

IN SEARCH OF SACREDVERSITIES: Ancient-New Portals into Education



Ecoversities Alliance

**IN SEARCH OF SACREDVERSITIES:
Ancient-New Portals into Education
Volume 1**

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“Everything in modern city life is calculated to keep man from entering into himself and thinking about spiritual things. Even with the best of intentions, a spiritual man finds himself exhausted and deadened and debased by the constant noise of machines and loudspeakers, the dead air and the glaring lights of offices and shops, the everlasting suggestion of advertising and propaganda.”

- Thomas Merton, No Man Is an Island

An Invitation into Liminality

By Manish Jain

This inquiry into Sacredversities comes from a belief that modern systems (economic, political and educational) have been designed to bring out the lowest frequencies of humanity. Our modern consciousness is being continually colonized and down-graded by a mindset of scarcity, competition, separation, monoculture and fear. Gandhi warned of the dangers of a decapitated education system that focused only on the head rather than the hands, heart and home. As a result, across the planet, we are witness to rising levels of greed, war, genocide, inequality, depression, drug abuse, ecological breakdown, etc. This is not due to a few individual ‘bad Hitlers’ as we have been taught to believe but rather due to the techno-industrial-military design of the system (its organizing structures, tools and technologies, data indicators, incentives, knowledge categories, speed and scale, etc).

One can use the metaphor of musical chairs to understand this more closely. If we recall one of the biggest rituals from our modernized childhoods, we can hear the music that used to blare at every birthday party and see the kids being forced to move around in a circle over and over again. We were taught that there is only one chair and we must fight against our friends for the chair. We should bite, cheat, kick and do whatever it takes to grab that chair from our friends. This is what winning is ultimately all about – as a child and for the rest of our lives. And, as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan infamously stated, There is No Alternative (TINA) to this. The musical chairs operating system tells us who is a “winner” and who is a “loser” with its survival of the fittest orientation. It educates and conditions us into an extremely anemic, isolated and anti-nature notion of “self” which often get internalized and reproduced by even the “good-guys” and “change-makers”.

This design both gives shape to and perpetuates itself through a cancerous, fragmented and anthropocentric logic (what Ivan Illich referred to as homo

economicus) that is being spread through modern education. Just calling it “madness” misses the point. It is a cold-blooded logic which morally justifies and creates the conditions for profiting from war, profiting from the pollution of rivers and cutting of forests, profiting from poisoning food and soil, and profiting from loneliness. It trains us to think that we can see and understand Life and our purpose as human beings through flat Microsoft products (excel spreadsheets and ppt decks), textbooks and standardized exam scores, White Papers, policy briefs, and stock market graphs, oil prices and GDP. At the same time, it trains us to ignore, deny and lie about the harmful consequences of our actions through mythologies such as technological utopianism, unlimited growth-energy and human exceptionalism. We are all implicated in this logic in some way or the other. How we transcend this base logic and access another imagination is one of the most important questions of our times.

The urgent need to explore Sacredversities also comes from a sense that our institutionalized notions of spirituality and the sacred have become fractured and disconnected from the rest of nature and everyday Life. Due to which, our collective immune system and capacities to meaningfully respond to the absurdity of the musical chairs paradigm has been greatly compromised. The West taught us that they are “materialists” and we in the East are “spiritualists”. But this is a fragmented lie. We are spiritual-materialists. This is perhaps the most important aspect to understand for any socio-cultural-ecological regeneration efforts. The original sin is the separation of spirit and matter or, in other words, the severing and absence-ing of the sacred from everyday life. It comes from being taught over and over that the sacred is somewhere ‘out there’ or something you do only in specific buildings or specific institutions or at specific times. For our ancestors, making a clay pot (and being made by it) was a spiritual act, growing food (and being grown by it) was spiritual act, healing (and being healed by) medicinal plants, soil, mountains and rivers was a spiritual act, gifting (and being gifted by) drinking water in the desert was a spiritual act, etc. My friend and mentor, Waterman Rajendra Singh, once told me that the meaning of Bhagvan (god in Hindi) is derived from the letters: bh- for bhoomi (earth), ag- for agni (fire), wa- for vahu (air) and n- for neer (water). The divine is intertwined with and emerges from the elements of Life.

Fractured spirituality allows modern civilization to continue to create businesses without spiritual purpose, compassion and well-being; science and technology without wisdom and a sense of humility and limits; and governance

and politics without deep service, belonging and oneness. It makes us forget the real value of things. There is a saying that if you beat them at their own game, you will lose everything. Humanity is slowly waking up to the harsh costs of “winning” the game of modernity’s musical chairs and its escalation trap.

There is a need for a different game that moves beyond the traumas, tools and triggers of the “god of money”, the enslaving and commodification of the commons, the cult of hyper-individualism, the violence of measurement and the continuous technological-energy colonization necessary to sustain this system. I call it the Ancestral game. This was a game that was uploaded millenia ago by our ancestors to remind us that, when confronted with debilitating collective amnesia, we are capable of operating at a higher frequency and level of consciousness. Our ancestors left us many gifts for opening up new channels within ourselves; for re-accessing a deeper wisdom, imagination and courage; for re-partnering with the more-than-human world; for remembering who we really are and why we are on this planet. This is an intelligence for opening up other possible games for humanity.

Sacredversities are practice spaces and processes: for being initiated and deepening commitment; for cleansing and healing; for accessing and interpreting dream-worlds; for grieving; for composting and dissolving; for honoring transitions and shapeshifting; for listening to other beings and across dimensions; for more playfulness and mischief; for forgiving conflict; for breaking the spell of voracious capital, debt and greed and shifting our collective frequencies. They remind us how to integrate. They seek to re-weave the spiritual-material world into our cognitive and epistemological moorings. They seek to re-weave our everyday notions of business, work, healing, education, entertainment with holistic spirituality. They seek to re-weave “arrogant modern individuals” back into the relational, interdependent web of life.

They are also wisdom spaces for questioning the dominant definitions of progress, success and happiness as well as our institutionalized tools, educational degrees and ideological frameworks. In India, for example, reconnecting with the goddesses Lakshmi, Saraswati and Durga reminds us to ask ourselves fundamental systemic questions of decolonization: what is real wealth?; what is real knowledge?; and what is real power? Sacredversities help us to reclaim the deeper wisdom of these goddesses in our collective learning,

valuation and decision-making frameworks, organizational structures and processes as part of a larger cosmological reset for modernity.

This collection of essays is a humble exploration of how Sacredversities have shaped different peoples' lives. As a survivor of American suburbia and its hyper-sterility, my own encounters with the "sacred" have happened through many important Sacredversities: unlearning with my illiterate Grandmother's University in her village and, through her, listening to my Ancestors-versity; serving food to people in the Sikh Langar community kitchen in the Seva-versity; connecting to goodness and beauty in the midst of pain and violence with inmate-learners through the Swaraj Jail University; surrendering and bowing to the mighty Amazon Forest-versity; forgiving others and myself in the Jain-versity; opening myself to Dream-versity where I have received uploads about masti yoga and the trickster's journey; exploring how to host ritual pedagogies of sacred-versities in Swaraj University. These encounters have given me the courage not only to walk on a different path but also to surrender to where those paths want to take me. All along the way, I have had to engage with my educated inner skeptic and the critical and hyper-rational mind which keeps questioning whether the "sacred" even exists and who is quick to label and judge everything that does not fit neatly in the monoculture norm as 'superstitious'. Editing this book has been another initiation of sorts for me.

Just today, I was thinking about what it means to practically reconnect to the sense of the sacred. The following mantra popped up in my heart - "Remember to take care of those who take care of you." This simple idea seems so revolutionary if we stop to remember it: take care of our bodies, take care of our parents and relatives, take care of our friends, take care of our employees, take care of our employers, take care of our mentees, take care of our mentors, take care of our local rivers and water bodies, take care of our forests, take care of our soils, take care of the animals, take care of the refugees and the migrants, take care of the farmers and the earthworms, bees and butterflies, take care of all the invisible beings and spirits who sustain our lives, take care of our ancestors. We don't need to do this with the burden of paying things back in some linear tit-for-tat accounting system. Rather, it is with the spirit of joy, gratitude, playfulness, love, belonging and seva that we pay things forward. This is what our indigenous wisdom teaches us about how life flourishes. It is also the ethos of indigenous creativity and innovation.

We welcome seekers of all backgrounds and traditions to contribute to this exploration of Sacredversities. One word of caution: please don't treat these Sacredversities as commercial gimmicks, tricks or quick-fixes as "modern alternatives" tend to do. They are not about convenient weekend workshops, heady academic courses or new revenue streams. They invite deep apprenticeship with significant self-study, devotion, introspection, humility, unlearning, care and practice. They are not to be commodified - they fuel and are fueled by the gift culture. Sacredversities are also not about more reactionary "solutionism" or "activism". We are being invited to enter into the space of not knowing what to really do in these times; very vulnerable and scary spaces that can make us feel very uncomfortable and even unhinged. It is only by journeying through this portal can we open up ancient-new ways forward.

This book is an invitation to slow down, scale down and remember. It is an invitation into sensing and imagining a new education, a new politics and a new economics. It is an invitation to loosen the firm grip of fixed categories, soul-numbing identity politics and black and white answers and flow into the temporary confusion that comes with re-entanglement. It is an invitation to let go of our rationalist demands for "inner alignment" and quest for logical consistency as a "human" and lean into the mystical paradoxes of Life. It is an invitation to sit with the messy conflicts, cracks and chaos as potential forces of liberation. It is an invitation to unlearn polarizing narratives of "good vs. evil", "survival of the fittest", and "the enemy is out there" and re-infuse ourselves with radical trust, open-heartedness and abundance. It is an invitation to renew our sacred covenant with the spirit worlds and the rest of nature and to re-prioritize what really matters. Most importantly, it is an invitation to awaken our senses and sensibilities to the miracle of this wild and precious Life again and to notice that we are in the midst of a profound planetary initiation as a species.

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Reviving the Sacred: Some of my Experiments with Mysticism in the Modern World

By Sujith Ravindran

My Journey from Communist to Mystic: A Rite of Passage

In the suburbs of sprawling metropolitan cities, many young men seek identity in gangs. These gangs offer a surrogate family and a dangerous rite of passage, where manhood is earned through scars instead of inner growth.

Growing up as a hot-blooded young boy in middle-class Kerala, becoming a communist was sort of my rite of passage into adulthood. It was how I began to challenge authority and question the systems around me. At that stage, communism seemed to offer answers to the questions I was asking. However, as life went on I realized that as a communist my unique essence—my individuality—was subordinated to the collective cause. Personal sovereignty gave way to the “larger” mission, and I defined myself by what I opposed. I was dividing the world into victims and perpetrators, oppressors and oppressed. Like with many others, as a communist I was a rebel, an adolescent on a quest to separate myself from the authority figures around me and establish my place in the world.

But something was missing. As I grew older, I realized that my rebellion wasn't leading me toward peace or fulfillment. I wasn't happy: and I was deepening the divide, polarizing my world into “us” versus “them.” I started to see that this state of bitterness wasn't a sign of maturity—it was a sign of an inner struggle I hadn't yet resolved.

The shift began slowly, between the ages of 15 and 22. It was a period of initiation, a transition from adolescence to adulthood, from rebellion to

reconciliation. This wasn't just an intellectual journey—it was deeply personal and spiritual. I began to see that the fight wasn't only outside me; it was within. The anger, the constant sense of separation—they were reflections of my own brokenness, my own unmet need for wholeness.

As I moved into mysticism, the perspective shifted entirely. I began to see myself not as a rebel but as a reconciler. Instead of dividing the world into victims and oppressors, I started to see oneness. I saw humanity not as fractured groups in conflict but as interconnected, each person a unique reflection of the divine. Mysticism taught me to honor my individuality, not to subordinate it, and to understand that my uniqueness was part of a greater whole.

The journey wasn't easy. It meant taming my ego, dissolving my conditioning, altering my belief systems, and healing the wounds that had kept me angry and separate. It required me to learn to love myself—not in a grand, ego-driven way, but in a gentle, accepting way. It was about coming to terms with my imperfections and finding peace in simply being.

Looking back, I see this journey as one of maturation, moving from the juvenile masculine to the sacred masculine. It was a process of initiation that helped me grow from an angry rebel into a compassionate reconciler, from division into unity. As a mystic, I found the deeper sense of fulfillment I had been searching for all along.

The Sacred Masculine: My Quest and Why It's Needed Today

2010 was a pivotal year for me, a moment of cosmic alignment in my life. I had just completed four years of monasticism; a time of deep spiritual practice and gentle, inexplicable joy. During those years, I realized something profound: the highest form of leadership isn't about doing—it's about being. The most elevated leader, I came to understand, is a "being leader," someone who leads with purpose, presence, and inner clarity.

That realization inspired me to write two books over the next four years: *Mature Masculinity*[1] (also known as *The Shiva Code*) and *The Being Leader* [2]. These books were my attempts to bring the timeless wisdom of higher leadership—what is often referred to as Sattvic Leadership—into the modern world. They were also personal experiments in what it meant to embody the sacred masculine in contemporary life.

As a mystic navigating a modern world driven by speed and ambition, I was learning how to do from a place of being. I explored what it meant to deliver peak performance through cultivating peak inner state. I led with purpose, practiced non-attachment, stayed rooted in inner authority, and prioritized integrity above all else. These experiments were my way of living the eternal truths of the sacred masculine, a way of being that the world desperately needs today.

“It became clear to me: our crisis isn’t one of information, competence or resources, but of being...”

Looking around, the problems we face as a society are staggering. Humans are struggling to love themselves. Communities are breaking down, and people feel increasingly disconnected. Our economies are creating greater inequality, governance is growing more polarized, institutions are becoming elitist and centralized, and democracies are losing their grip as defenders of civil and human rights. Meanwhile, the scars on our planet’s ecology grow deeper every day.

Many of these problems are rooted in the ego, often expressed through men. This ego is shaped by generations of unhealthy conditioning and intergenerational trauma. The silent inheritance that many of us men carry are wounds passed down from fathers, grandfathers, and the generations before them. These traumas are not just personal struggles, but ancestral patterns of suppression, fear, and emotional disconnection that quietly shape how we love, lead, and live. Without the absence of healing resources in our lives, we are reenacting the same pain in our relationships, our families, and our institutions.

Yet men themselves are in a silent crisis that few acknowledge. Globally, men account for 65–75% of suicides, a grim reflection of unaddressed mental health struggles and overwhelming societal pressures. The majority of the homeless are men, left behind by systems that fail to support them. Men make up more than 90% of the incarcerated population, trapped in cycles of punishment without meaningful rehabilitation. In materially developed lands, less than 40% of university students today are men, signaling a growing gap in education!

Many men suffer in silence, disconnected from their emotions and the deeper truths of their being. This disconnection drives unhealthy behaviors—pornography, addiction, aggression and a thirst for power—that wound not only themselves but the world around them.

When men feel unwhole and scarce within, they become greedy for wealth and dominance. When they feel hurt, they inflict hurt on others. Without self-love, they struggle to love others. Disconnected from their emotions, they become numb to the suffering of those around them. This cycle perpetuates personal and societal harm.

The sacred masculine offers a way out of this crisis. It calls for men to reconnect with their inner wholeness, to lead from a place of integrity, compassion, and purpose. It's not about rejecting masculinity but elevating it to its highest potential—where strength is balanced by gentleness, authority by humility, and action by presence. The sacred masculine heals the divide within and without, creating space for men to embody their true selves and contribute to a world that desperately needs their grounded, heart-centered leadership. For me, this journey has been one of continual learning, unlearning, and healing. By taming my ego and reconnecting with the sacred within, I've found a way to lead that feels authentic and whole. It's a journey I believe every man can undertake, and one that has the power to transform not only individual lives but the world itself.

Why I Started the Sacred Masculine Festival and What Happens There

By 2014, my journey with the sacred masculine had grown into something far bigger than I ever imagined. What started as personal experiments in activating the sacred masculine within myself had begun to resonate with men across the world. In over 25 countries and 4 continents, everyday men—fathers, professionals, lovers, and friends—were practicing alongside me. Together, we were creating a profound brotherhood, a safe space where men could escape the daily battles of life and begin to heal the many unseen wounds they carried.

These men came from all walks of life, but they had one thing in common: they were trying their best to live good lives while being held back by generations of conditioning. They carried the weight of expectations and unresolved struggles passed down by their fathers, grandfathers, and ancestors before them. Many of these men were in desperate need of initiation into their higher

selves, yet they often resisted it. On the other hand, those who were eager for initiation sometimes didn't need it as urgently. It was a paradox, but the calling was undeniable.

As the movement grew, so did the need for spaces where this work could deepen. By 2014, I had already launched over 100 sacred brotherhood circles worldwide and offered more than 100 retreats, initiation walks, talks, and trainings. Over a million men were actively engaging with the idea of sacred brotherhood, seeking to become better versions of themselves—more loving partners, present fathers, purposeful professionals, and joyful human beings.

That same year, the first Festival of the Sacred Masculine became a reality. While online talks and trainings were valuable for sharing wisdom, many men were yearning for something deeper: the chance to practice and connect in person. This collective desire for a space to truly experience and embody the sacred masculine gave birth to the festival. The festival was designed to offer something unique—3.5 days where men could gather not as a fraternity, but as a sacred brotherhood. It wasn't about competition or bravado but about coming together in a spirit of self-inquiry, playfulness, and gentle spirituality. They participate in sweat lodges, sacred circles, warrior dances, ceremonies to cut dysfunctional umbilical cords, energy work and much more. The goal was to create a sanctuary where men could look inward and explore their true essence while feeling supported by a circle of brothers and elders.

What happens at these festivals is deeply transformative. Through playful yet profound practices, men reconnect with their spirits, renew their sense of purpose, and leave with a newfound conviction to lead their lives from a place of authenticity and inner strength. The festivals are not about rigid teachings or rituals—they are about creating an open space where men can explore the mysteries of life and themselves.

Since then, the festival has multiplied across continents, touching the lives of men in Europe, North America, and New Zealand. It has become a place where men come to rejuvenate, heal, and grow. They leave with a sense of mystery, a renewed spirit, and a commitment to lead from within. For me, these festivals are not just gatherings—they are a movement, a living expression of the sacred masculine in the modern world.

Recovering the Ancient Indian Rites of Passage

Like all indigenous wisdom traditions, India holds a treasure trove of deep knowledge about the secrets of initiation. Ancient Indian rites of passage were carefully designed to guide individuals through the stages of life, aligning their personal growth with their responsibilities towards family, community, and the spiritual realm. These practices, rooted in Vedic and post-Vedic traditions, involved a profound process: a departure, a passage, and an arrival. They were not just rituals—they were transformative journeys.

I have been fortunate to experience some of these rites of passage myself. They have been pivotal moments in my life, shaping my adulthood, relationships, fatherhood, spiritual growth, and how I contribute to society. Each initiation offered me something unique, but all shared the same essential purpose: to help me grow into a fuller, truer version of myself.

In ancient India, these rites of passage served three main purposes:

- 1. Spiritual Awakening:** They emphasized the awakening of higher consciousness and self-realization. Through these practices, we were guided to explore the deeper truths of existence and to connect with their spiritual essence.
- 2. Community and Responsibility:** Initiations prepared us for our societal roles, whether as students, householders, warriors, or spiritual seekers. They helped us understand our place in the greater web of life and our responsibilities to those around us.
- 3. Detachment and Liberation:** Lastly, these rites were about cultivating detachment from worldly desires. They reminded us that life's highest purpose is spiritual liberation and alignment with the divine.

Why is it important to recover male initiations now? In today's fast-paced, fragmented world, many men are untethered from their core, and struggle to find meaning and direction. Traditional rites of passage, which once provided clarity and purpose, have been lost in modern society. Without them, we risk losing touch with our inner selves and our connection to the larger whole.

I have dedicated my work to reviving and reimagining these ancient practices, adapting them for the modern world while preserving their sacred essence. By recovering these rites of passage, I have been blessed to help many men navigate life's transitions with greater awareness and intention. I could offer

them tools for self-discovery, healing, and growth, enabling them to contribute to their communities and live with purpose.

The Story of my Narmada Walks

When I began my leadership journey in the mid-nineties in the West, I carried two important assets—my Marine Engineering education, and my spiritual practice. The engineering gave me the resourcefulness to troubleshoot life; people often called me “street-smart” for my ability to navigate tough situations. But what gave my leadership true depth was my spiritual grounding. It reminded me to show up with clarity, compassion, and purpose.

In those days, the world seemed more balanced. Work was plentiful, life was simpler, and there was still faith in governance and institutions. But after 9/11, that equilibrium seemed to have gone. I noticed cynicism grow, economies faltering, and leadership becoming more reactive and transactional. I was coming across more and more leaders with immense knowledge, but with largely constricted awareness and little inner anchoring.

It became clear to me: our crisis isn't one of information, competence or resources, but of being. Today's leadership needed more soul. We must return to sacredness, to inner awareness and meaning. I've come to recognize that the issue isn't know-how; it's ontology—our way of being. In 2014 I published *The Being Leader* to expose this ontology.

This is why I do the work I do, taking (male) leaders walking on the banks of the Narmada. The call is the same: to help them reconnect with the sacred, and to lead from within.

The deepest well of wisdom and the widest ocean of transformation I have ever experienced in my life is through the practice of the initiation walk. For centuries, indigenous traditions across the world have used rites of passage to mark the journey into maturity and purpose. For men, these rites almost always take place in the wilderness, far from the comforts and distractions of civilization.

At the age of 15, I was blessed to experience such an initiation myself. It was a life-changing moment, one that forever shaped my path. From that moment, I knew that in some way, the work of initiation was intertwined with my life's purpose.

When I was 22, I had the privilege of leading my first group of men on an initiation walk. This journey took place in the majestic Himalayas and spanned eight weeks—a format that allowed the sacred transformation to unfold naturally. Over the next few years, I continued guiding men through these Himalayan walks, witnessing their courage and growth as they stepped into their deeper selves.

But life has its own flow, and after 2010, my visits to India shifted to the winters. With that change came the discovery of a new sacred trail: the holy river Narmada.

The Narmada is a river of immense spiritual significance, second only to the Ganges in Indian mythology. It is believed to have divine origins and is frequently mentioned in ancient scriptures as a symbol of spiritual purity and grace. The river flows from Amarkantak in Madhya Pradesh to the Arabian Sea in Gujarat, carving a sacred path through the heart of India.

“We won’t just seek professions -- we’ll pursue vocations and craftsmanship, pouring our creativity and individuality into everything we do.”

What makes the Narmada unique is not just its mythology but the deep reverence it inspires in those who encounter it. For those living along its banks, it is a lifeline, sustaining their daily needs. For those who walk its length in faith, it is a life-giver in a much deeper sense—a source of spiritual renewal and transformation.

For me, the 8-days Narmada walk I extend to men has become the sacred womb of initiation, a place where profound transformation takes root. When I guide men along the Narmada, I see them connect with something ancient and powerful within themselves. Through a set of practices, processes, rituals and ceremonies ordained by our Rishis, I help these men strip away their masks and conditioning, allowing them to meet their truest selves. Through the practices and the immersion in nature, and the sacred energy of the river, they find clarity, strength, and purpose.

These pilgrimages are more than just walks—they are profound rites of passage, where men are initiated into their higher selves. For me, the Narmada

represents both a teacher and a guide, holding the space for transformation with grace and purity. Each step along its banks is a step into the sacred, a step toward becoming whole.

Bringing the Sacred to Government and Corporate Leaders

Over the years, I've had the privilege of holding space for highly accomplished leaders in governments and corporations, guiding them to connect with something deeper within themselves. These are people who have achieved incredible success in their fields. They are intelligent, driven, and deeply aware of the landscapes they navigate. They know the stage on which they perform every day, and they understand the pressures and challenges that come with it. Yet, many of them also know when they're stuck—when no amount of strategy or external effort can break them free from the traps they find themselves in.

Leaders who have in the past walked this path with me help their peers see their spiritual crisis. Initiated leaders help other leaders see the connection between their outer challenges and their inner state. Leadership, especially at the highest levels, isn't just about making decisions or driving results; it's about who you are while doing those things. Many leaders today are facing a spiritual crisis, even if they don't name it as such. Knowing that others have undertaken their leadership rite of passage before them makes them feel ready to take their own steps toward transformation.

The final piece is making this journey accessible and practical for today's world. While preserving the sacred core of ancient rites of passage, I've worked to demystify these practices so that modern leaders can relate to them. For example, fasting has long been a way to transcend physical needs and connect with higher awareness. When I introduce fasting to leaders, I present it not only as a spiritual practice but also as a tool to build resilience and enhance physical health.

By presenting ancient wisdom in modern terms I've seen these leaders transform—not only for their own benefit but for the benefit of the organizations, governments, and communities they lead.

Rethinking Higher Education

As mainstream societies evolve from the industrial era to the information era to now the era of awareness, work is no longer just about earning a paycheck

or climbing a career ladder. It is becoming a means of creative expression and self-realization, especially for the younger generations. We are seeking purpose and fulfillment, and our professions are becoming increasingly self-governed.

Being self-governed means something profound—it demands an inner moral compass. This isn't something that can be taught through lectures or exams. It's cultivated through life experience, reflection, and practices that connect us to our deeper selves. Work is no longer something we retire from; it is something we will do until our last breath, not out of necessity but because it brings us joy and fulfillment.

Our lives will run on three interconnected tracks: personal, professional, and lifelong (un)learning. Unlike previous generations, we won't see learning as something that ends with a degree. Instead, we will embrace it as a continuous journey, alongside our personal growth and professional pursuits. We won't just seek professions—we'll pursue vocations and craftsmanship, pouring our creativity and individuality into everything we do.

Here is where sacredversities come in. I imagine sacredversities as spaces designed not just to teach but to transform, to help young people become better humans. These can't be schools in the traditional sense; they must be spaces where young people can explore who they are, uncover deeper meaning and higher purpose, discover their unique gifts, and step into their higher potential.

Today's young people are looking for more—they want to understand themselves, connect with their purpose, and contribute to something meaningful. In sacredversities, the focus would shift from intellectual development to self-realization. Instead of asking, "What are you capable of doing?" we would ask, "Who are you becoming?"

A sacredversity should not be just an institution—it should be a temple, a sacred container where people can grow into the fullness of who they are meant to be. It should be a place where they can cultivate wholeness, connect with their inner wisdom, and become compassionate humans.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, sacredversities should be about creating environments that inspire self-inquiry about life's deeper questions: "What am I here for?"; "How can I serve?"; "What does it mean to live fully?" For

older generations, education often activated the faculties needed for worldly success—logic, discipline, and technical skills. These were important, and they served their purpose. But with younger people, the focus should be on archetypal exploration.

Our sages knew that there are some divine archetypes that are fundamental truths within universal consciousness. Divine archetypes are not mere psychological patterns but deeper universal experiences that exist in the realm of our collective consciousness. They are divine because they are fundamental to each human being's quest in life, like for love, truth, abundance, power, justice, etc. We consciously or unconsciously aspire to embody them.

These archetypes drive our experience and evolution. Sacredversities would hold space for individuals to consciously engage with these archetypes to understand themselves and their place in the world. Sacredversities would help humanity embody these archetypes in our lives as our purpose, leading to a deeper understanding of reality and a sense of interconnectedness.

The world needs Sacredversities because the future depends on the evolution of humanity—not just in what we know but in who we are. If we can create spaces that support this evolution, we can help young people become the architects of a more meaningful, compassionate, and purposeful world. That should be the vision for Sacredversities, and it's one worth building together.

Sujith Ravindran is often referred to as a contemporary mystic, known for his deep scholarship and practice in the consciousness sciences from the Indian traditions. You can reach him at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sujithravindran/>.

ENDNOTES

1 **Mature Masculinity** takes men back to their roots to access the sacred truths of the ancient civilizations. This book finds its origin in my years of pursuit to reclaim my misplaced mature masculinity. It captures the greatest masculine attributes of the Indian deity, Shiva.

2 **The BEING Leader** explores the often-overlooked inner path that legendary leaders like Gandhi and Mandela walked—marked by self-awareness, purpose, and presence. It reveals how their greatest strength lies not in what they do, but in who they are being.

Neocolonial Lullaby

What I learned when I turned twelve:
Dreams are problems work will solve,
Truth is locked away in books,
Cops are not the same as crooks,
Power turns the best fruit vrot,*
Education's worth a lot,
Art is something people buy,
God will happen when we die,
I must own the thing I love,
Right is served up from above,
All that sells is all that's true,
Scorn is mean, the sky is blue,
Grass is green, to fart is rude,
'Grown-up' = platitude.

** Afrikaans word meaning 'rotten'*

- Siddiq Khan

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Sacred Sites of Learning

by Pooven Moodley

How did an international human rights and environment lawyer end up receiving counsel from sacred energy points on the planet? This is a strange and true tale of what we do not see, which is all around us, what influences and guides us. We have glimpses of understanding that perhaps the planets, the sun, the moon, mountains, rivers and the ocean have some influence on our lives.

As I travelled from the courtrooms into a journey to sacred sites, I realised I understood very little about myself and the cosmos. The mathematics, physics and biology, geography and history I learned in schools and universities was so rudimentary compared with the fullness and richness we learn from sacred sites and cosmic teachings. The journey continues to unfold.

I was born in South Africa during the repressive system of apartheid which was brutal. My great grandparents were put on a ship from Chennai to Durban in the 1860s, to work as slaves on sugar cane farms as part of the British slave system. I was on a hit list when I was a student, where each assassin had a list of twenty activists to kill. While many activists were killed, I somehow managed to evade death. As activists, we were prepared to die for the cause of freedom, justice and equality. When we collectively managed to end apartheid, there was some time for celebration and hope. It quickly dawned on me that struggles are never ending.

I became a human rights and environmental lawyer and worked with communities across the globe, from women in Africa fighting for their right to land, to first nations people in Australia trying to stop an expansion of mining on their territory, to Amazon communities defending their territories from illegal logging, mining and oil and gas extraction. While there were several

victories along the way, I realised that there is a tsunami of rights violations and extraction. In order to turn the tide, I contemplated on the question: “What are we missing as activists?” As part of this inquiry, I regularly heard the voice of struggle icon Steve Biko in my head: “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”

In 2019, as my own life was in complete turmoil, I had to go through the fire to figure out who I am, where I come from and why I am here. Every weekend for the year while I was in Cape Town, I climbed up Table Mountain (originally named Hoerrikwaggo). I was guided to a cave by two eagles from the mountain. As I sat and meditated in the cave during that year, I started to receive many messages and guidance about the coming transition on the planet and some key things that needed to be done. At first, I thought I was making this up. I soon realised that what I was receiving was information I did not read about or that I consciously thought about.

There were a few streams of knowledge I was receiving. I will share two here. The first was about key energy points on the planet, the energy grid and the science in terms of how they work, how they are connected to other parts of the universe and what to do with them. I was shown that I would meet people from various traditions from around the world and we would together with the guardians of the sacred sites, work on the energy grid of the planet to shift the frequency of the planet for the great transition. I wondered how this would unfold.

A few days later I received an e-mail inviting me to a global sacred site gathering which was to take place three months later. When I shared some of what I received to people from a few other traditions like the Kogi in Colombia, they indicated that they received very similar guidance. During the past 5 years, we (people from various traditions from all continents) have been working at sacred sites with the energy of these sites. Initially, we felt we would do something to these sites, but quickly learned that these sites are doing something to us. The knowledge transmitted from these sites is vast in the aspects of energy and frequency, interconnectedness of everything, vibrations of unconditional love, the process of moving away from the breaking point of separation to unification and what we need to do to find our way through the great transformation on the planet.

The second streaming of knowledge was about the time we are currently in

on the planet and the need to gather as people. This relates to each one of us having a certain gift and holding a certain piece of the puzzle in terms of us as wisdom keepers from ancient and modern times, activists, artists, etc.

“Sacred sites are all around us. Once we open ourselves to the energetics, it opens us up to our greater potential.”

In 2020, as Covid made its waves across the planet, the gathering of people started in a deep and accelerated way. The Earthrise Collective (www.earthrisecollective.com/) emerged providing a convening space and weaving ancient wisdom with modern science, activism and alternatives to the current paradigms. Wisdom keepers from remote parts of the forests and mountains linking up with activists to learn, share and navigate a pathway through the turbulence we find ourselves in now.

We are in a current state of a breaking point of separation and disconnection. We are reaching a point of uncertainty on planet Earth. This uncertainty emerges from the environmental shifts on the planet as we reach key tipping points as outlined in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports as we head closer to the 1,5-degree mark. The intersection with advancements in artificial intelligence and reaching the point of singularity in the not-so-distant future is creating a situation of greater unknowns. The conflation of wars and conflicts, loss of trust in politics and systems of governance, the continued rise of patriarchy, injustice and inequalities is creating a situation of the ‘perfect storm’ which will shake the fundamentals of everything we believe in and the way we perceive and experience the world.

Internally there is an acceleration of anxiety and depression and a feeling of hopelessness. We are going through a cycle of destruction and rebirth as part of a massive transformation on the planet. As old systems are being challenged, we are remembering ancient wisdom and bringing forward knowledge from the forests, mountains, caves and cosmos to guide us through this period of great transformation to the next era. This was foretold through prophesy from various traditions and also confirmed by climate science and what we are experiencing and witnessing.

As I started understanding and interacting with sacred energy points across the

planet, I realised that we use a very limited amount of our potential when we limit ourselves to the identities that we have created for ourselves, and which society has shaped. I came to the realisation that if we walk lightly and silently on the earth there is an infinite amount we can learn. Part of the process of learning is remembering and part of the process is tapping into the infinite potential and knowledge.

Sacred sites are all around us. Once we open ourselves to the energetics, it opens us up to our greater potential. Recently 300 people with brilliant ideas were invited to do an Atlantic Crossing. It was the route used for the slave trade from Africa to the United States of America. It was a range of people from billionaire philanthropists, people working in artificial intelligence, indigenous elders, scientists, musicians, artists, lawyers, etc. What became clear during the journey is that we are not going to be able to ‘fix’ the world without first going through our inner journeys to deal with our traumas and ego and baggage which we carry. Unless we do this, we will be creating the next phase of humanity on this planet with the old patterns and unresolved issues which will continue to lead to conflict, fear, and hatred. We need to create alternative ways of being on the planet from a deeper understanding of natural law, frequencies and from a place of love.

As a lawyer and social justice activist, I have been able to apply what I learned from sacred sites in a practical way. A recent example of this is going to court to stop Shell from doing oil and gas drilling in a 6000 square kilometre range on the Indian Ocean along the East Coast of South Africa. As we were doing a ceremony with wisdom keepers and activists along the sacred sand dunes and the ocean, the idea emerged that we should argue in court that the ancestors of the indigenous and local communities along the coastline are in the ocean and if Shell blasts the oceans for 8 months non-stop it would have a massive impact on the whales and dolphins and disturb the ancestors.

As this argument was being made in court together with the usual arguments of environmental impact and communities not being consulted, the Shell lawyers laughed, but the judges took it seriously. The communities won the case (www.wildcoastwarriorsfilm.com) and Shell was stopped from causing this harm and they also lost on appeal.

The connection between the sacred sites, wisdom keepers and activists were key to going beyond human law and to shift towards natural law and natural

justice. Working with the communities of the Sarayaku Territory, deep within the Ecuadorian Amazon, together with the More Than Human Life initiative of New York University (www.mothrights.org, they are advocating for Kawsak Sacha (www.ecojurisprudence.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/KAWSAK-SACHA-Declaration-Summary-Eng.pdf). This is a concept of the living forest and the recognition of the spirit of the forest which is invisible but a big part of who the Kichwa are as a people.

As part of sacred sites and ancient wisdom there is a coming together of human rights, rights of nature and now a more interconnected framework that shifts the understanding of humans not just as part of nature but humans as nature. After several decades of struggle, we collectively pushed for the United Nations to adopt a new human right. It is the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment was adopted by the General Assembly in 2022. (<https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-01/UNDP-UNEPUNHCHR-What-is-the-Right-to-a-Healthy-Environment.pdf>). It brings together the idea that you cannot separate humans from the rest of nature.

People working with sacred sites are tapping into knowledge which is bringing forward ideas and thinking which is shaping the trajectory out of the intersecting crises we are currently dealing with. As we continue protect the rights of people and planet, we have also been called to create a pathway where humans move away from the current levels of inequality and injustice and to shift to a place that is not only sustainable but a space we co-create and thrive in.

During the recent Brazil global gathering of the Ecoversities Alliance, we launched the idea of Sacredversities. The Ecoversities Alliance is committed to radically re-imagining higher education to cultivate human and ecological flourishing. Ecoversities seek to transform the unsustainable and unjust economic, political and social systems/mindsets that dominate the planet. Knowledge from sacred sites can guide our journey during the great transformation on the planet as we move through the sixth mass extinction event into a flourishing future.

Each sacred site has taught me very particular lessons and I gained access to various knowledge systems. At Inzalo ye Langa (birthplace of a millions sons), one of the oldest stone circles in the world which is in South Africa, I understood the true nature of energy and how to work with it both within myself and within the cosmos. We are in the cosmos and the cosmos is in us,

we are the cosmos.

At Giza in Egypt, in front of the Sphinx I was shown numbers and started to understand the true nature of numbers. Zero being the nothingness from which we come. The dark matter out of which the cosmos is manifested with the light which is one and the duality which splits us to have an expanded experience as two, the trinity creates, preserves and destroys, the four worlds and the five elements. The numbers went on to infinity and beyond. That evening while we were doing an all night ceremony in the Great Pyramid, while I was in the Kings chamber, I was shown a sequence of numbers and then another and it continued the whole night. I was shown that these are frequencies and shown how they work and how to shift from one frequency to the next and why this is important during the great transformation on the planet.

At Mount Shasta in California, I was taken through a process where I lay on the snow. I could hear my heart beat loudly. I then started to hear a second heart beat even louder. I was shown that this is the heartbeat of the earth. As these two were beating separately I was taken through a process where they started to synchronise and beat as one. At this point I felt an explosion of unconditional love and truly understood and felt what it is like to be in total alignment with the energetic flow of the planet.

“Ultimately each one of us are sacred sites. As you journey deeper within yourself, you will recognise and respect even deeper the sacredness with you.”

At Mount Kailash in Tibet, I was taken through a process of understanding where I come from, why I am here at this time and what needs to be in place for the great transformation to take place on the planet as we move from one era to the next. I was also taken through processes to understand how to access and work with sacred energy, how to go through a unification process within myself, with others and with other parts of nature. Deep into the amazon jungle, I learned the reality of the truth of where we are at this time on the planet and what will happen during the great transformation.

Ultimately each one of us are sacred sites. As you journey deeper within yourself you will recognise and respect even deeper the sacredness with you. In the place where you live, find an ancient tree, a cave, a rock, a mountain or

a river or ocean and continue to spend time there and connect. You will get to deeply understand and feel the energetics of the place and as you sit silently or walk lightly, you will feel the connection and you will find the sacred places in your area you can connect with. Given the interconnectedness of everything, it will show you how your area is connected energetically to the rest of the country, planet and multiverse.

We should see these places as ecoversities because they hold knowledge through time and space. There is the spirit of these places and the energy that we may not ordinarily pay attention to. People deeply connected to the land, the ocean and the skies have accessed knowledge for thousands of years by aligning structures to star systems, planting food during particular alignments and cycles and living with the spirits of sacred sites. We all have the potential and the ability and the tools. We can uncover this if we continue to go on our inner journey. Sacred sites accelerates us energetically and deepens our understanding.

The unlearning process at sacred sites starts with the appreciation of multi paradigms and ways of learning. Learning from a mountain is a very different methodology than learning from a teacher in a classroom. It opens up a process that goes beyond our mind and beyond our senses which we use on a daily basis. It shows us the full potential of who we are and what we are connected to and can access. These sites hold memories, energy and knowledge that has been stored for thousands of years. We can access this within our DNA.

It has been a deep part of my decolonising journey as I understand the ancient wisdom from different traditions and also from sacred sites across the planet. It is important to ensure there are some protocols in place. Respecting the site is a fundamental principle. As you develop a relationship with a site you will learn how to ask for permission to enter the site. Protecting sites is a key part of the work that needs to be done.

Many of the sites are under constant threat from extractive projects like mining and oil and gas, for development type projects like housing or where indigenous and traditional communities are kicked out of their forests in the name of conservation or protection. Many legal, human rights and environmental organisations I work with across the globe are doing their best to back up communities who are protecting these sites. They are also biodiversity hotspots and play a key role in terms of the energetics and for the

transformation and future of humanity as we are in the sixth mass extinction event.

The Earthrise Collective is bringing forward the knowledge that has been held by people from various traditions and ancestries from across the planet, to protect these sites as part of activism and also as part of a process to create a pathway through the intersecting crises and turbulence we are facing and which will accelerate over the next few years based on prophecy, climate science and what people are experiencing.

As we work with the energy of the sacred sites, it will contribute to the shift in frequency within us and across the planet and will open up the space for us to continue to create. We have what it takes to live in an interconnected way where people and planet thrives. We are the planet!

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“For our civilization to make different choices, to set a new course, including new voices in the old structures is not enough. Using them as decoration, even less so. Using the indigenous to brand events as ‘conscious’ won’t achieve much either. Nor will expropriating their rituals as ‘content’, their stories as AI training data, or their sacred sites as spiritual tourism destinations. The economic growth machine is always hungry for some new form of capital—natural, cultural, or spiritual—to convert into money, requiring ever-new forms of colonialism.

There is an alternative. We who see the bankruptcy of modern narratives of development look for other mythologies, and along with them other ways of being human, other ways of relating to the rest of life and the material world. We look to the indigenous for needed assistance in the project of global transformation, and seek to support them in their contribution. We do not patronize them, imagining that we know how to live better than they, imagining that we know how to know better than they. We don’t try to make them like ourselves, to enroll them in failed notions of progress. We don’t broker access to them in exchange for donations to our NGOs. We don’t attempt to plug them into a system that we no longer believe in.

We understand that for humanity to pass the initiatory threshold that is upon us, we must gather together all that modernity has exiled to the margins of reality. Therefore, we value intact indigenous cultures not only for the contributions that fit easily into mainstream paradigms of land stewardship and ecological

conservation, but also for their cosmologies; their stories; and their technologies of mind, sound, symbol, body, and matter. The familiar causal framework of science can recognize the indigenous for tending ecosystems and living sustainably. Invisible in that framework, yet plain to those who are willing to step outside it, is the role of indigenous cultures in maintaining networks of sacred sites, earth shrines, ceremonies, and stories that hold the world together. The modern mind believes that we make stories about the world. Other minds have believed that stories weave the world. They have believed that words, sounds, gestures, songs, rituals, etiquette, and prayer influence matter by means beyond force-based causation. According to Mircea Eliade, many cultures believed that if they did not reenact world-renewal ceremonies, the world would cease to exist. Creation would fall apart. In the Yurok and other California traditions, world-renewal festivals were conceived as a kind of maintenance or repair of the world.”

- Charles Eisenstein, World Renewal and the Indigenous Substack

Flipping the Knowledge Paradigm: A Journey of Unlearning

By Daniel Gomez Seidel

In the hallowed lecture halls of academia and gleaming corporate boardrooms, knowledge is framed as a commodity to be acquired, a territory to be conquered. We are told to amass degrees, accumulate facts, and hoard information in pursuit of validation and power. But what if true wisdom lay not in acquisition, but in subtraction? What if the path to knowing required us not to learn, but to unlearn?

This is the story of how I, a Colombian-born child of the “American Dream,” journeyed from the pinnacles of Western education to the precipice of self-destruction, only to discover that the deepest knowledge isn’t found in textbooks or lecture halls, but also in the whispers of ancestors and the silence of the heart. It’s an invitation to flip the knowledge paradigm on its head, developing a counter-narrative to the colonial paradigm of education, and an invitation to seek wisdom from within.

I am the son of a blend of European and Muisca peoples, born east of the Andes mountains, in the city of Bogotá. From an early age, I was bestowed with both a high degree of sensibility (“sense-ability”) and intelligence (sense-making ability). However, in the scarcity-minded, hyper-masculine, and grief-stricken Colombia of the late 1980s, intelligence was rewarded while expressions of sensibility and sensitivity were ignored, dampened, and often criticized.

Like many children from “developing” nations, I was taught to seek opportunity elsewhere, mainly in the United States and Europe. This aspiration was anchored to a caricature of the “American dream” – a life embellished with material abundance and comfort at any and all costs. To attain it, my sense of self-worth became tethered to a single mission: acquire knowledge

and exchange it for money and influence at one of the centers of the globalized West.

“The embrace of plant medicines gently dissolved the boundaries of my egoic identity, unveiling more expansive and elemental states of being...”

Driven by this expansionist mindset, I poured myself into a university track that would allow me to leave the country and join the global arena. As a business management student, I enrolled in exchange programs, visiting lecture halls across the United States, Australia, Germany, and beyond. Ambitiously, I earned three degrees in nine years, devouring essays, accumulating facts, and acquiring new skills to be recognized as “someone” in the global forum of the intellectual elite.

By 28, I was caught in a feedback loop that incentivized my choices through glowing performance reviews, increased paychecks, and the freedom to travel with earned visa permits. By most external measures, I had succeeded according to the Western pursuit of knowledge and prosperity.

And then, a crack opened.

It began with a noticeable shortness of breath, coming and going at unpredictable moments. Sporadically, I felt haunted by states of imminent danger or fear. At times, a sense of complete overwhelm would render even the most entertaining events opaque, meaningless, and foreign. I sensed something was off but quickly resorted to mindless distractions to pull myself back from these confusing, bitter states. Eventually, however, the neglected sensibilities and primal emotions – long domesticated to align with my expansionist priorities – poured through the crack, bringing a torrent of unprocessed feelings that could no longer be repressed.

What bewildered me most was the realization that nowhere in my external pursuit of knowledge had I received tools to reckon with these intimate dimensions. I had never been taught to listen to or express my emotions, or to connect with an inner source of wisdom. I was an educated, successful young man, yet completely mute in matters of the heart – emotionally illiterate and painfully aware of my own ignorance. What followed were years of panic

attacks and depressive episodes that, though uncomfortable, marked the beginning of a new quest for knowledge. This journey diverged from the standard pathways I had long traveled, steering into uncharted ways of seeing and living. Thus began my relationship with unlearning.

This time, the focus was not on acquiring new knowledge, but on shedding old certainties. My first exposure to this path was through learning about the experience of others who had shed the identity markers imposed onto them by Modernity. Ram Dass' journey from Harvard researcher to devoted servant was particularly inspiring at that stage. His life inspired me to deepen the process of peeling away layers of conditioning, and questioning the very foundations upon which I had built my understanding of success, knowledge, and self-worth.

I found myself drawn to practices and traditions, like those available at the ecoversites, that honored sensibility as much as intellect. Indigenous wisdom, spiritual teachings, and embodied practices became my new study. These weren't additions to my resume, but invitations to strip away the excess and return to a more essential way of knowing.

In the silence of meditation retreats, I began to hear the whispers of my own intuition, long obscured by the relentless chatter of habitual thoughts. As the mental noise subsided, a more fundamental sense of existence emerged – one where my inner tranquility and well-being were no longer tethered to my actions or words. In this space of quiet revelation, I discovered the profound contentment of simply being, learning to rest in a peace that required no justification or achievement. Through movement practices like contact dance and hatha yoga, I rediscovered my body's wisdom, learning to trust sensations and impulses whose truth required no legitimization by language or logic. I came to understand that intelligence wasn't the sole domain of the brain, but rather a distributed network spanning my entire physical and emotional being. This revelation unveiled a map to my intuition, illuminating areas where tension, trauma, or anxiety had taken root, while offering gentle guidance towards choices and actions that fostered greater states of ease and alignment.

The embrace of plant medicines gently dissolved the boundaries of my egoic identity, unveiling more expansive and elemental states of being. Though I haven't experienced Ayahuasca (or Yajé in Colombia), even milder plants have brought significant insights and revelations. From the anchoring presence

of tea, to the creative conduit opened by cannabis, to the deep dive into archetypal and unconscious realms facilitated by psilocybin, this communion with nature as teacher has opened up a new world of wisdom, distinctly different from what is available to gain in the halls of traditional education. This green university, much like the network of ecoversities available around the world, showed me that there is profound knowledge to be found not only in our bodies, but also in the essential medicines available to us through the natural world.

The unlearning process extended to my understanding of knowledge itself, flipping the paradigm on its head. I began to see how the mindset of knowledge acquisition lauded by Modernity and the West mirrored the colonial enterprise – seeking to conquer, extract, possess, claim, and own. In contrast, indigenous and spiritual traditions often viewed knowledge as something to be received, not taken – a gift from the natural world, from ancestors, and the many names of the divine. These traditions teach that true wisdom often comes from a process of removal rather than accumulation. By shedding our preconceptions, biases, and ego-driven desires, we create space for deeper understanding to emerge, aligning ourselves with the inherent wisdom that already exists within and around us.

This shift in perspective was profound. What began as a crack in my carefully constructed worldview became a gateway to finally feeling at home with myself. Instead of striving to know more, I found myself cultivating the ability to shed, remove, and renounce. For example, for a few years now, I begin my days with a the following prayer:

May I be clear and hollow, so god can act through me in service.

May I be attuned and attentive, so I may recognize the opportunities to serve.

May I remain humble, present and grateful, singing the song of my ancestors.

May I allow love to flow through me freely and without restrain.

May all beings be happy, free and safe.

The process was not always comfortable. Unlearning meant facing parts

of myself I had long neglected or suppressed. It meant acknowledging the emotional illiteracy that my academic pursuits had never addressed. Yet, as I embraced the journey, I found a different kind of strength emerging – a resilience born not of rigid certainty, but of flexibility and openness.

I became increasingly comfortable with the messiness of paradox, and began to enjoy the emergent process of becoming, finding myself drawn to a different way of knowing – one that values subtracting layers of ignorance over acquiring and accumulating vaults of knowledge. Ultimately, I've come to recognize that true mastery lies in finding a balance: honoring the value of traditional academic knowledge while equally creating space to cultivate inner wisdom, allowing both to inform and enrich our understanding of the world.

Today, I continue to seek to shed that which continues to keep truth at bay. Whether studying, for example, the nondual teachings of Vedanta which strip away layers of identification, or the trickster provocations of Bayo Akomolafe's posthumanism which invite us to think of our "self" as an intermingling and co-emerging of different ecological forces that far extend the limitations of the human psyche, these perspectives stand in stark, illuminating contrast to the philosophies that shaped my early childhood and education.

Unlearning has taught me that true wisdom isn't a commodity to be hoarded, but a truth that abides in our innermost being, awaiting discovery. To reach it, we must remove our biases, shed our insecurities, and let go of our illusion of separateness and control. This journey invites us to look within, instead of reaching out for answers. It asks us to tap into an ecology of wisdom shared by all living beings, one that is both intimately ours and not available for any single individual to possess.

My path now leads deeper into the practice of unlearning, challenging my assumptions and sharing these insights with others who feel called to question their own beliefs about knowledge and success. I advocate for alternative educational forums, such as the ecoversities emerging on every continent, which expand our understanding of knowledge to include sources and pedagogies intimately connected to nature, the deep wisdom of our ancestors, and the spiritual insights of diverse traditions. These platforms honor the stewards of "other ways of knowing or seeing" across cultures, broadening our perspectives beyond conventional academia and preparing us for inner growth and transformation.

Whether it is through self-practice and personal discovery, or by opening the aperture of curiosity to include new arenas for education such as the ecoversities or other networks reclaiming knowledge systems to restore and re-envision learning processes that are meaningful outside of the traditional academic paths, there is much to gain in expanding our relationship to education and learning. In a world that often prioritizes knowing over being, unlearning may well be the most radical and transformative educational act we can undertake.

And so, I leave you with this:

- *What might you need to unlearn to access the wisdom already within?*
- *How might your life transform if you approached knowledge not as something to acquire, but as something to return to?*
- *What would you give away, so you may finally see?*

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*“Not everything that knocks wants to come in.
Some things knock because they already have.”*

- Arabella Sveinsdottir, The Roof Was Never Empty

Rites of Passage: Creating a House of Belonging & Initiation for Women

by Pooja Prema

The Rites of Passage Project is an evolving ‘House of the Collective Female Soul’— a collaborative and immersive “ritual house” of art and healing celebrating the lives of women from girlhood through elderhood. Each of its “Rooms of Cure” embodies a rite of passage or theme of ancestral reclamation in the lives of women, with a total of 39 themes to-date.

As a community-weaver, ritualist and multidisciplinary artist, I founded and produced two large-scale incarnations of the Rites of Passage Project. Each of these was a sprawling kaleidoscopic offering of live ritual-performance and multimedia installation art set throughout 20+ rooms of a historic Victorian mansion (a former ‘Women’s Club’) in the Northeastern United States. The first took place in 2013, co-created by 60 local (mostly white European-descending) women, ages 3 to 89. And the second in 2021 – “Rites of Passage: 20/20 Vision”, co-created with 65 women from around the US, ages 3 to 75 – centered the experiences of Women of Color (or Women of the Global Majority)

Origins

After immigrating from South India to the US as a child, I eventually returned to Kerala as an undergraduate student to study storytelling and folklore. Through the benevolence of dozens of artists, folklorists and cultural luminaries, I was granted entry into the shimmering world of traditional ritual performance— one as diverse, and also as endangered, as the jungles of the Western Ghats from which it sprang. Here, theater and the arts were a liminal, communal and multi-sensoral experience; a process of personal and collective meaning-

making which re-embedded human beings into a larger ecology; and a shared seasonal courtship and reanimation of the Wild and the Sacred. The ritual arts were understood not only as inseparable from a place-based village way of life, but also from the territory of the numinous. By contrast, European-descended modes of art and theater in the West had been largely reduced to capitalist modes of consumption that primarily service the affluent—people go to the theatre to be entertained and distracted; not to dissolve their hard-won sense of a separate self.

As a wanderer between the East and West, and one who had always felt out-of-place everywhere, I sought to create a home for myself in the arts. Ten years after my initial encounter with ritual-performances in Kerala, I wanted to devise a kind of theatre that I hadn't encountered back in the US: one not bound to a capitalist worldview metered by restlessness, but moored in ritual and in relationship to its local community and region—and one that, like Indian forms, would incorporate music, movement, storytelling and visual art into “a whole work of art”. This was both a means of personal survival, as well as a way to re-plant, adapt and cultivate the heirloom seeds of a place-based culture that had so graciously been shared with me, and that were fast disappearing in Kerala. So in 2012 I founded ‘The Ritual Theatre’ – an experimental site-specific theater company rooted in my experience of South Indian ritual performance, along with my training in contemporary Western theater and dance.

Shortly after founding the company, I read the autobiography of West African Dagara writer and shaman Malidoma Patrice Somé. In it, he wrote of initiation and the modern world's lack of it, and that “*unless our trials can be ritually heard, seen and honored, they will likely remain dimmed as traumas to cope with, instead of as powerful initiations.*” His words spoke to my very core, since like most modern people, I felt both uninitiated and profoundly alone in a world that sought only to make me useful, not free.

Although the extant ritual-theater traditions of Kerala aren't focused on personal experiences of initiation, they function as communal initiatory processes in which meaning – and thereby the world of the village as a whole – are seasonally renewed and remade.

So I began to wonder how the arts might offer another avenue of initiation that was at once generative, connective and liberatory; that could allow modern

people to recognize and redeem those would-be initiations – the traumas and the triumphs – that had for so long been relegated to the hidden corners of life and society—scorned, shamed and feared, or at best discarded as irrelevant.

The vision of *Rites of Passage* then came to me during a conversation with a friend who had created a performance-installation in a house for her senior thesis. As we spoke, I began to see a series of imaginary scenes within a house – women of all ages, familiar objects and symbols, and recognizable, repeating ritual-gestures – that could make tangible the mysterious and transitory nature of women’s initiations, revealing through their simple yet poetic ordinary-ness—the sacred, luminous nature of women’s everyday lives.

“In a world that deflates wanting anything outside of industrial society’s pre-fix menu of choices as utopian and therefore impossible, Rites of Passage encourages us to gestate visionary possibilities on the margins of collapsing systems and -isms — showing us what it could look like, sound like, and feel like to live into who we truly are beyond our oppressions.”

A Culture of Honoring

As a woman, I wanted to honor and celebrate the rites of passage that women undergo in a lifetime because I deeply longed for such a culture, and sensed that hidden underneath our collective amnesia, we all did—whether we knew it or not.

I’d come to the realization that there’s virtually no acknowledgment of personal rites of passage in modern colonized, Westernized culture. There is almost no place to seek out ritual or community that would gift us life-giving support when we most need it.

For the majority of women in the United States, the closest they may get to community initiation is being celebrated as wives if they choose to get married, perhaps fleetingly as mothers with a “baby-shower” (which is often

more about the baby than the mother-being herself), and finally at their funeral, for which they themselves will no longer be present. There are no collective rites of passage for our entry into life itself, for the end of our girlhood, or to mark our journey into elderhood; none for our long lives full of heart openings and heartbreaks; none commemorating the betrayals we've endured, or the abuses against us through which we've thrived; none which would allow us to to grieve our losses, or heal and transform the vestiges of trauma we've inherited. There are no rites of passage that honor our evolution through the many deaths we encounter in a lifetime—the passing away of our parents, partners, or our own children; or for transitions such as divorce or the end of a partnership; for the journey of migration and its lingering chords of cultural displacement; or simply the inevitable dissolution of who we once were in order to make space for who we're yet becoming.

Collected together, the myriad initiations that may occur over the course of a lifetime hold the potential to make us whole, ripe and complete; they are the making of well-earned strength, wisdom and grace. Yet today growing older has become something to loathe, hide and avoid, along with so many other good things—like birth, menstruation, menopause, and death.

I needed a place for this whole spectrum of complex, gorgeous life-living to exist and belong, to been seen and treasured; a place for reflection and conversation to arise, so that those of us who have no template for a culture of celebrations and ritual could begin to see and to viscerally feel what honoring a fully lived life could mean, and then perhaps know too—the desire for such an honoring in our own lives.

Thus the *Rites of Passage Project* was born in 2013 as an expression of our shared Collective Female Soul searching for and re-assembling Herself, and as a sanctuary for that very nature of the Feminine which births, nurtures and sustains, and which also gives death when it's due.

Housing the Collective Female Soul

Together, the 2013 and 2021 iterations of *Rites of Passage* included rooms one might imagine such as: *Girlhood*, *Adolescence*, *Maidenhood*, *The Wise Wound* (a bathroom honoring menstruation), *A Womb of Her Own* (dedicated to pregnancy), *Motherhood*, *Menopause*, *The Elder Room*, and *Death*; as well as unconventional and visionary rooms such as *Animus* (a room about the inner Masculine), *No Longer Secret* (on healing from sexual trauma), *Hysteria*

(on breaking taboos about mental health), *Queer Origins* (exploring gender-expansive childhood), *Our Fathers, Divorce, and Dissolution* (about difficult initiatory experiences that change the course of our lives).

Other rooms centered around positive reclamations such as: *The Body Room*, *The Living Womb*, *Re-Matriation* (re-membering a matriarchal way of life in relationship with land), *Sustenance* (honoring rest and reconnection to Nature), both editions of the *Kitchen* (celebrating intergenerational community, nourishment and creativity), *The Sustenance Pantry* (a treasury of folk foodways and heirloom seeds), *The Apothecary*, and *The Library* (a radical feminist canon). And still other rooms were devoted to personal and collective transformation such as: *Wombman Heal Thyself* (on the healing of women's bodies and natural water bodies), *The Nothing* (a closet-shrine for miscarriage, abortion and stillbirth), *Loss*, *The Grief Room* (memorializing grief, displacement and resilience of four global Diasporas: the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Middle East), *Forgiveness*, *Migration/Diaspora* and *Legacy* (each exploring immigration and intergenerational healing), *V is for Victory* (a prayer for reweaving of our shared humanity) and *The Re-Birth Canal* (set within a stairwell).

As a live community offering open to others to witness, *Rites of Passage* admits the public eye into women's private worlds—both the domestic, as well as our inner emotional and imaginal worlds – the intimate realms of the auto-poetic, and what Black feminist writer Audre Lorde described as ‘the erotic’. As such, it stands for claiming the worth inherent in a woman's *being*, and not merely her doing. *Rites of Passage* upholds vulnerability and relationality as the very ground of personal transformation and collective liberation, while restoring ritual and the arts to their rightful place within the weave of our everyday lives. As 2021's *Soul Kitchen* curator Cheryl R. Riley's hieroglyphic language of “The Glyphs” teaches us—“The Arts” include “Birth, Seeking Balance, Intimacy, Laughter, Music, Theatre, Dance, Dreams, Empathy and Listening,” and that after having mastered them, one may be rewarded with “a Good Death”.

Emergence & Initiation

As with all true art, genuine initiation can't be made from without: neither a concept nor a formula—it can't be captured, copied, bought, sold or even taught. Rather, it can only come from within a community—emerging organically from the rich soil of what writer and teacher Martín Prechtel calls its ‘indigenosity’—out of the personal and collective needs, heartaches, and

soul-life of its members.

Beyond being a public art exhibition, the *Rites of Passage* houses serve as a personal and communal rite of passage for their co-creators. By definition, initiation is a passage into a new way of being – an expanded, more whole way of being. And as with any real initiation – we were stretched and reshaped, and learned that we each possessed more courage and capacity than we knew. The experience of creating *Rites of Passage* forever changed us— altering the ways we looked at our own lives, and would live into them afterward.

As “Rooms of Cure”, each was “cure-ated” by one or more women who may or may not be recognized as ‘artists’ in the eyes of mainstream society. Our cure-ators ranged from professional artists who’ve exhibited at some of the country’s best known institutions—to farmers, herbalists, doulas, educators, community healers, full-time mothers, grandmothers, and adolescent girls who’d hadn’t considered themselves artists, but discovered and claimed their artistry in the process of creation.

The act of creating the houses was in-and-of-itself part of the initiation, the rite. For each iteration, we gathered together at odd hours of day and night over the course of about seven days to give form and fullness to the empty neglected rooms that came to house our Collective Female Soul—filling it with a riotous collage of memory, color and beauty—and making, for a time, a promised-land for our long-ago-displaced womanness.

We make the world through our living and stories told, and through our breadth of grief and love for life and the people in it. Our creations are not things to be ogled in static museums or quantified through arbitrary measures of capital, as much as they are what make the fabric of our daily lives vital and eloquent. They may equally include the nourishment of food or of music; tending a garden or a movement; birthing a book or a human being—because while patriarchy and capitalism attempt to convince us of their contrived (and often conflicting) hierarchies, there is no such thing. Our artworks may be composed of a collage of spice-jars, a basket-full of tangled yarn, or a bowl of foraged shells; favorite recipes passed down through generations, letters, journals; or radical ideas. Our creation is the chaos in the kitchen, the overflowing messiness of teenage bedrooms, the sacrosanct spaces of our aloneness, our intimate dreamscapes, and for many of us—our surrender to the cyclic nature of our bodies, over and over again.

In a lifetime, a woman dies and is re-born hundreds upon hundreds of times, yet we live in a world that would, if it could, force an end to these turnings all together—killing off what writer-storyteller Clarissa Pinkola Estés termed the ‘Life-Death-Life nature’ of the universe itself, and with it the very essence of what’s Sacred, and what’s Real. Within this larger context, the *Rites of Passage Project* lives as both a collective prayer of re-membrance, and an embodied, decolonial vision of resilience and possibility.

Learning to be a Healing Village

Each incarnation of *Rites of Passage* possesses its own unique signature of learning and healing in community. And each is an imperfect and exquisite experiment in creating home.

The first *Rites of Passage* house in 2013 planted seeds for what “*Rites of Passage: 20/20 Vision*” later brought into flower in 2021: a ‘village’ culture that offered a sense of belonging rare for most of us in the modern world. This was especially poignant as it highlighted Women of the Global Majority on the backdrop of a nation still defined by the white male or female as the standard. By contrast, this was a place we could fully and unapologetically inhabit our bodies and our wisdom, while also recognizing the grief of our ancestral lineages, stolen and dismembered. At the same time, the house was a space of welcome and inclusion for all who walked past its threshold—a healing village in practice.

And yet, the Rites of Passage houses weren’t just a place for our beauty to belong, but so too our shadows and failures. This meant tending to the ways that we may feel unseen, unappreciated or unknown. For so many of us, our childhood homes may not have been a safe place; maybe not a place at all. Add to this, the reality of communal or ‘village’ life is that it’s often messy, busy, and intense, and for those unacquainted with such, it can be overwhelming. As modern people, we often don’t know what family is, let alone a village. And so we made it up as we went along—crafting literal rooms for that which the colonized world at large, and often our families of origin—had discounted, ignored, or outcasted. Finally, this was a place where we could begin to be at home in kinship.

All of our ancient ancestors once lived in villages or small communities, and somewhere in our blood and bones we still long for this like an echo. It’s not a matter of whether, but of how far back we must search for what’s been

forgotten. So experiencing a return to the village – the holding of a community – was inherently healing. But as a temporary village, it was a moment in space and time, and not the reality most of us live in every day, or would return to. This truth is both a profound heartbreak, and a reason to dream.

The Role of Initiation in Visionary Futures

For all the labor, energy and time we spent creating the two *Rites of Passage* ritual houses, they were open for just five performances in 2013, and ten in 2021, and witnessed live by about 1,300 people total. Audiences thanked us for the intimate experience of walking through the houses—one which many described as having been a rite of passage in itself. But much like elaborate seasonal ritual houses or shrines built by indigenous cultures the world over to celebrate the Goddess/ the Earth and the cyclic nature of Life, only to be dismantled days later—our *Rites of Passage* houses were also temples to Impermanence, to the ebbs and flows of the Female Soul, and the ever-changing rhythm of Nature.

Ultimately, there are as many ways to authentically re-envision and create initiation as there are human beings. And no one iteration of *Rites of Passage* can – or is intended to – encompass the vast breadth of what initiation is for all women. The Rites of Passage Project includes 39 Rooms of Cure and counting, because every community has its own unique needs and visions. Our previous houses exist as an invitation, and an open call to reclamation - for other communities to create their own *Rites of Passage* living ritual art houses; or otherwise imagine new ways to honor the passages of our lives, and the full expression of our beings.

While the *Rites of Passage Project* reflects the lived experiences of its creators, it also holds up a mirror to the larger world of our shared longing for reconnection, diverse expression, and belonging in the face of ever-encroaching monoculture, scarcity and violence.

A society bereft of initiation is one of endless wars—one which never confronts and therefore never metabolizes its grief and pain. A reorientation to community-supported rites of passage is the critical missing piece needed for an adolescent humanity to mature into adulthood—relinquishing its misplaced drives of becoming ever-faster, more wealthy, ageless and deathless—to at last become beings who protect the village as a whole, including all its human and beyond-human kin. As initiated members of a community, we no longer need

to fantasize about conquering other galaxies because we know who we are, and where we belong. Our task then is not just to consume more resources or create for the sake of novelty, but that as Prechtel and Tz’utujil Maya teach—our creations serve as offerings of gratitude and indebtedness for that which gives us life.

For the wider reimagining education movement, the *Rites of Passage Project* offers another site of fertile resistance—as oases of imagination within the suburban-sprawl of globalized culture; and home-grown medicine for generational disconnection and soul-erasure. Radical in its simplicity, it remains committed to cultivating face-to-face, living relationality and ritual—celebrating the tactile and the felt-sense in an age of virtual facsimile and digital isolation. And in a world that deflates wanting anything outside of industrial society’s pre-fix menu of choices as utopian and therefore impossible, Rites of Passage encourages us to gestate visionary possibilities on the margins of collapsing systems and -isms—showing us what it could look like, sound like, and feel like to live into who we truly are beyond our oppressions.

In kinship with others in the web of the Great Re-membering – *Rites of Passage* is water for those beautiful and parched rebels and misfits of patriarchy who still follow their own knowing. For those unable and unwilling to conform to the synthetic consensus of a rootless society, or to the tyranny of linear progress, it is a spiraling welcome home — an embrace of the brilliance that can be born only of trusting the animate Earth within us.

After hundreds – and in some cases, thousands – of years of colonization and dismemberment, our re-membering will take ongoing dedication, fierceness, tenderness, and time. Perhaps in coming home, however temporarily, to such places of wholeness, we inspire others in realizing their own latent longing for ritual, reconnection and place. A liberated future will not be contained within the narrow walls we’ve inherited; it is waiting to come alive in the Houses of our true Belonging.

To learn more, watch the film of Rites of Passage: 20/20 Vision, or to create your own Rites of Passage House, visit <www.RitesofPassageProject.org>.

ENDNOTES

1 Excerpted from the in-process book, [Rites of Passage: Rooms of Our Own from Girlhood Through Elderhood.v](#)

The colonialism of the Spirit: Alcohol

*They called it a drink. But it was a weapon.
When they couldn't take your land, they came for your spirit.
Before colonization, fermentation was ceremony.
Mead for harvest.
Wine for ritual. Plant brews for prayer. Everything was sacred.
Everything had rhythm. Then came the empires.
With barrels of rum, gin, whisky.
Distilled stronger, faster, addictive.
They traded it for gold, for labor, for silence.
It was never just a drink. It was a system of forgetting.
In Africa, it replaced ritual with dependency.
In the Americas, it broke tribal bonds.
In India and Australia, it numbed rebellion. The colonizer knew:
a people disconnected from their spirit are easier to control.
They didn't just colonize land. They colonized consciousness.
Turned sacred plant medicine into profit and poison.
Alcohol – from the Arabic al-kuhl means
the spirit that extracts the soul.
It does exactly that. It pulls the spirit out of the body.
And we call that “fun.”
This is how we were taught to escape our own power.
To silence the womb. To drown the ancestors.
To forget who we are. But now we remember.
Our true intoxication is breath. Our high is ceremony.
Our communion is life itself.*

- Shavita, @womb_wisdom_with_shavita

Unveiling the Sacred Everyday: Five Ways to Reconnect and Revitalize Your Organization

By Shilpa Jain

In my view, the sacred is part and parcel of the material world, not something separate from it. Although factory-schooling and other domination-based institutions have vilified, obscured, and set it aside in favor of logic, rationality, etc., they cannot eliminate this underlying and woven dimension of life. For me, connecting with the sacred is one of the most beautiful gifts of being alive – not as something ‘religious’ but rather as something deeply linked to my humanity.

At a young age, I remember first feeling the presence of the sacred in my encounters with the earth. Whether I was playing with caterpillars, ladybugs and fireflies, or awed by rainbows and thunderstorms, I remember a sense of magic all around me. As I grew up, some of this got diluted by the pervasiveness of school schedules and consumer culture, but it never fully left me. It would show up while holding a friend crying over a break-up, or while hiking in a forest, or sitting in silence in the firelight, or when I encountered tarot decks. The sacred was never far.

Then, later, as a facilitator (a facilitator who is also a participant), I began to co-create spaces with others to lift the veils around the sacred, to make it more visible to ourselves and each other, and to find pathways into it together. That began more in earnest consciousness about 20-some years ago and hasn’t stopped since. Here, I want to share with you a few practices I have learned and experimented with, both from my work in [YES! Jams](#) and in other spaces of personal, interpersonal and systemic transformation. I invite you to

consider these options and engage with them as your context permits.

Note: Context is very important in co-creating the sacred with a group. Before making any offering, inquire into their level of engagement and comfort and set in place consent-based agreements ([here are some that are used in YES! Jams](#)). If it's a relatively formal and professional organization, you might only use the first practice offered here, and trust that it is enough. The more intimate and familiar the group is, or will become eventually, the more deeply you can dive into the other practices.

I aim to always operate in the spirit of people before agenda – even an agenda for the sacred – which means I try to assess what will be an appropriate invitation to stretch for the folks involved, rather than pushing them to do too much too fast. That usually leads to reactivity rather than connection and curiosity. So, my invitation to you is to slow down and tune in with your group before introducing any of these practices

Grounding with the Earth, Spirit, and Body Wisdom

One of the simplest ways I include the sacred is through a 'grounding'. Towards the beginning of a gathering, as a facilitator, I invite people to get into a comfortable position, close their eyes or soften their gaze, and slow down their breathing. This helps to both land into the current place/time and also check in to what is inside of each of us.

I then offer a body scan, starting from the feet and slowly working my way up through the body, acknowledging each part and inviting a breath and a listening in there. In the course of your grounding, I also mention earth elements - air, earth, water, fire, space - which all live inside our bodies as well - through our breath, bones, blood, inner temperature, and connection with self and others. Lastly, as I reach the crown of the head, I invite a moment to connect above ourselves to the cosmos, inspiration, divinity, or whatever lies beyond. I then notice the full body, from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head, as a whole being, a conduit between earth and sky, part and parcel of both.

I like to close the grounding with a moment of silence before returning to the group and continuing on. This takes about seven minutes and can set a tone for the sacred, while also helping everyone to arrive more into the gathering.

Co-Creating a Hearth

The co-creation of a group hearth is another relatively simple way to invoke

the sacred into a gathering. Sometimes called ‘altars’ or ‘centers’, this is a space in which people can bring together objects that help them continue to feel grounded and supported. This process can be done ceremonially as a whole group, or left as an open invitation to add to the space. It can also be paired with some story-sharing in small groups around the object(s). [A full write-up of the activity can be found here as Sacred Space: Making an Altar/Center/Hearth in the YES! facilitation manual.](#)

I personally prefer the term ‘hearth’ because it doesn’t have a religious connotation which can be off-putting to some, either because they don’t ascribe to a religion, or because their religion doesn’t use altars. A hearth, on the other hand, both connects to the word ‘heart’ and also to the fireplace in an old-time kitchen, a place to return for warmth and coziness.

Collective group hearths can lead to group members creating a personal hearth back home, which can be an easy way for the sacred to continue into life on a daily basis. Ours sits directly in the heart of our home, on one side of the built-in cabinet in the dining room. Our circular dining table, which sits opposite it, has held so many shared meals and collective conversations over these last 16 years, that I have come to see the hearth as being infused by its co-creative energy, just as much as it has, without fanfare or even attention, quietly infused the groups that have gathered.

My and my beloved Austin’s own syncretism, along with that of our community, are also revealed here. It is steeped in our values of humility, generosity, compassion, forgiveness, surrender, and love, and connects so many different traditions, with earth elements, Buddha, Ganesha, the hand of Fatima, incense, friend-cestor photos, and more. Bringing all of these different elements together supports us in feeling whole, connected, and held in these complicated and challenging times. When we are feeling particularly challenged or when we just want to feel more connected, we light a candle, or burn some sage, incense, or palo santo, and take a moment to meditate or pray, and call upon the hearth for support.

Calling in the Ancestors

Many cultural traditions hold this practice of welcoming in our ‘well’ ancestors, the ones we want to join us in this moment. They are often named out loud while the people have gathered in a circle. In some of the gatherings I have co-hosted, we ask people to invoke them together – going one by one

in a circle, if the group is small, or saying names simultaneously, or naming them in our own heart-minds, if the group is large. If there is time, we can also connect with the values / gifts / energies that these ancestors have brought into our lives that we are carrying forward here. That can be a beautiful pair or small group share, if there is time and interest.

It is important to note that ancestors can be both chosen or given. For example, I call in Jiya, Bausa, Bhasa, and Bauji (what I call my paternal and maternal grandparents, whose names are Nanibai and Vijay Raj Chandaliya and Chandan Kamar and Sumer Raj Daga, respectively). I feel the qualities I carry from each of them living and breathing in me: Jiya's playfulness, her connection to the earth, her joy in dancing and in creating sweet little things for others; Bausa's simplicity, his rebelliousness and stubbornness; Bhasa's strong dignity and her sense of house-holding; Bauji's boisterous extroversion and his big welcoming hospitality. And then there are all my unseen and unknown ancestors, the parents and grandparents of my grandparents, all the way back. I have so much gratitude for their lives and what they made possible for me, and for so many.

Then, there are also my chosen ancestors: inspirational historical or mentor figures who I hold as luminaries of love and light. I feel grateful for the profound gifts they brought to the world, and the opportunity to revisit their messages and continue to learn with/from them. And, I tune into what it means for them to be holding us from the spirit world as our ancestors and guardians. How can I invite in their magic, messages, and mischief from that ethereal form? What might they do from that side, even beyond what they did on this one? I'm holding my faith that they are holding me, and us, and that, in unexpected moments, they will send over sparks of courage, laughter, and fortitude.

Calling in the ancestors can help me re-member who I am and help me belong, and this practice can also do the same for a group. I realized that my ancestors have my back, and yours have yours, and mine have your back, and yours have my back, too.

When I live and lead from this place, I find myself more able to be present, to be grounded and at ease, to be open-hearted. I can more easily accept the struggle and the beauty that lives within each person, and to trust that each of us are just listening inside to find our own creation song. And then I have

the opportunity to nurture and support those songs with my being, with my leadership, with my love. That's the gift from my ancestors. And, that's the gift to them.

Entering Deep Time

To build upon some of this ancestral connection, and to see ourselves also as future ancestors, I use this activity, adapted from one created by my dear elder Joanna Macy. I have described it briefly below, and you can [find the full description as Deep Time Wisdom Groups here in the YES! facilitation manual](#).

For example, in an online YES! HOME Jam (Healing Our Movement Ecosystem), I was in a group with Mary* and Julia*. After each of us had personally done some visioning around our paths forward, we set about practicing a deep time ritual. One of us would be the sharer; one of us would listen as an ancestor; one of us would listen as a future descendant. After the sharer spoke, the 'ancestor' and the 'descendant' offer reflections from their vantage points. Then, we all rotate roles until everyone has a chance to be in each role. Until I did it, I had no idea how much this practice can invoke the sacred and serve as a channel for profound healing.

Mary shared what she was going through and working on in herself and related it to the trauma of her family and her Irish ancestors. I was listening as her ancestor, and the message came through: I asked her for forgiveness. I accepted the truth that I had hurt her with my thoughts, words, actions — and what I can do is acknowledge it, ask to be forgiven, and do my best to learn and integrate. Sometimes, all of that happens in a lifetime; sometimes, it happens in the spiritual realm; sometimes, both. Regardless, when I sat with Mary and listened to her, I felt the ancestral spirit aiming for forgiveness, release, and integration.

I also felt the energy — the part that stays alive and keeps choosing even the littlest bit of life, regardless of the trauma. And isn't that something to celebrate and have gratitude for? Yes, my ancestors' trauma brought me here, and so did their power. I can release what I can of their pain in my lifetime and also build upon their foundation of strength.

Julia offered the other side to Mary: gratitude. Gratitude for her beautiful vision, her life and her work, that made so much more possible in the world.

As her ‘descendant’, Julia expressed her joy and appreciation to Mary, and told her to keep going. It mattered who she was and what she did. It truly made a difference for the future that Julia was lucky to live in.

As Mary, Julia and I shared this reflection together, I sensed something unlocked in each of us. The connection to our ancestors and to our future descendants was an opening, a softening, a deepening, a collaborating. The power of embodiment is real. This exercise infuses the sacred through our bodies and voices. If your group is willing to try it out, I think you will be deeply moved.

Grief Circles

This last practice I offer is best used when the group has established a good amount of trust and has shown a willingness to be vulnerable together. Grief circles are an opportunity to tap into the sacredness of our pain, loss, and longing, and be with all of it. On the other side of the listening and sharing is love – for self, each other, and the Earth. Coming together in our grief is a restoration of the sacred.

“I realized that my ancestors have my back, and yours have yours, and mine have your back, and yours have my back, too.”

Francis Weller talks about the five gates of grief in his book, [The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief](#): 1) grief for the loss of who and what we love (because everything we love, we will one day lose); 2) grief for that within us which has not received love; 3) grief for the suffering and sorrows of the world, for human and all Earth bodies; 4) grief for that which we expected and did not receive; 5) ancestral grief that moves through generations.

What I really appreciate is that Weller both demystifies grief and tries to democratize our roles in working with grief. He shares how simple it is to co-create spaces for grief and how easily we can expand access to it. In this way, grief can more readily move out of the shadows of shame and into the light of healing. To me, this is the medicine we need right now.

Over the years, I have joined with people to co-create grief circles in person and online. In all cases, the process is relatively simple. It began with an invitation and, then with those who chose to come, we landed together in a quiet space, ideally outside in a forest or near the water. Each of us had the opportunity to invite in any support we want from the Earth, from spirit, from ancestors, from the love around us, etc. Online, we began with a breath and body grounding, and invited everyone to call in any support they wanted.

We also asked everyone to bring in earth elements — a candle to light a fire, a bowl of water, and an Earth object like a stone, leaf, etc., to connect with during our time online. The connection to Mother Earth in any grief work feels vital to me, because she is a great teacher on grief. She is constantly experiencing loss and death, as well as new beginnings and sustenance, and her wisdom can guide the healing with our own grief

After grounding, we then had open space and time for people to share what they were grieving. In person, we built a cairn, in the Gaelic tradition, piling stones and shells and leaves, each as a symbol for the grief that was shared, spoken or unspoken. Online, we first held a check-in with small groups of three to share what was present and what our earth objects meant to us. Then, we came back together and wrote on slips of paper what we were each grieving, using the prompts of, “I grieve...” “I mourn...” “I have lost...” “I am longing for...” There was soft music and an opportunity to slow down and tap in. We then offered space for people to vocalize what they were feeling and experiencing, and invited others to bear witness and to connect with a hand gesture on screen, if they too shared in this grief.

Both online and in-person, we also sang together, to open our hearts and allow the channels of grief to flow more freely. We closed with a word/phrase check-in, and another deep breath to complete for now. The songs, the words, the Earth and simple ceremonial actions, all made space for tears to be shed, for each of us to be held and to know we were not alone.

I see grief as a process of release on so many levels. The physical letting go with tears and sobs, the mental letting go of stories and future fantasies, the spiritual letting go of failures and disappointments... Doing that letting go in community, with a sacred foundation and purpose, instead of trying to do it in isolation, is what makes the difference. As I heard someone say in another gathering, “Your healing is my healing.” When we release the pain,

what is left is love. And from there, connection, collaboration, creativity, and possibility, abound – the next wave of the sacred in practice.

I would love to hear which of these practices you try on in your workplace and community, and how you feel on the other side. In my experience, these practices, and others like them, can help us break through our stuck places. We feel more connected and whole, which helps us get out of institutional malaise, profit-driven (or funder-driven) thinking, and rigid decision-making, and into the realm of imagination and creativity. We feel more supported and collective – not outnumbered at all – which helps with overwhelm and nervous system stress.

From here, we can rethink what ‘going to scale’ truly means, when we are interconnected with the unseen energy all around us. Belonging is more possible when it is undergirded by a sense of humility and surrender. I have been in awe of what people transform from this place – from unhealed trauma and unprocessed grief, to centuries-old conflicts and divisions, to generative structures, powerful movements, and new paradigms. The sacred simply makes more possible.

I believe the sacred is within reach at every moment, inside each of us and in all of the life around us. Each of us, in joining with our hearts, each other, and the Earth, can grow a sacrediversity. We need to see it and feel it now more than ever, right? Let’s open our hearts and let it flow through.

Shilpa Jain served as Executive Director of YES! For 11+ years. She has facilitated dozens of transformative leadership gatherings in India, Jordan, Senegal, Lebanon, Egypt, Thailand, Canada, Peru, and the US, working with hundreds of young leaders from over 50 countries. Shilpa can be reached at <shilpa@swaraj.org>. Follow her latest writings on on <shilpajain.substack.com>.

Ceremonial Framework: From Grief to Creation

Hosted by the Wisdom Keepers Delegation

This gathering is structured around three distinct ceremonies that guide participants through loss, transition, and world-building—anchoring climate change adaptation and mitigation in spiritual responsibility and collective action.

Ceremony One: Honoring Grief and Loss

The first ceremony creates space to acknowledge what has been lost—lives, species, lands, ways of living, and certainty itself. Grief is honored not as an endpoint, but as a necessary act of truth-telling that clears the way for responsibility. Through prayer, song, silence, and offering, participants release what can no longer be carried and reaffirm their obligations to one another and to future generations.

Ceremony Two: The Shift from Destruction to Creation

The second ceremony marks the transition we are living through: a movement away from systems of extraction and collapse toward renewal and co-creation. This ceremony affirms that the current planetary shift, while disruptive, carries the possibility of a new world if ancestral teachings remain intact. Here, wisdom keepers share teachings on humility, acceptance of change, and no resilience—guiding participants to recognize this moment not as an ending, but as an opening.

Ceremony Three: Celebration of the New World and Blessing for the Planet

The final ceremony is a celebration of what is being built now. It offers blessings for the Earth, for emerging climate hubs, for strengthened global networks, and for the practical pathways of adaptation and mitigation taking root across communities. This ceremony affirms life, joy, and responsibility, sending participants forward with clarity, commitment, and collective purpose.

Together, these ceremonies move participants from reflection into action. Grounded in ancestral knowledge, the gathering supports the creation of living systems — food sovereignty, seed saving, water protection, fire stewardship, shelter, migration pathways, and community care — that safeguard humanity and the planet during this time of profound change.

From Gift Culture's Sacred Womb: The Next Asian Tiger Awakens to Spread Kindness

By Vu Truong

Tragedy of the Gift

“I was raised by the ecosystem of gentle silt-laden rivers and fertile soils in the Mekong Delta region in Vietnam. Thanks to nature’s bounty, people tend to have a happy-go-lucky attitude, along with generosity (hào sảng) and reciprocity (có qua có lại) toward each other. Sometimes, my mom cooked the entire pot of mouth-watering sweet soup, not only for her kids but the entire village. I used to venture around my neighborhood and sincerely share the fruits of my mom’s labor. It is the sign of a real healthy and prosperous society.” -Thien Quach the VCIL Community initiator.

In contrast to his experience, many Vietnamese children today grow up isolated within urban environments, disconnected from neighbors and nature. Forests are disappearing to fuel market demand and consumer culture expands, boosting economic growth since the 1986 reforms. In our conversation with previous generations, one common trait people recognize is that our material wealth has increased rapidly, yet the sense of community and biodiversity tends to go down. In this wave, Thien Quach witnessed dramatic change in his hometown: “Canals are filled with plastic instead of fishes. The soil was degraded by agrochemicals. People fight over land, driven by a scarcity mindset. It was indignant to see my neighbor ask for money just because the pathway to my house crosses his land.”

He further shares “As a teen, I hated poverty and wanted to uplift my community. This led me to business school in an Asian Economic Tiger country, but I left after three days when a professor taught students how to

curry favors with the boss. I would like to be an entrepreneur for my people, not a corporate slave. From that moment, I started to realize the connection between the schooling system and corporate agenda. Then, I have been going through a deep process of unlearning.” Thien’s journey of unlearning brought us together to form the VCIL Community.

VCIL Community is a learning ecosystem of Vietnamese changemakers working toward a regenerative and well-being paradigm of development. In order to shift the current destructive system, we combine inner transformation with system change. VCIL Community initiated projects to re-imagining education, experimenting with alternative lifestyle and development models, and building networks for social entrepreneurship and social innovation. We often organize un/learning journeys - we called it VCIL Travel School - to many innovative Ecoversities’ projects in Thailand, India, Korea, etc. to inspire changemakers. That’s also how we weave learners from diverse backgrounds together to form a dynamic ecosystem.

As Vietnam keeps pursuing the goal of becoming an Economic Tiger, rivers are polluted, genetic resources lost, and communities erased, replacing true wealth with superficial assets. Something essential to well-being is missing in this race for endless growth. Vietnam’s tiger, the “King of the Jungle” (**Chúa Tể Sơn Lâm**), traditionally guards the sacred. A “real” Asian Tiger would regenerate life, prioritize happiness, and protect the common good. This vision called us to look for an alternative economy that is rooted in our core spiritual values: gift culture.

Living Tradition of the Gift

Gift-giving in Vietnam reflects a rich cultural tradition encompassing in-kind transfers, cash, labor, or services. Anthropologist Emmanuel Pannir (1) notes key themes like mutual aid (**giúp đỡ**), reciprocity (**có qua có lại**), moral obligation (**tình nghĩa**), and sometimes a sense of moral indebtedness (**nợ**). While reciprocity is ideal, gifts may not always be returned, especially in unequal relationships. Instead, moral obligation is emphasized, as in the saying “**Thương người như thể thương thân**” (Love others as you love yourself). When offering gifts, do not expect anything in return (**tặng lễ không cầu người**). This phrase reflects the ideal of sincerity and selflessness in relationships, suggesting that one should not try to manipulate others with gifts. When one party is unable to repay a favor due to economic circumstances, a natural sense of gratitude is expressed in terms of social indebtedness.

This sense of moral obligation, approached with patience, reflects a cultural continuity rather than a burden. “**Uống nước nhớ nguồn**” (When drinking water, remember its source) as one saying goes.

That phrase also reflects deep-seated reverence in the context of ancestors, urging people to honor those who came before us. In Vietnamese culture, ancestors hold a central place as symbols of gratitude, rootedness, and continuity, embodying the values of respect. Ancestors are seen as guardians and sources of wisdom, linking generations through shared traditions and rituals. This connection is maintained through practices like ancestor worship, offerings, and the annual death anniversary (**giỗ**) ceremonies, where families gather to pay respects.

“In Vietnamese culture, ancestors hold a central place as symbols of gratitude, rootedness, and continuity, embodying the values of respect...”

The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, deepened this reverence by viewing ancestors as living within us—not just biologically, but spiritually. He teaches that by looking deeply within ourselves, we can connect with generations past, carrying forward their wisdom and compassion. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, honoring ancestors means acknowledging our interdependence and understanding that we are a continuation of those before us.

Gift culture, in this sense, is more than a transfer of resources; it is a spiritual force that binds individuals together, fostering a sense of community care, social security and mutual responsibility. These practices, deeply embedded in our cultural norms, continue to play a significant role in Vietnamese society (even in the face of modernization). When VCIL Community members were asked how we have experienced gift culture in our own lives, we shared:

- Ly (a learner of our alternative to university project) vividly described how she lived with a sense of abundance in her childhood in Mekong Delta. Back then, children spent lots of time playing in nature. Whenever they felt hungry, they could freely go into any neighborhood house to pick fruits or have a meal in the kitchen. She remembers the “fence” between neighbors was very loosely defined. Families could cross other people’s land to give and take any food easily. Nowadays, that spirit has almost disappeared.

- For Thien and Ly, they are nurtured by gift culture from childhood by immersing themselves in Buddhist social service. The Pure Land Buddhist Community exemplifies gift culture through its longstanding commitment to traditional medicine, offering free healthcare to those in need. The community operates over 200 centers across the country, where monks, nuns and trained volunteers provide holistic treatments based on Vietnamese traditional medicine, including herbal remedies and acupuncture. These services are offered without cost, embodying the Buddhist principle of “**phước huệ song tu**”—cultivating both blessings and wisdom—by alleviating the suffering of others. The community’s sustainable approach to healthcare also includes a significant focus on growing medicinal herbs, with some temples dedicating large plots to cultivate hundreds of medicinal plants. This not only supplies their clinics but also enhances local green spaces, reflecting a sense of environmental responsibility and respect for natural resources. By offering care and traditional healing at no cost, the Pure Land Buddhist Community provides a model of generosity that deeply aligns with Vietnam’s cultural values, illustrating how gift culture is rooted in compassion and community support. Thien always emphasized that experiencing those practices shaped his mindset and determination in doing social work. It also helps him see through the illusion of a materialistic paradigm of development.
- When I first met the VCIL team, I accidentally walked into a local Caodaism temple (a Vietnamese esoteric religion). Local people told me that on the full moon day of the 8th Lunar Month, followers gather around **Tay Ninh Holy See** to offer vegetarian food and drink as a blessing for travelers. Food is mainly donated by aunties and grandmas from whatever available on their own farm. Strangers from faraway are welcome to the Holy See to eat any time. They can contribute back by helping prepare food for others. I was really amazed by how generous people are when doing service for strangers.
- Across Vietnam, there are many vegan restaurants and tea shops operating in the spirit of voluntary contribution. One of the places that embodies the essence of gift culture that I encountered in Ho Chi Minh City was **Man Tu Vegan**. Nestled in a cozy alley, this vegan restaurant fosters a sense of community by welcoming people from all walks of life to share meals together, transcending social barriers. The diverse and nourishing

dishes are served buffet-style, encouraging diners to contribute as they feel moved. Mãn Tụ Vegan not only nourishes the body but also cultivates a culture of sharing and compassion, where everyone, regardless of their financial means, can enjoy a wholesome meal together. In the beginning of my journey, the restaurant showed me a glimpse of gift culture and has been a huge source of inspiration for our international guests.

- When my grandpa was alive, I and other grandchildren gathered at his house before Lunar New Year. For me, it is one of the most warm moments in the year because Vietnamese people make **bánh chưng** and **bánh dày** for the holiday. I learned that the story of its origin reflects a deep-rooted practice of gift culture in Vietnam, where offerings are imbued with symbolic meaning and a spirit of gratitude. When King Hùng Vương challenged his sons to present a dish embodying the essence of the Earth, Prince Lang Liêu—guided by simplicity and reverence—crafted **bánh chưng** (square, symbolizing the Earth) and **bánh dày** (round, symbolizing the sky) using humble ingredients: sticky rice, mung beans, and pork. These cakes were not merely food but gifts that conveyed harmony with nature, respect for ancestral wisdom, and an understanding of life’s interconnectedness. By offering these symbolic creations, Lang Liêu honored his father and the Earth’s abundance, showcasing the power of meaningful, thoughtful gifts to foster connection and uphold cultural values. To this day, the tradition of making and sharing **bánh chưng** and **bánh dày** during **Tết** (Vietnamese Lunar New Year) embodies the Vietnamese spirit of giving, rooted in gratitude, community, and balance.
- In one of our learning journeys exploring local culture, Thien threw me in the middle of “Giặt Cô Hồn” Festival. Meaning “stealing from hungry ghosts”, it is a vibrant practice celebrated during the Lunar July Festival in Southern Vietnam, particularly among the local Chinese community. This ritual involves participants scrambling to collect offerings of food and other goods from altars, which symbolize both sustenance and spiritual purification. In the case of “Giặt Cô Hồn,” there is no expectation for the recipients to return a gift. The participants, often referred to as “living souls”, symbolically embody the spirits they honor, creating a complex interplay between the living and the dead. This ritual not only serves to appease these spirits but also represents a form of community where wealthier individuals provide for the less

fortunate. Observers of “Giặt Cô Hồn” will notice a diverse mix of participants from different regions of Vietnam, highlighting the practice’s inclusivity and historical significance in fostering social ties. Ultimately, “Giặt Cô Hồn” reinforces the belief that generosity enriches both giver and receiver while nurturing community bonds across socioeconomic lines.

- Gift culture is not only the exchange between humans, but also the intimate relationship with non-human beings. Thien and Ly grew up in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. Between the 7th to 10th month of the Lunar Calendar, the Delta is inundated with floods. However, this flooding is not considered a natural disaster but seen as a gift instead. It is not a kind of flash flood but a slow and gentle wave of rising and falling water level. Flooding season here creates perfect conditions for agricultural land in the lower Mekong basin to rest, wash away the pests and diseases. It brings the sediment to increase the fertility of rice fields and regenerate the river ecosystem. In Vietnamese, we call the movement or the tide of river “con nước” The classier “con” signified the river as an alive being with its own consciousness.

Our Experiments with Truth

At VCIL Community, we draw from Vietnamese culture and examples of gift culture-based communities in Asia which operate on volunteerism. Inspired by this, we chose not to be confined by fixed salaries, seeing our labor as priceless and rooted in love and service. Instead of traditional wages, we pool resources to meet basic needs, providing Universal Basic Services such as food, healthcare, and housing. This model, inspired by communal traditions in early Southern Vietnam villages (bản thôn điền thổ), turns money into a shared resource, managed transparently by the community. Sharing has reduced our living costs while maintaining quality of life, allowing us to enjoy local, healthy food at lower costs. With a minimalist lifestyle, we’ve found that moderate consumption brings greater fulfillment. Trust and transparency are central, and all transactions are visible to members, fostering shared responsibility. Our collective fund provides a safety net for teammates in need.

Seeing the transformative potential of resource sharing and solidarity economics, we decided to expand the experiment to a wider circle of our VCIL Community Membership. These are our brothers and sisters who share similar values to us and are on their own journeys. They also support us monthly because they feel aligned with the community’s vision. In addition, with the

purpose of re-imagine “banking” based on the spirit of the gift, we launched “Gift Bank”.

This ‘bank’ is formed based on the voluntary contributions of our members. They are welcome to contribute at any time with any amount. Members are also free to withdraw from the account for personal purposes to meet basic needs, or family issues, or for community service purposes without any additional constraints. Someone bought seeds for his organic farm, others used it to attend training courses, etc. On the other hand, the person withdrawing can choose to repay the full amount, or just a portion, or not at all. It is designed to reinforce sharing, and generosity between members. By turning the bank into a common good, mutual trust is also nurtured, as everyone can use the funds, and everyone has the responsibility to maintain and protect this shared asset.

By activating the circle of gifting, it opened up a whole different range of possibilities. Lately, one farmer was touched by the way the community operates, hence she decided to donate a macadamia tree to the “bank”. The tree was supposed to be cut down on her farm, but now is taken care of by her family in an organic way. Every year, fruit from the tree will be distributed among the Circle of Membership. Members are welcome to pay as much as they feel like, but not directly to the farmer but to the “Giftbank” for others. She wants to ensure that the circle of giving and sharing keeps flow.

In a recent “Re-imagining Education” workshop led by Manish Jain in Hoi An, participants co-created a unique “zero-money wedding” event that showcased a gift culture-based approach to celebrating life milestones. Designed to move away from heavy costs and consumerism associated with modern weddings, this celebration relied entirely on the generosity and creativity of community members. Each aspect, from the décor to the food and music to the clothes and jewelry, was contributed by participants who offered their skills, resources, and support as gifts. The VCIL community witnessed the union of the bride and groom and agreed to act as guardians for their journey forwards. This approach fostered a sense of community connection, joy, and shared values, embodying the principles of a regenerative, solidarity-based economy that values human relationships.

Money is often a source of misery for many people, whether one pursues a social-oriented career or mainstream corporate ladder. Part of the reason is we don’t know what “money” is or how it is “printed”. Another reason is that the

school system trained us only to be consumers and employees as a “human resource” for the global economy. Through fake education, we learn how to accumulate “fake assets”. To understand and experiment with ‘real wealth’, we run a series of workshops on personal finance called “Money IQ - Money EQ”. Our mission is to transform our relationship with money, emphasizing on conscious engagement with “happy” money. Combining practical methods of personal financial planning, learners are equipped to make financial decisions in alignment with their values and life goals. Through this, we also promote the spirit of social entrepreneurship and “alivelihoods” - work that rebuilds the local community, ecology and economy. We created a space to learn how to build a healthy relationship with money and explore the trauma of money. The shift in consciousness also requires us to deeply rethink our economic and financial system too. The workshop opens up dialogue on ethical banking, local economy, impact investing and regenerative finance.

The Way Forward

In the beginning, we noticed that the challenge for modern gift culture renaissance on the large scale is the collective consciousness. In Vietnam, when a service is offered under the spirit of “pay as much as you can”, people tend to pay the least, even though sometimes they have the capacity to contribute more. The dominant capitalist free market system keeps reinforcing the value of scarcity in people’s minds. When strangers seek to meet their needs, the mentality of self-interest is lurking around. And the general public easily mis-understands that gift culture equals charity. That’s why VCIL Community started small, within the core team first then expanded to members circle who are interested in the values of mutual care and radical trust. Gift culture meant re-establishing the mutual understanding and deeper connection between people, not just another careless form of goods exchange. We found that helping people remember the essence of gift culture takes lots of time and effort.

Nonetheless, upon introspection, the most important aspect of experimenting with gift culture is that it has shifted our mindsets. Trinh (VCIL Community’s core team members) shared that it brings her closer to others. She enjoys the deep human connection from gifting relationships rather than commercial exchange. Huy (another VCIL Community’s core team member) feels abundant and secure because the community is his safety net. He felt it is easier to let things go.

When we live in the spirit of the gift, it opens up a whole new range of

possibilities to re-access our sacred sensibilities. We start to feel ‘wealthy’, in terms of relationships with other people and even non-human beings. Our dream would be seeing the diversity of gift culture practices proliferate around the world. We believe this sacred way of life is already ubiquitous among Asian traditional cultures. We just need to remember and awaken this. Many Ecoversties like VCIL Community are already experimenting with bringing gift culture back to modern context. By sharing those stories, we can learn from each other and strengthen the spirit. And I invite readers to share your stories of gift culture to help bring sacred economies to reality.

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ENDNOTES

1 Pannier E., 2015, “An overview of non-commercial flows in contemporary Vietnam”, Vietnam Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities 1(3): 229-245.v

“I grew up hearing the word seva whispered like prayer — not something you did, but something you were. My grandmother never used the word volunteer, never spoke of helping. She would say, beta, thoda seva kar lo — do some seva. When she fed the stray cow, give something to neighbor, donate some food or grains to Fakirs or cleaned the temple floor, there was no concept of generosity. It was belonging — simple and complete.

But as I grew older, I noticed something subtle and devastating: the same word that once meant sacred offering had been reborn as service. It appeared in textbooks, government mottos, NGO slogans, and corporate walls — Service to the Nation. Customer Service. Volunteer Service. With each new use, a little more of its soul leaked away.

This was not accidental. It was political. Power always seeks to tame what is free. Seva, in its original form, could not be owned, measured, or taxed. It was not obedience to authority but intimacy with existence. When people act from that kind of freedom, systems tremble.

British colonial systems understood this well. They reframed seva through bureaucratic, missionary, and capitalist lenses: missionaries moralized it as charity and pity; bureaucrats turned it into public service and loyalty to the empire; later, corporations rebranded it as customer service — seva stripped of spirit, refitted for the market. Thus it was secularized, standardized, and slowly translated into service. And that translation — though simple — carried enormous spiritual and cultural consequences. Where once there was no “server” and “served,” only participation in the whole, now hierarchy and transaction took their place.

Modern institutions learned to translate spirit into function, rebranding offering as duty, love as labor, humility as submission. A worker cleaning a floor is now “in service,” a woman caring for her family performs “unpaid service,” and citizens questioning injustice are told to “serve the nation” by staying silent. What was once devotion has become discipline; what was once sacred has become strategic.

And this story is not only ours. Across cultures — whether omotenashi in Japan, diakonia in Christianity, Indigenous reciprocity with the Earth, or the Ubuntu truth of “I am because we are” — sacred ways of giving have been absorbed by systems of profit and power. The sacred becomes a slogan; the relational becomes procedural.

Yet I refuse despair. Words can be reclaimed. Seva is not gone; it only hides beneath the language of labor, waiting in the smallest gestures of care that ask for nothing in return. This is what systems fear most — not rebellion with banners, but quiet, radiant disobedience: the kind that refuses to exploit what gives us life, that sees the divine not in the temple, but in the soil, the hands, the breath of the other.

So the next time you think about doing service, pause for a moment. Remember that your impulse to serve is ancient — and that your sacredness has been quietly colonized by systems that learned to name, measure, and monetize what was once free. To remember this is not to reject service, but to return it to its source. Because seva was never about serving — it was always about remembering who you truly are.”

- Diken Patel, Reclaiming Seva, Personal Facebook Blog

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Life as a living lab: Becoming with the relational field.

By Mona Calvet



Introduction: Life as inquiry

Last fall, I connected with Manish Jain from the Ecoversities Alliance. “What is an experiential researcher?”, he asked. From the threads of our conversation, a lived response wanted to be born and shared. This essay is one. Incomplete, unfolding, intimate. It is an offering that peeks into how I make sense of hyper-complexity, keep moving through it and tend to dying systems by experiencing life as a living lab. The intention is not to offer fixed answers, but to trace my process. The process is the research.

I invite us to dive into this piece as an experience we will share together. I am proposing we meet in my childhood backyard, on the margins of the city

centre, where we will sit on the fertile soil that has shaped my inquiry. Some stories will be shared about how my relationship with modernity became a ground for observation, resistance, grief, and medicine. Then, we will walk the urban landscape towards downtown, arriving in front of academia's steps. Here, we'll walk the corridors, where I will recall glimpses of my time in academia. We might also eavesdrop on some hallway conversations, revealing some institutional shadows. We may need a pause after that. I'll suggest some options, but please be free to sense into your body's needs and respond accordingly.

When we are ready, I'd like to show you a nearby hidden spot. I feel it might energize you as much as it does for me. It's where my breath slows down, my senses heighten, and the life that flows through me unleashes. I feel we might stay a while, so I suggest we have a picnic there, gazing at the wild, as I share with you what my research is about, how it unfolds, and why it matters in this time of great socio-ecological unravelling. So what do you say? Do you accept my invitation? I have prepared a gift for you with some resources that have significantly touched my soul and shaped my living lab. No expectations, of course. Hope to see ya!



Stepping into my youth's urban, yet in-the-outskirts backyard

Greetings kindred, thank you for accepting my invitation. Here we are, in my childhood backyard, which was only shyly borrowed. Our French-Canadian neighbours on the ground floor kindly let me play here. But I had to be a "good girl" and play gently if I wanted to keep coming down here. As we sit

and play with the dirt, I'll show you some spots where inquiry took root for me. Pull out a log over there and come sit with me.

Early on in life, as a child, I was drawn to the kind of questions that linger in hushed corners. Questions that felt ancient, encoded within my cells and bones, passed down through silence rather than speech. Perhaps they were questions, ancestors (human and more-than-human), could not afford to ask. Questions swallowed, left unanswered.

How dare I challenge religion? Patriarchy? Racism? Human supremacy? I learned quickly that some questions were dangerous. That voicing them could unsettle, provoke, isolate. It felt safer to keep most of them in, though my sacred inner clown has always had a taste for poking at the "monster", testing the edges of what could or could not be expressed. Information does not cease to exist just because it isn't voiced, heard or seen. It burrows into the moist, dark depths of the relational soil, taking root, weaving fugitive patterns into the fabric of life, shaping it from the shadows, the cracks, the edges.

Each of these practices is a vessel for insights to settle, cross-pollinate, decompose, and transform in their own time. She is the air I breathe, the water I drink, the food that nourishes me, the soil that cradles my body, and I am her remembering, her voice, her kin.

Moving between continents, cultures, languages, and unspoken codes of belonging, I observed how each place revealed its own hierarchies of worth, its own choreography of performance; who and what was valued, centred or cast aside. I was expected to adapt, to mould myself to each logic, to master the language, memorize the scripts, move in rhythm with prescribed steps. But life, as it expressed itself through me, disruptive, layered, tension-full, never fit neatly into such rigid staging. Where dominant systems rewarded the performance, I was drawn to the scaffolding, the pulleys and wires, the unseen machinery behind the spectacle. While others seemed to take their cues and play their roles, I was distracted by the not-so-quiet noise coming from the unlit corners, where the script unraveled, where the shadows of the backstage whispered stories the spotlight was never meant to reveal.

Looking back, I see now that experiential research was never something I “chose”. It was life’s healing impulse moving through me, as I tried to make sense of the mad world I was entangled with as a TCK [1] of indigenous and SWANA [2] heritage, growing up in North America post 9/11. Paradox lived in me as I sensed into modernity’s ghostly patterns of harm rippling across systems, cultures, lineages, bodies, and stories, carried in both the numbed-out silences and the raw, uncontained expressions of trauma, and grief. Modernity did not feel safe, and yet it still felt attractive, like the cool kids at school you secretly want to be seen with and acknowledged by but deep down don’t like or trust.

I became a psycho-sociologist with a mix of hope, dread, and idealism, driven by the desire to “make the world a better place.” But as I moved across academic institutions, workplaces, and social landscapes, I witnessed patterns of dis-ease reverberating across every layer of relationship, within and between interiorities, intimate partnerships, families, communities, organizations, nation-states, and the Earth herself.

Was I mad? Was the world mad? Both, perhaps? How does one remain physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually whole in a world that feels so fractured?

Research “became” in rupture. In my body’s sacred refusal. At the phase when modernity’s crumbling edifice no longer felt like something I was moving through, but something unravelling within me. Its debris generating clouds of dust clogging my lungs and choking my throat with resent and cynicism, yet also making space for relief and compassion as ancient/new forms of knowing started re-emerging, seeking to be re/membered.

I let go. And in that letting go, grief flooded in. The grief of plunging into the depth of realization that the privileges I had enjoyed were built upon histories of violence and unsustainability. The very systems that had granted me social mobility were the same ones exploiting the land, the more-than-human, BIPOC communities, and the Global South, endangering the very foundations of life itself and all that I dearly care about. The pain I had carried all along resurfaced, exposing the depth of harm inflicted upon my bloodline. Wounds passed down through generations, wounds I had unwillingly been complicit in.

At the height of my entanglement with modernity, I overworked and overachieved, collecting validation like breadcrumbs. The dopamine rush of recognition kept me running, but the further I advanced, the hollower it all felt.

I could no longer unsee the cost. No longer justify my participation. No longer trick myself into believing that the path I was on led anywhere but collapse.

Experiential research emerged as a response from grief, a medicine of remembrance, of reverence. As I stopped searching for answers within the very logic that created the polycrisis, surrendering instead to the descent of the unravelling, letting collapse become a teacher, a friend, a lover. The floods of grief carved new rivers for life to flourish from.

My relationship with academia

Wow, what a walk. I lost track of time as we made our way from my childhood backward to downtown. We have now arrived in the heart of the city, standing before an imposing academic institution. Modern glass windows meet with neoclassical columns, an ornate golden lion standing watch as we ascend the steps. Let us step inside.



Into the walls of modernity's dominant system of knowledge production

To understand the research I practice, it is relevant to situate it in relation to the dominant system of knowledge production, rooted in the paradigm of modernity-coloniality. This system has long dictated what is considered legitimate research. Academia serving as gatekeeper, defining knowledge, determining who has the authority to produce it, and structuring access to funding, publication, and recognition. Here, knowledge is not seen as a living, relational process but as something to be extracted, dissected, and categorized.

My relationship with academia has been complex, holding both nourishment and toxicity. Studying to become a psychosociologist, I was propelled by an overflow of intrinsic motivation, absorbing theoretical frameworks that deepened knowledge I had already encountered through lived experience. It felt as though the roots of my knowing were strengthening, anchoring what had once been intuitive and unstructured. I was passionate about my studies, especially their practical applications. Learning was not reduced to memory-based regurgitations but invited engagement through context-based case studies, interviews, diagnostics, intervention planning, training design, and facilitation. The intellectual stimulation was electric.

Yet, the structure of academia was not designed to sustain the aliveness of learning. I noticed how it functioned as a machine of production, performance, and efficiency. I felt the pressure of systems that fed on extrinsic motivation, where proving oneself was recognized, and hence rewarded more than deepening one's understanding. The more I excelled, the more I saw how these structures subtly conditioned me to value output over relationality, validation over inquiry, intellectual mastery over embodied wisdom. I witnessed professors and researchers, considered authorities in their fields, carrying vast oceans of knowledge in their minds while walking in a way that felt disembodied, disconnected from the very expertise they dedicated their lives to.

At the same time, my partner's over seven-year PhD journey became a window into the deeper realities of academic research. Conversations with his peers revealed a landscape marked as much by curiosity and devotion as by intricate power dynamics, enclaved ivory towers, and suffocating institutional constraints. Stories of dominance, competition, isolation, and burnout echoed through the corridors. Many of us seemed to smell the stink coming from the building's unkept basement. Beneath the grand facade of academia lay a foundation of hidden truths few dared to voice beyond trusted circles.

And so, as I recognize the shadows, I also recognize its value, and how entangled I am with academia through my ever flowing intellectual curiosity, partnerships with edgy academics and research institutes, and my partner's deep relationship with it. Hosting this paradox is part of my research which I will get to in the following section called "the meadow of experiential research, an open field"

The mechanistic inheritance of conventional academic research

The mechanistic approach to conventional research is not separate from the broader structures of modernity; it is an extension of them.

Just as industrialization stripped the land of its so-called "resources" in an unrelenting pursuit of development, academia has stripped knowledge from its relational context, extracting, dissecting, and classifying it within controlled environments. Framed as a positivist quest to make knowledge so-called universal, this process severs knowing from the living world, reducing it to isolated fragments.

Just as capitalism assigns value based on productivity and efficiency, research is evaluated by its ability to be published, cited, and absorbed into existing systems of power, prioritizing knowledge that is measurable and replicable, regardless of its depth or relevance.

Just as colonialism mapped, categorized, and dominated the world through conquest and exploitation, academic research has functioned as an epistemic cartography, charting territories of knowledge while rendering others invisible. This extractive logic of domination extends to the very bodies that sustain academia, exploiting data, students, and faculty members alike in service of so-called progress. Ancestral traditions, oral knowledge, Indigenous, place-based, and subjective ways of knowing have long been dismissed as anecdotal or unscientific. Not because they lack validity, but because they do not conform to modernity's criteria for legibility.

This paradigm assumes research must be conducted at a distance, minimizing bias by removing the researcher from the field of study. It favours predefined methodologies and standardized analytical models. Even qualitative research, which sought to challenge positivist constraints, is often forced into rigid frameworks, bound by systematic coding, triangulation, and theoretical alignment, reflecting an institutional anxiety toward knowledge that cannot

be neatly contained.

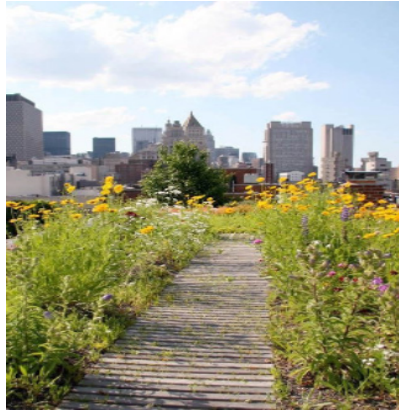
Specialization deepens fragmentation. Scholars are trained to become experts in increasingly narrow fields, typically unable to engage meaningfully with interconnected realities. The assumption is that by dissecting knowledge into smaller and smaller parts, we arrive at a greater understanding of the whole. Yet the world is not a machine. It is complex, nonlinear, emergent, and unpredictable. Living systems cannot be understood through dissection alone. Their intelligence emerges in relationship, in the interwoven patterns that reductionist methods cannot reveal.

The cracks in the foundation

As modernity's violent and unsustainable foundations unravel into the polycrisis of our times, the world as we know it edges closer to systemic collapse. The crises we face are not isolated but deeply entangled. Ecological, social, political, economic, and technological upheavals reinforcing one another in complex feedback loops. Research frameworks born from this paradigm are proving inadequate, unable to grasp the interconnected nature of these crises. Fragmented approaches to knowledge creation cannot respond to problems that are relational at their core.

But as modernity crumbles under its own weight, other ways of researching, knowing, and being are re/membering themselves. They were never absent. They were silenced, buried, dismissed. And yet, they persist, pushing through the fractures, emerging like rebellious plants, bending and shifting, cracking through the concrete. They do not need permission to exist. They adapt.

That was a lot. How is this all landing in your inner landscape? It might be the first time you come in relation with concepts like the polycrisis and collapse, or maybe you are familiar with these. In any case, I want to acknowledge the intensity of it all. As we step out of academia's walls, maybe we can walk towards a bench and sit in silence for a while. Focus on our breathing. Shake our body. Look around, what colours shapes, textures do you notice? Please take care of your body's needs, and when you feel ready, i'd love to take you a place I call home. It is hidden, and yet it is everywhere. Come... Can't wait to show you!



The meadow of experiential research, an open field

Research as a decolonial and emergent process

Earth's healing impulse is calling for ways of knowing that open space for regenerative possibilities to take root. Decontextualized knowledge has reinforced systems that no longer sustain us. As modernity crumbles, what might emerge from the ruins? What ways of knowing have been buried beneath its foundations, waiting to breathe again? How do we research in times of collapse? What does it mean to inquire from within the very systems that are unraveling? If knowledge has been severed from life, how do we return it to the communities it emerged from through their relationship with the more-than-human world?

Experiential research came to me as one response to these questions, amongst an ecosystem of responses. It is not a solution, but a practice of response. It is a way of inhabiting inquiry and a way of listening that invites the subtle, complex melody of the living Earth to shape us as we move more fluidly with what these times demand of us, as individuals and as communities, human and more-than-human.

It learns to host multiple truths, understanding that no single perspective holds the whole, but that wisdom lives in the in-betweens. It is a process of becoming.

However, this approach does not seek to replace dominant research frameworks or discard the value that has emerged from academic inquiry. It moves from a different center. It is not about villainizing modernity and rejecting it as we escape into some romanticized alternative. I acknowledge

modernity's gifts, including how it offers me the technological tools to remain connected with human kin across the planet. Making it the enemy keeps us trapped within modernity's frame of separation and othering. It is however about unlearning the mechanistic logic of modernity, reweaving relationship, hosting its paradoxes, and tending to its contradictions. Experiential research can serve as a process to unlearn, reconnect, and remember in communion. Through it, I witness an ongoing shift in how I relate to life, in how I show up in the world with more awareness, with more kinship, with more ache, with more love.

To research in this way is to participate in the hospicing of modernity. To witness its slow, inevitable death, not as an enemy, but as a system whose time has come. It is to grieve what must be grieved while recognizing that life continues beyond it. The world is much older and wiser than modernity.

The Earth carries 4.54 billion years of evolutionary intelligence. We are not the architects of life but offsprings to an elder. Strands within a web we did not weave. Participants in a dance far beyond our control. Modernity tricks us into believing we are at the center, yet we are only one note in the symphony of existence. I have learned that much of this process is about getting out of our own way, releasing human supremacy, and letting the wisdom of the Earth guide us.



A booklet called “Récits qui reliant” I came across during a Work That Reconnects training at Sageterre farm in Rimouski, Quebec.

The poem above in French, translates in English as follows:

I wonder if...

I wonder if the moon doubts her power and the effects she creates
just by being herself.

If turtles feel trapped under their shells.

If rocks worry about whether it's okay to crumble, to let themselves
be shattered by the waves created by tides.

I wonder if the sea worries about being sometimes very calm and
sometimes very agitated.

If the oak tree worries about not having rooted itself in the right
place.

If the geese question which direction to take once autumn arrives.

If the bear resists the approaching winter or simply takes the
opportunity to rest. I wonder if the meteorite is aware, it can change
its trajectory.

If the bird is aware that it has herself planted the tree she feeds on
by dropping her seeds along the way.

If butterflies worry about what will happen to them in their
chrysalis phase, or if they know that darkness does not last. If they
are terrified at the thought of leaving their cocoon and tasting full
freedom.

I wonder if the bean feels guilty for needing the sunflower to climb
higher.

If the fear of judgment pushes the chameleon to change its color to
blend into the background.

- Marilyne

Revisiting the questions in the beginning of the section, maybe we can just sit with the idea that there is no single answer. Perhaps the answer is not the point. Knowledge is not static, it is alive and dynamic, arising in relationship, between people, between systems, between the seen and the unseen.

The form of research I experiment with is decolonial. One that recognizes the failures of modernity's epistemic foundations while tending to the emergence of new and ancient ways of knowing. It is a practice of presencing into complexity, of surrendering control, and of allowing the inquiry to shape the inquirer.

My work draws from relational, eco-autoethnographic research, a qualitative

methodology that situates the researcher within the field as an active participant. It recognizes that we are not separate from the systems we seek to understand; we are entangled within them. This approach weaves personal, ecological, ancestral, and socio-cultural dimensions of knowing, embracing the porous, fluid, and emergent nature of research as a lived practice with no fixed conclusions.

Life itself becomes the vessel, the field, the lab. Every moment, every interaction, every encounter carries information, flowing beyond sterile laboratories and academic journals. In stories, in pauses between words, in the way the body senses before the mind understands, in the rhymes of the Earth that pulse through every living being. Carried through lineages, whispered through soil, encoded in practices that honour interconnection. The process is cyclical, relational, non-linear. It draws, non-exclusively, from living systems' theory, deep ecology, ancestral ways of knowing, contemplative traditions, and oral knowledge transmission.

Peak into my living lab. How does it unfold?

How are you liking this spot? Perhaps you have some questions. Do you? So, what do you say if I were to take you to my living lab to show you how my research unfolds? We are here already. In the meadow. But not just in the meadow. You have entered my living lab the moment you met me in my childhood backyard. Bits of it, actually. What's fascinating is that what you see and feel from your encounter with my living lab might differ from what another person sees or feels. I'm curious to hear from you, but first, I'll share with you a glimpse of my process.

My process is more like a rhythmic and spontaneous dance, unreplicable. I do not force coherence where none exists, nor cling to rigid frameworks, models, and practices.

There are several layers to my practice, though they are not separate from one another. They exist in relationship, woven together. We will explore three core elements: observation, participation, and integration.

Observation: presencing into the field

Observation is not passive. It is not about standing at a distance, watching life unfold from the outside. It is a practice of awareness, of deep listening, of attunement, and of sensing into both the relational field and our inner

landscape, which are not separate. For example, what ripples do I notice in the field as I engage with a place, a person, a group, or a bird. What happens within my inner landscape as I relate? What are the subtle movements within my physical, emotional, mental and energetic responses? What shifts in the space between us?



Pausing during a morning forest walk in Lac Beauport, Quebec to appreciate entangled ecological lifeforms, layers, textures, movement easily unnoticed at the pace of modernity.

This kind of observation requires active presence. I cultivate it through contemplative practices like breathwork and meditation, which allow me to slow down, sense more fully, and notice patterns that might otherwise be lost in the noise of modern urgency. These practices have widened and deepened my consciousness, opening the space for some powerful inner work to take place. Combined with different forms of psychosomatic healing like Internal Family Systems and Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures's bus methodology, it is a potent container for compassionate inner relating, nervous system regulation, and trauma integration. I have learned that memories are not static recollections; they are living portals that can be entered, re-experienced, and even rewritten. In one instance, I revisited a memory from twelve years ago, attached to deep shame and pain. Instead of simply recalling it, I stepped into it fully. I saw my younger self frozen, unable to escape. But in this state of compassionate presence not only for her, but also for the threat, something shifted. I saw her break free, dive from the living room's window into the ocean, her pain dissolving into the waves. I saw her washing ashore, held by

the presence of the sea, her future self there to witness and receive her. The memory itself transformed, no longer an infected wound but a site of healing.

Participation: Becoming part of the inquiry

Participation is not optional. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are always part of the systems we are studying. The question is not whether we engage, but how.

I move between contexts, immersing myself in what Nora Bateson calls trans-contextual learning; building relationships across intercultural, intergenerational, interfaith, and multispecies spaces. I take part in and co-create relational spaces where people come together to imagine, reflect, grieve, and act as life's healing impulse.

Hence, at a weekly rhythm, I participate in both online and in-person events; one-on-one calls, group discussions, team projects, community gatherings, summits, trainings, forums, ceremonies, and multispecies encounters. I am also deeply grateful for the privilege of travelling across the world as part of my research project. Some of these spaces are intimate, niche, and local, others are open, diverse, and global. They are sources of rich learning, not just through exchange but through tension. The friction that arises between divergent worldviews/cosmologies is an essential part of the process.



“Where do I begin, and where do I end? Where do you begin, and where do you end? And what is in-between? A tender dance of roots and skin, Earth meeting flesh, boundaries softening, The land of my body merging with the body of the land. Each step sinks deeper,

into mud, into being. Each moment, a return to what is. Here, we are not separate, Here, we are held.” By Mona Calvet, in partnership with the living.

One of the most profound aspects of my practice has been meeting the “other.” Last fall, I travelled to Germany to meet Germans, members of the local Jewish community, and members of the Palestinian and Arab diaspora. My intention was to listen. To sense into the layered histories of collective trauma, to descent into the depths of systemic shadows. To feel into how my soul and body relate and respond. To practice relational peacemaking, not as an abstract concept, but as something embodied in the way I showed up in each encounter. And so, I let the flow of life guide me into synchronistic encounters, dialogues, and story sharing. The intent was to connect to worldviews, regardless of my own, to presence into the relational field and let it transform me.

These moments of participation unfold in unexpected ways. One afternoon in Stockholm, I entered a small shop and ended up engaging in a conversation with the Russian owner. As we spoke, something shifted in the space between us. My curiosity led me to ask her questions, and as I listened, without intent to agree or disagree, but just understand, the door to her intricate world opened wider, inviting me in with growing warmth. Her world, which I had yet to be in contact with, collided with mine, bringing forth some discomfort. And yet, here she was, a human before me, sharing the beliefs, experiences, and histories that shaped her reality, and I could see her and feel her beneath the surface of her conclusions. She offered me tea and cake before we hugged goodbye. My world was not the same after that encounter, just as it has moved through each meeting, expanding my capacity to relate with more compassion.

Integration: Composting insights into embodiment

Integration is where the pieces come together, where insights metabolize, transform, and root themselves in the body.

I integrate in a wide variety of ways through journaling, movement, creative expression, grief tending, dialogue, dreamwork, listening to the land and the more-than-human, connecting with ancient wisdom and ancestors, and tending to the daily tasks of life like cooking, showering, walking. I document in fragments; freeflow writing, visual thinking, doodles, poetry, voice recordings, photographs of moments that hold meaning beyond words. Each of these practices is a vessel for insights to settle, cross-pollinate, decompose, and transform in their own time. Patterns emerge. Threads weave together.

Observation is alive here as well. What are my sensations, emotions, and thoughts revealing about my needs, my longings, and my struggles? As systemic collapse is accelerating, it has revealed many insights and possibilities, particularly through grief. Grief tending has become a portal, allowing me to access a deep reservoir of love and care, illuminating what truly matters as I move through experiences, stories, and memories. I witness how my body contracts, how my throat tightens, how my breath becomes shallow, how my eyes moisten. Each sensation a messenger, guiding me to the undercurrents of loss, tenderness, and transformation.

Grief tending has opened the door to the medicine of the soul. In acknowledging my grief, I have come to recognize it not as a weight to be carried, but as a current to be moved by. It has led me deeper into my soul's calling for collective liberation, healing, and regeneration. I have learned that when I am unwell, so is the Earth. When she suffers, so do I. She is the air I breathe, the water I drink, the food that nourishes me, the soil that cradles my body, and I am her remembering, her voice, her kin.

In conventional research, integration is reduced to analysis; breaking information into categories, drawing conclusions, fixing knowledge into static forms. In my practice, integration is more like composting. Knowledge must be given time to break down, to ferment, to ripen before it can emerge in new form.

Acknowledgements, an invitation and a gift for you.

Here we are, the sun is setting, and my husband and daughter are calling for my presence back home... Also, part of my living lab by the way. I loved sharing this moment with you, and I'd love to sit with you again sometime soon and listen to how this experience has landed in you. I am craving to listen to you, and how your living lab unfolds. If you are keen to meeting again, I warmly invite you to reach out to me and weave some threads together. Before you go, I'd like to offer you a small gift, just a gesture of gratitude for walking through this experience with me. Hope to talk to you soon.

What I offer here is not a conclusion, but an opening. A way of sensing into inquiry as something that moves through us, rather than something we control. A way of letting research shape us as much as we shape it.

This living inquiry has been shaped by the wisdom, care, and presence of

many teachers, human and more-than-human. I wish to acknowledge the elders, thinkers, and practitioners whose work has profoundly influenced the weaving of my path: Arkan Lushwala, Bayo Akomolafe, Nora Bateson, Thomas Hübl, Gabor Maté, Vanessa Andreotti, Otto Scharmer, Joanna Macy, Francis Weller, and Daniel Christian Wahl. Motherhood, through my dear Serena, and marriage, through mon amour Emmanuel, have been tender invitations into deeper, intimate healing.

In the more-than-human realm, some teachers have included:

- Our two cats, woodpeckers and chickadees, showing me trust
- Trees, teaching me about supportive, reciprocal family ties
- Shit, reminding me of humility
- A freezing rainstorm, inviting me to play
- My ancestors, human and beyond, guiding me toward forgiveness

A living library

Below is a list of books, podcasts, films, music, and communities that have nourished my journey, or are streams I look to dive into soon. You might be familiar with some, and in that case, I'd love to listen to your relationship with these resources. Otherwise, I hope these serve as a window into fertile un/learning, remembering, connection and healing.

Books

- Hospicing Modernity by Vanessa Andreotti
- The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief by Francis Weller
- Healing Collective Trauma: A Process for Integrating Our Intergenerational and Cultural Wounds by Thomas Hübl
- Combining by Nora Bateson
- Promiscuous Infrastructures: Practicing Care, co-authored by 21 contributors
- Ecopsychologie pratique et rituels pour la terre by Joanna Macy
- Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community by Malidoma Patrice Somé
- One Drum: Stories and Ceremonies for a Planet by Richard Wagamese

- The Spirit of the Glacier Speaks: Ancestral Teachings of the Andean World for the Time of Natural Disorder by Arkan Lushwala
- The Time of the Black Jaguar: An Offering of Indigenous Wisdom for the Continuity of Life on Earth by Arkan Lushwala

Podcasts

- A New and Ancient Story podcast
- ReGeneration rising
- For the Wild
- Medicine Stories
- Healing Culture Podcast

Films/series

- A New and Ancient Story podcast
- ReGeneration rising
- For the Wild
- Medicine Stories
- Healing Culture Podcast

Music

- Wails: songs for grief
- Zeyne – Ana asli
- Snow raven – Crying Earth
- Snow Raven – Web of life
- RAJIEEN نيعع ار

Communities of Practice

- Work that Reconnects
- EcoGather
- Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures
- Facing Human Wrongs: Navigating paradoxes and complexities of social and global change
- Good Grief Network
- Pachamama Alliance
- Science and Non Duality
- Tamera Institute
- The Village of Lovers
- Global Ecovillage Network
- Gathering of Tribes

- Earthhaven School of Integrated Living
 - Institute of Relational Being
 - Grandmothers Wisdom Project
 - Global Center for Indigenous Leadership and Lifeways
 - Abrarmh.ca
 - Academy of Inner Science (including Pocket Project and Timeless Wisdom Training)
 - Presencing Institute
 - Spore Initiative
 - Canadian Unitarian Council
 - Deep Adaptation
 - And of course, Ecoversities Alliance, including the Reimagining Education Conference community, and TEN's Becoming Monster festival.
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ENDNOTES

1 A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who spends a significant part of their developmental years outside their parents' culture(s). They grow up navigating multiple cultures, leading to the formation of a "third culture," a blended identity shaped by multiple cultural influences and global mobility. This often results in a strong sense of adaptability and global perspective but can also bring challenges like rootlessness and identity ambiguity.

2 SWANA refers to the region of Southwest Asia and North Africa, offering a decolonial alternative to Eurocentric terms like "Middle East."

*Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world.
Then we took it for granted.
Discontent began a small rumble in the earthly mind.
Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head.
And once Doubt ruptured the web,
All manner of demon thoughts
Jumped through—
We destroyed the world we had been given
For inspiration, for life—
Each stone of jealousy, each stone
Of fear, greed, envy, and hatred, put out the light.
No one was without a stone in his or her hand.
There we were,
Right back where we had started.
We were bumping into each other
In the dark.
And now we had no place to live, since we didn't know
How to live with each other.
Then one of the stumbling ones took pity on another
And shared a blanket.
A spark of kindness made a light.
The light made an opening in the darkness.
Everyone worked together to make a ladder.
A Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world,
And then the other clans, the children of those clans, their
children,
And their children, all the way through time—
To now, into this morning light to you.*

Joy Harjo, Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings