellect, will, desire, and purpose is seen in the eyes, and the emotions, sensitivities, affections, and feelings are portrayed in the mouth.

Communication, then, is perhaps one of the most important tools humans possess, and yet it is the most difficult to accurately and effectively apply. Understanding the complexity of all the moving parts that surround humans while trying to interact with one another, there is no escaping the hardship and strain of trying to make sense of the way one human communicates with another. Often times, the most effective communication comes from those who speak with their bodies only as it is more difficult to filter out messages. The body acts quickly without hesitation or time to process signals sent and received. Often, the eyes, hands, and body movement non-verbally provide meaningful, clear, and effective communication. The chief expressive actions portrayed by man are innate or inherited. These expressions are simply beyond our control: for example, the relaxation of the arteries of the skin in blushing and the increased action of the heart in a state of anger (Weitz 49). People who suffer from excessive grief often seek relief by expressing violent and desperate actions (Weitz 54). This type of behavior was certainly demonstrated by Strayed as she consumed alcohol and drugs while engaging in a promiscuous sexual lifestyle. Like Strayed, I was turned upside down by the loss of my mother. I didn't use drugs or alcohol, but my hidden anger manifested itself and eventually led to a divorce. Ultimately, the grieving individual no longer wishes for action but remains somewhat motionless. The circulation becomes languid, the face is pale, the lips, cheeks, and features are lengthened, and the face of the person who hears the bad news is known to simply fall (Weitz 54). This was certainly how I felt when my brother gave the news of my father's

passing to me. Not only was my face dropping, but my arms fell and my shoulders dropped too. Strayed could only hunch for the five years after her mother passed away. It was only when the backpack came off her back that she was able to stand straight and allow the muscles to fully expand to normalcy. I felt this expansion of muscular normalcy when, at my father's funeral, I was able to speak to the audience what it was like to be his nine year old son.

The importance of communication in the grieving process is paramount to the psychological wellbeing of those who experience it. The film expressed this idea impressively as it demonstrated traditional Western methods of communication between a therapist or a hospice counselor and the individual who is grieving the loss of a parent is not necessarily the most effective channel for healing. The film *Wild* adequately communicates that the PCT is a nontraditional form of communication that taps into the human brain which humans are programmed biologically to understand and make sense of. One of the many facets of clinical depression that has not received scientific scrutiny is facial expression. Though therapists are often taught to attend to nonverbal signs of emotions, which include posture, tone of voice, and facial expression, the significance of this research has only recently been acknowledged (Weitz 55). This film perfectly illustrates how the quiet sounds of nature provide some of the best forms of communication. Human beings who suffer tragedies are far better off taking in the messages from the guided vibrations and rhythms of nature while hiking along the PCT than that of a therapist who speaks about repressed thoughts and wishes to engage dialogue. The unspoken word is perhaps the loudest and most significant because there is no need for acknowledgement, but only a desire to smile, nod, or wince. The PCT was Cheryl Strayed's unspoken word. The communication was always in front of her. All Strayed needed to do was merely move forward and let the messages filter in.

Humans move through life with constructed messages they yearn to understand and prosper from. Messages of simplicity and distortion often confuse the mind. The peripheral messages on the edge, away from the obvious, are seemingly elusive. Yet, in the still quiet of Mother Nature, the mere movement of our feet, and the opening of our souls and hearts, allow us to experience a connection to our primal selves and find answers to questions that can never be verbalized effectively.

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Appendix



