

DEAR HEALERS: A PHOTOGRAPHIC STORY OF FINDING HOPE, COMMUNITY, AND PARTNERSHIP IN CONNECTION WITH NATURE

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Abstract

After working on the frontlines of the COVID pandemic, the author reflects on finding the principles of *partnerism*, hope, and community in nature through the healing art of poetry, photography, and story sharing. The partnership paradigm empowers the qualities of respect, justice, balance, and innovation. Partnership practices catalyzed by the natural elements of life and the land are foundational to community and cultural transformation, raising the nature of our planetary system to be the most transformative model of *partnerism* in action.

Keywords: Partnership; partnerism; community; connection; nature; hope; culture; transformation; bio-culturism; biodiversity; caring science

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SHIELDED: 05.2020

*Can you hear me?
I am afraid
I cannot hear you
Sir, open your eyes
I am your nurse, I'm here to help*

*Air is stagnant inside the walls
The walls my patient and I are in
They are made of glass*

*We see people on the other side
They want to know what's going on
But they are not going to come inside*

*Behind the glass
Emptiness is growing fast
He's fading
He calls for his daughter
But we are alone
We try to catch her on the phone
If I cry, my shield will fog
I can't. I have no other shield
Fight the tears, now is not the time to feel*

*Stay looking at me okay?
Give me your hand
Nurse, I am scared
Where are we going?*

*Emotions packed and shoved so tight
It's been days since seeing sunlight
I want to see the sun rise
The feeling of warmth across my eyes*

*I need help in here
He's about to code.
Get the cart
Someone call his daughter
He's coding
Call it
Repeat.*

By Angelica Walton

INTRODUCTION

It was May of 2020 in a room on the tenth floor of a hospital in downtown Chicago. The uprising that followed the murder of George Floyd was happening outside in the streets, while dead space was taking over the air inside of hospital walls. The wave of

cases escalated as beds and resources grew scarce; a daunting place to be as an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) nurse standing at the bedside of someone's father. His life-sustaining medications were infusing at rapid rates and there were no replacement medications available in the department. The neighboring patient was coding, and another was in urgent need of respiratory support through placement of a breathing tube and ventilation to survive.

Here and in many other COVID-filled ICUs, essential resources such as staff, tubing, tape, medications, wound care materials, ventilators, protective equipment, feeding, and nutrients were in short supply. Despite these structural obstacles, there were also courageous acts by healers coming together to keep people safe while the COVID crisis mushroomed out of control and systems around us continued to crumble.

FROM FRONTLINES TO FOREST LINES

After my partner and I had worked as traveling nurses in various COVID ICUs for about six months, our spirits were exhausted and there was no end in sight. We decided to turn to nature before landing in the next city of hospitals in need. We fully immersed ourselves in the natural world, living in a rooftop car tent with our 2 dogs and traveling through nearly 8,000 miles of land over a period of seven weeks. During that time, we encountered the extreme polarities of weather and the awe of meeting 1000-year-old conifers – spruce, pine, redwoods, and sequoias. Our hearts opened as we were chased by forest fires, stood atop the peaks of mountain valleys, cleansed our hands in sacred falls, and flowed with the changing currents of many rivers and streams. The voice of nature called us back to a place of hope and deep connection, revealing itself as a profound and transformative model of *parternism* to learn from. Eisler (2018) describes *partnerism* as a system that recognizes the value of caring for people and nature, creating a more peaceful and equitable society built on principles of respect, justice, non-violence, empathy, balance, and innovation instead of

domination. I experienced this truth among the natural elements of life discovered in our opportunity to live in equal partnership with the land.

FINDING COMMUNITY VOICES IN NATURE

One of the first lessons I learned while immersed in the natural world was the powerful 'song' of an omnipresent 'hum'. I realized that I could hear and feel this hum only when I was still and open. Sometimes this hum was more of a feeling than a frequency that could be heard. Time in nature softens this hum and eventually calls one to simply Be. This was invitation number one. I felt the wisdom of a solid rock, rising from centuries of ocean dwelling to now rest on the land: calm, strong, and steady.



Figure 1. *BE*: Standing on Ruby Beach at the outer banks of Olympic National Forest between Reservation lands looking out to the North Pacific Ocean (Photo by A. Walton)

The more into being I became, the more I noticed about the rock's intricacies and the obstacles it has overcome to show up in this space, able to share its story of resiliency, strength, and acceptance.

Finding community and place within the natural world is one way to re-embody the deep knowing that we are not alone. Consider how living and being in community with the land has potential to strengthen our sense of connection with self, purpose, and our truest nature; all needed no less than water or air. Communities of trees, rivers, falls, and native creatures share glimmers of this deep connection to self simply by the acts of existing. Gray Whales of the Salish Sea, for example, celebrated for their strength and stamina, have



Figure 2. *BREATHE*: Gray Whale captured coming up to sprout air from its lungs at about 6 feet in height in the Salish Sea. (Photo by A. Walton)

mastered an almost perfectly rhythmic art of breathing patterns. This reminds us that to be of lasting value to those around us, we must first know and balance our own basic needs, always coming up for air when needed. We might also view this as an invitation to integrate the value of breath into our interdisciplinary settings, day-to-day workflow, and routines with deeper purpose and meaning.

We can imagine the power of building bridges when viewing a structure connecting two places; but spotting a lone tree bridge in the middle of the woods expands our imagination. Stumbling upon this small but sturdy, well-constructed bridge in the Olympic National Forest reminded me to look around and notice the paths laid before us. A message found in the trees; there is no need to go alone and recreate bridges again and again. Instead, nature invites us to look deeper and study more about the paths already there. When we find them, we may need to extend a hand and ask

for help to get across. Only then will we know the quality of our connections, feel inspired enough to call in the others, share discoveries, and build upon foundations which have been laid. Finding community in the *bioculture* makes the idea of building much more organic.

Our understanding of community has been historically challenged by lack of a clear definition. At times, community has been described as a place where people or creatures of common interest and characteristics might come together (MacQueen et al., 2001). Nature, on the other hand, challenges us to consider different connections, purpose, and value in community. What if we viewed community through nature's lens of diversity instead of cultural homogeneity? For example, the ocean's vast range of creatures may lend credence to the idea of a community that honors differences, finds strength in uniqueness, and discovers the possibilities of a biodiverse collective.



Figure 3. *BRIDGE*: Tree built bridge, Olympic National Forest (Photo by A. Walton)



Figure 4. *BUILD*: A community taking flight together off the coast of the San Juan Islands (Photo by A. Walton)

Respecting and understanding the need for biodiversity in the natural world (of forest, soil, water, crop, and native creatures) invites the opportunity for sustainable partnerships between and within human-made and nature-made communities. The paradigms of *partnerism* can be found in the reflections of nature all around. Eislers'



Figure 5. *CONNECT*: Roots of entanglement discovered in forest of the Pacific Northwest along the coast of Hwy 1 (Photo by A. Walton)

(1987) *Unified Theory of Cultural Transformation and Bio-Culturism* helps us to consider our biological dependencies on mutual respect and social and economic justice, as well as gender and environmental balance. The inhabitants of the natural world require this of each other to survive. Just as humans are not resources to be exploited, used,

and undervalued, the land deserves equal consideration and respect. The trees, forest, rivers, and streams hold one another to the same standards of respect and accountability. The planet needs all beings to practice such values to create connections for cultural transformation and build a world in which all relationships, institutions, policies, and organizations honor the principles of partnership (Potter et al., 2015), and thrive. These are connections built on curiosity, empathy, and acts of listening for the sake of understanding each other's stories and fields of life, also known as a sacred form of Caring Science (Watson, 2005). Finding safety and connection in community allows space for energy to move as well as space for spiritual and emotional wounds to be healed.

Nature reminds us that when we find safe and sacred places within and around ourselves, it is okay to



Figure 6. *CRY*: Falls pour from the Snoqualmie River through ancient stone at dusk (Photo by A. Walton)

let go, release, and cry. We are invited to acknowledge and hold space for the experiences of sadness and suffering, as this is often where deep healing, transformation, and strength are resurrected. These are virtues honored by the Native American Snoqualmie Tribe, Indigenous Nations of the Puget Sound region of Washington State. The Snoqualmie are known as Strong People of Status and People of the Moon (Tollefson, 1992; Snoqualmie [sduk^walbix^w] Indian Tribe, 2021). They honor the waterfalls fed by the Snoqualmie River as Moon the Transformer, a story of birthplace and a sacred site for seeking spiritual power (Ballard, 1929). Like the message of ancient stones along the Snoqualmie River, when you feel safe enough and held by the earth beneath you, don't hold back — let it out.

Embracing vulnerability as a part of our individual and collective wholeness brings clarity to our experiences; this clarity further informs our choices and supports alignment with our heart. In my experience, clear decision making can serve to liberate internal discord and dissonant sounds that weigh on our minds, bodies, and spirits. When we acknowledge our vulnerability, we invite more awareness and attention to our surrounding environments and to those within it. The more in tune and honest we are with our environments, the stronger the sense of connection,



Figure 7. *DECIDE*: A Blue Jay takes flight (Photo by A. Walton)

trust, and confidence we might feel in the decisions we make. Nature teaches us that when we find ourselves in these moments of struggle, like the courageous Blue Jay as it takes flight from its resting place, embrace your wholeness, spread your wings, and



Figure 8. *FALL*: Snoqualmie Falls
(Photo by A. Walton)

decide. Watching Moon the Transformer as it falls from rocks at varying levels reminds us: the exhilaration of that decision often brings more challenges, barriers, and risk taking. The falls also remind us that we, like the Snoqualmie River, can welcome the falling waters and learn to flow with the current. Eventually we may find ourselves, our experiences, and wisdom gathered along the way as a source which nurtures someone else's growth and regeneration.

patience, time, and living through cycles of adversity. We may find ourselves in the middle of storms and fires. We may lose people around us and at times we may lose ourselves. We rinse and repeat; this is where we develop stamina, courage, and trust. It ages our bodies but strengthens our spirits. It expands our views and heightens our visions. As we grow tall and firm in who and what we are, our abilities to respect the process of growth in those among us only bring our communities closer together. Like the forest lines of the Pacific Northwest coastal pine, we might find hope in knowing that we have each other to lean on. Together, the possibilities of growth and regeneration are endless. Nature's

The process of regeneration does not reveal its fullness at once. It requires (and at times, demands)



Figure 9. *GROW*: A tree stump in the stage of regeneration (Photo by A. Walton)



Figure 10. *HOPE*: Forest line of the Pacific Northwest Coast (Photo by A. Walton)

LEAD WITH LOVE

It was early morning when I arrived for report on a COVID ICU in California. It was my first day on this unit. I walked into a department in utter chaos: staff members were yelling at each other, a patient restrained for his safety was trying to pull out his breathing tube, a resuscitation was



Figure 12. *LEAD*: Marine bird takes flight from group (Photo by A. Walton)

land its and inhabitant creatures remind us that there is no one or right way to live. Think outside of the box, see beyond the limitations, be courageous, be creative, be innovative, and do not be afraid to lead.



Figure 11. *INNOVATE*: A different kind of home (Photo by A. Walton)

in progress in the hall, and there was no leadership in sight. The nurse assigned to give me report was crying while she battled a patient who was attempting to rip off the mask that was sustaining his ability to breathe and oxygenate adequately. What I saw when I entered the room was a nurse who felt completely depleted, exhausted, had little support, and

was clearly in crisis. She explained that the patient needed blood tests, along with a list of things since admission that were yet to be completed given the circumstances. I encouraged her to take a deep breath and read off the list of the most acute needs first, and that from there we would work together to get the patient settled and safe. I told the patient that his condition was serious, that we needed his help to manage this emergency, and informed him that his questions and concerns would be addressed once he was stabilized. Gratefully, both patient and nurse calmed, the blood tests were drawn, and the situation de-escalated. The nurse and I debriefed, hugged, cried, and then parted ways.



Figure 13. *LOVE*: A sun rises over Gas Works Park, Seattle, WA (Photo by A. Walton)

The same nurse returned for the evening shift to receive my handoff and shared this with me: In the two hours before I had arrived, she was planning not to return to the unit the next night, and maybe not to the nursing profession at all. She shared that during her shift, she felt so burdened that she was beginning to question her desire to return to the “next day of sunlight,” and for the first time in her career, experienced

a level of suicidal thought due to the overwhelming stress she was experiencing in the moment.

Since years 2007-2018, nurses have been reported as 18% more likely to die by suicide than the general population (Davis et al., 2021). Between the years 2017 and 2018, 729 American Nurses committed suicide, and we have yet to see the impact on suicide rates related to the repeated traumatic stress experiences of the pandemic on nurses' mental health (Lee & Frieze, 2021). When the nurse shared this with me on this day, we assessed for suicidal intent, connected with resources, cried, hugged again, and then she said, "You showed me the first sign of kindness in hours, compassion to the patient, did what needed to be done, and it just made me feel the feeling of love. That was enough and because of it, here I am."

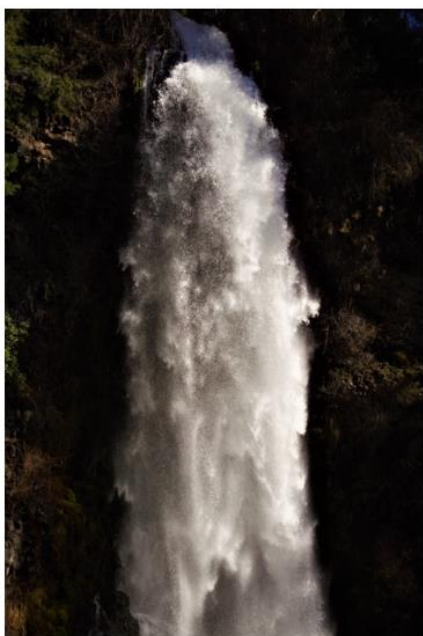


Figure 14. *RELEASE*: A fall in the woods rushing down (Photo by A. Walton)

Today, this is what I would say to that nurse and all who are in roles of service who continue to battle the complexities of crisis work across the world: The work you did and are continuing to do is not easy or simple. It is not natural to work this way. We are not made for constant states of overdrive and stress. We are not here to only give and not receive, or to save the world at the expense of our own. There is love to be felt, experienced, and shared. If these feelings come again, step outside, see the sun, let it guide you, and lead with love. Nature places before us every opportunity to pause and feel this.

REST, RELEASE, RISE



Figure 15. *REST*: A Blue Jay sits in the trees of the Olympic Forest (Photo by A. Walton)

Resting and taking pause have become acts of courage in our society and culture. Nature embraces resting and pausing quite effortlessly. We can learn much from the natural world. Non-human beings are not racing through life to prove their value by increasing productivity, social status, or material gain. In the natural world, it is not about how fast or far one goes, or who

does it better. In most cases it is simply about being, existing, and exploring with curiosity. It is about a life of adventure, play, laughter, joy, and connection. Find a waterfall, observe its rhythm, and feel the energy flow. This act of release can serve as permission from the land for attachments to be let go. Even forceful flows of water run their course. It is natural to take time to pause and feel what we are feeling. Find comfort here and let the nervous system settle, allow your eyes to close and mind to rest for a moment. Just be where you are. This pause is often what brings

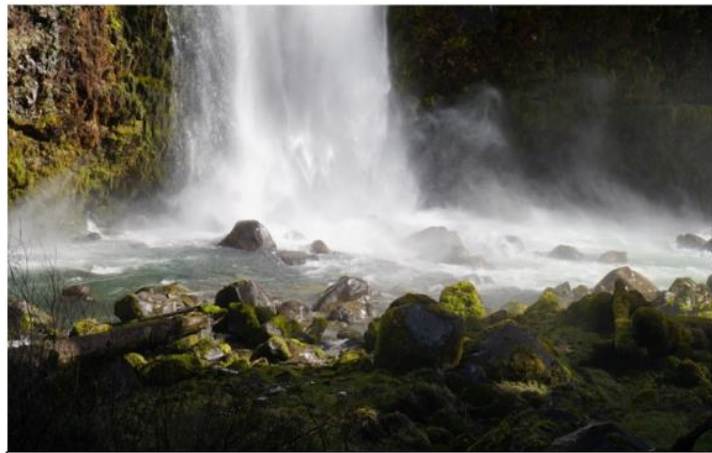


Figure 16. *RISE*: Mist rising as waterfalls and rock collide (Photo by A. Walton)

balance to our sense of drive and motivation. I believe waterfalls inspire us to create an intention for letting energy and emotions move, as well as to release unhealthy attachments. By noticing what is within and around us, we can let the body, mind,

and spirit recharge. The moment to act will make itself known when the forceful flow begins again and breaks at its first collision.

When you recognize your call to act, partners of the land will show you how to surrender to the natural cycles of rise and fall, give and take, listen and speak. The natural world is filled with examples of the power that is generated through organic acts of surrender. Even fallen trees continue to promote new life and have purpose in the cycles of nature.

SURRENDER, TRUST, LEAD



Figure 17. *SURRENDER*: A fallen tree provides home for new life to form (Photo by A. Walton)

Like the fallen trees of the Pacific Northwest forest, let go of resistance and embrace becoming a conduit for life to grow from. This simple act of surrendering holds and

creates space for the growth of others, strengthens communities, and opens the door to endless collective possibilities. As Eisler (2023) has observed in years of studying human societies, this capacity to give, nurture, and sustain the spirit of mutual care and responsibility is to be revered and celebrated for us to build a more equitable and just world. It is the most natural and organic expression of our innate empathy. Let us look to our non-human neighbors and learn from their inner strengths of kindness and generosity.

The voices of nature sing songs of hope all around, reminding us again and again the power of partnership rather than domination (Eisler & Loye, 1998, 2005). As much as I learned by time spent in the natural world, I was left with more questions than answers. This may be the biggest invitation nature calls us to. To embrace *partnerism*

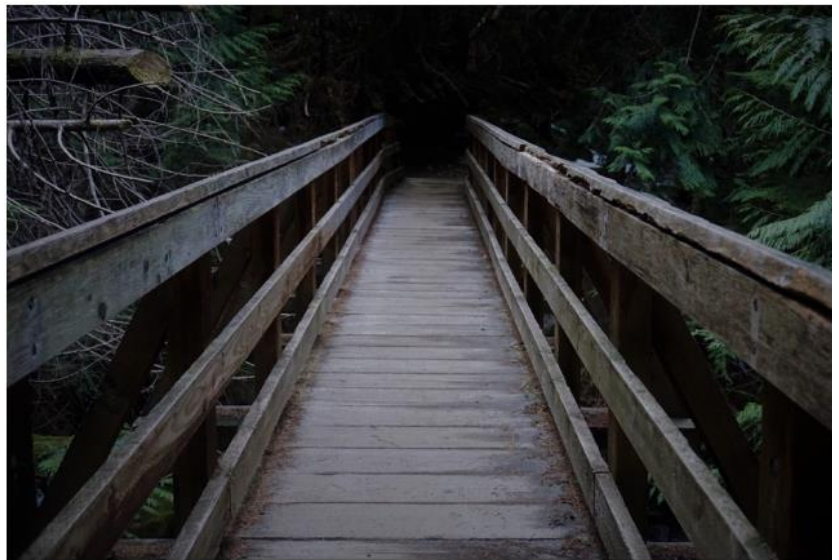


Figure 18. *TRUST*: A bridge leads to the unknown (Photo by A. Walton)

in our relationships, institutions, policies, and organizations as our non-human communities do, we may have to show up with more questions than answers. The major culture shift that this embrace might require of us is our willingness to place trust in the unknown, trust in ourselves, and trust in each other. Trust is the fundamental quality upon which partnerships and safe spaces are built — a quality found in the heart of the healer within each of us. We must first turn inward and learn to trust the goodness within ourselves, as it grants us the gift of trusting the goodness within each other. This is hope in action; a leap of faith in believing that at our truest nature, human beings are good.

I conclude by sharing the words of nature's 'ask' of me as I stood at the edge of a bridge to unknown possibilities in question of humanity, the sustainability of our planet and systems, strength in our societies, direction, and hope for the future: *Dear Healer, though what is to come is unrevealed from the place you stand, do you trust enough in the goodness of your own heart to step forth and lead anyway?*

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