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# The Collective Contemplation: How a Global Pandemic Offers an Invitation to Dance with the Abundant Divine

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The Collective Contemplation:

How a Global Pandemic Offers an Invitation to Dance with the

Abundant Divine

Skyler Pestle

Educational Leadership & Policy

Portland State University

Spring 2020

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*“Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair.”*

*Robin Kimmerer*

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*“To dance with god, the creator of all things, is to dance with ourselves.”*

*Gary Zukav*

## **Part I: Guiding Principles and Values**

The questions oscillating in my mind during the first week of quarantine were very different than the questions I ask myself today, 11 weeks in, as I sit perched on my roof, staring at the sky. An early summer breeze brushes my warm skin and we breathe together, the wind and I. This mutual exchange of air, this Life force, is no longer taken for granted. The accelerated transformation that I have lived through within the 2020 spring cycle is like that of a butterfly's. I have emerged with grace and gratitude. The start of this project was uncertainties: “how can I best be gentle with myself during this scary time? Will my family be well? Will society use this as a global reset and revolutionize our oppressive systems? If so, how can I help?” These questions led me to here and now as I complete the ineffable learning experience of writing this paper, which served as an initiation into the abundant realm of Divine discovery, I have never in my 26 years of living felt more empowered, more alive.

By listening to our human and more-than-human teachers, to my heart and to the wisdom in silence, it is clear that shelter-in-place must be seen as an opportunity for slowing down. This is the time for community healing— a time to reflect on the meaningful questions. These past 11 weeks of chaos have been anything but simple, yet it is through the beauty of simplicity that I have found peace. The abundance of paradox in Nature presents us with a choice. How will we dance with the uncertainties of Life and Death, of joy and suffering? I find that when I am deeply listening to the Divine, (by use of ‘Divine’ I am referring to whatever speaks to you: be it Gaia,

Love, God, Allah, Mycelium, Creation and so on), these questions are answered. When I practice mindfulness in walking aimlessly beneath the Portland trees or tending to my propagating plants in my windowsills, I find comfort in the humble demonstrations of Life's abundance and resiliency.

My **biophilic** heart guides my path, as I cannot deny the intimate and everlasting relationship that I have with the natural world. The sight of a blooming rhododendron or a bright red leaf catching the deep autumn sun makes my heart flutter. I am grounded and enlightened by these little nods of reverence and recognition between me and the Earth. This cosmic pleasure from the wonders of the world is what led me to sustainability education. As David Orr (1991), reminds us, "all education is environmental education," and to know is to Love. If more people felt as moved as I do by the miracle of Life, perhaps more people would act as an ally for the Earthbody which sustains us.

I fell in love with the Pacific Northwest's abundance of Life— every crack spilling out vibrant moss and the abundance of thriving mushrooms fed my fixation with the sensation of awe. Ever since my first knee-buckling view of the milky way, I have cherished, and in some ways been fundamentally changed by, flashes of big **Wonder**. These universal, fleeting, and transformative moments of appreciation for creation have the power to stimulate generosity, altruism and a worldview shift towards loving-kindness (Perlin & Li, 2020). Here we find another paradox — these little wow-inducing moments give us insight into our smallness, and simultaneously a larger-than-Life humility and acceptance of our interconnectedness (Abram, 2017; Hari, 2018; Louv, 2012). Sharing these moments of big wonder with each other creates a sacred space of mutual connection and vulnerability (Brown, 2015).

I found the Leadership for Sustainability program by exploring how I could enmesh my values, principles, and natural talents in a way that continues my journey with **intention**. The unconditional, expanding Love I feel for Nature's magic and beauty reflects my Love for Life. The Earth is our home, and our mother is sick; my intention is to heal myself as a way to heal the land. I will forever remember one particular moment of awe while camping behind a waterfall in Big Sur. The moment I had my "Vision of Vocation" as Palmer would call it, the decision to connect my work with my spirit, the sunshine caught the wing of a monarch butterfly. She flew, almost as if in slow motion, right across my face in a holy moment of understood magic. As Robin Kimmerer (2013), a true Goddess of Gaia, puts it beautifully: "When you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond" (p. 33).

I travel down my personal and educational path with guiding philosophies that have been my Truth. I recognize that this deep Love for Earth is not separate from the Love I have for my community. This bond is not separate from my Love for my body, my heart, and my soul. Reading *The More Beautiful World our Hearts Know is Possible* by Charles Eistenstein (2013) solidified my belief that once one experiences a moment of "nonseparation," the indoctrinated story of separation and dominance begins to dissolve. As I experience Life, I have developed a deeper understanding of the **interconnection** of all things, this "unbroken wholeness," and this recognition of our interdependence has become a continual pedagogical and spiritual awakening (Wheatley, 2006, p. 43). So many of our societal norms perpetuate disconnection, but I believe that our bodies and souls are innately aware of our interdependence. After years of learning from

preschoolers, I understand that a child's tendency to believe in magic and revere Nature is a reflection of the inner child within each of us who craves curiosity.

I deeply value my **sense of place**. Growing up in both Montana and California, the mountains and the waves hold sacred meaning to me. My childhood years spent falling down sand dunes and climbing sandstone instilled a bond to the places which held me as I became me. Wangari Maathai (2007) a beloved teacher, tells us that “how you translate the life you see, feel, smell, and touch as you grow up — the water you drink, the air you breathe, and the food you eat — are what you become” (p. 52). Our sense of place is established by the sensory delights that the municipalities and the land beneath them offer—we embody our place. I believe there is a reason many of us have such fond memories of being outdoors as children, we have evolved as co-creators with the land (Louv, 2012). To love the land is to practice self-care. This Love is mutually transcendental! And yet, it is not enough to love a place, “we must find ways to heal it” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 48). When we work to heal a place, we find that we are deeply healing ourselves.

### **Educational and Leadership Philosophies.**

Growing up, I was never explicitly told that I had fallen in Love with stolen land. Since I was a young girl, I have been enamored by the way many indigenous cultures held such a deep reverence for the land and the rhythmic appreciation of Life's ebbs and flows. As I have learned more about Traditional Ecological Knowledge and was moved by *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I recognize the value in studying indigenous wisdom and sharing what I learn with my students and community. My pedagogy continues to blossom with active listening. Continuously listening to artists, writers, and leaders who have experienced oppression and/or displacement has become

a part of my educational praxes. I strive to learn from silenced voices and to share their stories and see “education as the practice of freedom” to heal our collective trauma and work towards a healthier, more compassionate planet (Freire, 1972).

bell hooks’ (1994, 2004) works, especially *Teaching to Transgress* and *Teaching Community* were particularly transformative to read as an educator. I leaned into practicing an “engaged pedagogy” with my students, which finds learning to be an act of creative expression and freedom (hooks, 1994). This educational philosophy seeks to empower students and also reflects the “Cycle of Liberation,” in that it recognizes that a healthy selfhood is at the core of any effort to critically transform systems of oppression (Harro, 2000). My self-forgiveness and self-compassion practices reflect my humanistic education style, and are crucial in my physical, emotional, and spiritual ability to be an agent for change (Elias & Merriam, 2005). When teaching at The Center for African Refugees and Immigrants of Oregon (CAIRO), I strove to create a classroom that invoked a sense of safety, self-worth, creative freedom, and connection to place. Many of my students and their families experienced intergenerational trauma and systemic harassment, but the healing expressions of curiosity as well as the spirit of play, especially when interacting with the natural world, liberated our classroom community. Engaged pedagogy is devoted to the wellbeing of the teacher and the student, and therefore empowers both (hooks, 2001).

My educational philosophies are weaved in with my leadership philosophies. As I became intimately connected with the Eastern African immigrant and refugee community through my work while simultaneously devouring the works of hooks, Freire, Palmer, Kimmerer, and Maathai, I began to reflect on my identity as a privileged white woman. I spent a lot of my time

actively listening and asking questions, and developing a liberatory consciousness as a way to unlearn our societal narratives which perpetuate social oppression (Love, 2000). I remember my time spent living in Ireland to converse with my roots and continue these conversations with elders and family. This reflection and unlearning is an ongoing process with which I will continually dance throughout my Life. This dance is the process of contemplation and deeply connecting with my values and privileges. My leadership philosophies reflect this practice in awareness as I create space for contemplative dialogue and challenge oppressive norms. This process has diverse appearances as learning environments remain in flux. Right now, as a white, cisgendered, middle class woman, I am practicing deep listening, surrender, and collective compassion.

To say that working at CAIRO during the Trump era was an eye-opening experience would be an understatement. I started teaching right when the 2016 election shook our country and specifically attacked the Muslim, immigrant community I was just beginning to connect with. It felt vital to reflect on how I could best represent the compassionate side of America and do what I could to assist in creating a classroom community of care. Inevitably, strong bonds were formed and the compassion that I witnessed and felt were transformative. What I learned from working with immigrant families as well as in *Global Political Ecology* was the importance of local action and education, and how crisis can transform communities towards a stronger connection (Armstrong, 2005; Hawken, 2008). This fractal-inspired propagation of compassion is a form of emergent strategy, an important part of both my leadership and educational philosophies (brown, 2017). As the norms of our global society are disrupted, I will nurture the health and healing of myself and my community. In doing so, I am practicing my values and

modeling the story of magic, of Interbeing, and I am inviting my community to join me in leading, hand-in-hand. We can all be leaders using our unique skills and inspirations. We are stronger together.

**Self understanding and commitment.** A typical LSE class usually begins with a check-in to heighten awareness before we begin our work. These check-ins, as well as solidifying my self-care practice in Costa Rica through the class *Soil, Soul, and Society*, helped me to recognize that without a foundational Love and respect for one's selfhood, one cannot be an effective sustainable leader. I strengthened my praxes by stacking functions and using my full time job at the nonprofit as my community based learning. In doing so, I was able to reflect on what I was learning in my studies and practice with intention in the classroom. *Philosophy of Education* and the works of Parker Palmer led me to recognize the beauty in teaching with your heart. This is a process towards self-actualization to liberate the world, one heart at a time.

**Systemic view of the world.** Classes like *Developmental Perspectives on Adult Learning* as well as *Ecological and Cultural Foundations of Learning* assisted me in forming an intersectional lens when considering ecological and social injustices, as well as the complexities of oppression. We are a part of many systems, all which mingle and affect each other. Nothing can be separated from its relationships (Wheatley, 2006). The concept of Critical Social Theory emphasizes how systems of social power impact sustainability action, and my experiences at the Learning Gardens Laboratory symbolized the visionary possibilities of communities coming together through food. Reading *The More Beautiful World We All Know is Possible* reiterated my appreciation for the holistic relationship between people-care and earth-care.

**Bio-cultural Relationships.** In *Ecological and Cultural Foundations of Learning*, I developed an appreciation for Ecofeminism and the symbolic nature of environmental activism as an “extension of the care and subsistence work that women in general ... already do” (Holmes, 2016). Earthcare work is an expression of the Divine Feminine. Leading a classroom of Eastern African students alongside three hard-working women of color led me to reflect on my role as an ally of marginalized communities. Practicing Critical Social Theory has me continually checking my privilege and engaging in dialogue which challenges the intersectional oppression of dominant, normative representations and systems. I engage in this conversation not only as an educator, but as a Life-long learner and practicing witch.

**Tools for sustainable change.** One of the tools that I continually use to enhance the power of conversation is through the use of metaphor. This language, much like a spell or a poem, ignites pragmatic imagination (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). We are storytellers, and an embellished story is more fun to listen to. My experience at LGL, as well as in the course *Soil, Soul, and Society* in Costa Rica showed me how regenerative earth-care is not separate from people-care. Additionally, *Advanced Leadership for Sustainability* emphasized the importance of creating environments of collaboration. This class helped me to articulate my values and praxis in creating space to foster critical co-investigators of societal dialogue (Freire, 1972). As a citizen of this world, a partner, an educator, a mystic, a roommate, and a neighbor, Leadership for Sustainability Education has instilled in me the tools for transforming a vision of radical compassion into a reality.

## **Part II: Academic Synthesis.**

**Introduction.** Going into 2020, our world was already facing a multitude of crises to be critically concerned about, such as climate change, growing income inequality, and normalized political exploitation of the vulnerable. Major perpetrators of these crises include globalization, capitalism, and the persistent story of scarcity and separation that has infiltrated our psyches (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005; Peet et al., 2011). The scale of the damage that this narrative has done, as well as the lack of political action, can create feelings of helplessness and doom (Eisenstein, 2013). To add to this, 2020 was hit with a global pandemic from a virus that grows exponentially and has affected the lives of billions. All of this is occurring in the age of information which makes for a quick descent into despair, as the scary news fills up our screens. Due to shelter in place orders, many individuals are stuck at home, alone, without a job, and bombarded with news of the carnage and chaos. Collectively, our psyches are experiencing a magnitude of trauma (Aydin, 2017). It is clear that now, more than ever, sustainable leaders must brave this crisis as an opportunity to put their theories into practice.

Life is in constant flux, and “it is chaos’ great destructive energy that dissolves the past and gives us the gift of the future” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 119). SARS-CoV-2 has not only caused entire countries to go on lockdown, but it has revealed the true power of Nature— the devastation caused by an invisible virus is a reminder of our humble fragility. Any yet, the silence and the sight of cleared streets have shown us the power of solidarity, of Love. We are not in charge on this planet, but we can abruptly change our actions to assure the safety of the more vulnerable. As transformative chaos can be discombobulating, it is imperative that heart-led leaders practice mindful self-compassion. This is the core of the cycle of social liberation — the disintegration of

indoctrinated assumptions of hierarchy and separation — a critical transformation of the self which then ramifies into our societal web of relationships (Harro, 2000). A sustainable leader who radiates the radical compassion needed to fuel community resilience must unlearn a multitude of societal norms which create societal trauma (Brown, 2015; Eisenstein, 2013). By practicing the recognition of the abundance in generosity and connection that surrounds us, we are engaging in a healing practice (Armstrong, 2005; brown, 2017; Maathai, 2006).

We are all entangled within a fabric of systems, from microscopic levels inside of us to cosmic levels encasing us (brown, 2017; Talbot, 1986; Wheatley, 2006). The spirals engrained on tiny seashells reflect the millions of galaxies which make up our universe (Kimmerer, 2013, Havel, 1994). We must honor that we are inseparable from the web of Life and incorporate this foundational truth within our day-to-day lives. In understanding the interconnectivity and interdependence, we nurture our sense of place within ourselves and within our communities (Armstrong, 2005). As Charles Eisenstein puts it, “the most direct way to disrupt the Story of Separation at its foundation is to give someone an experience of nonseparation” (2013). An experience of nonseparation is a deep knowing, an awe-inducing, inexplicable awareness of Interbeing, of magic. We hear Interbeing in harmonious music, we feel it when we dance freely, and we honor this Interbeing as we practice compassion (brown, 2017). As our society navigates the traumatic levels of fear and despair of a global pandemic amidst the ecological crisis, sustainable leaders are invited to propagate abundance by engaging in healing expressions of Divine Interbeing. To share these moments of awe is to transcend toward a deeper connection (Hari, 2018). I have felt profound big Wonder as I consider this pandemic as an expression of Gaia’s health— an outcry of the oppressed so to coerce our collective consciousness to consider

the possibilities of a more beautiful tomorrow. This crisis calls for a collective reset; this lockdown serves as a cocoon, and this paper invites you.

**Problem.** Imperialism and global capitalism have established a collective narrative of separation on a massive scale— a story which assumes humans are independent beings who can dominate the natural world and hoard her gifts without consequence (brown, 2017; Freire, 1972; Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1999). This ideology values material accumulation as well as the commodification of everything, from natural resources, to happiness, to education (Hari, 2018; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005). The story is multifaceted, and stems from a patriarchal and xenophobic worldview—the fear of not having enough means to share, which has been catalyzed across the globe through colonialism (hooks, 1994; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005; Peet et al., 2011). Colonialism, literally meaning the extension of a colony’s territory by use of force, created the wasteful, resource-devouring, exploitative mentality that is still prevalent today (Peet et al., 2011). Prevalent, yet unraveling (brown, 2017; Eisenstein, 2013; Wheatley, 2007).

Our collective consciousness is shifting away from this story of scarcity, as evident in tens of thousands of movements advocating for earth care and people care across the globe (Hawken, 2007; Macnamara, 2012). Today’s people-powered community collaboration, metamodernist art, and youth justice movements with turnouts in the multi-millions are making it clear that this old narrative is nearing collapse (Havel, 1994; Hawken, 2007). The global response to COVID-19 shows us that the systems we created to provide for our society are failing. Our federal institutions dismantled pandemic protective measures and spread disinformation regarding the virus (Packer, 2020). Capitalist sympathizers see citizens as “human capital stock,” and urge workers to protest their rights, to risk Death for the economy (Rupar, 2020) The unsustainable,

disconnected nature of our “business as usual” can no longer be ignored, and the disruption of a global pandemic serves as an opportunity for sustainable leaders to embody the transformation toward a story of abundance, Interbeing and healing (brown, 2017; Eisenstein, 2013). First, we must deeply contemplate how our societal norms perpetuate disconnection within ourselves, within our relationships, and within our relationship to Mother Earth.

**Disconnection within ourselves.** The societal and personal trauma induced by the story of separation and scarcity is abundantly clear in the United States (Eisenstein, 2013). There are indications all around us— the mental health crisis, an increase in mass shootings, the “banking” method of education, and our addiction to consumption barely scratches the surface of the systemic calamities that our country struggles to reform (Freire, 1972, Hari, 2018; Statista Research Department, 2020). This collective sense of separation can manifest itself as individualized distress, such as anxiety, addiction, despair, loss of meaning (Armstrong, 2005; Hari, 2018; Palmer, 1998). Americans carry the intergenerational trauma of the unjust bloodshed which has taken place, in some cases on a massive scale, in the interest of America’s economic growth (Fromm, 2012; Kimmerer, 2013). The sense of loss that results from displacement is especially difficult for immigrant and refugee families, which is layered upon the danger of institutionalized xenophobia (Morina et. al., 2018; Semkin & Brandt, 2010).

It is no surprise, then, that this societal trauma has led to generations of individuals without the tools to practice self-compassion (Freire, 1972; Hari, 2018; Van der Kolk, 2014). Although Eisenstein (2019) would argue against “trauma fundamentalism,” as he finds the problem to be more multifaceted, I believe that these individual wounds ramify the story of separation and fear within our communities—a cycle that must be disrupted. Trauma, if not healed, spreads like a

virus. Trauma is internalized, projected onto others and passed down through generations (Stein, 2012). As our society continues to normalize the unjust character of our pervasive political and educational organizations, we are perpetuating the story of scarcity and fear by reinforcing hierarchies (Bell, 2015; Freire, 1972; Palmer, 1998) The mental anguish that accompanies being a part of a system of oppression includes loss of self-determination, and can disrupt positive self-development (Bell, 2015). These emotions are felt deeply within the body, and if crystallized into thought patterns, have the power to affect reality through socialization, which then further fuels the collective story (Harro, 2000; Stein, 2012; Van der Kolk, 2014).

Feelings of insecurity, shame, depression, and inadequacy which arise from societal trauma, are spawned by the concept of separateness and fuel the fear that creates conditions for a war within ourselves (brown, 2017; Neff, 2011; Palmer, 2000). Depression is “the ultimate state of disconnection,” not just from other people but from our mind and our hearts (Palmer, 2000, p. 58). Our country is clearly experiencing an emotional crisis: one in four American women takes antidepressants, and self-destructive behaviors are impacting the average American lifespan (Francis, 2014; Hari, 2018). These medications intended to oppress our feelings of disconnection are so prevalent that scientists have detected traces of antidepressants in our sacred water sources (Hari, 2018). Our tendency to over-medicate, over-consume and fall into destructive addictions are palliative remedies to distract ourselves from these deep feelings of disconnection are damaging our ability to listen to our intuition and find meaning (Brown, 2015; Eisenstein, 2013; Hari, 2018). A war within ourselves bleeds out and impacts our relationships with our friends, families, and anyone else we interact with (hooks, 2001). We must have deep compassion for ourselves in order to intuitively connect with each other (Brown, 2015).

**Disconnection from each other.** The root of these deep emotions is fear— fear of being alienated, fear of the unknown, fear of a loss of control, fear of isolation (Brown, 2015; Neff, 2011; Palmer, 1998). We are scared of being alone in the universe (Eisenstein, 2013). Humans evolved as cooperators— in relatively small communities in which members lived and suffered as one (Armstrong, 2005; Cacioppo, 2009; Ramushray, 1995). However, we’ve disbanded our sense of community with the growth of globalism and now live in a way that goes against our natural instinct to commune and connect with each other (Berry, 1992; Cajete, 2005, Hari, 2018). The fear that creeps in when one feels isolated is an evolutionary response to a perceived lack of safety (Cacioppo, 2009; Van der Kolk, 2014). Instead of recognizing this innate human need for security through belonging and intimate relationships, our story became fueled by this fear in the creation of institutions that oppress our ability to connect on a deep, vital level (Brown, 2015; Eisenstein, 2013; hooks, 2004).

Existential uncertainties can cause feelings of vulnerability (Brown, 2015, brown, 2017; Palmer, 1983). If individuals are not offered the space to communicate about these intimidating feelings, they often morph into projected self-doubt, anger, despair, and shame (Neff, 2001; Hari, 2018; Palmer, 1983). Often, we veer away from contemplating topics Death and “otherness” because our societal conventional narrative finds this subject matter taboo or too uncomfortable to process (Hari, 2018; Macnamara, 2012). This can be damaging, as sharing vulnerability has been found to heal relational wounds not only with others but within ourselves (Brown, 2017; Eisenstein, 2013; Neff, 2011). We must create space within ourselves and within our homes, classrooms, workspaces, and relationships for intentional, compassionate dialogue to occur.

Without this space, the oppression of these vulnerable feelings leads to the transmission of societal trauma upon further generations to come (Stein, 2012).

A blaring example of our culture's tendency to suppress difficult feelings is seen in our relationship to Death (Eisenstein, 2013). The global pandemic unveils our chaotic relationship to Death, we desensitize ourselves through violence. Death embodies everything that we fear most— uncertainty, suffering, isolation and fear itself (hooks, 2001; Neff, 2011; Palmer, 1998). These feelings are powerful and real, and have their place in protecting our precious aliveness. But the Unknown must be revered in the same way we celebrate Life, however, as nothing on Earth can be composed without decomposers (Sheldrake, 2020). This is a cosmic dance between mutual states of Being. Sure, the idea of Death can make us feel, but just as we are Living together, we are Dying together. Dying is one of the few experiences that we will all be affected by in some way or another. It is beautifully communal in that way. There is a spiritual self-transcendence that can come from sitting with Death, really feeling the presence (Doughty, 2016). Our collective narrative's tendency to ignore and deny decay with anti-aging rituals and separating elders from society prevents us from achieving this transcendence (Eisenstein, 2013). Space to celebrate Death offers a sacred invitation to explore the mysteries of what brings Life meaning and revel in the Divine energy which connects us all (Hawken; 2007; Kimmerer, 2013; Kumar, 1996).

By dissecting the destructive quality of the story of separation and scarcity, in both the social sense as well as the ecological sense, we are uncovering the root causes of humanity's existential crisis (Eisenstein, 2013; Hari, 2018; Watkins, 2019). Although deep exploration of the suffering caused by these systems of disconnection can be transformative, the realization of how

the stories have infiltrated all aspects of Life can instill a paralyzing despair (brown, 2017; Eisenstein, 2013; Palmer, 1983). This exploration is emotionally laborious. But the work is met with a liberation of heart, as true optimism often shines on the other side of despair (Brown, 2015; Eisenstein, 2013; Palmer, 1998). If despair is not respected for its place in the liberation process, leadership practices will not be maintained in an effective manner (brown, 2017). Sustainable leadership must be a holistic, collaborative, and reflective process, inviting in our deepest and most vulnerable emotions (Burns, 2015). Our relationship to our inner selves and to the members of our communities must find absolution and healing from societal trauma in order to emerge and restore the innate connection to each other and to the planet (Brown, 2015; Watkins, 2019).

**Disconnection from Mother Earth.** It is no longer a question that humanity has a wounded relationship with the natural world (Hawken, 2007; Kimmerer, 2013; Orr, 1991). The ideological core of capitalist systems which continue to push us further toward the brink of ecological limits is misaligned with our intuitive relationship with Earth (Cajete, 1994; Klein, 2014, Kumar, 1996). This causes a societal dissonance, seen during times of quarantine as people flock to natural spaces for comfort, despite this being a dangerous choice. The notion that spending time with the natural world benefits our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing has made the transition from theory to evidence and from evidence to action (Louv, 2012). This earth-care action is propagating on a smaller, more local level, all while our global systems of order continue behaviors of mass destruction and waste (Eisenstein, 2013; Hawken, 2007; Macnamara, 2012). To witness the poisoning of the land with deep awareness of the harm creates what philosophers call “species loneliness”—a deep, mysterious sadness and sense of

alienation which stems from the loss of meaningful relationship to place (Kimmerer, 2013; Louv, 2019; McGinnis, 1993). This bond must be restored if we are to reconnect and protect these delicate ecosystems which we heavily rely on (Semken & Brandt, 2010).

Our relationship with Nature is not only about conserving resources, land and water, but about preserving and growing the connectedness we have to her (Cajete, 1994; Louv, 2012; Macnamara, 2012). Our ancestors developed a language and kinship with the land which came along with a deep reverence for the regenerative abundant gifts of Life (Kimmerer, 2013; Kumar, 1996). The story of separation attempts to erase that language. Richard Louv (2005), coined the term nature-deficit disorder to describe this deep feeling of disconnection to define it in western DSM-5 dialect. This embodied disconnect has negative consequences on our ability to be fully aware and discover the magic of Gaia (Kimmerer, 2013; Louv, 2012). We are no longer listening with all of our senses (brown, 2017). We have created illusions of scarcity and security which dampen our natural tendency to flirt with Nature, and admire her displays of wonder (Armstrong, 2005; Kimmerer, 2013; Walla, 2009). A society of exploitation and constant noise dampens our senses and our ability to listen to our bodies and connect to our intuition (Kumar, 1996; Louv, 2012; Watkins, 2019).

It is time to live, teach, communicate with an honor of Deep Ecology - that recognition that every species has a right to exist beyond its value to humans, we are not separate (Naess, 1973). We must abandon the story that humans and Nature cannot sustainably coexist. Within the lens of interconnectedness, the story of separation and scarcity adopted by our current systems is a way of participating in societal self-harm. The systemic abuse of all things vulnerable leads to the suppression of vulnerable states of Being, which only leads to a deeper, wider felt

disconnection (Brown, 2015; Hawken, 2007). We need to explore vulnerable feelings as a way to learn the ways of the world (hooks, 1994). Today, we are experiencing an increasing shame, because felt in our bodies is this truth: we are one in the same as the Earth that we are harming, and we are a part of the system destroying it (Eisenstein, 2013; Hari, 2018; Hawken, 2007). This deep shame can result in despair — a powerful, often debilitating “spiritual condition” (Brown, 2015, p. 202). It strips the soul of agency and hope (2015). Despair, however, can be regenerative (Watkins, 2019). It is in the surrendering to these emotions, these unconscious messages, that initiates the journey toward liberation (Watkins, 2019). Shame and despair will accompany us throughout our lives, as a way to reorient us toward our Life path — “the path that expresses an integration of what we know and feel with how we live and how we act” (Watkins, 2019, p. 195).

As we experience the transformative space between despair and hope, between a reality of separation and Interbeing, we can begin to envision what a better, more beautiful tomorrow looks like (brown, 2017; Eisenstein, 2013; Hawken, 2007). When we pay attention to the natural ecosystems in conversation around us, we understand that all are, deeply in tune with each other and the Land. Cooperation and transformation are necessary for Life to thrive (Wheatley, 2006). These systems are our teachers. How will we heal from the heartbreak of participating in a system which disrespects the balanced ways that natural systems operate? We are place-based, naturally biophilic creatures; the Earth from whence we came is the Land we will return to (Kimmerer, 2013; Maathai, 2006). It is our responsibility to follow this biophilia and to be held in this experience of wonder, of the Divine abundance of connection and Love, in order to collectively heal (brown, 2017; Watkins, 2019).

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*"From the masses to the masses" the most  
Revolutionary consciousness is to be found  
Among the most ruthlessly exploited classes:  
Animals, trees, water, air, grasses"*  
Gary Snyder  
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**Solution.** A global pandemic allows us to contemplate our deepest inquiries. What does it mean to be alive? What is the right way to live? To die? What is essential? What is sacred? This pandemic created circumstances which have sent me down a river of Divine discovery. 11 weeks ago, I went into writing this final comprehensive paper with many uncertainties, feeling undeserving of a Master's degree in Leadership and Sustainability Education. Instead of dancing with the despair and shame with grace, I let fear take over. The state of the world appeared too hopeless to make a difference and I felt uncomfortable calling myself a leader. The layers of despair and confusion felt like a weighted blanket wrapped around my shoulders, dragging behind me as I went about my day. This blanket began to feel comforting, as if the weight of yielding to despair was the only way I could make sense of the world. Perhaps I could find peace in becoming a cynical environmentalist. I surrendered to the grief.

An accident in the kitchen, perhaps a Divine intervention, shook me out of this oblivion. I was using a knife while so intoxicated with despair that I sliced a nerve beneath my pinky, resulting in damage that would require surgery. I had no choice but to go to the hospital and surrender my body to the hands of our more-than-essential healers at the frontlines of the pandemic.

This part of my story is important, because as one who understands Life through metaphor and poetry, I understand why I needed this injury, this revival. The power of my cynical thoughts

patterns, my fragility, and the miracle of healing and compassion were all explicitly displayed for me through this experience. It was a sudden shock to my system—a realignment of my thoughts towards trusting my gut and acknowledging the abundant force of forgiveness and gentle humility. The liberation from this psychological reboot made way for a hyper-awareness of the story I was living before. My belief in Interbeing as a theory has transformed from a theoretical understanding into a spiritual Knowing. From noticing the patterns of abundant compassion arising as we collectively process COVID-19, and the transition between stories, I find that I am not the only one undergoing an awakening of sorts.

The societal shock following a disaster serves as a platform to disrupt the norm and reevaluate what makes Life meaningful (Eisenstein, 2013; Solnit, 2009). Humans have been creating templates of narratives, agreements, and symbolic systems in search for Truth for as long as we have walked the Earth (Eisenstein, 2013, hooks, 2004; Maathai, 2007). Humans are story-tellers (Gottschall, 2012; Orr, 1999). We create, we fantasize other worlds, and we share these visions with each other as a way to connect and process what it is that ignites meaning within the conscious experience (Brown, 2015; Frankl, 1946). These stories come alive through dialogue and practice; eventually some grow strong enough to become a Truth that entire societies follow (Eisenstein, 2013; Freire, 1972; hooks, 2004). The journey of finding this Truth is frightening, testing, and requires surrender. It is a dance of Knowing and Unknowing, of Love and Fear, of Conscious and Unconscious.

This Truth is personal and subjective (Palmer, 1983). Once you truly believe in something, this story has a profound effect—a power to create reality (Chopra, 2015; Eisenstein, 2013). I felt this first hand, quite literally, as my thoughts of self-judgment manifested into a spiral of despair

and a damaged nerve. What Truth do we teach our students? In other words, *what sacred conversations are we collectively engaged in?* This pandemic serves as a time to confront these societal stories we believe, teach, and practice, and to observe our habits as we adapt to the new reality of a global pandemic (Walla, 2020). Leaders and educators must lean into the power and abundance of interconnection during these times of great suffering and fear (Eisenstein, 2020). Compassion, the ability to feel suffering together, is powerful beyond explanation; it is a Divine harmony (hooks, 2001; Neff, 2011; Salzberg, 1995). Compassion allows us to bear witness to suffering, our own or our neighbor's, with courage and conviction (Salzberg, 1995). Disasters like this pandemic not only illuminate the strength of local community in mutual aid and creativity, but also proves that the story of separation is not serving us (Solnit, 2009). This is a Truth that we can all believe in during this time of disaster. Community is the protector of the tender, vulnerable, and vital components of our country (Berry, 1992).

**Reconnection with self.** How do we respond to this social change? This is not a call to big action. In fact, this is an invitation to join me in this empowering revolution of faith in the power of small. This revolution starts with contemplation and awareness of our own thought processes (Eisenstein, 2013; Watkins, 2019). Dr. Kristen Neff (2011), the pioneer of self-compassion as a technical term, states, “when you are focused on the fact that you are having certain thoughts and feelings, you are no longer lost in the storyline (p. 133). Mindfulness—the embodiment of being fully present in our bodies and aware of where we are and what we’re thinking and doing—offers a space of reflection to begin the self-compassion needed to heal from personal and societal trauma (Hari, 2018; Neff, 2011; Macnamara, 2012). In order to emerge from our quarantine cocoons embodying the story of Interbeing, we must feed our compassionate, creative

selves. Shelter-in-place orders provide us with the uncomfortable but vital space of confronting our fears of isolation and indoctrinated belief that we are powerless. The first step toward dissolving this limiting belief is awareness (Chopra, 2015; hooks, 2004; Kumar, 1996). This begins the process of self-actualization, the process of finding meaning through individual growth toward fulfillment of the highest needs (Maslow, 1943). Mindfulness practices are healing practices of awareness - providing space to listen to our inner narration, our inner teacher, without judgment (Hari, 2018; Harro, 2000; Neff, 2011). Meditation is surrendering to the art of deep listening, of self-discovery. It is a dance with the mysterious creative energy of divinity, of Life.

This hyper-awareness can be practiced anytime, anywhere, through noticing with all of our senses. Mindfulness is a conscious dismantling of sorts, a process of unlearning societal stories of hierarchy (brown, 2017; Harro, 2000). Our bodies are wise systems of communication, able to listen and heal in miraculous ways (Brown, 2017; Kimmerer, 2013; Van der Kolk, 2014). As the ancient practice of Ayurveda, a Hindu system of healing through bodily balance of diet, herbal treatments, and mindful breathing sings:

“As is the human body, so is the cosmic body.

As is the human mind, so is the cosmic mind.

As is the microcosm, so is the macrocosm.” (as cited in Chopra, 2015, p. 408)

Our bodies are symbols of the earth, our pure consciousness is abundant in our smiles, in birdsong, in the passion of a raging fire and peace of a descending stream. Our aliveness screams through the buzzing bees and the croaking toads. In mindfulness practices we are surrendering to the wisdom of these teachers and letting the Spirit of the wind be our guide towards peace.

Economics refers to the essential weaving and interactivity between the layered versions of “body,” from our own bodies and the microbiome contained within each of us, to our “social body” or our community, and to the grander, planetary “body” — Earth (Walla, 2009). To participate in a daily practice of mindfulness within each layer, such as meditating, freeform dancing, and conversing with Nature, is to participate in our collective healing (Brown, 2017; Chopra, 2015). Responding to our conditioned thoughts with compassion, forgiveness, and understanding that the story of scarcity has infiltrated our minds can be empowering; it begins the process of practicing a new narrative of healing ourselves as a way to heal the world. Mindfulness is a practice of liberation and self-love, which transcend into a recognition of Universal interconnection (Harro, 2000). All practices, however, are challenged. I am by no means claiming that these small actions are easy actions. One of the more challenging but powerful facets of a meditation practice is the ability to surrender to the process of the dance — of falling and rising, of breathing in and breathing out (Brown, 2017; Chopra, 2015; Neff, 2011).

As our mindfulness practice strengthens, we can begin to embrace stillness and listen to the silence and “in silence, the barriers of objective knowledge fall away” (Palmer, 1983, p. 120). When one begins to incorporate this reverence for Interbeing into a daily practice, they are liberated from the societal story of hierarchy and open their hearts to be graced with a Divine energy (hooks, 2001; Kimmerer, 2013). Some call this energy Love, Gaia, the Universe, God, Mycelium, or our Higher Selves; whatever it is that guides us into this deep, ethereal feeling of connection has been felt by humanity for thousands of years. Learning is a spiritual process—an ever expanding, non-linear, continual process of connecting with who we are as people, as citizens of the Earth, as a part of something bigger (Palmer, 1983). As a teacher, I now recognize

that education itself is sacred, that examining social norms creates the space to question our personal beliefs and habits, and search for meaning together. Learning is a communal process, we need each other in more ways than we are able to understand (Watkins, 2019). As Eisenstein remarks, “enlightenment is a group project,” and as a teacher, as a leader, as a neighbor and a friend, it is crucial that I find courage to refuse participation in the story of separation, as this is how our collective narrative shifts towards a world of healing (Eisenstein, 2013).

**Reconnection with each other.** In the words of Margaret Wheatley (2006), relationships are everything; the significance of this statement rings true as academic conversations regarding the mystery of quantum entanglement and mycelium communication are beginning to sound more like poetry or science fiction (Sheldrake, 2020; Wheatley, 2006). There is a reason that we crave connection: it is in the bonds with other people, with Nature, with the Cosmos itself, that we find meaning (Frankl, 1946; Harro, 2000; Palmer, 2000). Oftentimes, through experiences shared together, we are able to reach a place that could not have been reached alone (Eisenstein, 2013). If we continue to teach Life as a solo endeavor, rather than as a collective phenomenon, we will continue to behave in ways that perpetuate interrelational and intergenerational trauma (Stein, 2012). The fall of community due to capitalist pursuits has emphasized how essential community compassion is for the protection of the more vulnerable: the elderly, the youth, and our Mother Earth (Berry, 1992). As we experience a disruption of societal norms caused by the pandemic, now is the time to practice holistic reconnection practices with ourselves and our communities.

I feel lucky to have developed intimate relationships with Eastern African refugee and immigrant families through my work at a nonprofit preschool. Many of them have experienced

displacement and trauma due to violence, separation from family, and systemic xenophobia. I recently visited my old friends (maintaining safe physical distancing) and listened to their wisdom about communities in crisis. Our conversations felt more like lessons, as they shared with me their experiences. My friend Ahmed reminded me that, although Somalia is a war-torn, impoverished country, “the people are much happier than Americans, because our community stays strong and we take care of each other” (personal communication, May 17, 2020). They went on to tell me that throughout the frightening experiences, it was through personal and communal spirituality and acts of shared Love that helped them to survive with grace (2020). Shared within their community is an unspoken understanding that they *all* must open their arms to neighbors, friends, even strangers, in order to be resilient through crisis (2020). There is ancient Wisdom in this message. In order to be strong and resilient, we need a healthy sense of place through relationships with our neighbors (Solnit, 2009).

As adrienne marie brown (2017) puts it, having an understanding “on the front end of the race, class, gender, ability, geographic, and other power dynamics that exist between [us]” helps us to remember that these are social constructs meant to silence our innate call toward neighborly compassion (brown, 2017). It is a complex experience to be aware of societal stories of separation while practicing behaviors of interconnection (Eisenstein, 2013). This bizarre experience of being in-between stories, as referenced by Eisenstein (2013) as “The Breakdown,” is another reason self-compassion is vital during this time. Finding Joy while remaining aware of the work that must be done is a challenge but worthy practice (Brown, 2015). Sustainable leaders can act as models in their communities—with the people with whom we share Land, as well as the people with whom we share dialogue. Now is the time to embrace vulnerability and share

moments of magic within your direct zones of influence—ourselves, our friends and family, and our neighbors/colleagues (Macnamara, 2012).

As a way to incorporate my mindfulness practice of self and community compassion into my daily Life, I set up an “abundance table” outside my home for community members to participate in sharing and receiving anything they wish. Not only has this little act of community participation sparked conversation and connection, but now, illuminated by fairy lights left by a neighbor, it has provided space for people to share sacred gifts — vegetable starts, seeds, flower bulbs and books. Together, we are propagating Life. The collective slowdown from the quarantine allowed the space for me to deeply listen to my heart's desire to strengthen my Sense of Place. It taught me to surrender to the power of compassion. I am discovering this abundance that surrounds us every day, as this crisis has awakened our innate ability to cooperate and thrive. My relatively small interaction with my community as an adaptation to the changing environment is the manifestation of biomimicry— “the imitation of the models, systems, and elements of nature for the purpose of solving complex human problems” (brown, 2017, p. 19) I made like mycelium and shared vital nutrients with my surrounding neighbors. Was this my decision? Or perhaps my microbiome, nourished by the ancient celebration of decay — fermented kefir, sourdough, kraut and wine, influenced this action to deepen connection... I enjoy dancing with this mystery. Mother Earth has created the space for us to slow down, to face the Unknown, to suffer together. How grateful we should feel that Gaia assists us as we heal the wounds we have inflicted.

**Reconnection to Mother Earth.** What better way to show reverential reconciliation to Mother Earth than to mimic the balanced organization of her beings and ecosystems? When one

contemplates the success of fractal-like systems, it becomes clear that this reflected pattern must be embodied in our sustainability leadership and education as well (brown, 2017). The micro is the macro; small action is big action, and it is all a part of the whole (Wheatley, 2006). By practicing self and community compassion as environmental activism, we recognize the value and influence of the abundant microconnections in natural systems (Eisenstein, 2013). We will not be able to effectively do our important, intentional work without self and earth reverence (Kimmerer, 2013; Palmer, 2000). Mindfulness practices strengthen our ability to tune-in to the abundance of beauty around us and practice this reverence.

Wangari Maathai (2007), a true exemplar of emergent strategy, tells us, “education... should not take people away from the land, but instill in them even more respect for it, because educated people are in a position to understand what is being lost” (p. 138). What is being lost is more than our sustenance, our resources and our collective home. What is being lost is our Spirit. Learning about the magic of the natural world creates a spiritual place of mutual healing. When a student is provided space to truly feel Divine Interbeing they are offered a sense of awareness which can lead to self-transcendence (Havel, 1994; Watkins, 2019). We are all teachers, we are all students. I find abundance when I tend to my garden, to my bubbling sourdough starter; when I laugh and cry with loved ones; when I fight for justice and listen to my oppressed brothers and sisters. I feel truly Alive. There are infinite ways to be holistically expressive with how we share Interbeing, but the dialogue of Interbeing must be nurtured in all places and shared spaces in order for our world to heal and our hearts to dance and create as One.

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*“I am as if the whole universe might exist just to teach me more about love. I listen to strangers, I listen to random invitations, I listen to criticisms, I listen to my body, I listen to my creativity and to the artists who inspire me, I listen to elders, I listen to my dreams and the books I am reading. I notice that the more I pay attention, the more I see order; clear messages, patterns, and invitations in the small or seemingly random things that happen in my life.”*

*adrienne marie brown*

*“Our hands imbibe like roots,  
So I place them on what is beautiful in this world.”*

*Saint Francis of Assisi*

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**Conclusion.** This paper is for you, who is reading this either during or in the wake of a viral catastrophe inflicting trauma on an already distressed world. This paper is for me, as the process of writing it served as a catalyst for the awakening of the witch within me, growing stronger as I resist the oppression of my Intuition. This paper is for us. This is a call for a revolution of consciousness. We are empowered with choices, which we practice everyday, with each moment we decide to participate in a story. Yes, the implication that we have the power to change the world within us can seem like wishful thinking when considering the systemic concerns that humanity faces. But educators and leaders, and all who lead a Life of conviction, intention and Love, have the power to be courageous participants of social change. You, reader, have the power to be a courageous participant of social change. This paper is an invitation to embrace that agency in the dance toward a more beautiful world. This revolution requires your art, your vocation and relationships. We need the passion and mindfulness which sustain your Creativity whether it be cooking, crying, writing, worshiping, dancing —as it is the creative expression of learning about ourselves, and that is truly Sacred.

Quiet acts of resistance to the story of scarcity will ramify into large and loud systemic shifts. Conversation inspires action, which can “restore our faith in the future” (Wheatley, 2006).

This pandemic has taught us many things, but to me, the most glaring is that we are able to change our behaviors and rapidly adapt to a new way of Life. When we collectively decide on a common cause of humility, our transformation begins.

Let us end with a story. A few years ago, as I was juggling teaching preschool, directing a nonprofit, while also attending graduate school, I was introduced into the world of houseplant motherhood. On one particular plant shopping binge, I bought two of each variety that Fred Meyer was offering that day— one for my classroom and one for my bedroom.

Throughout the year, as I experienced the stressors and distractions of a hyper-busy lifestyle, my students, co-teachers and I carefully cultivated a community of compassion and abundance in our classroom. We created a temple of Love and respect, a place we all felt safe and at home. We cried together, we laughed and danced and held hands (every single day). We planted flowers, painted and meditated in the sunshine, we listened to the birds. We yelled at each other, got messy, shared our worst selves, apologized and forgave. Then we returned to exploration and play. A thriving community of care.

How poetic that it was the Maranta, commonly known as the Prayer Plant, which expressed the contrast of environments most theatrically. In my bedroom, the potted plant was cared for by only an inattentive me; she survived, but never flowered and always appeared a bit droopy. Despite both receiving comparable amounts of sun/water/nutrients, my classroom Prayer Plant bloomed delicate, orchid-like flowers over multiple weeks and eventually dripped with new growth, pouring over the container with an abundance of leaves. Was it the transcendental Love radiating in our learning community that caused Prayer Plant to flourish? As we collectively practiced ceremonies of reverence, the energy of our classroom was enlivened with Interbeing.

The power of connection and compassion creates a social fabric which is powerful and contagious. Let us learn from these lessons of nonseparation and grow towards the light—not only the sunrays, but toward the divinity in ineffable experiences of wonder. Toward collective expressions of suffering and healing. This story is just one of many experiences of nonseparation inspiring my renounced faith in Nature’s reverence for compassion.

I encourage the reader of this paper to start today. Whatever you “do,” whether that be a teacher, a sales representative, a painter, an interior designer— now is the opportunity to celebrate our expressions of inspiration together and pursue our passions with intention and care. All that we do has the power to bring us closer together and closer to a sense of place, of home. Now is the time to listen to beings who have been oppressed for so many years— People of Color, the LGBTQ+ community, individuals who are not able-bodied, and the Earthbody herself. Now is the time to reconsider habits of oppression, of disregard for Nature and our intuition. Listen, listen, listen. Learn, learn, learn. Celebrate the beauty and feel the deep *knowing* that a more beautiful world is possible. Feel our collective consciousness becoming more aware, more loving. I have surrendered to dance with the paradoxes of Truth. What is left guiding me is the whisper in the wind, the music that moves me. Dancing is my favorite expression of Interbeing. What is yours?

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*“This is a setting out.*

*The leaving of everything behind. Leaving the social milieu.*

*The preconceptions. The definitions. The language. The narrowed field of vision.*

*The expectations. No longer expecting relationships, memories, words, or letters to mean what they used*

*To mean”*

*Rabbi Lawrence Kushner*

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