

Pulling Together in Rising Waters: Reciprocity as Practice

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Abstract

Resilience is needed to survive the looming crises of the Anthropocene, and the need to access tools that can build resilience is more important than ever. Through personal stories and literature review, I consider how individual and cultural resilience is built through empathy, connection, and reciprocity—between humans and, especially importantly, with the more-than-human world. Each is rooted in expanding the boundaries of self. The revival of Coast Salish communities, now known as Tribal Journeys, is a deeply powerful cultural movement that uses the canoe as a vessel for renewal. Recovery from crushing colonial depredations is a potent example of resilience from which to draw insight. Loving kindness training, the practice of natural history, and meditation techniques that focus on accessing and using sorrow and vulnerability are described as tools that foster a more spacious understanding of self. Key Words: Resilience—Reciprocity—Empathy—Connection.

A Story About Empathy and Reciprocity

The June that his foot and mine fit in exactly the same print on the beach, my son was caught in a killer rip tide off Costa Rica's Pacific Coast. One moment he danced in waist-deep foam, close enough to hear me when I called him for lunch, the next his thin body rose backlit against the top third of a luminous green wall. My boy should have ridden in with that big wave. He disappeared behind it instead.

The rip tides at Dominical, we learned later, are famous throughout Costa Rica for their deadliness, claiming a life about every four months. Weeks before, a father was dragged out and drowned after managing to pull his three-year-old to ground.

At four years old, our son had hauled the inner-tube body of a stranded squid to shoulder-deep water; at six, hand fed fish to a dying sea lion. Walking on a Mexican beach one morning, he noticed, in the sun's low angle, quicksilver drops resting on the sand: marooned jellyfish. He couldn't pass one of these thumbnail-sized blobs of life without cupping it in his palm for a trip back to the open water, never mind the sting rays or the chill.

There is a strain of old story, a gratitude story. The one where one being helps another, when no one else, not even the most able by dint of great power or strength, is willing. The helper is repaid with his own life at the moment of need: In a story of reciprocity dating from the 2nd century, Androcles encounters a wounded lion while hiding in a cave to escape enslavement. He removes a thorn from the lion's paw. Recaptured and condemned to be devoured at the Circus Maximus, he is saved because the fearsome beast in the arena of death is the same lion that he helped. Variations of this story reappear in Western literature through the Middle Ages to the present, where YouTube videos of it appear in several languages. Aesop included both "The Shepherd and the Lion" and "The Lion and the Mouse," another tale of mutual dependence, in his fables. In *The Lord of the Rings*, giant eagles, healed of arrow wounds by the wizard, carry Gandalf to Mount Doom to save Frodo and Sam. We enjoy these stories as fiction. Some, remembering that reciprocity governs all relations, still dance the rain to the desert every summer. But many of us have forgotten. We move out into the world discounting behavior that acknowledges interdependence. Too often, the profound reciprocal balance of right relations, a balance rooted in deep gratefulness and an attitude of kindness toward all beings, is ignored in the rush toward success. Our commodified culture assumes that the overly empathetic soul can't negotiate the deal. The softhearted are sneeringly called naive, or patronizingly, idealistic. As the dying howls of the Anthropocene are heard from hurricane-devastated towns to scorched mountains, the dominant Western paradigm demands that winners have rhino-thick skin and maneuver with self-interest firmly at center—catch or be caught.

But the true stories should be remembered. I could not swear by what grace the ocean released us that day. The water dragged relentlessly as I pushed my dear boy in front of me, through one swell, then another, but getting no closer to the shore. We were caught in the rip only an hour before its peak strength. In the end, the ocean's grip simply, suddenly, released.

I do know this: From the time he was small, my son noticed that humans often disregard the needs of other species. In the way of a child, he did what he could, and what he did was immediate, concrete. I do know this: He noticed a sea bass gasping on a heap of desiccated beach wrack and carried it out into the cool waters of the Gulf of California in January. He and I swam away from a deadly Pacific rip tide in June.

A Story About Connection

Fifteen years later—July in Arizona. You can't touch the pavement after about 9:30 in the morning. If you are a dog, your paws will burn if you are slow. In our house, without air conditioning, the massive swamp cooler roars with surreal white noise. My sweet dog, Hank, is going to die this hour, and I am broken with sorrow: for her hips, all jutting angles; for her tiny, careful steps restlessly pacing as she tries to escape arthritis grinding bone to bone; for the expression of mixed surprise and trust when her legs give out and she falls splayed and helpless, looking around for me to pick her up.

On the face of it, there hadn't been much good to say about Hank's prospects. We found her lying on a dirt road in a small town in Mexico. But my kids and I knelt and saw breath move the distended belly. When we held a little bit of fish taco toward her encrusted nose, the tiny eyes instantly opened, and there it was—a black spark that did not falter for more than a decade and a half.

It took about a year of various washes, antibiotics, and adjustments, but our dead puppy grew sleek with prodigious energy and black licorice gloss. She had a bump on the top of her head that we called her love bump. I thought of that bump as holding what Buddhists call *bodhichitta*, the original tenderness, a soft spot that is as vulnerable and sensitive as an open wound, equated, in part, with our ability to love and also, in part, with compassion—the broken heart that leads us toward understanding the brokenness around us (Chodron, 2019).

Hank was often in the car with me at the end of the day, leaning into the kids to absorb the horrors of middle school. She would turn from her contemplation of the outside scenery to cast on them a humorous side eye, gratefully received, that put many things in perspective. For 16 years Hank was the brave and droll constant in our children's lives: like a little sister, like a child we all were raising together, like a kindly second mother, like a living example of spunk against odds.

Hank would get a certain look when she wanted to lick a beloved face. She had round eyes as it was, and they would seem to get rounder as she zeroed in, anticipating, the way a child would look at a double ice cream cone. The habit started way back when the kids would lean toward her and beguilingly coo, "Fish taco? FISH TACO?" But it seems to me that over the years there grew to be more to Hank's kiss than the happy thought of getting a taste of whatever her person had just eaten. There was anticipation in those eyes but also invitation, a dog's call to the delight of connection.

The visiting vet was already at the house with her euthanasia form and needles the last time Hank got the ice cream cone look and leaned in, all her sweetness coming at me in a long, long moment of gladness and gratitude and invitation. She licked and licked and stared and licked. Days later, my face was still a little chapped from it all. It is that look that pushed my water-logged boat of sorrow back into the current and that carries me now—those delighted eyes transmuting the dark knowledge that in the end we will, every one of us, lose everything and everybody we care about.

With her body that gave out on her, with strangers in the house that smelled like chemicals and maybe even death, with the pavement too hot to walk and the fan blowing too hard to think, Hank demonstrated the possibility that beyond the painful details of personal story we can access a soft spot of bravery and kindness and delight by extending ourselves to another.

A Story About Resilience

Exactly a month after Hank died, we went to stay for a couple of weeks on the coast of the Salish Sea in Washington State. I discovered while there a lump in my right breast. It felt like my thumb above the joint. It felt like all the just misses and the things I had yet to do. It felt like anger for the wounded world and, most of all, like the hard knot of the question: Had I made good and helpful use of my time?

I took the next day to wander a museum exhibit, *People of the Sea and Cedar*. The carved house posts, handmade tools, bark hats, soft wool blankets, and exquisite bent wood boxes of fragrant cedar—the material culture of the Coast Salish people—reflected an enviable wholeness of lives lived for generations under the guidance of ancestors. This guidance emphasized responsibility and reciprocity and was ultimately expressed in the multiple dimensions of the potlatch ceremony.

The coastal and inland waters of what is now British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, and Northern California have been, for millennia, the homeland of indigenous peoples of many nations and tribal affiliations. Each has distinctive cultural and political identities, but certain beliefs, traditions, and practices are held in common.

The Potlatch—a days-long ceremony marked by lavish distribution of gifts, shared meals, and deeply symbolic and prayerful dance—is a defining feature of all Northwest Coast societies (Ames & Maschner, 2000). This “great reciprocity system of potlatch ceremonies and feasts” guided proprietorship, ethics, and resource management (Trosper, 2003) and was the primary governmental institution, legislative body, and economic system for indigenous groups up and down the coast for thousands of years (Jonaitis, 1991). Significantly, in contrast to most non-indigenous societies, wealth and status along the Northwest Coast were not determined by how much you had but by how much you had to give away.

For coastal peoples, the long, shimmering days of the Northwest summers were for traveling in cedar canoes to gather in the abundance of the waters and islands: roots, greens, berries, the mussels and clams, the seal and whale, the all-important salmon, the less famous oolichan, or candlefish, bursting with nutritious oils (Ryser & Korn, 2007).

In fall people processed for storage the riches gathered from land and water. Winter, when darkness fell early and rain pounded the longhouse roof, was the time for Potlatch: to discuss, negotiate, and affirm rights to and uses of specific territories and resources, following, as the Kwakwaka'wakw chiefs said to anthropologist Franz Boas in 1886, the “strict law that bids us dance” (Jonaitis, 2017).

In the late 1800s, potlatches were banned in both Canada and the United States—targeted with zeal by governments and missionaries in their push for complete assimilation. The idea of ritualistically giving away nearly all of one's hard-earned possessions was seen as a sign that the indigenous people were “unstable”—they demonstrated the opposite of the “Christian capitalist” ideals highly valued by most European colonists (Lutz, 1992).

Bob Joseph (2012), a Gwawaenuk Nation member from the Queen Charlotte Islands and trainer in indigenous communications, explains the effect of the ban. Over seven decades of the Potlatch Law, “Almost an entire generation grew up deprived of the cultural fabric of their ancestors, and countless thousands of irreplaceable ceremonial masks, robes, blankets, and other potlatch items were lost forever to their People.” These are the tools by which one culture annihilates another: legal erasure of the most sacred ceremonies, the diseases and alcohol brought ashore with convenient new goods, the boarding schools, the suppression of language, and the pervasive racism that dismissed hundreds of years of culture as “savage.”

Toward the end of the *People of the Sea and Cedar* exhibit hall, the story changes. Fernlike cedar branches in the background photos disappear; sleek canoes are replaced by bulky ships of commerce. I take in the images of devastation wrought by European colonists:

the stump fields and the mud, the ruts, the spindly trees left behind—looking for all the world like confused and grieving orphans. The indigenous cultures of the Northwest were expected to go down with the ancient cedars. They didn't.

In the sun-drenched summer of 2019, across the waters of the Salish Sea, the people come in canoes. The people are singing, pulling paddles in rhythm. They come to the Lummi Nation, at the mouth of the Nooksack River which pours into the northern reaches of Puget Sound. Some canoes, pulling from as far away as Oregon and Alaska, have been on the water for a month. The canoe families are singing, pulling their paddles through the cold and tossing water. On the cobble beach we are clapping and cheering, feeling each pull in our hearts. Some canoes have flags, red and yellow, blue and green, rippling and snapping in the bright breeze. A fist painted on one, on others, rainbows, tribal crests. Canoe bows are carved into elegant bird heads, wolves, raven. A canoe approaches the beach—paddles are raised blade forward to signal the request to land. The canoe is met by several people who have waded knee deep to catch and hold it against the waves. A cedar wreath is placed over its arching bow. Then, finally, in a protocol filled with reverence and pride, in cadences that recur throughout the afternoon, one person stands in the swaying boat, faces the gathered crowd, and asks to come ashore. Sometimes the speaker uses English, but as often, the language is that of the canoe family's ancestors: sounds that have been heard on these coasts for a thousand years, words that survived under the most crushing and unlikely of circumstances. The words are respectful and joyful, the same entreaty spoken again and again as more and yet more canoes come in, are met, and held, and bestowed with wreaths. The voices are tired and jubilant. In the many languages of the Northwest Coast, the words are repeated: We come in peace, we are tired and hungry and have come a long way, we request permission to land our canoes in order to share our stories and share our songs and share our dances and food. And here, as nowhere else in our beleaguered country, we on the cobble beach hear repeated again and yet again over the course of a long afternoon, “Come Ashore! Come Ashore! We reach our hand out to you!” We run down and help carry the canoes across the cobble beach to the grassy ceremonial area.

Every summer since 1998, drawn from tribes across Western Washington, Canada, Alaska, and beyond, canoe families have traveled the ancestral highways of the Coast Salish people to reach one nation's home ground. The canoe resurgence, now known as Tribal Journeys, is a deeply powerful cultural movement using the canoe as a vessel for renewal. Lummi reef net fisherman Troy Olsen called the Journey “a celebration of resilience and sovereignty.”

To hear our youth speaking the language, it's nothing short of a miracle—nothing more, nothing less ... we are bringing back our elders, our youth, our songs, our dances and our potlatch for each and every person here to be a part of. And they will take away that it's not about [self], it's about coming together in a good way, giving our hy'shqas [thanks] to the Creator for the gifts we have been given. (Walker, 2019)

What follows the landing is several days of potlach celebration that, like potlatches through the hundreds of years before colonial incursion, honor and nourish relationships and connections with the land, water, and one another (Rossnagle, 2019).

A Story About Dissolving Boundaries

Now the doctor says I have cancer. Now I cry in the parking lot, lean against my husband. Now I talk to my kids as the coal train hoots and howls down at the shoreline tracks. Now I am nourished with friends at a salmon feast. Now I float on a small lake as the full summer moon rises while my friend, in the most graceful way, makes room for my deepest fears and tells me of her own cancer 20 years before, how she made the decision to love the world every single day of the two years that were given her for survival.

MRIs eventually found two tumors, one in each breast. The surgery was not too bad. The “targeted radiation” that followed proved stunningly invasive. Two catheters each carrying a purple nine-tubed expandable appliance are pushed into the tissue of my breasts. All tubes are attached to a machine holding radioactive “seeds” designed to zip down the tubes, like some miniature form of public transportation from the Jetsons. Of course, no one can be in the room with you while this happens. You are naked from the waist up, a ceiling camera monitoring for panic. Above the stainless steel cylinder that holds, and hopefully, restrains, the radiation, is a large video screen. All week, twice a day, the machines whir, the tubes flex, the seeds race to battle. Shivering under the eye in the ceiling, I hang by a slim visual thread—like a spider in the wind, like a desperate and drowning person—to episode after episode of Planet Earth II. Monday: the rare pygmy three-toed sloth. Tuesday: snow leopards leaping down precipitous slopes. Wednesday: jaguars, stealthy and elegant, and spider monkeys, our cousins of the canopy. And so on, all week. The stories from my friends, the voices of my children, the grounding reality of other beings going about their business—unconcerned with my drama, my life or death, which, of course, loomed like a boulder next to the video screen—each pierced a small hole in the shell of my fear and isolation.

Empathy, Connection, and Reciprocity as Tools for Remembering the Future

I write these words in the early afternoon of the day the *Washington Post* reports “Top Scientists Warn of an Amazon ‘Tipping Point,’” that the lungs of the planet are teetering on the edge of functional destruction, and so are we (Mooney & Dennis, 2019). A few days before, the headlines alerted that thawing permafrost in the Arctic is now ushering in a long-dreaded climate feedback loop (Freedman, 2019). Who can say what tomorrow's dire news will be? If you are paying attention, you can see that the earth is speeding toward hell in a hand basket. If it is possible to see that basket as a vessel and if that vessel were a canoe, could we find a way to pull through the rising waters together?

Tom Heidelbaugh was one of the visionaries who worked tirelessly toward Tribal Canoe Journeys. Calling his visioning process “remembering the future,” Heidelbaugh describes how the sense of self will expand and empathy become essential.

Now, we spend as much time for families as we do for ourselves. Now we dedicate our work to our community and our land as much as we dedicate it to our family. Now we live in balance, finding that smooth passage that only a carved cedar canoe can make over the roughest water on the welcoming shore. (Cohen, 2011)

The *Ten Canoe Rules* developed by the Quileute Canoe Contingent (1990) provide useful counsel to those of us hoping to stay together and stay afloat. Centrally: *There is to be no abuse of self or others; The gift of each enriches all; We all pull and support each other.*

Ronald Trosper, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Montana, defines resilience as persistence in the presence of variability (including variability caused by humans) (Trosper, 1998). One of the buffers that allowed Pacific Northwest cultural systems to endure environmental and human disruption was “provided by interactions among the potlatch systems of reciprocal exchange” (Trosper, 2003). He calls attention to the history of these exchanges as part of a negotiation and regulating process for environmental management decisions that supported sustainability, and follows the thread to its logical conclusion: The reciprocity of the potlatch system can be applied to modern circumstances. He makes the seemingly radical proposal that the reciprocity of the potlatch system could be applied by “changing the rules for the distribution of income from using ecosystem resources so that all entities share their surplus income with each other” (Trosper 1998). Prophetically, Trosper emphasized that we will adopt changes only in response to taking seriously the intensity of our crises.

The saving moments of my life have happened because the boundaries of my sense of “self” were allowed to blur and soften. My son’s compassionate empathy set in motion the reciprocity that freed us from a rip tide, Hank’s insistence on connecting pierced despair, and opening beyond the limits of my fearful self brought me back home to the still beautiful earth. These point a way toward things we may have forgotten, the tools to remember that will help us navigate the passage through the dangerous currents, waves, and whirlpools ahead. It is time to take our crisis seriously enough to change our habitually self-interested ways—to expand ourselves toward each other, to recognize interdependence, and to practice reciprocity.

Building Connection and Empathy

Death—of a beloved dog, or confronting your own—is the ultimate whack on the chest with a two-by-four. A truth laid bare by multiple critics of consumerist culture: We try to blunt the sorrow embedded in death’s multiple realities—the loss of our parents, our youth, the disappearance of birds, the warming planet—with any number of addictions, from beguiling online deals to the prescription bottle. Never mind the consequences to the good green places, our families, or our lovers (Glendinning, 1994; Jensen, 2005; Shaw, 2011).

Synthesizing the current research into the underlying causes of addiction, Hari (2015) concludes that the opposite of addiction is not sobriety, it’s connection. Weiss (2015) agrees, “addiction is not about the pleasurable effects of substances, it’s about the user’s inability to connect in healthy ways with other human beings. In other words, addiction is not a substance disorder, it’s a social disorder.”

It is not the rhino-skinned that are going to help us survive the Anthropocene. Recent research links empathy and systems thinking with an inclusive and expansive self-concept and a proenvironmental identity (Davis, Leppanen, Mularczyk, Bedard, & Stroink, 2018). Researchers in environmental education and outdoor recreation who study how people’s underlying values affect their behaviors and attitudes use the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) Scale to gauge beliefs about the natural world. A high score indicates a “pro-ecological” worldview. Research shows that having an expansive self-concept, as described above, uniquely predicts a high NEP score (Davis & Stroink, 2015). In other words, expanding beyond the limited sense of self is not only good for ourselves; it is good for the planet.

The extent to which people feel empathy and the actual capacity for empathy can be increased (Weisz & Zaki, 2017). A promising area of research looks at meditation techniques that build feelings of benevolence and kindness. “Loving Kindness Training” is a specific meditation where participants cultivate friendliness to a series of imagined people, starting with a person with whom one already feels

close, then working outward to extend toward strangers and people one has difficulties with. Ultimately, the goal is to build feelings of benevolence toward all human beings (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008).

Philosopher and writer Roman Krznaric’s Empathy Museum is a series of participatory art projects dedicated to helping us look at the world through other people’s eyes or, literally, in the case of one exhibit, by walking in someone else’s shoes. Krznaric (2014) argues that our brains are wired for social connection: Empathy is at the heart of who we are and is an essential, transforming quality for the 21st century. *Six Habits of Highly Empathic People* gives a blueprint for developing empathy. It includes cultivating curiosity about strangers, challenging prejudices and discovering commonalities, and trying on another person’s life. For example, the religiously observant might attend services of another faith—a “God Swap;” atheists can stretch themselves by going to church. To develop empathy, he says, take John Dewey’s counsel: Genuine education comes about through experience. He advises us to encounter—as much as possible and as deeply as possible—the worldviews of those different from ourselves (Krznaric, 2012).

This work effectively argues for and focuses on developing empathy between the human family. But our vessel would surely sink if it only carried human companions. The research in many fields that demonstrates that people are better off—happier, fitter, more focused and creative—when connected to the natural world is expanding exponentially (Atchley, Strayer, & Atchley, 2012; Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008; Zhang, Piff, Iyer, Koleva, & Keltner, 2014). Fleischner (2019) places the need for kinship with the more-than-human world as a deeply human hunger and builds a case for the practice of natural history as a way to foster our understanding of interdependence. Practices to build affinity through natural history range from taking up binoculars and a field book to guided nature walks and environmental education activities, classically presented by Cornell (1979).

Expanding the Sense of Self and Opening to Shared Sorrow

But as we build affinity and become more empathetic and loving toward our beleaguered world, we can find ourselves teetering on the edge of empathic despair (Singer & Klimecki, 2014) or forming addictive patterns that arise from and contribute to psychic numbing. To arrive safely together at a shore beyond the bereft and lonely landscape of the Anthropocene, our canoe will need to carry us over deep waters and also down daunting rivers. Any river runner will tell you that when faced head-on into a boulder, you need to make the counterintuitive decision to lift your edge and tilt your weight toward

the rock, essentially leaning into the thing you most want to avoid. One very powerful and hopeful solution is offered by Buddhist nun Pema Chodron. It is possible, she says, to extend empathy without sinking into despair. Chodron writes comprehensively on meditation practices that deepen our compassion by leaning toward our deepest vulnerabilities. In the practice of Tonglen, we can consciously use our personal pain to develop *bodhichitta*—compassion toward the universal human predicament (Chodron, 2019).

Ultimately, it is the bounded sense of self that keeps us from pulling forward together. We shape our paddles by remembering the old stories, paying attention to the many ways that we belong to this earth, and acting on the new information that reminds us of our interdependence. Walens (1981) related the inclusive understanding among Kwakwaka'wakw people that animals and spirits lead lives exactly equivalent to those of humans: living in winter villages, dancing, marrying, praying. Jensen (2005, p. 551) succinctly put it, "What is done to the earth is done to ourselves. It really is that simple." Perhaps it is the Dalai Lama (2005, p. 64) who best summed up insights of quantum physics as applied to the spiritual world to illuminate the limits of individual identity: "Anything that exists and has an identity does so only within the total network of everything that has a possible or potential relation to it. No phenomenon exists with an independent or intrinsic identity." We are all made from atoms emanated from stars. Resilience and commitment grow from this deep knowing—that we are not, and have never been, alone.

What if we believed that there really is no hierarchy between human people and animal people and tree people and any other beings that make their home here on our precious blue planet? What if we committed to a place in the canoe for every single thing? What if we reached beyond ourselves to feel the pain of the earth as if it were our own and dealt directly with our sorrow rather than relinquishing ourselves to our distractions? What if we took seriously both the endgame we now are in and the reality of reciprocity so that every action is based on understanding the radically interdependent relationship we share with our suffering planet? What if every day we breathed in the sorrow of the earth as if our hearts could expand, as if we could become as big as the sky and let our difference go? What if we pulled together as if our very lives depended on it? Because, of course, they do.

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