

being... here... now

mark butler

being... here... now

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A note on the cover artwork by Eloff Pretorius

I approached this project with three themes in mind; cultivation, time and process. I decided to use an image of an espalier fig tree. Espalier is a method of urban gardening where a fruit tree is trained to grow horizontally. It is a sculptural gardening method that requires immense patience and effort. The plant itself appears heavily pruned and evokes a spirit of struggle and overcoming to me. This subject was rendered in oil paint, a slow and time consuming painting medium. This text points to the importance of time, and the oil paint felt like an appropriate material with which to respond to the events of 2020 and 2021. I mixed my paint on the canvas, instead of using a pallet. I wanted to record the process of mixing colours and include some of the hues that would usually be excluded from the final painting. This also created a chaotic visual element in the work, almost intruding on the subject and emphasizing the materiality of the oil paint.

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Dedication

Please take a moment with us to acknowledge with compassion the suffering of people near and far from us, and also to acknowledge with gratitude the many loving people, practices, resources, and communities of care and tenderness that help us through, and that bring light to the world.

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What is...

Church Land Programme

The Church Land Programme (CLP)¹ is a small, independent, non-profit organisation that affirms, learns from, and journeys with, struggles of dignity, justice and freedom.

Padkos

Afrikaans dictionaries translate '*padkos*' as 'provisions' in English. It is made up of two separate Afrikaans words: *pad*, meaning road; and *kos*, meaning food. So it describes **food for the journey**. CLP's *padkos* initiative began in 2010 as an email-list to provide and share some resources for our journey. In the beginning, those resources were limited to written pieces that come from, or connect with, the thinking and reflection that is part of our praxis. Over time, *padkos* has expanded into a vibrant and varied programme. But the core aims have remained the same, and we've always tried to ensure that the *padkos* we share is seasonal, locally-grounded, and nutritious.

Why?

CLP has often spoken of its work as a journey, and we are inspired by Paulo Freire's argument that we make the path by walking. The journey of our work is deeply rewarding, and our main guide and inspiration remains the rebellious struggles of the people. But it is also a long and demanding journey. As we continue together, we all need *padkos* – sustenance and food-for-thought along the way. CLP makes this *padkos* available because emancipatory action is always thought; because reflection strengthens struggle; and also because we have been asked to! This initiative is one aspect of our response to requests from friends and members, colleagues and comrades to be 'fed': to hear from and learn with CLP about its thinking and work.

1 See our website <http://churchland.org.za/> for more information.

How?

padkos began as a low-traffic **email distribution list** for people directly connected with CLP, as well as fellow travellers interested in and supportive of CLP's work. In the beginning, we simply shared written pieces.

In response to the interest the readings generated, we created the 'palaver' where we could get together to focus on a particular issue or paper, and really discuss and digest the richness and challenges. In turn, the palaver then grew into a remarkable programme of *padkos* events that draws in friends and guests, from across the country and around the world, sharing their work and thinking in interactive discussions at our offices in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

We also developed a programme showing films and documentaries that has been really stimulating and enlightening. Watching them together enables us to understand, to learn from, and to make connections with other struggles in other contexts – and also with diverse modes of emancipatory organisation and struggle around the globe. We called this aspect of *padkos* the 'bioscope'.

Another dimension of the evolving *padkos* menu incorporated culture as a rich and nourishing part of our 'food for the journey'. *padkos* 'intermission' has included creative events featuring, for instance, poetry and art, food and drink – and lots of live music.

From time to time we have collated the materials that have been shared via *padkos* into printed and bound **digests** which many have found really useful resources.

To try and ensure that *padkos* remains a nurturing and nourishing resource, we facilitate both the list and the events it enables with care and a principled commitment to decency, dignity and deliberation. When we get together for *padkos* discussions, it's never been simply a 'public' space and, while serious issues get debated and participants' wide range of views and questions are always encouraged, we are not interested in regressive forms of 'debating' with those who are basically hostile to the thought of emancipatory work.

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If you would like to be on the *padkos* list, please email padkos@churchland.org.za, briefly outlining your interest for us to look at. You can check out previous *padkos* servings here: http://www.churchland.org.za/?page_id=128.



A short note about this booklet

This booklet brings together a series of *padkos* mailings (or ‘servings’) that were distributed during 2021. That material has been lightly edited and re-arranged so that the booklet reads easily, but we’ve kept the dates and numbers and headings from each of the servings as they went out. *Padkos* servings often have additional reading resources in the form of attachments. In this booklet, the attachments that were written by ourselves have been incorporated into the text. Those resources that were written by others are not included here, but we have provided brief notes about them and an online reference so that you can find them if you would like to follow up (and for those without internet access, we will keep a hard copy of the consolidated attachments at the CLP offices).

Foreword

A little over a decade ago, a wise healer and long-time activist for the protection of global biodiversity observed that the intense chronic headaches plaguing me for many years were due to Atlas Syndrome. “You think you carry the world on your shoulders”, she told me. “You’ve forgotten that it is the earth that carries you”.

At that time, I had already travelled many years through the international solidarity and NGO world view. I knew my work, and I appreciated the truth of the image of Atlas groaning under the weight of a world that seemed so much heavier year after year. However, it took some time, and more determined lifting, before I could fully grasp the insight she offered that day:

Remember, it is Earth that carries you. Walk lightly on the earth.

Her advice took root in my mind and grew in silence while the world outside continued to call me to action. I continued to believe that if only I were more determined, more capable of doing ever more, ever better, things would change for the better and I would be worthy of the life I miraculously enjoyed. Of course, I was not alone in that belief. I have had the great fortune to have lived and worked with people and organisations around the world dedicated to struggles for justice and the protection of life and dignity. In the face of the “fierce urgency of now”, we encouraged, and even applauded, the exhaustion that comes from being unwavering for most of our waking hours in devotion to persistent, collective action.

At the time of publication of this *padkos* booklet, the fierce urgency of now could not be more compelling. Nor could the suffering and profound fatigue that so many people are experiencing be more heart-rending. As the COVID-19 pandemic enters its third year, profound disorientation and confusion – as well as war and ecological collapse – shake our world on many fronts. We witness a dramatic ripping away of whatever veils remain over the destructive nature of capitalism and its relentless death march toward humanity’s extinction.

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We lament the exhaustion and worry traced in the faces of friends and comrades and urge them to take better care of themselves. To rest in order not to stop. To recuperate in order to return to a permanent battle. We remind each other of the advice on airplanes, “In case of emergency, place your own oxygen mask on first before helping others”. Undoubtedly, this life-saving, practical advice is appropriate for many aspects of our lives, even when our first impulse may be to attend to others first. And this beautiful booklet from *padkos* does indeed provide welcome oxygen in a time of emergency.

But the publication emerges from a deeper source of concern for both the suffering in the world and the possibilities for its transformation. That deeper source is one of love for the living Earth, and compassion for its people who struggle, who labour to realize their aspirations for a “Beloved Community”. Perhaps more remarkably and radically, this offering from *padkos* is subversive of the instrumental logic of “put-your-own-mask-on-first”.

Instead, it supports our desire to be connected, to be present as human beings, bringing our attention and our love to a world in need of repair and healing. A world that holds us and carries us within vast and incomprehensible mystery and possibility. What brought us to a permanent state of emergency? What ways of nurturing love and care for creation have been forgotten or abandoned? Are we truly doomed to accept that it is easier to imagine the end of life than the end of capitalism? Why do we cling to the tools of the master when we know they cannot dismantle the master’s house, the house in which hope is so tragically imprisoned? What other ways of being human could we be nurturing, here and now, the only time we ever have?

Frantz Fanon famously counselled, “Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it”. In the obscurity of our own times how do we free our imaginations to act and reflect together, unleashed from the weight of despair and fatalism? We need more than emergency masks. We breathe with all of life, and in breathing together we tap the source of the vitality needed to sustain our lives over the long arc of history that bends toward justice.

We make a path forward by paying full and careful attention with all our being. We listen. We ask another question, and another. We learn to forgive ourselves and each other for the clumsiness of our efforts – our fears, our fatigue, our confusion and our ragged imperfections. The ways in which we encourage and care for each other now, offer their own rewards, providing glimpses of possibility – of the life-affirming, transformative ways of being and doing that are generative of the hope that so often eludes us.

In these pages, I have found a timely treasure, *padkos*, delicious and nutritious food for the ongoing journey.

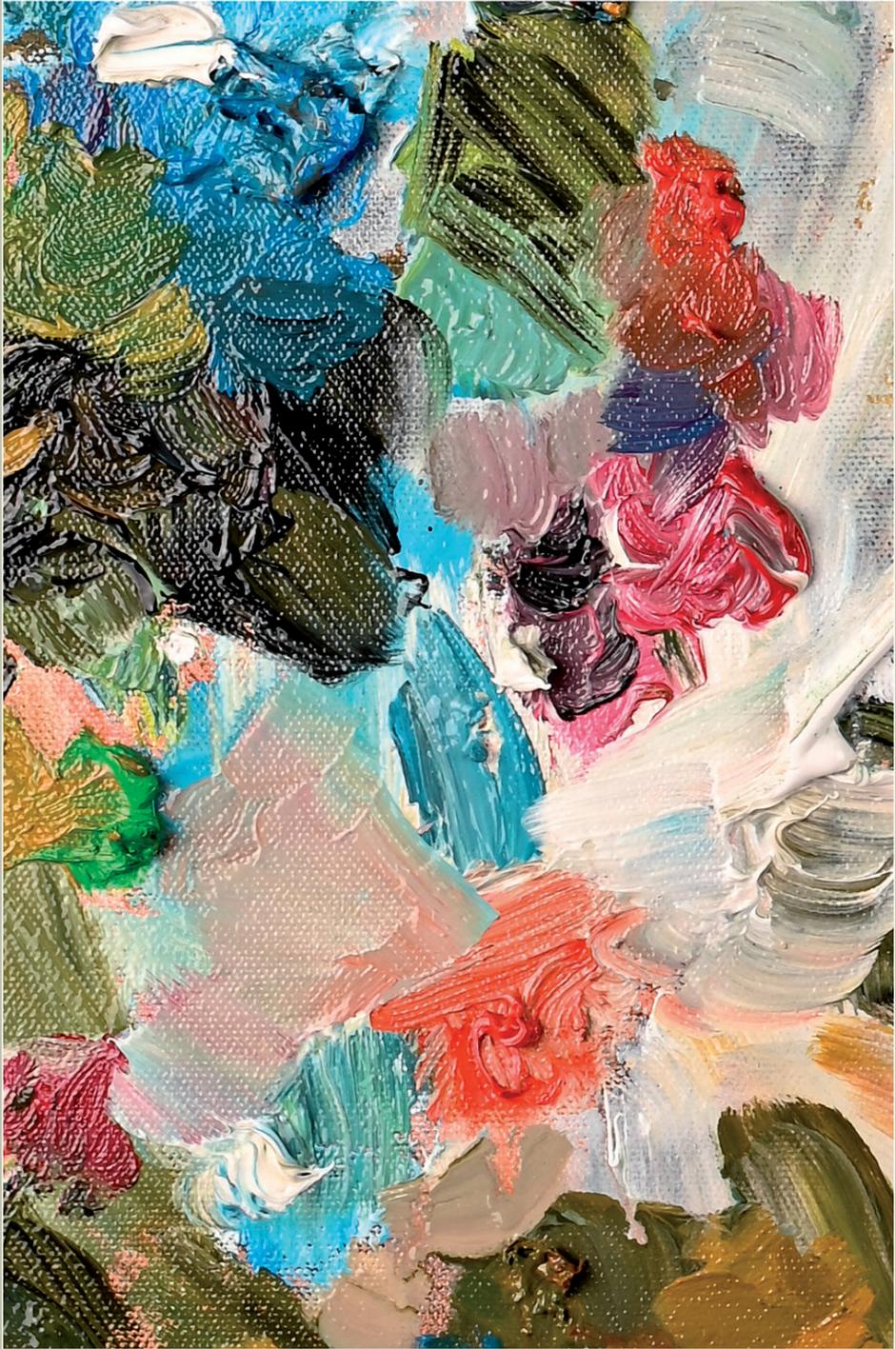
May you also be nourished by this generous gift.

Molly Kane

February 25th, 2022



Molly Kane has, in her own words, “lived and worked with people and organizations around the world dedicated to struggles for justice and the protection of life and dignity”. Most recently she was Executive Director at **The Council of Canadians** (2019-2020), and her prior work has included: **Inter Pares**; **ETC Group** (Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration); **L’Entraide missionnaire**; **Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace**; **Pambazuka News**; and **Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID)**. She was also researcher in residence at the **Centre interdisciplinaire en développement et société (CIRDIS)** at the **Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)**, and visiting adjunct professor at **Queen’s University (Kingston, Ontario)** in **Global Development Studies**.



Introduction

A lot of this introduction comes from the final *padkos* mailing of the series that went out on November 24th 2021. In one part of that serving, we looked back at how the series had begun, how it almost stalled, and then how things evolved and what we covered. It seems appropriate to draw on those thoughts now as we introduce all the servings that we shared over the series.

what were we thinking?

When we began discussing this mini-season, we imagined quite a different process from what it became. Despite the constraints of COVID-19 restrictions, we initially thought we'd be working with groups of people experienced and knowledgeable in different healing and therapeutic practices to make the process happen. And we envisaged that each theme would be accompanied by a practical and social event bringing some of those people together with others from our *padkos* community. In the coming period we may well return to some of these ideas and facilitate sessions of gardening or mindful yoga, music- or other art-making, and the like. But the real obstacle to that way forward turned out not to be COVID lockdown restrictions – well, not directly anyway. The therapists and healers we spoke and met with all supported the ideas, but they were too stretched by increased demands on their time and capacity, or too exhausted to the point of feeling overwhelmed, to contribute what they would have liked. For a while we wondered about dropping the whole idea. On the other hand, these obstacles directly affirmed the need for, and the relevance of, what we were proposing to deal with. So we pressed ahead – and of course we're indebted to a number of people (including from amongst our friendly therapists and healers) who have nonetheless contributed their thinking, resources, perspectives and support through the season.

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what have we done?

And so, on Mental Health Action Day late in May, and at a global time of deep trauma as the COVID pandemic rolled on, we kicked off this series of *padkos* servings focused on being and being well [and] oriented to nurture and nourishment; to offering kindness and care; to encouraging resilience, compassion and perhaps, hope. Valuing abundant life, and expanding the practices that do so, marks a complete rupture with the logic of death, with the logics of money and profit, of competition and individualism, of exploitation and domination that otherwise rule our society. And breaking with the logic of death by doing according to the logic of life instead, is how we change the world ... here ... now...

In June, *padkos* zoned in on mental health and well-being specifically. To connect this with our previous and ongoing work, we referred to CLP's *In, Against, Beyond Corona* (published in 2020)². There the point was strongly made that we confront

not only intensified rates of suffering and death, but greatly heightened levels of psycho-social anxiety and trauma. ... Some people came into this period of crisis already more predisposed to psychological stress and need special concern and support. Now, many more are also stressed by factors directly associated with the virus and its preventative measures. ... [O]ur awareness, and the caring and nurturing that should flow from it, should certainly remain with us as we move 'beyond'.

In the next serving, we got out into the garden, so to speak, appreciating, and connecting with, the much larger web of natural life that we're part of, the width and depth of our connectedness with all forms of life in nature, and the deeply restorative and transformative possibilities it might offer. We wanted to re-affirm ways of being in the world that embrace the symbiosis between human and other forms of natural life, and that the possibility of connecting to nature can be made real – even though in our country, as elsewhere, access to 'green space', as well as the quality of green space most easily available, is unfairly rigged along class and

² Mark Butler, with Cindy Dennis, Zodwa Nsibande, David Ntseng, Graham Philpott, Zonke Sithole, Nomusa Sokhela, Phiwa Xulu, Skhumbuzo Zuma, 2020. *In, Against, Beyond Corona: What does living through the corona crisis in South Africa reveal to us?* Pietermaritzburg: Church Land Programme and Ottawa: Daraja Press. Hereinafter referred to as *In, Against, Beyond Corona*.

race contours. We had made a similar point in our pamphlet *In, Against, Beyond Corona* where we also said that “The separation of humans from our connectedness with the rest of nature is very damaging to our whole human being”.

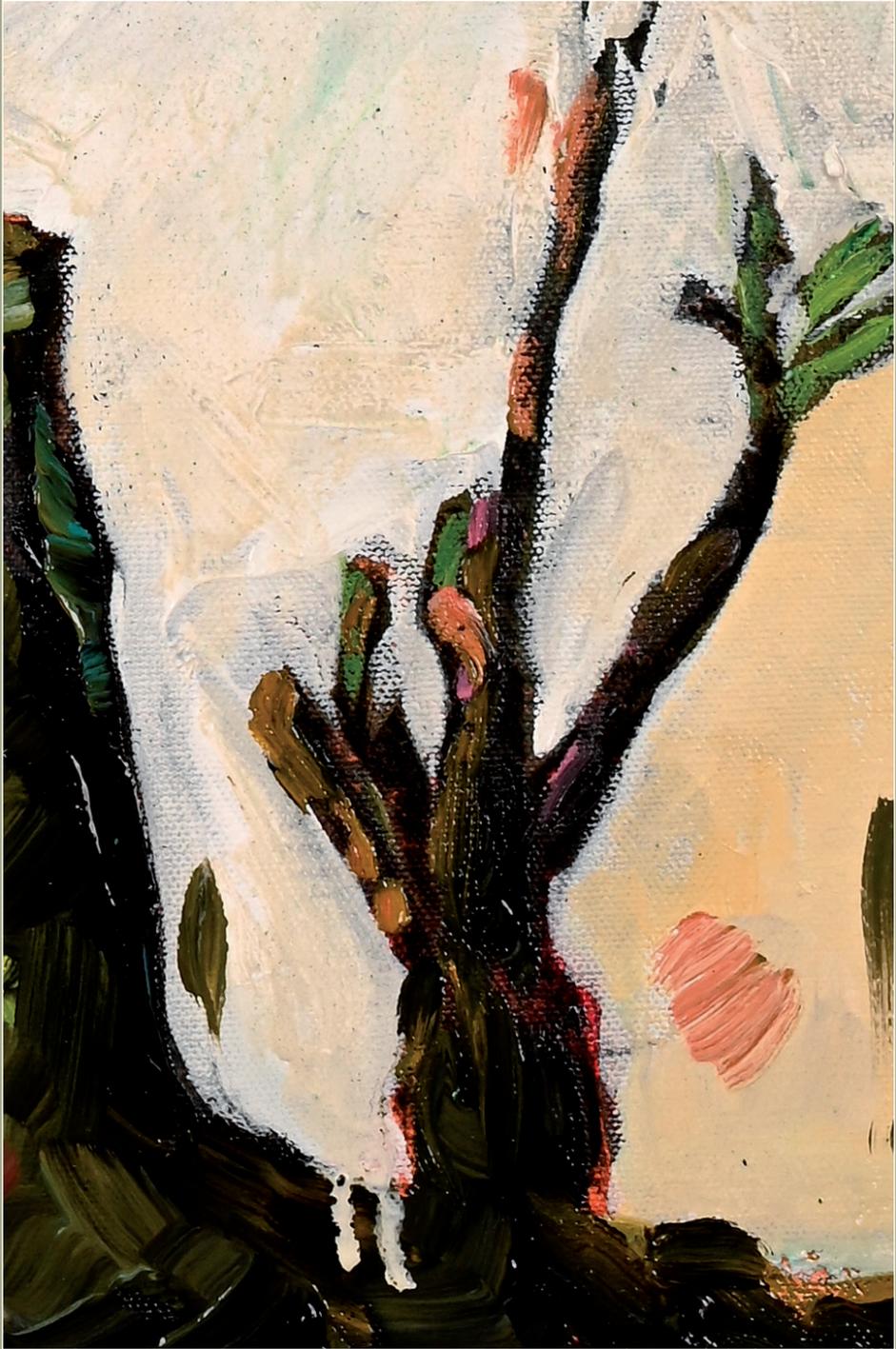
Then in August, we turned to creative work and what it offers for healing and wholeness. We recalled Kristin Ross’ work on the revolutionary Paris Commune and its demand for ‘communal luxury’:

a demand for something like public beauty – the idea that everyone has the right to live and work in pleasing circumstances, the demand that art and beauty should not be reserved for the enjoyment of the elite, but that they be fully integrated into daily public life. This ... calls for nothing short of the total reinvention of what counts as wealth, what a society values.

The penultimate serving focused on mindfulness and meditation – practices that are clearly and deeply beneficial for mental, spiritual, and holistic well-being. In our exploration together we saw that mindfulness practice unites body, mind, and spirit in the here and now, and can relieve our minds, bringing peace, calm, and clarity. In the traditions we’re focused on here in *padkos*, this is not done by escaping the realities of this world or the suffering and injustice in it, but being present to them, and by connecting mindfulness with radically-critical engagement in the world. We quoted the globally-renowned Zen-Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh, as saying, “Meditation’s purpose is to be aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world. What is going on in the world can be seen within ourselves and vice versa. Once we see this clearly, we cannot refuse to take a position and act”.

In the final serving of the series, we drew together some strands to reconnect them with our ongoing work of thinking our collective praxis. Rejecting the separation of the personal from the social, and refusing the co-option of self-care or wellness away from engagement in the world, we continue to think and build a way of being and doing that is healthful, healing, ethical and transformative.





THE FIRST SERVING: Being ... here ... now ...

20 May 2021

A message arrives during a meeting of the *padkos* committee and our colleague starts crying. Yet another dear friend has died in the midst of COVID-19. We take time out from the business of the meeting to be present with each other in the face of yet more sadness and trauma. But we realise that the business of the meeting is and was the same subject-matter anyway: if *padkos* is 'food for the journey', what does that mean here and now? What nourishes and sustains us individually and together in this current moment? We are surrounded by death, hunger, desperation, anger, pain, loss, anxiety, fear, exhaustion, frustration and hardship at a level that is extraordinary. It is being lived personally and collectively. If we've tended to say that we start with 'the scream' of dignified rage against injustice and the mutilation of life by capital (acknowledging John Holloway's work), perhaps right now we start with the 'keening' – the anguished lament in the face of suffering and the assault on humanity and our world.

*there is no inherent contradiction in an integrated
commitment to self-care and revolutionary change in
the world*

From a meeting of the staff collective earlier this year that was held outdoors, we remember an image that colleague Zodwa brought after walking mindfully along the bank of a stream where it entered the dam – she talked about watching the reeds and how they bend with the flow of the water, able to rise at the appropriate time; how we too must find our own forms of acceptance and resilience in the face of the battering the world has taken over the past year and more, so that we too find our ways to rise.

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As ever, *padkos* is just a part of our organisation's total work, most of which continues in the work of presence, solidarity, and mutual learning with grass-roots spaces of organised thought and action that changes the world. Across all our work there is an undying fidelity to the realisation and flowering of human being, including valuing self-compassion and self-care for the journey. As CLP's Graham commented: "as we enact being human ourselves, we help enable other's humanity and being". It is true that self-care under capitalism can degenerate into a commodified wellness industry – its offerings accessed by those with cash, and deflecting attention and responsibility away from undoing important causes of harm and injustice³. But there is no inherent contradiction in an integrated commitment to self-care and revolutionary change in the world⁴. Like reeds in the water, our own ways of being and doing need to sustain us and build our resilience in the environment we're in. We should practice ways of being, of relating, and of doing in the world, that nurture the good and stop re-creating the bad.

Valuing abundant life, and expanding the practices that do so, marks a complete rupture with the logic of death, with the logics of money and profit, of competition and individualism, of exploitation and domination that otherwise rule our society. And breaking with the logic of death by doing according to the logic of life instead, is how we change the world ... here ... now...

Today, 20th May, is Mental Health Action Day. In a global time of deep trauma as the COVID pandemic rolls on, we launch this mini-series of *padkos* servings focused on being and being well. We offer this short season that is oriented to

3 See e.g. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4979-emma-dowling-examines-the-mantras-of-self-care-and-what-they-tell-us-about-our-anxieties>

4 We find this resonates with thinking within the 'Extinction Rebellion' movement and their commitment to building a regenerative culture. In their "statement of principles and values" (see: <https://rebellion.global/about-us/> or <https://www.xrebellion.ch//about/>), they advocate creating a regenerative human culture that "includes a healthy focus on mutually supporting categories of: self-care – how we take care of our own needs and personal recovery from this toxic system; action care – how we take care of each other whilst we undertake direct actions and civil disobedience together; interpersonal care – how we take care of the relationships we have, being mindful of how we affect each other, taking charge of our side of relationships; community care – how we take care of our development as a network and community, strengthening our connections and adherence to these principles and values; People and Planet care – how we look after our wider communities and the earth that sustains us all."

nurture and nourishment; to offering kindness and care; to encouraging resilience, compassion and perhaps hope. Here we echo the sentiments expressed in our *In, Against, Beyond Corona* pamphlet from 2020 that singled out key “values made so abundantly clear now in this crisis – of our interconnectedness, and the deep value and dignity of everything and everyone, of compassion, of kindness, of gentleness, of sensitivity and humility in our ecological relations with the world”⁵.

While the Corona situation still impacts space for collective and communal connection, in the coming weeks we will offer some thoughts and resources about areas of life that are vital to nurture and nourish. For instance, we’ll consider the power of creative work like music and poetry; of access to and healthful connection with nature and green spaces as well as the food we eat; of nurturing resilience and wellness in our situations through attending to our mental health, doing yoga, meditation, and movement and exercise. We reckon it’s about being; being present; and being connected, and we invite you to journey with us.

These were the attachments that went out with this serving...

Brian Murphy. 2021. *Transforming ourselves, Transforming the world – An Open Conspiracy for Social Change*. Ottawa: Daraja Press⁶

Brian Murphy offers a break from an all-too-common type of ‘activism’ that demands harmful suppression of our individual creativity, freedom and health. What we have here is a celebration – and an entirely convincing validation – of a way of changing the world that is always nurturing and open-ended; a process of possibility and becoming, as we build on humanness to realise greater humanness. As Murphy puts it: “I will act, because it is sane, and healthy, and human to do so. We will act together, because it is sane, and healthy, and human, and more effective to do so. ... This is how we can begin to develop an open conspiracy”.

⁵ Butler et al, 2020, 7.

⁶ Available for purchase from Daraja Press: <https://darajapress.com/publication/transforming-ourselves-transforming-the-world-an-open-conspiracy-for-social-change>

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There is nothing special about being an anti-capitalist revolutionary. ... This is the story of ordinary people.

JOHN HOLLOWAY

Post-script to the first serving

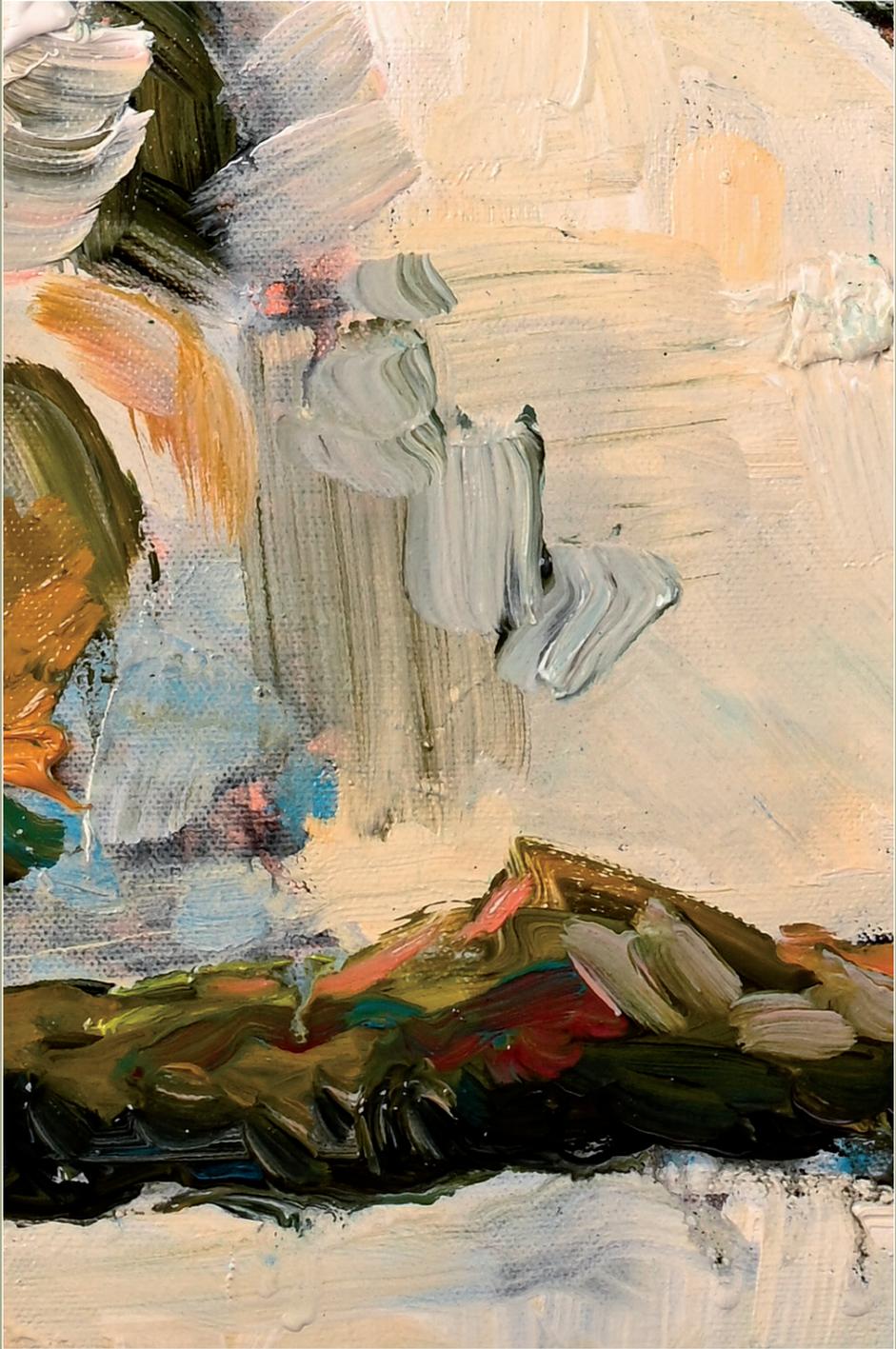
We recall these comments from John Holloway in his seminal book *Crack Capitalism*⁷:

We need revolution now, here and now. So absurd, so necessary. So obvious. Nothing more common, nothing more obvious. There is nothing special about being an anti-capitalist revolutionary. This is the story of many, many people, of millions, perhaps billions.

It is the story of the composer in London who expresses his anger and his dream of a better society through the music he composes. It is the story of the gardener in Cholula who creates a garden to struggle against the destruction of nature. Of the car worker in Birmingham who goes in the evenings to his garden allotment so that he has some activity that has meaning and pleasure for him. Of the indigenous peasants in Oventic, Chiapas, who create an autonomous space of self-government and defend it every day against the paramilitaries who harass them. Of the university professor in Athens who creates a seminar outside the university framework for the promotion of critical thought. Of the book publisher in Barcelona who centres his activity on publishing books against capitalism. Of the friends in Porto Alegre who form a choir, just because they enjoy singing. Of the teachers in Puebla who confront police oppression to fight for a different type of school, a different type of education. Of the theatre director in Vienna who decides she will use her skills to open a different world to those who see her plays. Of the call centre worker in Sydney who fills all his vacant moments thinking of how to fight for a better society. Of the people of Cochabamba who come together and fight a battle against the government and the army so that water should not be privatised but subject to their own control. Of the nurse in Seoul who does everything possible to help her patients. Of the workers in Neuquen who occupy the factory and make

7 John Holloway, 2010. *Crack Capitalism*, Pluto Press, London, 4-5.

it theirs. Of the student in New York who decides that university is a time for questioning the world. Of the community worker in Dalkeith who looks for cracks in the framework of rules that constrain him so that he can open another world. Of the young man in Mexico City, who, incensed by the brutality of capitalism, goes to the jungle to organise armed struggle to change the world. Of the retired teacher in Berlin who devotes her life to the struggle against capitalist globalisation. Of the government worker in Nairobi who gives all her free time to the struggle against AIDS. Of the university teacher in Leeds who uses the space that still exists in some universities to set up a course on activism and social change. Of the old man living in an ugly block of flats on the outskirts of Beirut who cultivates plants on his windowsill as a revolt against the concrete that surrounds him. Of the young woman in Ljubljana, the young man in Florence, who, like so many others throughout the world, throw their lives into inventing new forms of struggle for a better world. Of the peasant in Huejotzingo who refuses to allow his small orchard to be annexed to a massive park of unsold cars. Of the group of homeless friends in Rome who occupy a vacant house and refuse to pay rent. Of the enthusiast in Buenos Aires who devotes all his great energies to opening new perspectives for a different world. Of the girl in Tokyo who says she will not go to work today and goes to sit in the park with her book, this book or some other. Of the young man in France who devotes himself to building dry toilets as a contribution to radically altering the relation between humans and nature. Of the telephone engineer in Jalapa who leaves his job to spend more time with his children. Of the woman in Edinburgh who, in everything she does, expresses her rage through the creation of a world of love and mutual support. This is the story of ordinary people.



THE SECOND SERVING:

Mental health and well-being

3 June 2021

It's clearly vital that we try to take care of our being in this moment, of being present, resilient and well in the situation.

This mailing is the second in our mini-series focused on 'being and being well', and our focus is on mental health. Tragically and tellingly, it goes out to you all in the week we learned of the death of Aziz Choudry. Many of you will recall Aziz leading a memorable *padkos* session with us in 2012 that focused on social movement learning.

The autopsy report is not yet available, and there remains uncertainty but, tragically, one scenario that appears widely considered is that Aziz may have taken his own life. Our condolences go out to all his family, friends, colleagues and comrades, here and around the world. (We have included a selection of tributes honouring Aziz in this mailing.)

In our discussions and consultations while preparing for our current mini-series, literally all of the lovely mental-health practitioners that we spoke with shared their awareness of – and indeed their concern about – a dramatic surge in the demand for their work. The demand is such that many are close to feeling overwhelmed themselves. And in our country, so deeply wounded by inequality, racism, and patriarchy, many many people lack the resources and space to call on appropriate and specialist therapeutic help when they need it. It's clearly vital that

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we try to take care of our being in this moment, of being present, resilient and well in the situation.

By expanding the spaces of life where we refuse to continue hurtful practices, we undo a broader web that has trapped us into patterns of death

In CLP's *In, Against, Beyond Corona* (2020), we talked extensively about just how deep and wide the challenges to our mental health are in these times:

What we possibly confront at this time includes not only intensified rates of suffering and death, but greatly heightened levels of psycho-social anxiety and trauma. As such, this situation may call for a sense of being and presence, and not – or not only – doing and action. ... At a global level, World Health Organisation's mental health department director, Devora Kestel warned of another looming crisis: "The isolation, the fear, the uncertainty, the economic turmoil – they all cause or could cause psychological distress". According to the Guardian: "she said the world could expect to see an upsurge in the severity of mental illness, including amongst children, young people and healthcare workers. 'The mental health and wellbeing of whole societies have been severely impacted by this crisis and are a priority to be addressed urgently'". ...

Also in Mid-May [2020], the results of a major South African survey were reported on by Mark Orkin and others. ... It found that 33% of South African adults were depressed, 45% fearful, and 29% lonely during lockdown. An April 2020 academic article warns that "It appears likely that there will be substantial increases in anxiety and depression, substance use, loneliness, and domestic violence".... It turns out that much the strongest predictor of composite psychological distress is sheer hunger. This is, tragically, no surprise. ... In response to the 'worst thing' write-in option, the most frequent response, 31%, was not having enough food to eat. ...

The lockdown provisions exposed the horror that, for so many people, our intimate spaces of domestic, personal and relational life are powder kegs of simmering violence, frustration and dehumanisation. ...

Awareness, support, resources and appropriate actions are very un-even in response, but this is a huge and important area requiring attention. Some people came into this period of crisis already more predisposed to psychological stress and need special concern and support. Now, many more are also stressed by factors directly associated with the virus and its preventative measures – for instance, livelihood and income scarcity and uncertainty; or interpersonal tensions from being confined together with others in small spaces for long periods; or isolation and disconnection from healthy social interactions that are being disrupted by rules to achieve distancing; or pervasive and generalised underlying sense of loss, grief, trauma and mourning in the awareness of suffering and death caused by the pandemic. All these point to the light and the shadow of our fundamental connectedness across humanity and the world. Some of it will progressively lift as the pandemic recedes and the restrictions can be increasingly relaxed. But some will remain. And some of our awareness, and the caring and nurturing that should flow from it, should certainly remain with us as we move 'beyond'. ...

We must state the unavoidable and deeper implications of what has been revealed so that we stop re-creating, through our actions and attitudes, all the social and psycho-social malignancies that we have shown to be highlighted and exacerbated under lockdown – here we are recalling aspects like domestic violence and tyranny, but also deeper spiritual malaises of capitalist modernity like finding real human meaning, contentment, connection and value disconnected from (capitalist-defined) productivity and consumption. By expanding the spaces of life where we refuse to continue hurtful practices, we undo a broader web that has trapped us into patterns of death⁸.

8 Butler et al, 2020, pp. 4, 17-21 and 28.

being... here... now

Statements In Memoriam: Professor Aziz Choudry (23/06/1966 – 26/05/2021)

Issued by the staff and students of the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation (CERT) and the SARChI Chair in Community, Adult and Worker Education (CAWE):

It is with a deep sense of grief that we convey the devastating news of Prof. Aziz Choudry's passing. We are still in a state of shock and trying to comprehend the enormity of this loss. Aziz had many dear friends, comrades, colleagues and family around the world. We know that all are stunned and are trying to process his passing. We are thinking of you all and hold everyone close to our hearts. We ask you to reach out to all who knew him and support each other emotionally in this difficult time.

Aziz arrived from McGill University to join us as a full-time staff member of our Centre in February this year after a number of years as a visiting professor with our Faculty. He enjoyed a longstanding scholarly relation with all of the staff and expressed a profound affinity with our work.

Aziz was the quintessential scholar-activist and was deeply sensitive to injustices wherever they occurred. He made significant global contributions to social movement learning, knowledge production in community organisations, activist archives, immigrant workers' education, anti-racist/anti-colonial education and related fields. He will also be remembered for his unstinting and selfless devotion to the students he supervised and taught as well as the many academics and movement activists he mentored throughout the world. He was also an untiring international solidarity activist supporting indigenous, Palestinian and anticolonial struggles. Aziz helped activist work around opposing surveillance and repression, unfair trade, and supported activism around food sovereignty and climate justice. He was a strong advocate of education as a public good and championed the struggle for a decommodified and decolonial academy.

Prof. Choudry wrote prolifically and is the author and co-editor of the following ten books between 2009 and 2020: *Organize! Building from the Local for Global Justice* (2012); *Activists and the Surveillance State: Learning from Repression* (2019); *Learning*

from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production (2010); *Learning Activism: The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements* (2015); *Unfree Labour? Struggles of Migrant and Immigrant Workers in Canada* (2016); *Fight Back: Workplace Justice for Immigrants* (2009); *NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects* (2013); *The University and Social Justice: Struggle Across the Globe* (2020); *Just Work? Migrant Workers' Struggle Today* (2016) and *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning and Social Movements: History's Schools* (2018).

Aziz's praxis and vision for a kinder and more humane world will always inspire and remain with us.



From Peace Action Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand:

Kua hinga nga totara e rua. We are heartbroken and devastated by the loss of two of our great friends and comrades today: Dr Carl Bradley and Dr Aziz Choudry. These two men spent their time and energy working for a better world, speaking truth to power and making space for the powerless.

Carl worked to destigmatise gangs and bring wider understanding of how colonialism and imperialism are implicated in the creation of gangs in Aotearoa. He worked for liberation of Palestine, for feminism, against domestic violence and for a huge range of social justice kaupapa.

Aziz is a legend in Aotearoa having taken the Security Intelligence Service to court after the illegal break-in to his house during the 1996 protests against APEC (foiled by fellow academic Dr David Small). He has been an outspoken critic of the growing surveillance state ever since. Aziz has worked to expose the self-serving and self-perpetuating NGO-industrial complex that stands in the way of real justice, peace and self-determination. His was a great mind interested in pushing social justice thinking to new approaches and analysis.

We will miss you our friend. Your contributions will continue to resonate in days to come.

being... here... now

From *Interface* – a journal for and about social movements:

Activist, scholar, professor, chacha, son, popular educator, friend.

It is with heavy hearts that we mourn the passing of Aziz Choudry. Aziz was an editor of the Canada/US section of *Interface* from 2011 – 2016. In his role with the journal, he edited a special issue on anticolonial and postcolonial social movements and brought in new editors from South Asia.

Aziz was the quintessential activist scholar. He was deeply rooted in anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements, and sought to help movements to understand the changing context, and how to build capacity. The questions he asked are the ones movements asked – how historical patterns trap movements, how to win, how to organize in changing contexts.

Aziz's first moment of politicization came out of growing up in 1970's and early 1980's England where he was influenced by the anti-nuclear movement, migrant justice, anti-racist struggles by Asian and Black communities, as well as being inspired by national liberation struggles in the Third World and Indigenous people's struggles in settler colonies. He settled in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1988 where he was involved in a number of small organizations where he worked on campaigns against free trade agreements while linking with Maori anti-colonial struggles. Those experiences generated important reflections that fed into his future writings that critically examined NGOs (e.g. with Dip Kapoor, *NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects*), state surveillance of social movements (e.g. the edited collection in *Activists and the Surveillance State*), and how social movements are sites of knowledge production (e.g. *Learning Activism: The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements*).

Aziz moved to Montreal, Canada, in 2002 for graduate studies. There, he was actively involved in the Immigrant Workers Centre, and would eventually become a professor at the Faculty of Education at McGill University. His local and transnational organizing for migrant justice was mirrored by scholarly collaborations like the co-edited volume with Adrian A. Smith *Unfree Labour? Struggles of Migrant and Immigrant Workers in Canada*. In Montreal, Aziz was also involved in Palestine solidarity, Indigenous solidarity, anti-globalization efforts, anti-war activism, and

struggles against Islamophobia. In the past few years he was a visiting professor at the University of Johannesburg. He recently moved from Montreal to Johannesburg in February 2021 to take a position there in the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation.

In *Learning Activism: The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements*, Aziz wrote:

Some individuals achieve extraordinary things, but I believe that social change is driven mainly by ordinary people organizing, learning, and creating knowledge together – by people consciously and collectively taking steps to bring about change. Not to rule out spontaneity, but most struggles emerge from the hard work of organizing, incremental learning, lineages of earlier movements, and efforts to organize together. Although it is often overlooked, this work is both informed by and contributes to the intellectual work that takes place within social movements, as in social, political, and ecological activism.

Everyday acts of resistance are not always visible, nor is much of the long-haul work of organizing that takes place in communities, workplaces, fields, homes, and other spaces down the street and around the world, 365 days a year. This work is often slow, painful, and painstaking. It involves a lot of patient work in small groups and organizations.

(Choudry 2015: 9)

For him, this was not just a theoretical insight, but it described the way he lived his life. He considered himself an ordinary bloke who worked collectively for social change. This included everyday acts of resistance in the institutions where he worked, doing the grunt work of writing out and photocopying pamphlets for a campaign, and an important part of his praxis in movement-building was by being a friend and in several cases, a mentor.

We will miss his insight, his humour and his incredible energy for doing the work. He brought dozens of people together over the years, helping them to think in his humble, sly way.

He left us better. Thank you for everything.

being... here... now

From Rebecca Tarlau:

We should all strive to be Aziz Choudry. He did not get caught up in the bullshit. He was a brilliant academic, a prolific writer, a renowned scholar, a leading social movement theorist, but he would have laughed at all of those titles. He cared only about justice. He was my inspiration in an individualistic academic world that seems so far removed from the social movements I care about. He showed me the value of theory, of ideas like social movement learning and social movements as knowledge producers, of intentionally creating a space in the academy for students of color, poor students, Palestinian students, students like myself who were conflicted about the role of academic institutions. He was never conflicted because he was always clear about his purpose in the academy: to use its power and resources to support anti-racist struggles and migrant justice, to support trade unions and workers centers, to fight for climate justice, to condemn U.S. imperialism and the war on Palestine. His engagement with academia was driven by his commitment to social movement organizing, which in turn, was driven by his deep love for people. I benefited from that love as Aziz became my mentor and friend. Before the pandemic, Aziz hosted me for a week in Montreal organizing five book talks for me around the city, taking me out for meals with friends, and arranging a visit to the Immigrant Workers Centre that he supported for many years. His dedication to uplifting the next generation of activist-scholars was evident. During the pandemic if we went a few months without talking he would send me an email, "Thinking of you!" most recently reminding me that there were lots of uncles and aunties in South Africa for my newborn son to visit. Just two weeks ago, he went out of his way to help one of my students, not simply because I asked him for the favor, but because that is what he does. He was a giver. He gave his life to the fight for justice. We will honor you, dear Aziz, not by citing your work, although we will do that too. We will honor you by recommitting to our work with social movements and remembering the power of education for radical social transformation. Rest in Power, my friend.



These were the attachments that went out with this serving...

Stefan Blom. 19 May 2021. “Rest for the restless mind”. *Daily Maverick*⁹

Stefan Blom is a clinical psychologist. His piece offers guidance for finding peace of mind, and it is really relateable, practical, and healing. In the first part, he deals with how to understand loss and trauma, and discusses a number of follow-on processes to work through – as follows: Gently meet and greet your pain and worries; Make it visible and leave it in one place; Be kind with what you see; Slow down on measuring yourself and your experiences; Slow down on running away and avoidance; Silence the noise of others; Filter your feelings and decide what needs attention.

In the second part, Blom considers how meditation, breathing and other techniques can help you find rest. Towards the end, Blom reminds us that although he has offered “a kind of guide ... we all process these experiences in so many unique and often beautiful ways. You have to find your own path”.



Bhekisisa Gcumisa & Nikki Brighton. 12 July 2020. “Walking to stay sane”. Blog post of the Mpophomeni Conservation Group.¹⁰

Opening this delightful short reflection, Bhekisisa Gcumisa reckons that “[t]o live through two months of Lockdown in a four-walled township house, or even a comfortable home, is an impossible thing to expect of any young person”. In desperation he started going for runs and walks. His first solo walk took him up a steep mountain near his home at Mpophomeni, just up the road from our CLP offices in Pietermaritzburg: “Finally, I reached the top of the mountain and spotted a suitable rock to rest on. Wow! I was fascinated to see what had been kept away from me all that time”. Bhekisisa outlines how, as COVID lockdown restrictions

⁹ Available at: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-05-19-rest-for-the-restless-mind-part-one-of-two/>

¹⁰ Available at: <https://mpophomeniconservationgroup.wordpress.com/2020/07/12/walking-to-stay-sane/>

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were relaxed a little, these activities became group activities – ones with deep, unexpected and important positive outcomes. He remembers: “Once the perfect view of Mpophomeni was reached, we sat and started to discuss life’s realities. ... I could see the spark of hope on their facial expressions. ... Spending time in Nature helps us to de-stress, to clear our minds, to fix broken souls. We don’t have to go miles away to reap these benefits – they are right on our doorstep”.

If you feel affected by the issues or readings in this *padkos*, know that you are not alone and also that it’s good to talk about those feelings with someone. Here are some South African contacts and resources available for everyone:¹¹

South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG): Mental Health Line:
011 234 4837

SA Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) website: <https://www.sadag.org/>

Suicide Crisis Line: 0800 567 567

Akeso Psychiatric Response Unit 24 Hour: 0861 435 787

Lifeline South Africa national counseling line: 0861 322 322

Lifeline South Africa gender violence line: 0800 150 150

Lifeline South Africa website: <http://www.lifelinesa.co.za/>

For those with internet access, there are of course many supportive, thoughtful and restorative resources available too. For example, you could check out some of these resources:

<https://www.rickhanson.net/get-started/>

<https://onbeing.org/starting-points/>

<https://www.chacmc.org/gr-recordings>

<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/>

11 Thanks to Dr Narushni Pillay, Graham Philpott, John Soderlund, Joan Morgan, Anne Harley, Hilary Kromberg and others for their suggestions and guidance.

THE THIRD SERVING:

In the garden

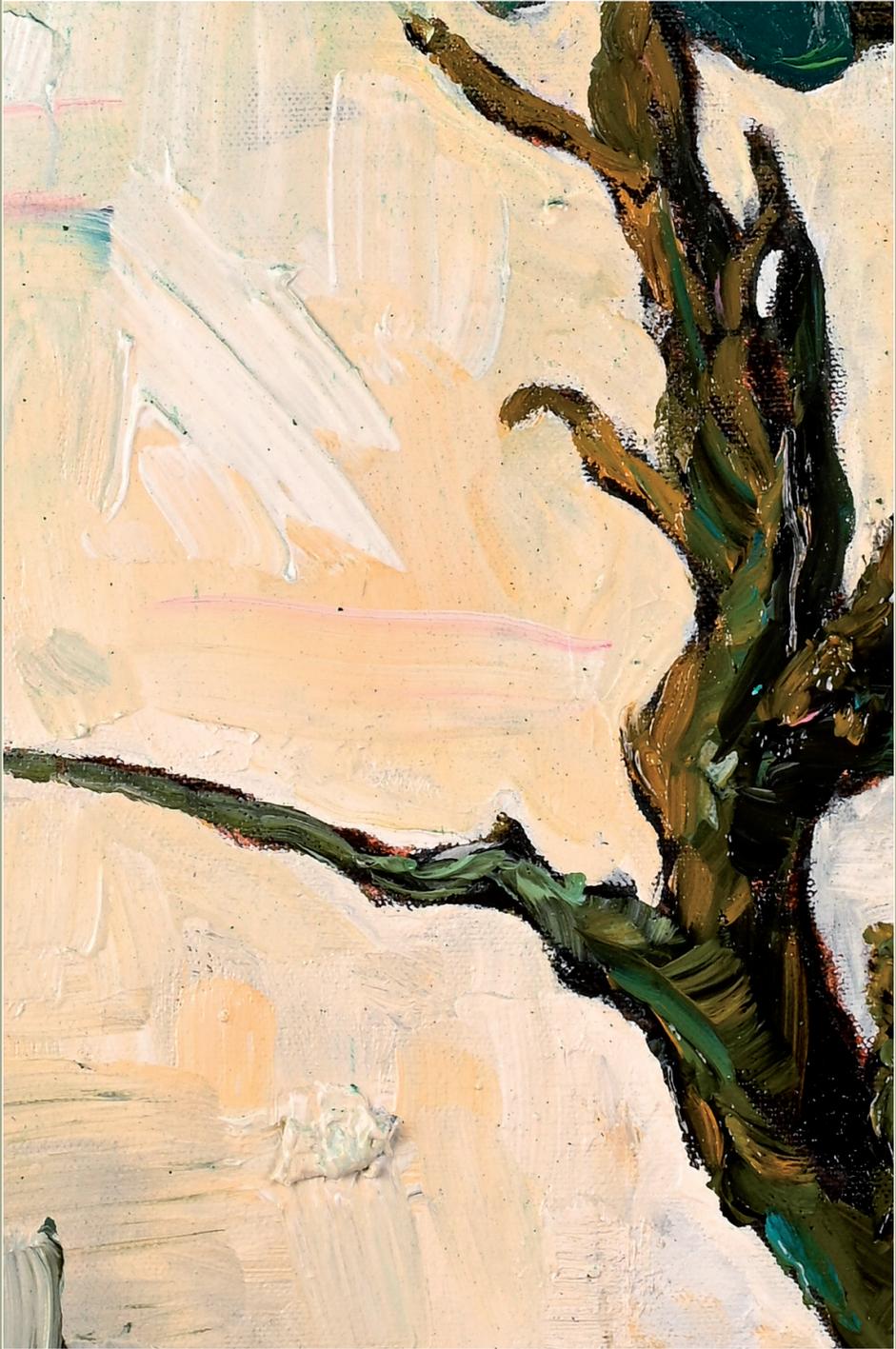
24 June 2021

Welcome, as we continue to think about being – and being well – here and now. This time around you're invited to join in appreciating, and connecting with, the much larger web of natural life that we're part of. A short *padkos* mailing like this can't do more than hint at the width and depth of our connectedness with all forms of life in nature, and of the deeply restorative and transformative possibilities it might offer.

In this edition then, let's take a look through the window of gardening to remember important parts of our individual and social humanity, and to re-affirm ways of being in the world that embraces the symbiosis between human and other forms of natural life.

In important ways of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the dark shadow of that inescapable connection we have. Modernity and capitalism constantly poison that relationship with a relentless logic that drives alienation and exploitation, domination and profit. But we also break that morbid logic in our shared human wonder and awe in the web of non-human life and nature; we break that logic when we insist that our reliance on that planetary web of life for the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat and share, should express the values of life and regeneration, of common sharing and solidarity. As Pope Francis recently commented at the launch of the Vatican's seven-year *Laudato si'* action plan: "We need a new ecological approach that can transform our way of dwelling in the world, our styles of life, our relationship with the resources of the Earth and, in general, our way of looking at humanity and of living life"¹².

¹² <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247777/pope-francis-launches-7-year-laudato-si-action-plan>



In this edition then, let's take a look through the window of gardening to remember important parts of our individual and social humanity, and to re-affirm ways of being in the world that embrace the symbiosis between human and other forms of natural life. So whether it's taking a mindful walk through a public park, or tending a herb plant or vegetable seedlings on a window-sill, whether you're taking care of a garden, or noticing the push of green shoots and weeds against urban sterility, or just surrendering to the green peace of a nature reserve, the possibility of connecting to nature can be made real – even though in our country, as elsewhere, access to 'green space', as well as the quality of green space most easily available, is unfairly rigged along class and race contours. Research by Zander Venter of the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research¹³ demonstrated this persistent 'green apartheid' graphically. Venter argued that "[i]t takes a bird's eye view to fully appreciate it. Satellite images and drone footage are illuminating the full extent of South Africa's 'green apartheid' – the uneven distribution of city trees, greenery and parks across racial and income geographies"¹⁴. Venter (2020) went on to point out that: "Green spaces like parks and green belts have positive effects on physical fitness, mental health, social cohesion and spiritual wellness. City trees reduce extreme temperatures, mitigate flooding and clean the air of harmful pollutants. Even just looking at a tree can have psychological benefits".

*re-affirm ways of being in the world that embrace
the symbiosis between human and other forms of
natural life*

Indeed, in our pamphlet *In, Against, Beyond Corona*, we argued that the COVID crisis raises again the question: "what is the appropriate human and ecological scale and patterning for co-living and settlement if we want to achieve a convivial, healthful and sustainable future for human society? Far too many people live in overly-crowded urban settlements with distressingly too little space for connections with nature – plants, birds, insects, and the like (gardens, allotments,

13 Venter, Z., 2020. <https://theconversation.com/we-mapped-green-spaces-in-south-africa-and-found-a-legacy-of-apartheid-143036>

14 For a graphic illustration of this, see also: <https://unequalscenes.com/south-africa>

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vegetable gardens, common green spaces, wild spaces and so on). The separation of humans from our connectedness with the rest of nature is very damaging to our whole human being”.

All these factors underscore the growing urgency of developing a ‘biophilic’¹⁵ approach to human settlements, and of ‘re-wilding’ our existing villages, towns and cities¹⁶.

In *In, Against, Beyond Corona* we also included

*Nomfundo Xolo’s account of collective food production at the shack settlement of eKhenana. ... The people of eKhenana were central to our recent Church Land Programme research report on brutal waves of attacks and evictions targeting shack settlements in the city of eThekweni/Durban. Little has been more toxic during this period than the inhumanity and violence of this campaign of violence waged against poor people. And yet, not only do the people remain, and not only do they defend and rebuild, they are also engaged in a programme of collective thought and of food production*¹⁷.

An unpublished note by CLP, written during the hard lockdown period of 2020, “*Fieldwork in a time of corona*”, documented the terrible socio-economic-nutritional impacts people were experiencing. But CLP fieldworkers noted that

[a]n important outlier response was recorded from a rural women’s group that is focused on food production. Here, our respondent indicated to CLP workers that “they are currently harvesting amadumbe (white-yam) and sweet-potatoes, and they are able to sell some of them to others on the main road. However, they consume most of the crop themselves, especially during this time of lockdown since most of the family members are at home which demands a lot of food. Since there is a limitation on movement, some members are restricted as they are prohibited from going to sell in town. But many members are feeling good because they are still able

15 Biophilia: “a hypothetical human tendency to interact or be closely associated with other forms of life in nature : a desire or tendency to commune with nature” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/biophilia>

16 See for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/apr/05/re-wilding-our-cities-beauty-biodiversity-and-the-biophilic-cities-movement>.

17 Butler et al, 2020, 37.

to sell their surplus harvest. People are coming from as far as Nkandla to Bhokolo to buy their harvest.

“So for them, the current pandemic and lockdown has not had a negative effect. They are able to use the money they get from selling to invest in their local stokvel organised by Save-Act”.

The possibility of connecting gardening with food production is deeply productive and healing in a number of ways. Corporatised, mechanised and monetised regimes of food production are massively dominant, and they reinforce our fundamental disconnect with the natural world that we’re part of and depend on. They’re also deeply implicated in grotesque food and nutritional harm and inequality, as well as catastrophic environmental impacts. Growing some of our own food, individually and/or at community-level, offers the possibility to break with those patterns and to restore fairer relations of equilibrium, resilience and regeneration.

Not only is the *activity* of gardening good for our mental health, but it is also strikingly clear that so is eating good food and maintaining a healthy gut micro-biome. There is growing evidence that the ‘gut-brain’ axis is crucial in the relationship between our mind and the eco-system or biome of bacteria in our gut. So nutritional deficiencies impact on our general but also our mental health – and the health of the microbiome in our gut impacts our immune system. As Nontuthuko kaMashimane, a nutritionist in our city of Pietermaritzburg says: “Food should be considered a medicine”¹⁸.

*The separation of humans from our connectedness
with the rest of nature is very damaging to our whole
human being*

¹⁸ Le Roux, J. & Bennie, S., 2020 <https://capitalnewspapers.co.za/118167/make-food-your-medicine/>

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These were the attachments that went out with this serving...

Maria Popova. 23 April 2021. “Gardening as resistance” and Maria Popova. 27 May 2019. “Healing power of gardens”. Blog posts, *The Marginalian*¹⁹

In “Gardening as resistance”, Maria Popova references Olivia Laing’s essay titled “Paradise” which, she says, “begins with the question of whether gardening is a form of art and ends with the question of whether art is a form of resistance – a necessary tool for building the Garden of Eden we imagine a flourishing society to be”.

Popova reckons holding the two questions means reconciling two distinct understandings of time itself – “linear time, which the Greeks called *chronos* and along which we plot the vector of progress, and cyclical time, or *kairos*, which is the time of gardens and, Laing intimates, the time of societies”. This will resonate with those who recall John Holloway’s brief comment in the text for the video installment “Life beyond capitalism” where he recalls that: “In the July revolution of 1830, according to Walter Benjamin, on the first evening of fighting, it turned out the clocks and towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris”²⁰.

The second piece from *The Marginalian* (the site formerly called *brainpickings.org*) is focused on “The Healing Power of Gardens”. Here Popova draws on the work of neurologist and author, Oliver Sacks, whom she quotes as saying: “In forty years of medical practice, I have found only two types of non-pharmaceutical ‘therapy’ to be vitally important for patients with chronic neurological diseases: music and gardens. ... Clearly, nature calls to something very deep in us. ... The effects of nature’s qualities on health are not only spiritual and emotional but physical and neurological”.

19 Available at: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2021/04/23/gardening-art-resistance/> and <https://www.brainpickings.org/2019/05/27/oliver-sacks-gardens/>

20 And also see Chapter 19 of his 2010 book *Crack Capitalism*: “The abstraction of doing into labour is the homogenisation of time”. There is also an interesting and recent discussion of this element of revolutionary change by Joe Zadeh in “The Tyranny of Time” here: <https://www.noemamag.com/the-tyranny-of-time/>

Marcela Guerrero Casas. 29 April 2021. “On crop of the world”. *Daily Maverick* ²¹

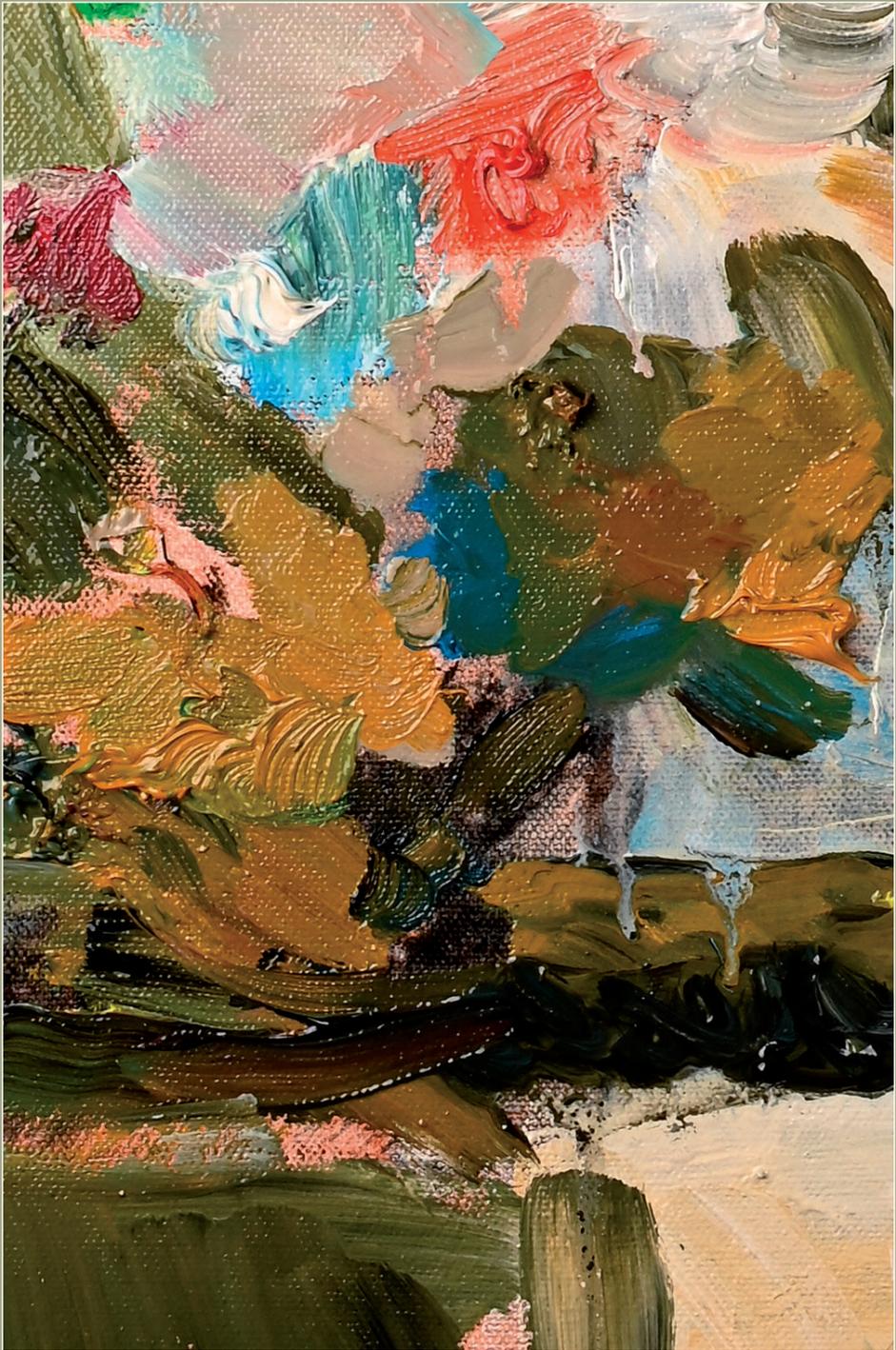
“On Crop of the World” relates a South African experience of developing an urban food garden during the COVID-19 pandemic. With a local community action group in Salt River (Cape Town), Zainap Salie drove the process because she “worried about the lack of green spaces in Cape Town, particularly for children, and how this has affected people’s mental health” – she knows we need “more public spaces, more trees and a school curriculum that teaches the value of urban gardens”.



John Holloway. 2010. *Crack Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.

Pulling a lot of the dots together is a short chapter from John Holloway: “The abstraction of doing into labour is the constitution of nature as object” from *Crack Capitalism*. We shared this piece a couple of years ago (in 2019) – but it’s well worth re-reading. In it, John argues that “The tearing of people from the land is perhaps the original and irredeemable sin of capitalism... a violent separation of humans from the natural conditions of their existence ... [and] a dis-enchantment of nature”. Tearing people from the land was essential to alienating our labour power for capitalism and “it creates a world of city dwellers depressed, impoverished and desensitised by their loss of contact with nature”. Holloway concludes “It is little wonder then that many of the movements of recent years have placed at the centre of their struggles the overcoming of the separation between humans and other forms of life” and quotes sixteenth century revolutionary preacher and theologian, Thomas Müntzer: “all living things must also become free”.

21 Available at: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-04-29-on-crop-of-the-world-cape-town-neighbours-plant-seeds-of-hope-during-covid-19/>



THE FOURTH SERVING:

Creating being, here and now

13 August 2021

It's been a tumultuous time²² in kwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where we, at the Church Land Programme, are based! Perhaps the time will come to write something more directly about what has happened but for now, the demands of our context require that we continue to think about being as well as we can be in our here and now. And indeed, if the dimensions of our experience of the current context exceed what can be contained in prose and words, it is perhaps good and right that in this edition of the current series we turn to the universe of creativity.

Tracy Tompkins²³ is well-known in creative circles in our part of the world. On July 16th 2021, she commented on her search for “hope and comfort” against “our brokenness as we face unprecedented times in South Africa this week”: “We’re all on a total roller coaster of emotions as uncertainty reigns supreme... For me, I’ve taken to the studio, dug up all the anger, fear and uncertainty and thrown it into paint..because that’s what brings my soft voice back!”

On the same day, South African activist and writer, Mark Heywood²⁴, wrote:

22 During July 2021, sparked by the imminent arrest of former South African (and African National Congress) President, Jacob Zuma, parts of the country experienced an intense wave of looting, arson, economic sabotage and deep social tension. Key aspects of what went down bore the hallmarks of extensive coordination and insurrectionary intent by some Zuma supporters. Equally important is the social context of stark inequality, widespread hunger and disillusion with the terrain of state- and party-politics that fuelled much of the participation of poor people rather than support for former president Zuma necessarily.

23 <http://www.tracytompkins.co.za/>

24 Mark Heywood, 16 July 2021. “On reading poetry and quarrelling with myself” <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-07-16-on-reading-poetry-and-quarrelling-with-myself/>

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If I had my way at the moment I would only write poetry and I would only read poetry. ... This is not a strategy to escape the harsh realities of a crisis of violence, criminality and inequality in our country or a universal free-fall of civility and civilisation. In fact, it is the opposite; it is my strategy to try to communicate better and better to hear, understand and connect with the things the world is trying to convey to us through our primary medium of communication: words. No violence starts without words. ... As a writer and an activist, I am fearful that bad reading habits – haste in particular – is neutralising the restorative power of words. ... I want more slowness, not just more speed; more acknowledgment of uncertainty and vulnerability than pre-cooked prescriptions. ... I'm also beginning to rebel against the artificial certainty of writing prose. ... Not by accident perhaps, I came across Ted Hughes quoted as writing that 'words are continually trying to displace our experiences. And in so far as they are stronger than the raw life of our experience, and full of themselves, and all the dictionaries they have digested, they do replace it.' I make a pencil mark beside his words. NB.

So, this time around we invite you to get out the crayons and paper, to enter the spaces of music, drama and poetry, to explore the place of art in its many forms that speak to, and about, how well we are, and how well we could be.

Creative processes and activities can help us gain more insight

The use and effectiveness of creative work and the arts is well established in the practices of mental health and therapy. The gifts for our well-being are there for us both when we receive or enjoy art made or performed by others (“receptive” uses), and also when we actively create something ourselves, individually or in groups, in processes of ‘expressive therapy’ (“active” uses). All sorts of creative areas and disciplines can be drawn on – from visual imagery and art (like drawing and painting) through to storytelling, drama, music, poetry, dance, and horticulture. Visual art therapy often uses the creative process itself as a therapeutic intervention but visual art can also be used by a psychotherapist analytically to understand a client’s ideas better. Creative processes and activities can help us gain more insight into ourselves and also help bolster our capacities to handle life – from simply

facing the challenges of ongoing daily life, to healing deeper layers of mental stress and trauma.

Creative expression and work have long and widely been connected with processing, sharing, and even healing, the good and the wounded, the shared and the private, of our human life experiences. In this broad sense, ‘art’ is considered by many to be essential to our human being – author Margaret Atwood²⁵ tweeted earlier this year [2021]: “Human beings are story-tellers by nature. They make art because that’s what human beings do”. And since even struggles against injustice, oppression or exploitation can themselves become brutalised and confined in scope and vision, it is vital to be vigilant and defend an orientation to full, abundant and overflowing life for all. In Kristin Ross’ extraordinary work on the Paris Commune, she excavates the revolutionary notion of ‘communal luxury’. In “The Survival of the Paris Commune”²⁶, Kristin Ross was interviewed for the first issue of *ROAR Magazine* – an interview that was reissued in the year of the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune. Here, in a way that resonates with the invocation of full and abundant life – not as bourgeois luxury but perhaps as the properly political excess beyond situations where human flowering is trampled and frustrated, as ‘public beauty’ – she comments that:

the phrase [‘communal luxury’ was] tucked away in the final sentence of the Manifesto Eugène Pottier, Courbet and other artists wrote when they were organizing during the Commune. For them the phrase expressed a demand for something like public beauty – the idea that everyone has the right to live and work in pleasing circumstances, the demand that art and beauty should not be reserved for the enjoyment of the elite, but that they be fully integrated into daily public life. This may seem a merely ‘decorative’ demand on the part of decorative artists and artisans, but it is a demand that in fact calls for nothing short of the total reinvention of what counts as wealth, what a society values. It is a call for the reinvention of wealth beyond exchange-value.

25 <https://twitter.com/MargaretAtwood>

26 <https://roarmag.org/essays/kristin-ross-paris-commune-interview/>

being... here... now

*it is vital to be vigilant and defend an orientation to
full, abundant and overflowing life for all*

Of course a lot of 'Art' tramples on egalitarian aspiration and can be deployed to express and consolidate the power of elites, of abusers, of exploiters. The exemplary life-work of John Berger²⁷ is one among many critical voices pointing us to the oppressive capacity of some art, especially western traditions of painting and sculpture, against beauty and truth. Berger delineated aspects of critique in an early piece first published in 1967, *Art and Property Now*²⁸ where he concludes that

in our European societies as they are now, the unique work of art is doomed: it cannot escape being a ritual object of property, and its content, if not entirely complacent, cannot help but be an oppressive, because hopeless, attempt to deny this role.

Other art goes in a very different direction though. Consider just one instance from the history of South Africa's freedom struggle and the work of Thami Mnyele (1948 – 1985) who understood the role of the artist to “inspire not possession of commodities, but action, ... to encourage people to believe that what they did – rather than what they owned or consumed – would make their lives better”²⁹. Mnyele himself wrote:

We need to clearly popularise and give dignity to the just thoughts and deeds of the people. With our brushes and paints we shall need to visualize the beauty of the country we would like our people to live in. We therefore need to humble ourselves as to heed the people's word ... [and] base our collectivity on a less bellicose patriotism and avoid a narrow and chauvinistic definition of ourselves³⁰.

27 padkos regulars will recall a documentary bioscope offering from padkos in 2017: “John Berger 1926-2017: A modest introduction and remembering” after his death at 90.

28 <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3032-art-and-property-now> This piece was incorporated later into Berger's seminal book (and TV documentary series) *Ways of Seeing* of 1972 (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ways_of_Seeing)

29 Diana Wylie, 2009. “Thami Mnyele and the Art of Tragedy” in: Clive Kellner and Gonzalez, Sergio-Albio (ed/s), *Thami Mnyele + MEDU Arts Ensemble Retrospective*, Jacana Press, Johannesburg

30 Thami Mnyele, 2009. “Observations on the state of contemporary visual arts in South Africa” in: Clive Kellner and Gonzalez, Sergio-Albio (ed/s), *Thami Mnyele + MEDU Arts Ensemble Retrospective*, Jacana Press, Johannesburg

Indeed, collective practices of creative expression like song and poetry, but also drama and visual art were powerfully present in the historic struggle against apartheid and continue to give voice, courage and comfort in contemporary struggle in South Africa ... and elsewhere too as the following examples illustrate.

“Estonia’s Singing Revolution”

Bessel van der Kolk recounts the following powerful tale in his seminal work on trauma and healing called *The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*³¹:

Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, who was born in the tiny Baltic country of Estonia, told me the remarkable story of Estonia’s “Singing Revolution”. In June 1987, on one of those endless sub-Arctic summer evenings, more than ten thousand concert goers at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds linked hands and began to sing patriotic songs that had been forbidden during half a century of Soviet occupation. These songfests and protests continued, and on September 11, 1988, three hundred thousand people, about a quarter of the population of Estonia, gathered to sing and make a public demand for independence. By August 1991 the Congress of Estonia had proclaimed the restoration of the Estonian state, and when Soviet tanks attempted to intervene, people acted as human shields to protect Tallinn’s TV and radio stations. As a columnist noted in the New York Times: “Imagine the scene in Casablanca in which the French patrons sing ‘La Marseillaise’ in defiance of the Germans, then multiply its power by a factor of thousands, and you’ve only begun to imagine the force of the Singing Revolution”.

Two pianists and the COVID pandemic

Rosey Chan³² and Christopher Duigan³³ are both renowned performers, musical collaborators, and pianists – and both had their live touring and shows grind to a halt as a result of the COVID pandemic. As they continued to try and connect

31 Bessel van der Kolk, 2014. *The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Penguin Books, New York

32 <http://roseychan.com/>

33 <https://www.musicrevival.co.za/>

being... here... now

their creative output with audiences in this new context, both discovered the healing touch art can bring.

In a podcast³⁴ for the Greater Good project, London-based Rosey Chan said of the experience:

It shifted my writing approach, and suddenly it became much more reflective and meditational, and it was almost like turning a mirror onto myself, you know, just thinking about how I was feeling emotionally. And, a few of my friends, they said to me, you know, I have like teething babies and I'm going a bit stir crazy here now. I'm just, like, stuck at home. So, I was sending music to help my friends and family at the beginning. And I kind of created a mind piano playlist, a private one, just for those people. And they were sending back messages like, can we have some more? It seems to be working. I thought, oh, this is so nice.

I'm glad to know that, because first, the most rewarding thing is I'm able to kind of heal myself and self-medicate through my own playing at home and improvising and just being at the piano and knowing it was also helping my friends and family was the most rewarding feeling possible. And so, it inspired me to write [her new album] Sonic Apothecary. ... [I]t's probably the first time in my life that I recognized and realize that music is a therapy tool. ...

Melodies just tap into themes of memory for me and storytelling. Sometimes at the end of a performance, I will do an improvisation and I'll say this is an improvisation based on a love thing that I wrote. And then I kind of stop myself off because I want to tell them the story. But then I say, "I'm going to let you make up your own story in your head. Because, I love talking to these members of the audience often and finding out how they interpreted it. And there was one woman once and she said to me, "You know, thank you so much for not elaborating on your story, because it gave me the room to kind of," she said, "This is the first time I cried since my mother passed away three months ago."

And my heart, just like the whole of my heart is just like, "Oh, my God, I'm so sorry." She goes, "No, you really helped me. That was kind of, I think I needed that,

34 https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/podcasts/item/how_music_soothes_us_lullabies

that you kind of healed me in some way. It was the beginning of my mourning process.

And so I realized, the more I play and the more I kind of tap into these things, the more powerful I realized the music can be. And I also realized that it's the responses I get from performing more melody-based pieces generally has a much better response than if I'm playing something that's more rhythmic or beat-driven because I also write electronic music, too. But I always go back to solo piano melody and just simple basics.

What I'm trying to create is a kind of musical pharmacy without sounding too clinical about that.

Christopher Duigan is based in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and for the past 30 something years, performed on average 100 performances a year – that too, came to a sudden halt as result of COVID restrictions. In Duigan's case, he shifted to exploring sharing live performances from his private home on-line – and for free to those able to access them. It started as a temporary measure but now Duigan intends continuing even when live concerts become possible again.

He says³⁵:

My live concerts have appealed particularly to dedicated music lovers but interestingly the on-line concerts are also providing a service akin to informal music therapy – an hour of company and calm amidst all the uncertainty.

It's not about the music necessarily, but what the music represents. The predictability and structure of music is soothing and reassuring. I read with interest about the musicians that have performed during times of war and crisis, and am beginning to understand better about the restorative and healing role of music.

35 Illa Thompson, 2021 "Keeping Music Alive". Update: Duigan has continued to make music and to make it freely available into 2022. In an emailed newsletter of 11 January 2022, he wrote: "I am aware that numerous viewers, many of whom depend on the regularity and presence of an uplifting and companionable 'visit' via the internet, are not in a position to contribute financially. I am also aware that many, who may not be inclined to purchase a ticket up-front or are familiar with the classical music content, are able to experience this for the first time. I don't intend to take a break as I see that my presence and dependability is valued and critical to the success of the project".

being... here... now

These were the attachments that went out with this serving...

Maria Popova. 30 October 2014. "The hand through the fence". Blog post, *The Marginalian*³⁶

Maria Popova presents a childhood recollection by Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971. The beautifully rendered recollection describes a free and anonymous, but intimate exchange of childhood treasures that had a life-long impact on Neruda, galvanizing "a precious idea: that all of humanity is somehow together". Popova relates Neruda's beautiful anecdote to the question of why we make art and enjoy it – "Since our cave-dwelling days, the question of why we make art and why we enjoy it has haunted us as a perennial specter of the human experience". The piece concludes by quoting Neruda in a later interview saying "This exchange of gifts – mysterious – settled deep inside me like a sedimentary deposit".



Susanne Crossman. 4 February 2021. "The play cure". *Aeon*³⁷

"*The Play Cure*" is a beautiful and powerful essay that draws on the lifelong work of Susanne Crossman, a "clinical arts therapist, specialising in mental health, and ... a lecturer and consultant using creative techniques". She describes play as an "opening of multitudes" facilitated through its defining features of being purposeless, voluntary and inherently attractive.

The "purposeless" character of art is important – Oscar Wilde famously said "A work of art is useless as a flower is useless". But as Josh Jones remarks, with all its ambiguities, nonetheless "art can move us beyond the selfish boundaries of the

36 Available at: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/10/30/pablo-neruda-childhood-and-poetry/>

37 Available at: <https://aeon.co/essays/play-is-cathartic-allowing-people-to-sit-with-their-shadows>

ego to connect with intangibles beyond ideas of use and uselessness”³⁸. In “The Play Cure”, Crossman reminds us that “when we play, we exist outside of time ..., outside of clock time. ... When we play and make art, the products we make, the things we do, are *autotelic* – they are their own end in themselves”. In Heywood’s³⁹ article mentioned earlier, he concludes on similar terrain, saying: “What is the role of poetry? Perhaps the notion that something must have ‘a role’ is part of the problem. Poetry is to be”.

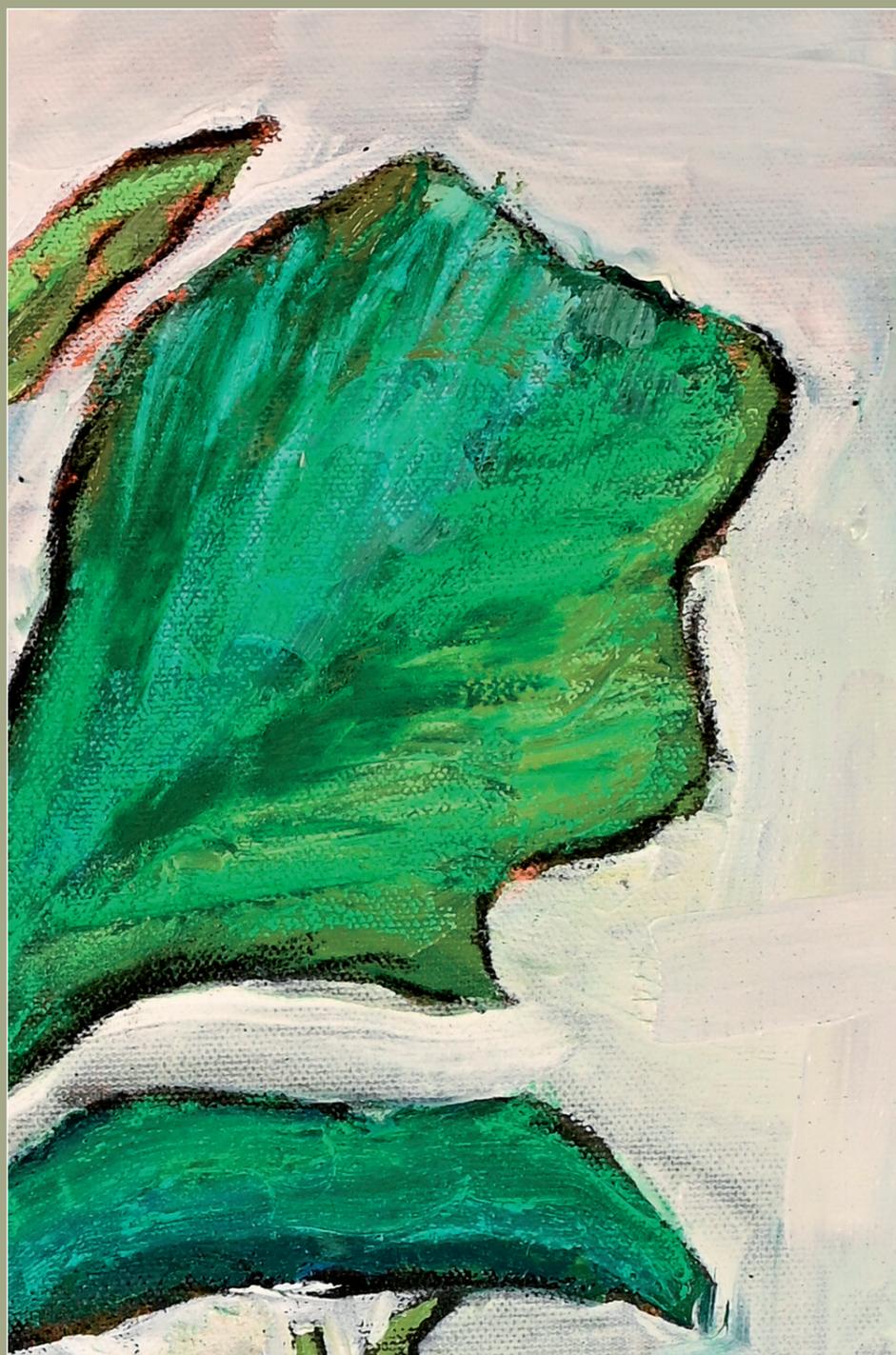
Crossman quotes Hannah Arendt’s contention that “only where we are confronted with things that exist independently of all utilitarian and functional references ... do we speak of works of art. In this way, play could be considered as an anti-capitalistic activity”:

In her article ‘Society and Culture’ (1960), Arendt wrote that ‘without the beauty of man-made, worldly things which we call works of art, without the radiant glory in which potential imperishability is made manifest to the world and in the world, all human life would be futile and no greatness could endure’.

*Despite all of this, the word ‘creative’ sits uncomfortably in my mouth, with its pop-psychology connections: a corporate jamboree feeding on ‘capitalist realism’, gurus in collarless shirts, hand-holding, sticking hearts onto walls. As a play practitioner, I have deep reservations about formulaic, one-size-fits-all doctrines of play. I see play and making as intimate, personal acts. Their force in changing the individual is their Locus Solus. In the 52nd fragment, Heraclitus describes Aion, cosmic time, as a child at play, play as a metaphor for the ever-living cosmic fire **pur aeizoon**, ‘the lightning-bolt which steers all things’. We can and must share imaginary acts, but our imaginations – if they are to empower, overturn and keep us awake at night because we’re creatures who desire – should be allowed to burn with a unique, vibrant light.*

38 Josh Jones, 22 June 2021. “David Bowie on Why It’s Crazy to Make Art – and We Do It Anyway” <https://www.openculture.com/2021/06/david-bowie-on-why-its-crazy-to-make-art-and-we-do-it-anyway-1998.html>

39 Mark Heywood 16 July 2021 *ibid*.



THE FIFTH SERVING:

The quiet power of being present, here and now

15 November 2021

dear *padkos* friends,

... breathe in, and breathe out deeply and calmly⁴⁰. On Spring Day (here in the South at least!) you join us in conversation with Sharon Grussendorf under the trees at the side of a tranquil dam at Solitude Retreat Centre⁴¹. In what will be second-last edition in this season of *padkos*, we are talking about mindfulness and meditation. It's a vast area that we can only begin to explore together in this brief mailing – but experience, and a growing body of data, make clear it's deeply beneficial for mental, spiritual, and holistic well-being. In our exploration together we will see that mindfulness practice unites body, mind, and spirit in the here and now, and can relieve our minds, bringing peace, calm, and clarity. In the traditions we're focused on here, this is not done by escaping the realities of this world or the suffering and injustice in it but being present to them.

*mindfulness practice unites body, mind, and spirit in
the here and now*

40 Please note that if, for you, the breath is associated with trauma and discomfort, you might adapt this to something that is more nurturing for you, such as mindfully focusing on a saying or an image (adapted from: <https://www.rickhanson.net/one-breath-at-a-time/>). See also very useful comments and suggestions from Dr Susan Pollock about "How to Meditate if You're Going through Trauma" from the Center for Mindfulness and Compassion at: <https://www.chacmc.org/practices>

41 <https://www.solitude.org.za/> Sharon is one of the founders and facilitators at Solitude, a retreat centre in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands – "a space where you are invited to find rest and recovery".

being... here... now

We closed *In, Against, Beyond Corona* with the extraordinary poem, *Lockdown*, from Brother Richard, a Capuchin Franciscan priest-friar who also teaches Christian meditation and mindfulness, and who works with the Sanctuary Spirituality Centre in Dublin. Sharon Grussendorf's approach is also rooted in Christian faith but there are many contemplative traditions, resources and practices to draw on (in, and outside of, all faith traditions).

A key point we made through *In, Against, Beyond Corona* was that the crisis we are living through “may call for a sense of being and presence, and not – or not only – doing and action”. The moment has granted us the opportunity to

re-think 'activism' too, and to recognise that for some people, a meaningful 'role' is much more one of being rather than acting. Indeed, there have been times in crisis when it becomes clear that this invisible work can be the deepest resource for others to draw on in life, and perhaps especially when normal or taken-for-granted resources that people draw on are under stress or removed. Let us also acknowledge that non-action can sometimes be a result of being overwhelmed by, or simply not clear in, a situation (like now in a time of global crisis and unimaginable loss and death) – and that that's okay. In all though, let us at least recognise that doing is indeed vital but only where it is thought – and that, right now, means deep and serious reflective thought⁴².

This sentiment echoes a comment by renowned Buddhist figure, Thich Nhat Hanh:⁴³

[T]he problem is not only what you can do. You are motivated by the desire to do something to help the world suffer less – yet 'to do' is just one option. 'To be' is another way of doing; if you can be relaxed, if you can be peaceful, if you can be compassionate, that is considerable action in itself.⁴⁴

42 Butler et al, 2020, 5-6.

43 Update: Between the time we posted this *padkos* serving out in 2021, and the publication of this little booklet in 2022, Thich Nhat Hanh passed away, aged 95, on the 22nd of January. In many ways he was, perhaps, the central figure through this *padkos* series. To discover more, the Plum Village Monastery that he founded has a biography here: <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/thich-nhat-hanh-full-biography/>

44 Thich Nhat Hanh, June 8, 2021. "Fighting injustice without being consumed with anger" <https://plumvillage.app/thich-nhat-hanh-on-fighting-injustice-without-being-consumed-with-anger/>

One of the world's great traditions of mindful practice and thought is yoga. A practitioner in that tradition, Keshav Mohta, notes that

the onset of the coronavirus has revealed that as a civilisation, we are far from a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of our body-mind complex as well as from a socio-economic design which enables a harmonious collective evolution inclusive of all life forms. In contrast to the ignorant view that as humans we are in complete control of this planet, we have been faced with the certainty of impermanence, the first universal characteristic of experience as laid out by the Buddha. ...

One of the fundamental views in ancient Indian wisdom is the understanding of inter-dependent existence – that as humans, we are all connected to each other as well as to other life forms in the very depths of consciousness.⁴⁵

*'to do' is just one option.
'To be' is another way of doing*

THICH NHAT HANH

This also resonates with comments in *In, Against, Beyond Corona*, where we stressed that

the ways in which the corona crisis has emphatically fore-grounded the fundamentally deep sense of the interconnectedness of all people, and of all people with the rest of the environment we're in, will validate for many, a sense that any worthy understanding of moving beyond this point to something radically transformed, will include reference to the 'spiritual' dimension of our being and our being-together.⁴⁶

Our conversation with Sharon Grussendorf began by asking her to share what areas of life and practice came to mind responding to the underlying themes of

45 Keshav Mohta, June 2021. "International Yoga Day 2021: Evolving along with the coronavirus, through the lens of yoga", <https://www.firstpost.com/living/at-yogas-heart-is-technology-to-transform-our-sensory-and-cognitive-faculties-to-see-and-know-whats-beyond-ordinary-conditioned-life-9738121.html>

46 Butler et al, 2020, 5.

being... here... now

this *padkos* series – ‘being... here... now ...’. She said that core things would be a daily commitment to meditation, and everyday *mindfulness*. In line with her Christianity, she uses the practice of ‘centering prayer’ for meditation.

Doing these helps us to shift from the auto-pilot mode that our mind can lock us into and instead to live in a more open, receptive and free mode. Paying attention to mindfulness through the day interrupts the auto-mind – and effectively disrupts the negative churning of our mind that gets us stuck in ordinariness allowing us to reconnect with being, with our being, and with being alive. We see with fresh eyes and we break usual ways of seeing and being in life – ways that can tend to be trapped in negativity and resistance to being in this moment. We make space for befriending who we are. For me the related sense of being held in this moment is a sense of aliveness in God, here, now.

We’ve tried to make sure to link ideas with practical ways of doing throughout this *padkos* series, so we talked about what everyday mindfulness might be about. Sharon explains that

the point of mindfulness is to take a moment to be aware – when we find ourselves feeling churned up inside, there is real power in coming to awareness that it is happening. In that awareness, and with self-compassionate curiosity, we can begin to trace back the thoughts that got us here. It may feel scary and dark to go there, but there is healing and relief in taking the time to painstakingly take notice.

The first step is often to become present, bodily and physically, to the moment – breathing and breath work are key here, but also just grounding our bodily presence with our senses (thus for instance, saying to myself, ‘I am at this table that I can feel; my feet are in touch with the ground; I am breathing’). Then we can bring our mindful awareness to the mind and our emotions. This often allows us to know that although things feel like such-and-such, actually it isn’t necessarily so. This awareness of how thoughts and emotions can trap us is vital – unless it’s noticed, it drives us and will keep us in a spiral. With time, the practice of mindfulness lifts the internal pressure and it feels like a light being shone onto the darkness that was there. This feeling of letting in the light, of opening the windows, starts to ease our distress.

The Fifth Serving: The quiet power of being present, here and now

Meditation, and for me the form of meditation through centering prayer in particular, is such a helpful practice. You learn to choose to notice when your mind may have drifted away from the present moment and you choose gently and non-judgmentally, to learn to return to presence. Learning to do that is very helpful and healing.

I think of meditation and mindfulness practice as a kind of mental and emotional hygiene – we brush our teeth daily but we also need daily cleansing of the foul fumes that can accumulate and corrupt our sense of self. We know from the science of neurobiology that we can't just trust our thoughts – especially because our brain tends to alarmist thoughts (probably as a result of our evolutionary need to be hyper-vigilant against danger – but that need has long since stopped being useful for us). The clear evidence of our 'neuroplasticity' means we know that we can 're-wire' the brain's pathways by ongoing practices to challenge and change those that trap us in negativity and keep us stuck.

We talked a little about how a mindful way of being connects with notions of an abundant life. Sharon referenced a Bible story where Jesus engages with the woman from Sumeria at the well.

Christ talks about the living waters that will flow from within. This is to speak of the possibility of abundant life. That abundant life contrasts with our ordinary experience in the linear economy, and its mentality of scarcity. The biblical parable of the feeding of the five thousand amply describes this abundant alternative that is possible outside of the logic of the way we currently order our life, our society and our economy. That 'logic of the world' is imprinted also in how we set up our cultures and society through othering to achieve a sense of belonging for ourselves. By contrast, for Christians, there is an other way of openness to abundance that is within; there's a vastness open to us. ... So contemplative and mindfulness practice is really important because we need to become aware of, and to notice how, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others keep us from living full and abundant lives; we need to draw on a different sense of self that is not governed by the logic of the linear economy and scarcity and fear; a sense of self that is not threatened but that knows contentment; a sense of self that knows well-being and expansiveness. Ramana Maharshi said: 'Let what comes come, and let what goes go, and find out what remains.'

being... here... now

In mathematics, a 'singularity' occurs where the logic of space and time stops being operational. I think of eternity similarly as a singularity – it does not mean linear time carrying on forever but being outside its logic.

Towards the end of our time together, we discussed the challenge of accessibility. In some important ways, access to the practices of mindfulness and the space for meditation can be inscribed with the privileges of power and wealth. For Sharon this is a deep and urgent challenge. She responded to the question emphasizing: “I will not be glib about the real challenges of inequality and unfairness” that constrain and damage people. Nonetheless there remains the powerful and paradoxical truth that in fact the work and the rewards of mindfulness require precisely nothing. As Sharon put it:

the core of this is inner work. My own surprising discovery has been of 'inner spaciousness', a discovery of inner un-restriction that is there for anyone to access – just sit down with nothing and be present to the moment and yourself in the simplicity of being. It precisely requires no thing/s – it is an inner resource and spaciousness that we all have the ability to tap into. In that sense, it is not elitist but genuinely and radically there for all. Like death, it's a great equaliser.

So despite the image that some people might have of contemplative work, you can see that it is mostly a way of being present rather than absent from the world – as we noted earlier, mindfulness here is not about escaping the realities of this world or the suffering and injustice in it⁴⁷. Nonetheless, maybe especially in the ‘West’ (and subsequently, in western-dominated areas of life and the world), some ways of thinking about this work have undoubtedly been more about escape from, or accommodation with, suffering and injustice rather than engagement and

47 Not only does escapism and accommodation with the status quo leave injustices intact, it can also be understood as fundamentally detrimental to our mental health. Kaufman points out that “Refusing to look at life’s darkness and avoiding uncomfortable experiences can be detrimental to mental health. This ‘toxic positivity’ is ultimately a denial of reality. Telling someone to ‘stay positive’ in the middle of a global crisis is missing out on an opportunity for growth, not to mention likely to backfire and only make them feel worse. ... The antidote to toxic positivity is ‘tragic optimism,’ a phrase coined by the existential-humanistic psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl”. Scott Barry Kaufman, 2021. “The Opposite of Toxic Positivity”, *The Atlantic*, 18 August 2021 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/08/tragic-optimism-opposite-toxic-positivity/619786/>)

transformation. Ronald Purser⁴⁸ makes some valuable critiques along these lines (though we will also look thoughtfully about his overall perspective below, and make some self-critical comments about certain modes of Left activism). Purser opens his critique of contemporary mindfulness by saying that “[i]t is sold as a force that can help us cope with the ravages of capitalism, but with its inward focus, mindful meditation may be the enemy of activism”. He acknowledges that “[a]lthough derived from Buddhism, it’s been stripped of the teachings on ethics that accompanied it, as well as the liberating aim of dissolving attachment to a false sense of self while enacting compassion for all other beings”. So Purser reckons that “mindfulness only serves to reinforce [the] destructive logic” of our “dysfunctional system” and that its practitioners “are providing support for the status quo”.

These are definitely important critical points to be aware of – and there is surely much mindfulness and meditative work of the type Purser has in his sights here. But there is also something disturbing in the language and approach underlying the article – disturbing elements that are all too often found in much (Left and Right) ‘activism’ and thought. Framing mindfulness as a ‘**conspiracy**’ (as per the title of the article – ‘The Mindfulness Conspiracy’), and opening with the line that “... mindful meditation may be the **enemy of activism**” discloses a certain kind of unhelpful and damaging mindset. As our *padkos* reflection here and throughout this series clearly shows, there are many traditions, practices and resources that connect mindfulness with radically-critical engagement in the world.

*contemplative work ... is mostly a way of being present
rather than absent from the world*

Holistic psychologist Nicole Le Pera (2021⁴⁹) highlights an uncomfortable truth when she comments that, at the individual level, “every time we blame someone for our current circumstances, we miss an opportunity to create new ones”. It’s

48 “The mindfulness conspiracy”, 14 June 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jun/14/the-mindfulness-conspiracy-capitalist-spirituality>

49 <https://www.instagram.com/the.holistic.psychologist/>

being... here... now

important to reflect on the ways in which this is true for collective action too. An orientation to blame and to conspiracy blinds us from our own, and others', multiplicity of entanglements and complicities with the situation we're in; it externalises and fetishises agency for the state of things to others (usually others with exaggerated ascriptions of power over us, and unanswerably sly and devious scheming); it obscures and suppresses our, and others', capacities for (critical, creative, and rebellious) thought, and for doing and relating in new ways that would break the patterns and relation that keep things as they are.

Timmerman⁵⁰ maintains that "contrary to the popular view of Buddhism as a 'refuge' from the world, to become a Buddhist today is definitely a political act. ... We are presented with something at once very old and very new: the connection of our daily activities to the sustaining of the vast, intricate and amazing world around us. This connection is known and celebrated by many religious traditions as 'the sacredness of the ordinary'". And as Martine Batchelor⁵¹ notes,

Buddhists throughout the ages have discovered that 'the truth that sets the heart free' is not found in some metaphysical reality outside the place and time in which each of us lives and breathes⁵². ... The spiritual meaning of life is to be found right here in the midst of this network of relationships we call 'life'.

This insight is foundational in the tradition of 'engaged Buddhism' associated with Thich Nhat Hanh, who was mentioned earlier. Talking about 'Breathing Mindfully', he explains that:

The kind of Buddhism I have been writing about and practising is called 'Engaged Buddhism'. Here we do not practice only in the meditation hall, but outside as well... I always recommend mindful breathing before action. When something happens it is good to breathe mindfully, but it is even better to be breathing mindfully before the arrival of that event. Because if you have practiced breathing before something

50 Peter Timmerman, 1992. "It is dark outside: Western Buddhism from the Enlightenment to the global crisis", in Martine Batchelor and Brown, Kerry (Eds), *Buddhism and Ecology*, Cassell, London and New York, 66.

51 Martine Batchelor, 1992. "Even the stones smile: Selections from the scriptures" in Martine Batchelor and Brown, Kerry (Eds), *Buddhism and Ecology*, Cassell, London and New York, 15.

52 Note that for Buddha this also means to be wary of endowing meaning and life with an all-powerful external God or eternal soul and like concepts too.

*happens, you will be able to receive it with calm and see the situation more clearly. Without such calm and deep understanding your action will probably bring about more harm than good.*⁵³

Some meditation teachers tell us not to pay attention to the problems of the world like hunger, war, oppression, social injustice, ecological problems, etc. We should only practise. These teachers have not truly understood the meaning of the Mahayana⁵⁴. Of course, we should not neglect practices like counting the breath, meditation and sutra study, but what is the purpose of doing these things? Meditation's purpose is to be aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world. What is going on in the world can be seen within ourselves and vice versa. Once we see this clearly, we cannot refuse to take a position and act. When a village is being bombed and children and adults are suffering from wounds and death, can a Buddhist sit still in his unbombed temple? Truly, if he has wisdom and compassion, he will be able to practice Buddhism while helping other people⁵⁵.

There continue to be many expressions of this tradition of engaged mindfulness organising around the world. For instance, "Buddhists Across Traditions"⁵⁶ is an

United Kingdom-based BPOC/BAME-centered collective (with white allies and currently white-led organisations) uniting Buddhist and Mindfulness groups in service of racial justice, social equity and healing. ... Our practices can help blossom a radically different society – 'beloved communities'. We recognise that racism is a result of greed, class and gender stratification, which impacts us all and is also rapidly destroying the planet. We hope to collaborate and share interest and energies in challenging and healing these intersecting areas of racial and social injustice.



53 Thich Nhat Hanh, 1992. "Look deep and smile: The thoughts and experiences of a Vietnamese monk", in Martine Batchelor and Brown, Kerry (Eds), *Buddhism and Ecology*, Cassell, London and New York. 102-3

54 For discussion of the meaning of mahayana, see, for example: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahayana>

55 *ibid* 108

56 <https://buddhistsacrosstraditions.org/>

being... here... now

These were the attachments that went out with this serving...

Thich Nhat Hanh. 8 June 2021. “Fighting injustice without being consumed with anger” and Thich Nhat Hanh. 29 July 2021. *Creating enlightened society*⁵⁷

There are two short reflections from Thich Nhat Hanh in one of your attachments. In the first one, “Fighting injustice without being consumed with anger”, the great Buddhist monk and teacher talks about the practice of mindfulness as a

practice to preserve ourselves, to stop ourselves being overwhelmed by the suffering all around. ... The practice of mindful breathing, of mindful walking – allowing yourself to be fully present in the here and now, in order to be nourished by nature – is very important. ... Then we can become instruments of peace, of happiness, of joy, to help others suffer less.

In “Creating Enlightened Society”, he recognises that

[a]round the world, we are facing climate change, terrorism, and wars between people of different religions. Fanaticism, discrimination, division, violence, economic crises, and the destruction of the environment affect us all. We have to look deeply into these sufferings so we can make good decisions and conduct ourselves wisely. ... If we look deeply with clarity, calm, and peace, we can see the causes of our suffering, uproot and transform them, and find a way out. ... A Buddhist contribution to global ethics is ... based on observing and understanding the world with mindfulness, concentration, and insight. It begins with an awareness of the nonduality of subject and object, and the interconnectedness of all things.

Thich Nhat Hanh discusses the emergence of the term ‘engaged Buddhism’ and the circumstances that gave rise to it, saying that “we wanted to maintain our practice while responding to the suffering around us. ... If we hadn’t practiced while we served, we would have lost ourselves, become burnt out, and we would not have been able to help anyone.”

⁵⁷ Available at: <https://plumvillage.app/thich-nhat-hanh-on-fighting-injustice-without-being-consumed-with-anger/> and: <https://plumvillage.app/good-citizens-creating-enlightened-society/>
The second piece is a lightly edited introductory chapter from: Thich Nhat Hanh, 2012. *Good Citizens*, Parallax Press, Berkeley.



Dahr Jamail. 13 February 2017. "Learning to See in the Dark Amid Catastrophe – An Interview With Deep Ecologist Joanna Macy". *Truthout*.⁵⁸

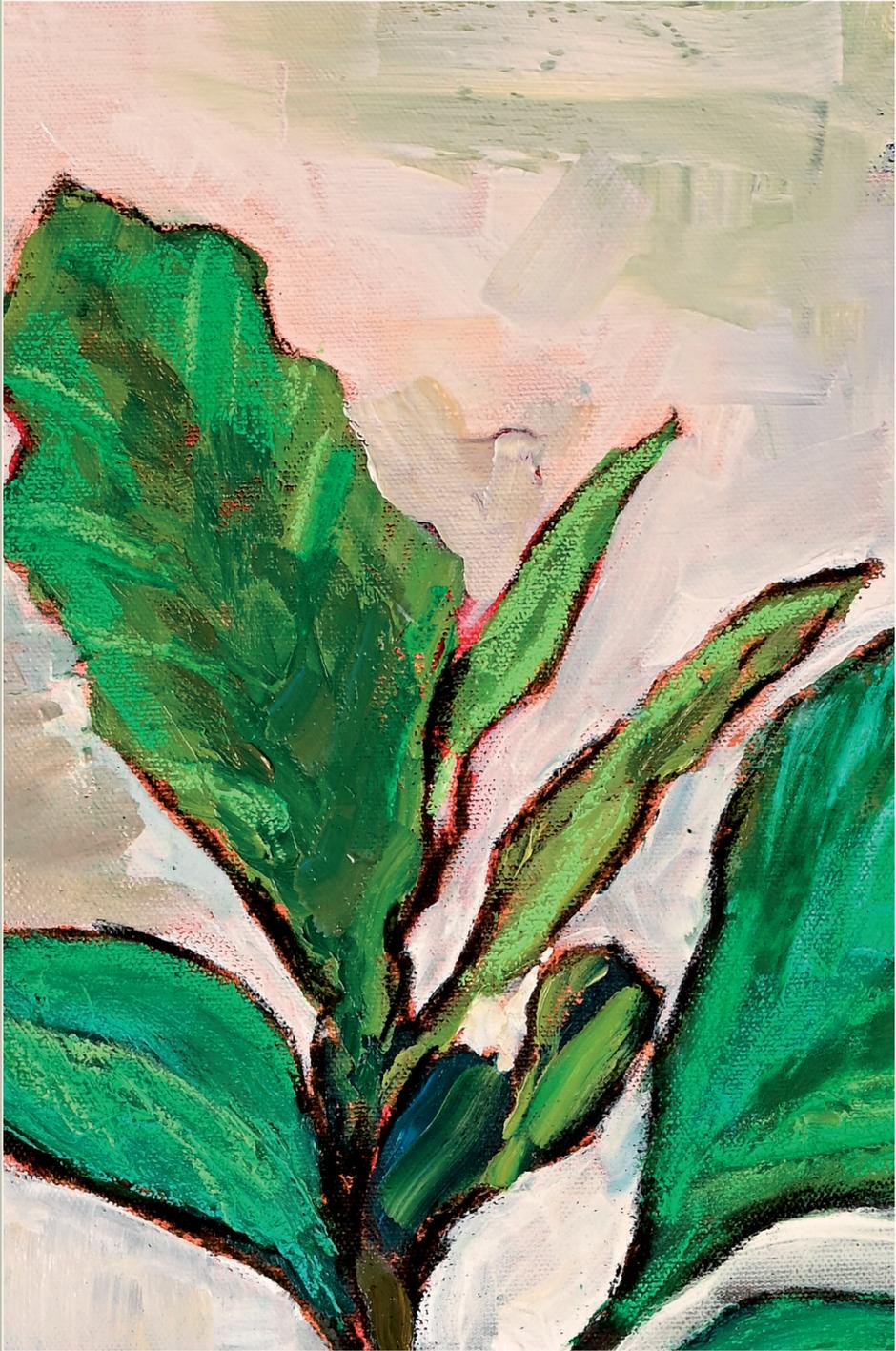
Joanna Macy is described as an eco-philosopher, and a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. A respected voice in the movements for peace, justice and ecology, she interweaves her scholarship with five decades of activism. In this lovely interview, she says that a lot of her work is to help people

to open the eyes and open the heart to discover ... that acceptance of ... discomfort and pain [that comes with really seeing what is going on] actually reflected the depths of your caring and commitment to life. When people find that they can, and want to, feel and know and tell what is happening to our world, that is so much sweeter and [more] liberating than the opposite.

Asked about people taking radical actions for justice and ecology, Macy says

They are the cutting edge of human evolution. They have broken free from being captives ... They are showing us what we can be". She talks about finding our strength and reason by connecting together, discovering our own paths, and our joy and gratitude, and "[t]o realize my inter-being with all life.

58 Available at: <https://truthout.org/articles/learning-to-see-in-the-dark-amid-catastrophe-an-interview-with-deep-ecologist-joanna-macy/>



THE FINAL SERVING:

Here we are now

24 November 2021

Welcome, we are here now – at the last offering in this season of *padkos* that we’ve called “being... here... now...”. In some ways it always felt like a slightly risky theme to highlight and sustain. We know that a focus on the care and well-being of individual people, including ourselves, can be seen as indulgent and individualistic, at the expense of political activism and revolutionary social change. But this separation of the personal from the social is not a division or distinction we believe to be true. In fact, the abstraction of the one from the other is probably at the bottom of some of the most disastrous and damaging impacts of much Left politics.

We’ve talked consistently about the relentless co-option and monetisation of self-care, and its many forms that strip mindfulness from an ethical base so that it’s just about getting people to accept and acquiesce to the situation – and we’re clear that our current situation is not acceptable and is causing much (though not all) of our distress and unwellness. We are not crazy to react negatively to the situation we’re in! We should also be aware that there is also growing evidence that ‘wellness’ has become an increasingly well-traveled entry point into rightwing conspiracy-thinking – and that this has accelerated during the global COVID pandemic. This ‘conspirituality’ is described by Eva Wiseman as

the sticky intersection of two worlds: the world of yoga and juice cleanses with that of New Age thinking and online theories about secret groups, covertly controlling the universe. ... While the overlap of left-wing, magazine-friendly wellness and far-right conspiracy theories might initially sound surprising, the similarities in cultures, in ways of thinking – the questioning of authority, of alternative medicines, the distrust of institutions – are clear⁵⁹.

59 Eva Wiseman, 17 October 2021. “The dark side of wellness: the overlap between spiritual thinking and far-right conspiracies”, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/oct/17/eva-wiseman-conspirituality-the-dark-side-of-wellness-how-it-all-got-so-toxic>

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By contrast with both these deviations, throughout this series we've returned again and again to the idea that the integration of inner- and outer- awareness and engagement is not just compatible with, but deeply productive for, holistic well-being and life. Jenny Odell⁶⁰ talks⁶¹ about self-care "in the sense before it was commodified; like actual care of the self in almost an activist sense in order to ultimately accomplish something later; self care that prepares ourselves for action". She quotes black north american poet, feminist and activist, Audre Lorde⁶² saying: "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare"⁶³.

The fact that spaces and resources for well-being and self-care are unfairly distributed, only encourages our ongoing commitment to change those conditions. The fact that key drivers of modernity, of capitalism, of patriarchy, of industry, of 'progress', of 'development', of 'efficiency', of profit, of money, of consumerism, are also key drivers of so much of our collective and individual un-wellness and dis-ease, only strengthens our resolve to break the logic of those patterns.

caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare

AUDRE LORDE



60 See Odell, J., 2019. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting The Attention Economy*, Melville House, New York.

61 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izjIP9qtmBU>. In that talk, Odell goes on to suggest, in a way that resonates with our earlier *padkos* on art and play, that we should "take a protective stance toward ourselves and each other, that we protect our spaces and our time for non-instrumental and non-commercial activity and thought; for maintenance, for care, and for conviviality; and that we fiercely protect our human animality against all technologies and rhetorics that actively ignore and disdain the body, the bodies of others, and the body of the land that we physically inhabit".

62 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Audre_Lorde

63 Quoted by Jenny Odell from Lorde, 1988. "A Burst of Light"

A note about *buen vivir* or *sumak kawsay*⁶⁴

Often through this series we've talked about an 'abundant life' being a worthwhile way to think about what it might be that we're striving to attain. There's a useful overlap with the latin american notions of *buen vivir* or *sumak kawsay*. *Buen vivir* is often translated as 'good living' or 'living well' (and *not* 'living better' – see below). It was, and continues to be, used by a number of social movements advancing the struggles of indigenous peoples, and including their natural world. It focuses on living sustainably as part of a community that includes both human beings and nature⁶⁵.

Originally created as a political and cultural proposal, Ecuadorian and Bolivian governments later adopted it. The term refers to the implementation of a socialism that moves away from Western socialist theory and instead embraces the ancestral, communitarian knowledge and lifestyle of Quechua people. ... In the original Quechua phrase, *sumak* refers to the ideal and beautiful fulfillment of the planet, and *kawsay* means 'life,' a life with dignity, plenitude, balance, and harmony⁶⁶.

Sumak kawsay is a paradigm based on five pillars:

- There is no life without knowledge or wisdom (*tucu yachay*)
- We all come from Mother Earth (*pacha mama*)
- Life is healthy (*hambi kawsay*)
- Life is collective (*sumak kamaña*)
- We all have an aspiration or a dream (*hatun muskuy*).

Johannes M. Waldmüller (2014)⁶⁷ discusses many of the complex and nuanced features of *buen vivir* and *sumak kawsay*. He says that the various terms used to express *buen vivir* point to what is actually a plurality of platforms of 'latin american' alternatives to "mainstream utilitarian development approaches". There is simply

64 Our gratitude to Anne Harley for pointing us to the terms and their use in latin american struggles and thought – and also for a number of great resource articles on the topic.

65 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism_of_the_21st_century#Buen_vivir

66 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumak_kawsay

67 "Buen Vivir, Sumak Kawsay, 'Good Living': An Introduction And Overview". Note that the full article is really worth reading – we can only present a few of the important points he makes here.

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no clearcut definition – and in a sense that’s an important point. It “intentionally leaves space for re-interpretation, re-appropriation or, as it is frequently called, ‘enactment’ and ‘reconstruction’”. Quoting Walsh (2010), Waldmüller says that it’s “a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and on the spatial-temporal-harmonious totality of existence. That is, on the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledges, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living. This notion is part and parcel of the cosmivision, cosmology, or philosophy of the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala.”

We should note it is a set of ideas and practices that are really diverse now, and that now includes a form of state-led development in some latin american countries – for instance, it is included in the constitutions of both Bolivia and Ecuador. But it is also – especially *Sumak Kawsay* – a form of living and thinking, with important spiritual and cosmological dimensions, based on a practice

of all-connected consciousness, being in constant exchange and reflection with the social and natural environment. ... Sumak Kawsay is regarded as explicitly entailing no aspirations to governance, to rule, to domination, to hierarchies, to competition. Instead it is the quintessential expression of a number of ontological values, such as connectedness, commonality, and balancing between eternal energies and poles, existent in every living being (which is everything). ... Thus being is always an active and passive act of sacred interconnectedness. Everything is alive and sacred. ... The goal of Buen Vivir is not to ‘overcome’ ‘ill living’ [‘Mal Vivir’/Llaki Kawsay], since there is no aspiration to ‘live better’ – but rather to balance both always existent sides in a refined way. The key to do so, is practicing consciousness, i.e. listening, responding and correlating with mind, heart and body. In opposition to Western concepts of exclusivity, competition, subjectification, etc., Buen Vivir puts emphasis on key values such as solidarity, generosity, reciprocity and complementarity. These stem from a primordial understanding of oneness, connectedness and animacy, i.e. plants, animals, water, stones, humans, soil, mountains, etc. are regarded as living beings⁶⁸.



68 Waltmüller, 2014. *ibid.*

These were the attachments that went out with this serving...

Guilherme Boulos. 2021. "Struggles of the Roofless – Interview by Mario Sergio Conti". *New Left Review*, 130: 6-23⁶⁹.

We selected some extracts from this extraordinary article from the *New Left Review*. It's based on an interview with Guilherme Boulos, a Brazilian militant with the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto, that articulates a deep connection between psychological well-being and radical social transformation. After a brief tour through his fascinating political trajectory and connection with militant movements, Boulos singles out an experience in Buenos Aires that was seminal too:

there was a meeting they called a 'reflection group'. It was coordinated by two psychoanalysts who brought people together in a circle and created an environment for listening – listening to people who had never been listened to before. They had just lived through traumatic situations, like being made redundant and evicted from their homes; or they had lost their partners, or seen their families destroyed. I will never forget that: for the power, for the strength that was present there. It was a catharsis that brought forth all the experience of suffering, of humiliation, of every sort of oppression and violence that people had lived through".

Boulos then went on to study "the correlation between mental suffering, poverty and collective organizations".



Kristin Neff. June 14, 2021. "Four ways self-compassion can help you fight for social justice". *Greater Good Magazine*.⁷⁰

Here Kristin Neff says that "[b]y aiming compassion inward as well as outward, we can better confront the pain of injustice without being overwhelmed, and find

69 Available at: <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii130/articles/struggles-of-the-roofless/> We're so grateful to Richard Pithouse at New Frame for pointing us to this piece.

70 Available at: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four_ways_self_compassion_can_help_you_fight_for_social_justice

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the strength and energy to fight for what's right. ... Self-compassion has three core components – kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness – and the fierce and tender aspect of each has an important role to play in the social justice movement”.

IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION, some thoughts and pointers back to praxis

Neff's piece is good, but pause for a moment and reflect on the 'fighting' language of the title. It flags something we want to emphasize about praxis as we bring this *padkos* season to a close. The healing work of taking care of the individual should be reflected in the way we think and do the simultaneous work of transforming the world. If modes of thinking and doing that (still) characterise a lot of 'activism' cause harm, we should not think about wellness as a patching-up operation to simply repair and return fighters to the fray. We need to refuse activism that is, itself, damaging. It is very clear that that kind of damage is not only to the individual activist but it infects – and is reflected in – the activism itself, ultimately doing more harm in the world, too. Sometimes it's our own pre-existing damage (and we all carry more or less damage) that really drives what we think of as 'activism' – folding layers of trauma upon trauma and damage, and then seeing it as an exemplary mode of activism. It's not. It's toxic, and invariably, we become the thing we hate. So we need to continually think self-critically about our praxis and try to align it with the good and the true; to look for alignment and for congruency with all we know about being mindful and well, here and now, and of being present in the here and now.

It's connected with a radical kind of politics of dignity; a kind of peaceable politics and of doing less harm; it's connected with a certain type and set of ethics and ecology. But it also is about starting to build a praxis of inter-connection and holism and life for all – especially in our current era dominated by western, capitalist, thought and practice (or ways of seeing and doing) that fractures the world into disabling and harmful shards and abstractions from each other.

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The idea that the deep heart of our organisational praxis at CLP is about being present with ‘no-thing’ was already expressed back in 2010 when we wrote a piece called “Finding Our Voice in the World” where we talked about CLP’s praxis and of:

Having faith in nothing.

What then is the work we do in those spaces? As one person put it in a reflection session: ‘We are not the messiahs but what could be CLP’s role?’. For CLP, it’s mainly to be present and to journey with the people and support their struggles. But sometimes it is difficult to know what it really means to ‘support’ when we meet with people and groups who you would think expect more. In a material sense, I/ we come with nothing, I/we have nothing. In a way, our political approach in CLP sharpens the question because we do not go in to places of poverty offering a solution and resources that we deliver as a product or a programme.

It was important to reflect carefully on this ‘nothingness’ that we bring as CLP. Even those raising this question mentioned some of the immaterial things we do bring – love, care, energy and ultimately perhaps, a simple commitment to being with the people.

But more than that, we are there and we bring ‘nothing’ because we deeply believe that nothing other than the struggles of the people themselves create the possibility for really changing the world – changing it away from what it is, and towards what it should and could be. We have seen and learned enough to know by now that anything else, any promise that some outside power or project will free the people, or will develop the people, or will fundamentally change the world, is a lie. And we know that the effect of that lie is to continuously make the people avoid the terrible but liberatory truth that change, rebellion, transformation is in their hands. In short, we have a theory of change in the world, and we continue to build our confidence in this.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Being well: What should we check up on?

Through the course of this *padkos* series we've looked at some aspects of an integrated and holistic notion of being well. You might feel you want to check in on the different parts of your own life and assess how that's going – but what aspects of life would you need to take into consideration? We thought it might be helpful to share and summarise a couple of lists from some of the resource people we've drawn from over the season.

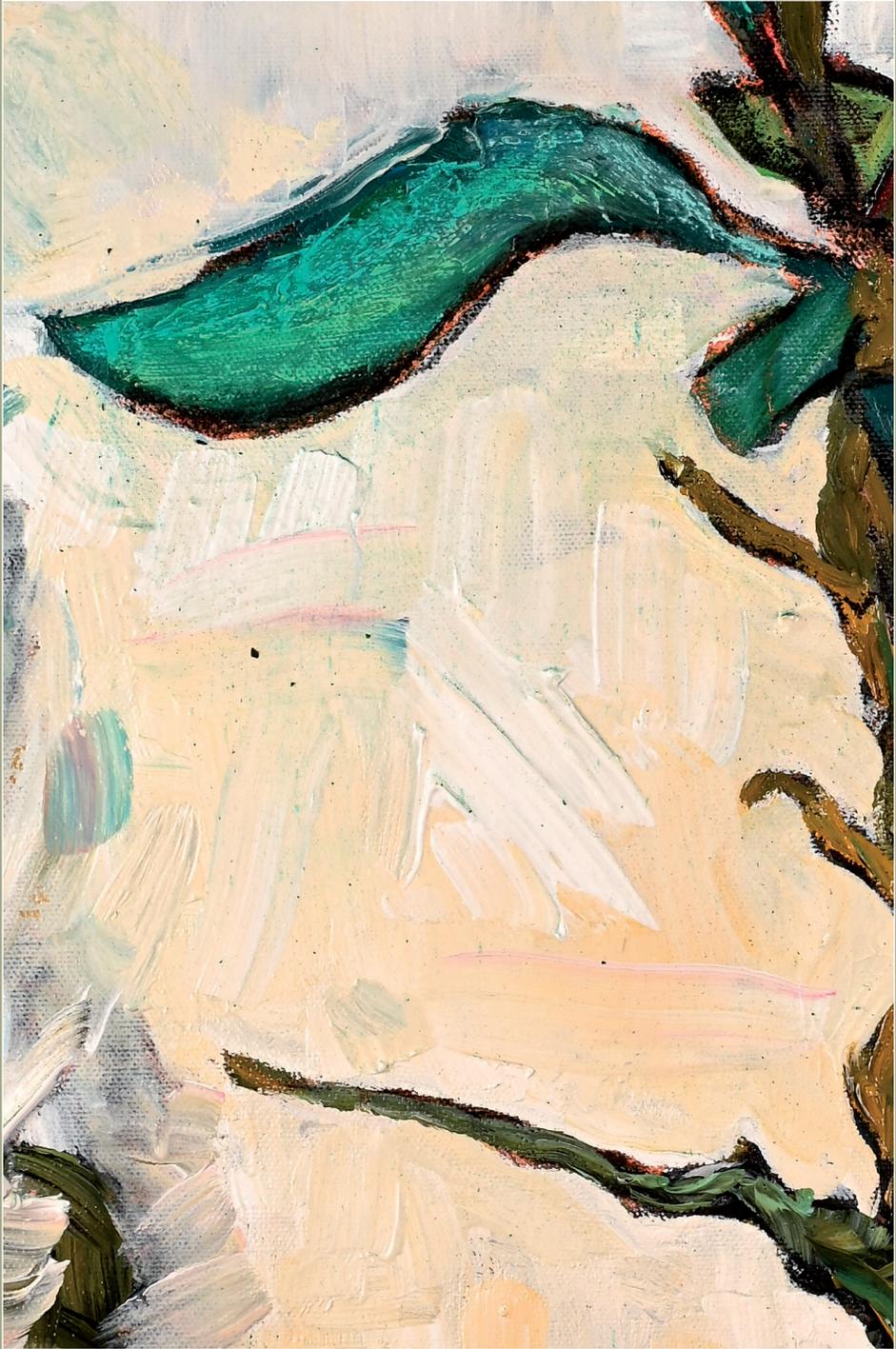
1. "Components of well-being"

"The Greater Good" project⁷¹, based at University of California (Berkeley, USA) lists the following aspects of social and individual life that all contribute to our well-being. Here are some edited extracts:

Purpose:

To psychologists, purpose is an abiding intention to achieve a long-term goal that is both personally meaningful and makes a positive mark on the world. The goals that foster a sense of purpose are ones that can potentially change the lives of other people... Our sense of purpose will change over the course of our lifetime. ... Like happiness, purpose is not a destination, but a journey and a practice. That means it's accessible at any age, if we're willing to explore what matters to us and what kind of person we want to be – and act to become that person. If we're able to revisit and renew our sense of purpose as we navigate milestones and transitions, suggests this research, then we can look forward to more satisfying, meaningful lives.

⁷¹ See their website <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/> for more information.



Altruism:

Altruism is when we act to promote someone else's welfare, even at a risk or cost to ourselves. Though some believe that humans are fundamentally self-interested, recent research suggests otherwise: Studies have found that people's first impulse is to cooperate rather than compete; that toddlers spontaneously help people in need out of a genuine concern for their welfare; and that even non-human primates display altruism. ... [R]ecent neuroscience studies ... have shown that when people behave altruistically, their brains activate in regions that signal pleasure and reward, similar to when they eat chocolate (or have sex). This does not mean that humans are more altruistic than selfish; instead, evidence suggests we have deeply ingrained tendencies to act in either direction. Our challenge lies in finding ways to evoke the better angels of our nature.

Empathy:

... Emotion researchers generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

Contemporary researchers often differentiate between two types of empathy:

"Affective empathy" refers to the sensations and feelings we get in response to others' emotions; this can include mirroring what that person is feeling, or just feeling stressed when we detect another's fear or anxiety. "Cognitive empathy," sometimes called "perspective taking," refers to our ability to identify and understand other people's emotions. ... Having empathy doesn't necessarily mean we'll want to help someone in need, though it's often a vital first step toward compassionate action.

Forgiveness:

Psychologists generally define forgiveness as a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness. ... [W]hen you forgive, you do not gloss over or deny the seriousness of an offense against you. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, nor does it mean condoning or excusing offenses. Though forgiveness can help repair a damaged relationship, it doesn't obligate you to reconcile with the person who harmed you... Instead, forgiveness brings the forgiver peace of mind and frees him or her

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from corrosive anger. ... [E]xperts agree that it at least involves letting go of deeply held negative feelings. In that way, it empowers you to recognize the pain you suffered without letting that pain define you, enabling you to heal and move on with your life. While early research focused on forgiveness of others by individuals, new areas of research are starting to examine the benefits of group forgiveness and self-forgiveness.

Happiness:

... [W]e often use the term to describe a range of positive emotions, including joy, pride, contentment, and gratitude.... Many [researchers] use the term interchangeably with “subjective well-being,” which they measure by simply asking people to report how satisfied they feel with their own lives and how much positive and negative emotion they’re experiencing. In her 2007 book *The How of Happiness*, positive psychology researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky elaborates, describing happiness as “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.” That definition ... captures the fleeting positive emotions that come with happiness, along with a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life – and suggests how these emotions and sense of meaning reinforce one another.

Social Connection:

When researchers refer to the concept of social connection, they mean the feeling that you belong to a group and generally feel close to other people. Scientific evidence strongly suggests that this is a core psychological need, essential to feeling satisfied with your life. Indeed, humans are a profoundly social species; our drive to connect with others is embedded in our biology and evolutionary history. It begins at birth, in our relationship with our caregiver – and the effects of this relationship seem to reverberate throughout our lives. When we’re cared for as children, we’re more likely to have healthy, secure attachments as we get older. What’s more, the pleasures of social life register in our brains much the same way physical pleasure does ... “To the extent that we can characterize evolution as designing our modern brains, this is what our brains were wired for: reaching out to and interacting with others,” writes neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman in his book *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*. “These social adaptations are central to making us the most successful species on earth.”

Awe:

Awe is the feeling we get in the presence of something vast that challenges our understanding of the world, like looking up at millions of stars in the night sky or marveling at the birth of a child. When people feel awe, they may use other words to describe the experience, such as wonder, amazement, surprise, or transcendence. The most common sources of awe are other people and nature, but awe can be elicited by many other experiences as well, such as music, art or architecture, religious experiences, the supernatural, or even one's own accomplishments. We often think about awe in response to rare and intense events... [b]ut awe is also found in the everyday... Today, researchers are uncovering the benefits of awe for clear thinking, good health, and close relationships. Although the modern view of awe in Western society is overwhelmingly positive, awe is a complex emotion, one that can be intensely pleasurable or imbued with dread, depending on the context.... More awful experiences of awe are tinged with fear and threat and may not have the same benefits as awesome experiences of wonder or amazement.

Diversity:

... "diversity" refers to both an obvious fact of human life – namely, that there are many different kinds of people – and the idea that this diversity drives cultural, economic, and social vitality and innovation. ... [D]ecades of research suggest that intolerance hurts our well-being – and that individuals thrive when they are able to tolerate and embrace the diversity of the world. ... [R]acial diversity ... is just one dimension of the human reality. We also differ in gender, language, manners and culture, social roles, sexual orientation, education, skills, income, and countless other domains. In recent years, some advocates have even argued for recognition of "neurodiversity," which refers to the range of differences in brain function. Research shows that differences do make it harder for people to connect and empathize with each other. Navigating differences can be tough... and yet people all over the world do it every day. It's a prosocial skill, like empathy or forgiveness, that can be developed over a lifetime with intentionality, knowledge, and practice. In diverse societies, cultivating our ability to forge relationships across differences can actually increase our well-being.

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Mindfulness:

Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens. Mindfulness also involves acceptance, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging them – without believing, for instance, that there’s a “right” or “wrong” way to think or feel in a given moment. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts tune into what we’re sensing in the present moment rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future. Though it has its roots in Buddhist meditation, a secular practice of mindfulness has entered the American mainstream in recent years, in part through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn and his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, which he launched at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. Since that time, thousands of studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness in general and MBSR in particular, inspiring countless programs to adapt the MBSR model for schools, prisons, hospitals, veterans centers, and beyond.

Gratitude:

Robert Emmons, perhaps the world’s leading scientific expert on gratitude, argues that gratitude has two key components. ... “First,” he writes, “it’s an affirmation of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we’ve received.” In the second part of gratitude ... “we recognize that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves. ... We acknowledge that other people – or even higher powers, if you’re of a spiritual mindset – gave us many gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives.” Emmons and other researchers see the social dimension as being especially important to gratitude. ... [G]ratitude encourages us not only to appreciate gifts but to repay them (or pay them forward). ... This is how gratitude may have evolved: by strengthening bonds between members of the same species who mutually helped each other out.

Compassion:

Compassion literally means “to suffer together.” Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. ... While cynics may dismiss compassion as touchy-feely or irrational, scientists have started to map the biological basis

of compassion, suggesting its deep evolutionary purpose. This research has shown that when we feel compassion, our heart rate slows down, we secrete the “bonding hormone” oxytocin, and regions of the brain linked to empathy, caregiving, and feelings of pleasure light up, which often results in our wanting to approach and care for other people.

Bridging Differences:

... Differences don't necessarily need to divide people, but we do have a tendency, rooted in evolution, to split the world into “us” and “them” – and to treat members of our own “ingroup” with kindness while behaving badly toward outside groups. These tendencies can be especially pronounced at times when we feel stressed or threatened, anxious about our own security or survival. ... By understanding the social and psychological roots of polarization, we can promote solutions that help bring people together by what they share in common, not what sets them apart.



2. Nicole La Pera – How to Create Mental Wellness

‘The holistic psychologist’, Nicole La Pera⁷², in an instagram post that draws from her influential book, *How To Do The Work*, outlines some important areas to pay attention to and create mental wellness:

1. Address nutrition/gut health:

The mind and gut are in constant communication with each other. Our microbiome (collection of bacteria lining our gut) impacts our mood, how we learn, and our memory. 95% of serotonin is made in the gut.

2. Do bloodwork for underlying infections/inflammation/disease:

Many mental health ‘disorders’ are actually an underlying infection or inflammation in the body. Undiagnosed thyroid conditions can cause panic attacks.

⁷² <https://www.instagram.com/the.holistic.psychologist/>: 7 August 2021

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Vitamin/omega 3 fatty acid deficiency can cause anxiety, depression, bipolar symptoms, and racing thoughts.

3. Prioritize sleep:

Sleep is key in mental wellness. It's when our bodies regenerate new cells, clean up old cells, and create new neural pathways in the mind. It also impacts our microbiome, which is key in mental health.

4. Practice consciousness:

Learning how to be the witness of your thoughts, life experiences, emotional energy, and daily interactions, allows you to be present/respond in new ways/create new patterns.

5. Practice boundaries:

Practice placing limits on how you spend your time, on what you consume, and who you spend your time around. Without boundaries we can become resentful, irritable and neglect ourselves in the process.

6. Move:

Mind body movement practices like yoga, conscious walking, kickboxing, lifting, sprints etc. are key in mental wellness. Movement doesn't have to be long and stressful – 15 minutes will have benefits.

7. Sunlight, nature and quiet to heal/repair the nervous system:

Our nervous system has not evolved to be chronically stressed/hyper-vigilant/distracted. Long-term nervous system dysregulation causes mental health issues, inability to be emotionally resilient, and 'mood swings'.

8. Understand your childhood trauma and heal dysfunctional relationship patterns:

Childhood trauma causes: low self-worth, false beliefs ("I'm not good enough, something is wrong with me"), and causes us to create the same dysfunctional relationship patterns we witness as children. Becoming aware of these patterns and unlearning them is healing.

9. Create, play, journal, write, authentically express yourself:

Creativity and authentic self-expression heal us and allow us to learn who we truly are. Most of us have been stripped of these things since childhood, so beginning might cause mental resistance/discomfort. Continue to show up and keep promises to yourself. This will restore your self trust and create self-worth⁷³.

⁷³ In *Additional note to the post* she says that “The mental health system has branded ‘disorders’ as solely genetic diseases of the brain. This is not the truth of these disorders. The brain-disease model leaves people unaware that the mind + body are connected (most serotonin/neurotransmitters are actually produced in the gut.) It leaves the gut/nutritional deficiencies/inflammation out of the picture, which is really unfortunate because each of these play a key role in mood, how we interact, our memory, + the symptoms that come from them are often misdiagnosed as mental health disorders. Genetics are not fixed. The science of epigenetics shows us that genes are always interacting with the environment. Genes express (or do not express) based on the environment. This means we can be empowered. We can play a key, active role in creating an environment that allows us mind/body health. I believe the mental health treatment of the future will include blood tests, nutritional therapies, childhood trauma healing, + education around nervous system dysregulation (also misdiagnosed as disorders or overlooked in treatment). We are much more powerful, resilient, + able to heal than the story we have been told”.

being... here... now

If you feel affected by the issues or readings in this booklet, know that you are not alone and also that it's good to talk about those feelings with someone. Here are some South African contacts and resources available for everyone:

South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG): Mental Health Line: 011 234 4837

SA Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) website: <https://www.sadag.org/>

Suicide Crisis Line: 0800 567 567

Akeso Psychiatric Response Unit 24 Hour: 0861 435 787

Lifeline South Africa national counseling line: 0861 322 322

Lifeline South Africa gender violence line: 0800 150 150

Lifeline South Africa website: <http://www.lifelinesa.co.za/>

For those with internet access, there are of course many supportive, thoughtful and restorative resources available too. For example, you could check out some of these resources:

<https://www.rickhanson.net/get-started/>

<https://onbeing.org/starting-points/>

<https://www.chacmc.org/gr-recordings>

<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/>