

Story as Medicine: Indigenous Storytelling as a Path to Resilience

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MAPP 800: Capstone Project

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August 1, 2022

Abstract

In many Indigenous communities around the world, storytelling was a central part of life (Erdoes & Ortiz, 1984). Stories were how wisdom was passed on, often from elders to young children; they held lessons and were something that could be ingrained into memory and helped build culture (Doupleff & Greenhalgh, 2019). As a result of the genocide of Native Americans in North America that lasted centuries (Corntassel et al., 2009), their stories changed from lessons of how the world came to be to lessons on how to overcome the deepest levels of grief and adversity. Today, some of the most popular Indigenous novels and poetry are stories of resilience born from trauma. These were not simple lessons of coyotes getting into mischief, but lessons from the deepest pain. Navigating trauma with the help of storytelling encouraged resilience (Corntassel et al., 2009; Estés, 1992; Harjo & Leen, 1995). This paper will explore the science and words behind the alchemical process of story as medicine, Indigenous storytelling as a conduit to resilience, and how it can be used for all.

Keywords: Indigenous wisdom, storytelling, Indigenous knowledge, positive psychology, resilience, earth-centrism, community, healing, psychology

Note

Although the word Indigenous can be used to describe native people from almost every continent, for the purposes of this paper the word Indigenous primarily encompasses modern-day people native to the United States and Canada (including Alaska and Hawai'i). The focus of this paper is from research on Indigenous communities in the United States, though reference is also made to Indigenous tribes in Australia given the large volume of research around well-being for Indigenous tribes in that area.

It is imperative to note that in writing this paper as a young white woman, I am addressing the subject matter through the lens of a white Western perspective. Although I grew up with a Christian, Western background and schooling, I was fortunate to be around my aunts who lived in native communities in Oregon, and a grandma who is a part Cherokee, learning from a young age that there was a different side of the earth I would explore someday. If I am mistaken in any part of the research on Indigenous wisdom or storytelling, this reflects on my own ignorance. It is important as a white person to always be open to Indigenous feedback. As the Minnesota Chippewa scholar and writer Gerald Vizenor (1991) once elucidated, the Native Americans that Western minds know are an “Indian invention” of white history’s own making. I hope the picture painted of Indigenous people in this paper is not one of a white person’s “Indian invention.”

Instead, I aspire to have this paper remind other Western minds that there is another way of living; one with less stress, fatigue, and burnout and with more understanding for each other and the planet we live on. These are the lessons that we can learn from Indigenous storytelling. With this paper, I hope to honor these teachings and Indigenous lineages as their wisdom is passed on.

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Story As Medicine

In using story as medicine, as in a vigorous psychoanalytic training as well as in other rigorously taught and supervised healing arts, we are trained carefully to know what to do and when, and especially we are trained in what not to do. This, perhaps more than anything, separates stories as entertainment - a worthy form in and of itself - from stories as medicine.

Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1992, pp. 506)

For people who have been through trauma, recovery can be a difficult road. Stories can be a profound source of healing, holding medicine for those in the recovery process. Indigenous populations in North America have passed on the medicine of storytelling while experiencing countless adversities, from having their land and children taken from them to the acts of genocide by Europeans. Stories can allow one to overcome trauma as, “the storyteller can at once celebrate, mourn, and honor the past – and look ahead” (Erdoes & Ortiz, 1984, p. XV). Oftentimes resources for moving from suffering to resilience are not easily accessible to people, especially people in minority populations (McClendon et al., 2020). Many could benefit from the medicine of stories, finding resilience, and ideally flourishing.

The main focus of this paper is to demonstrate how healing and resilience can emerge from life’s traumas through the wisdom of Indigenous storytelling. Indigenous stories are drawn upon, as are this author’s personal narratives (seen in Appendix B to L) as examples of how storytelling can be used for all people. First, the lens of this research will be explained, as well as the history behind Indigenous storytelling. Then Indigenous storytelling will be broken down into four elements, describing how storytelling has and can be used for trauma work. Through

this research, the evidence will argue how Indigenous storytelling can be a powerful intervention, used to reach resilience and, perhaps, post-traumatic growth.

The Science of Well-Being – Why Well-Being Matters

The branch of resilience that will be covered in this paper comes from the science of well-being, specifically, Positive Psychology. Through the lens of Positive Psychology that the use of Indigenous storytelling can be reviewed as an intervention for healing therapy and increasing well-being. One of the founders of Positive Psychology, Martin Seligman, first began looking into the topic of well-being when questions about human flourishing arose (Seligman, 2011). After studying depression and learned helplessness for most of his career, he turned toward topics of well-being like optimism. The data explored that not only is there a way to study concepts like optimism, but positive thinking (or focusing on what is going well) can broaden one's mind both physically and emotionally (Fredrickson, 2009). If seeds of optimism are planted now, the fruit of those seeds may lead to a positive upward spiral even just a few weeks from when the first seeds are planted (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018). Studying human flourishing and what humans do well, instead of fixing problems like depression, are the keys that connect Positive Psychology to Indigenous wisdom and storytelling.

Well-being and human flourishing, two terms that will be used interchangeably during this paper, can be defined in numerous ways, and understanding the various theories of well-being is important when looking at topics such as resilience and flourishing. Seligman (2011) defines well-being by positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (PERMA). Other initial researchers in Western science study how well-being happens on interpersonal, community, occupational, physical, psychological, and economic levels (I COPPE; Prilleltensky, 2016). As will be discussed in greater depth in this paper, Indigenous people have

survived - and in some instances thrived - despite over 500 years of adversity (Corntassel et al., 2009). Storytelling is linked to Indigenous people's well-being and how their people and culture have survived.

Like most scientific studies in Western history, minority populations have been left out of the scientific field (Chen et al., 2014; Willox et al., 2012; Smith, 1999, 2005). Even after the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Revitalization Act of 1993, which stated that minorities need to be included in NIH-funded research, very little change has been made (Chen et al., 2014). One Indigenous researcher, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous vocabulary” (p. 1). These are strong words, but it is important to point out these disparities of the diversity gap in scientific research.

Historically, research in the United States has not been inclusive of people of color, including Native Americans, and studies on flourishing within minority groups are minimal (Smith, 1999). This lack of knowledge may be due to the mass genocide over centuries (which will be discussed in greater detail in Truthfulness in History), or to the lack of Western understanding of Indigenous wisdom. It is important to note that there are more studies on the flourishing of Indigenous people in Australia and Canada (Corntassel et al., 2009; Willox et al., 2012), so there are countries that have started to look at Indigenous flourishing as the United States lags behind.

As fields like Positive Psychology grow, researchers must consider this disparity in the United States and find ways to transform the institution of research – decolonizing and deconstructing the power structure between the researcher and researched (Smith, 2005; Willox

et al., 2012). This paper hopes to be a part of this needed change toward respect for cultural practices, helping to find resilience for all and not just for some.

Connecting Storytelling and Resilience

People often connect resilience with “bouncing back” (Reivich & Saltzberg, 2021) but resilience is more than that; resilience is the capacity to persist through adversity (Reivich et al., 2011). The heart of resilience is self-efficacy, or knowing and using one’s individual talent and skills for goals, maintaining the need for one to play an active role in their actions. Dr. Karen Reivich (Reivich & Saltzberg, 2021) describes resilience as the “knowledge and the ability to use one’s knowledge in the service of one’s goals and values.” It is the path between suffering and flourishing; it is finding the internal strength and resources that one can use to navigate human experiences. Researchers claim that resilience is a positive adaptation during hardship (Masten et al., 2009).

Before delving deeper into resilience, it is important to distinguish resilience as different from post-traumatic growth. The goal of this storytelling project is focused on cultivating resilience instead of post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth is where one not only comes back to their norm but grows from and through a traumatic event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Post-traumatic growth is a lot to ask of someone going through trauma, whereas research on resilience shows that resilience is teachable (Gillham et al., 2007; Reivich & Shatté, 2003; Reivich et al., 2011). *Resilience is realistic*. Post-traumatic growth is for those who feel ready to heal, not because they were pushed into this experience of acceptance and growth. Many need the push to get up and get through their challenges when life knocks them to their knees. It may be too much to ask one to fly after falling down. First, it is imperative to get back up after a fall;

this is why resilience is the first step to overcoming trauma, and storytelling interventions may hold a key to resiliency.

It is important to follow the thread that brings one from suffering to flourishing; in Positive Psychology, those threads are called the resilience protective factors (Masten & Reed, 2002; Reivich & Shatté, 2003). There are a number of resilience protective factors, although researchers name and group these factors in different ways (Masten & Reed, 2002; Reivich & Shatté, 2003; Southwick & Charney, 2012). For this paper, there are eight resilience protective factors to focus on: biology, self-awareness, self-regulation, mental agility, optimism, self-efficacy or mastery, connection, and positive institutions (Reivich & Saltzberg, 2021). Using these factors as a basis for intervention, storytelling connects to every factor. Throughout this paper, the connection of storytelling to resilience will highlight how these topics are intertwined and how storytelling can be a powerful intervention for healing. Storytelling may be the missing link that weaves all of the resilience protective factors together.

Storytelling

Storytelling is vital communication for human life. Since ancient times, stories have been shared in every culture and in every land as a means to educate, entertain, preserve culture, and instill knowledge, values, and morals (Nguyen et al., 2016). Storytelling is a universal activity that may have served evolutionary purposes (Boyd, 2009). There is evidence that when humans listen to stories, there is a release of dopamine in the brain, bringing about pleasant feelings (Boyd, 2009; Brown, 2013). Listening to stories may not only make people feel good and be entertained, but these tales can pass down knowledge, moral values, and bring a sense of community which all make social cohesion happen naturally (Fernández-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2017). The way that stories are told, with complex elements and dramatization, engages both the

heart and the mind and assures that the stories will be passed down (MacDonald 1998; Archibald, 2008). One key aspect of Indigenous storytelling is the intergenerational transmission of experience, facilitating human adaptation (Fernández-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2017).

Western science may try to boil down the complexity of Indigenous storytelling into simply ‘narrative research,’ but storytelling is complex. It should be given the space not only to ascertain information for researchers, but to create an opening where researchers can “listen, reflect, learn, trust, and then listen again” (Wilcox et al., 2012, p. 13). Researcher Petra Munro Hendry (2007) categorizes the study of storytelling into a new ‘narrative research’ with a very specific definition: “as providing a method for sharing stories, giving voice to those traditionally marginalized, and providing a less exploitative research method than other modes” (p. 489). In this way, the Western mind must approach Indigenous storytelling from an Indigenous viewpoint. As Hendry (2007) illustrates, “through telling our lives we engage in the act of meaning-making. This is a sacred act. Stories are what makes us human. ... We are our narratives. They are not something that can be outside ourselves because they are what give shape to us, what gives meaning” (p. 495). Having meaning in one’s life can be incredibly powerful; it has been positively correlated with aspects like life satisfaction, positive emotions, self-esteem, hope, positive relationships, health, and longevity (Steger, 2018). Meaning is one key aspect that is part of the alchemical process of storytelling leading to resilience.

One of the most poignant examples of modern Indigenous storytelling may be the poetry of Joy Harjo. Harjo, a four-time Poet Laureate, has made it her mission to bring the healing of storytelling to others through the use of poetry. In a poem written by Harjo (2017) titled *For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in its Human Feet*, Harjo exemplifies what

Indigenous storytelling can feel like (see Appendix A for the full poem). This excerpt can be a form of instructions for those who wish to use the alchemy of storytelling as medicine:

Cut the ties you have to failure and shame.

Let go the pain you are holding in your mind, your shoulders, your heart, all the way to your feet. Let go the pain of your ancestors to make way for those who are heading in our direction.

Ask for forgiveness.

Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.

Call your spirit back. It may be caught in corners and creases of shame, judgment, and human abuse.

You must call in a way that your spirit will want to return. Speak to it as you would to a beloved child.

Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It may return in pieces, in tatters. Gather them together. They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.

(Harjo, 2017, pp. 190)

One of the beautiful aspects of this passage is how Harjo is not only able to use words to soothe wounds, but she makes space for aspects of Indigenous knowledge as well as her own truth, and her own experience. As Harjo leads the reader out of their pain and shame, she calls upon the earth (an earth-centric approach will be discussed in detail later in this paper) for guidance, reminding the reader they are not alone in this process. As she asks the reader to call their spirit back, she provides instructions on how to speak the truth and find words of healing.

While others need to tell their own stories and avoid copying Harjo's exact remedy, her words may be used as loose guidelines for those struggling. Using the elements of Indigenous storytelling to tell stories of difficulty can be a powerful way to help others heal. This is where storytelling can be most powerful: in speaking truth, connecting to the earth, and connecting to others through one's own experience.

In my own work, I have created seven stories that can be used as examples for the process of Story as Medicine. From these examples, I hope to illustrate that people do not need to be great poets or storytellers to be able to provide healing through stories. Ideally these draw out the wealth of stories that others have yet to tell, helping others find their own inner resilience through the power of storytelling. The first step to using storytelling as a tool for healing comes from telling the truth of one's life stories, seeing these stories as an extension of oneself, interconnected with all life.

The Storyteller Tells their Truth

The word for storytelling in the Nuu-chah-nulth tribe (people of the Pacific Northwest in Canada) is haa-huu-pah, which when translated means "truth-telling" (Corntassel et al., 2009). For most of the last 500 years, in modern-day storytelling in the United States and Canada, storytelling did not have to be truthful. Western history books often leave out many key details about the true histories of people of color (Corntassel et al., 2009; Smith, 1999, 2005). Without a base of truthfulness, storytelling loses some of its power. It is through truth-telling that resilience can bloom. While some Indigenous stories may seem like mythology, these stories ring with truth, often as lessons passed down for generations. Truth, in this sense, is about giving voice to authentic lived experiences. It is this element of truth that make Indigenous stories so powerful.

Professor Four Arrows (2019), also known as Don Trent Jacobs, describes Indigenous communication as “inseparable from the spiritual sense of interconnectedness to all things visible and invisible” (p. 183). To speak untruthfully, Four Arrows (2019) remarks, would have been “unthinkable” to Indigenous people. When he talks about the interconnectedness of the world, this is the rich soil from which the buds of stories blossom. Each human is connected to another; what happens to the earth and community also happens to each person. This interconnectedness is also what may make Indigenous stories seem like mythology to the Western mind which has been taught to feel disconnected (Narvaez, 2019). However, it is this truth of connection that has been misinterpreted or even taken advantage of.

Truthfulness in History

Using this truth-telling base, it is important to look again at history and how much of the United States’ and Canada’s written histories of Indigenous people and storytelling often has a base of manipulation. As Four Arrows talks about being untruthful as “unthinkable” for Indigenous people, this concept is seen immediately in first-hand accounts from explorers like Christopher Columbus. In one account, Columbus writes in April 1493 that Indigenous people are “generous with what they have, to such a degree as no one would believe him who had seen it” (DuVal & DuVal, 2009, p. 20). In other letters to the patron Luis de Santangel and to King Ferdinand of Spain, while Columbus continuously promised slaves and gold, Columbus still spoke of the kindness of Indigenous people. However, not even this was enough to stop the atrocities that would happen under Columbus. Given Indigenous people’s trust in other humans, the atrocities and trauma that were to come for more than 500 years are nothing less than genocide.

It is important to include this history of Indigenous people and the genocide that has been occurring for the past half a century. To speak the truth about this as Western culture moves forward in any form of storytelling related to North American Indigenous people, from history books to one's own personal narratives. The UN definition of genocide is:

Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (United Nations, 1951).

These acts are easily seen throughout Native American history, as with the histories of other people of color.

As an example, in 1542 the Dominican Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, an early immigrant to the Americas from Europe, began to speak up against the atrocities around him. He wrote a firsthand account of Spaniards' actions like cutting off the legs of Indigenous children, hanging Native people upside down and burning them alive, or cutting off the limbs of a young boy to feed a Spaniard's dog (de las Casas, 2007). Just as these acts of genocide were present even 500 years ago, other acts of genocide were and are still present such as the Indian residential schools in Canada and the United States.

Researchers out of the University of Victoria in Canada have brought Indigenous storytelling as an intervention to help Indigenous people through the process of Truth and

Reconciliation Canada (TRC), which was commissioned for the reparations of the Indian residential school survivors in Canada (Corntassel et al., 2009). Residential schools, also constructed in the United States, began in 1874 in Canada until 1996 (Corntassel et al., 2009) and were responsible for thousands of Indigenous children being taken from their homes, stripped of their native language and culture, and taught to live in a colonized society. In the process, thousands of children died (Corntassel et al., 2009). Residential schools again made the news in 2021 for the discovery of mass graves of children at one Native American residential school site run by the Catholic Church (Mosby, 2021). Now, after 12,000 claims of abuse came forward since the schools closed (Corntassel et al., 2009), a reparations council was finally formed. Researchers from the University of Victoria are hoping to “restory” the colonizer version of history as they make public the stories of the Indigenous people who survived atrocities like the residential schools in Canada and the United States. These are survivors’ “lived experiences of resilience and resurgence that need to be shared with intergenerational survivors and other Indigenous peoples” (Corntassel et al., 2009, p. 140).

The Canadian researchers, some Indigenous, asked what will become of people’s stories during the TRC and asked the question, “how will the resilience and power of these stories be represented in the testimony?” (Corntassel et al., 2009, p. 139). In many ways, the “restorying” of histories is necessary for resilience to take place – whether it’s histories, stories or history of Indigenous people, or personal stories. Drawing on storytelling methodologies, researchers view the stories of the residential school survivors “as living histories and truths that need to be conveyed to future generations so that movements toward decolonization and justice can be realized” (p. 141). Kwi-ahts-ah-pulth, from the Ahousaht First Nation, relays a desire for public airing of his people’s stories:

I would paint the scenarios of when residential schools came. I would want them to be in my shoes if they could. I would explain my story in a skit, and ask for participation; I would appoint certain people to be students of residential school, two people: mother and father; maybe grandparents, the government officials, and I would say I hope it is worth it, and then I would say I am the law, Kuu'us we are the law-natives. You now have to come to our institutions, come to our reserves, you now have to learn Indian, you now have to learn our culture, you now have to learn our religion and how we do things. And guess what, you can't speak English anymore, German, Italian, French—take away their language, take away their custom, and I would paint that scenario and say now the government agent is coming to your home and taking your child away. How would you feel? [...] I am a well respected orator and I will use my skills and [...] then paint some scenarios: here is what happened to me, you are hungry and you didn't eat that day and so you stole from the kitchen. They taught us how to steal. If you got caught, heaven help you if you got caught then you really got punished. So tell my story and give them nothing but facts, and ask them how they feel.

So that is what I would do to the public at large (Corntassel et al., 2009, pp. 154).

This first-hand account by Kwi-ahts-ah-pulth is powerful. When looking at storytelling, it is important to first understand where it comes from and how it was used by Indigenous people and how colonization has changed storytelling. The fact that storytelling came from truth, and many times was not honored in Western culture or history are important facts to convey. However, this truth-telling is still connected to Western psychology through the Positive Psychology topic of resilience.

Resilience Connection

These truth-tellings are where the biology, self-awareness, self-regulation, optimism, and self-efficacy from the resilience protective factors connect to Indigenous storytelling.

Resilience rests in human biology. The ancestors of Indigenous people were strong, and they were able to pass on these traits to the following generations despite being oppressed. As researcher Mary Leen (Harjo & Leen, 1995) states, storytelling preserves cultures and rituals as it is passed down between generations, which “serves as a ‘gentle survival’ tactic – a productive way to fight extinction” (p. 1). Resilience shows that each person does have agency in their actions, even if biology might show that each person passes down a certain level of resiliency (Bowes & Jaffee, 2013; Feder et al., 2019; Reivich & Shatté, 2003). For many Indigenous stories, themes of survival and continuation bring resilience to life (Harjo & Leen, 1995).

Storytelling is a powerful way to change the narrative of the way people think and feel.

Changing the story internally can, in turn, change the brain and biology which is where studied approaches like cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) can be supportive (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

There is also a great deal of self-awareness and self-regulation reflected in Indigenous stories; in order to generate these qualities, the storyteller has to connect to and own the truth of the story and speak mindfully when sharing it. Before beginning to write down or tell a powerful story of resilience, one needs to be mindful and self-aware. For example, sometimes there is a great deal of self-regulation in storytelling. As one storyteller once said, “it is important to speak or write your stories from a scar instead of a wound” (S. Selassie, personal communication, April 29, 2021); if something is still painful and needs time to heal, it may not be the right time to find resilience in that wound. Once it becomes a scar, with time and understanding, it can become a place of resilience.

With self-efficacy, it is about knowing one's own talent, skills, and abilities and mapping them specifically to the challenge. It is about being intentional about what one does. This is another essential skill for reciting or writing down life stories: finding the mastery necessary to craft the story and the courage to let the story unfold.

Finally, storytelling leads to optimism as defined in Positive Psychology as facing both the good and the bad and having the compassion to continue (Reivich & Saltzberg, 2021). Having a measure of optimism is essential in finding resilience through one's own stories. Even in stories of trauma and darkness, there can be a small ember of light. What happens when someone starts to fan that ember?

By first exploring storytelling through the lens of Positive Psychology and what the concept of truth means for Indigenous storytelling, it is easy to make the connection to resilience. Now it's important to share the application of storytelling; what are the methods of storytelling that are accessible to all? By breaking down Indigenous storytelling into four elements, it may give those coming from a Western background the tools to look more deeply and develop their own stories. In this next section, I will also be using my own stories as examples of each (see Appendix B to L).

Four Elements of Storytelling

These further sections explain the main principles, or elements, of Indigenous storytelling in a way that those coming from a Western background can understand, honor, and connect to the concept of well-being. If resilience is the path between languishing and flourishing (Reivich & Saltzberg, 2021), storytelling is the vehicle that can guide that journey to well-being. Based on a review of the literature, four principles of Indigenous storytelling emerge. First, for a Western mind, Indigenous storytelling is non-linear. Second, taking an earth-centric, rather than a human-

centric, approach to storytelling is necessary to Indigenous knowledge. Third, storytelling helps connect with community and finally, the fourth element covers how storytelling can be used to heal. It is through these four elements of Indigenous storytelling that the path of resilience will reveal itself.

Non-Linear Storytelling

Just as Indigenous stories were always considered to be truthful, they are not chronological in a Western sense: “the idea of history, of past and present and future for Indigenous people before contact, was quite different from the linear, chronological way events are organized in the Western world” (Harjo & Leen, 1995, p. 2). From a Western perspective, Indigenous stories are non-linear. Much like the resilience protective factors of self-efficacy and mental agility, or using one’s skills to have flexibility in thinking and being open with one’s perspective (Reivich & Shatté, 2003), in storytelling one may need to see all vantage points before a story can be told to its fullest capacity. In this capacity of Indigenous storytelling, those of Western minds need to have the mental agility to follow the rhythm of the story, letting go of the boundaries of organization and time (Harjo & Leen, 1995).

The *hive hypothesis* may shed light on why losing oneself to listening or taking part in storytelling can be so impactful and even cause increases in dopamine (Boyd, 2009; Brown, 2013; Haidt et al., 2008). The hive hypothesis is the theory that, in order to flourish, people need to periodically lose themselves in a greater social structure. Haidt et al. (2008) describe this as “occasional experiences in which self-consciousness is greatly reduced and one feels merged with or part of something greater than the self” (p. 136). As will be discussed in detail later, the sense of connection that storytelling builds can bind communities together (Harjo & Leen, 1995). This connection is a possible reason people can get lost in a story, or feel a deep connection to

something greater than themselves. Letting go of boundaries or time can be nonlinear from a Western point of view, but can be an effective way for resilience, and possibly flourishing, to happen.

Even researchers have found that “following traumatic events, individuals and societies tell ‘stories’ which carry with them fascinating underlying disturbances of time sense” (Terr, 1984, p. 633). Research has found how trauma can change one’s sense perception of time, sometimes called time disorders. For both children and adults, there can be an altered sense of time; trauma that lasts hours or days is often remembered as ‘foreshortened’ and short-lived traumatic experiences may feel drawn out or experienced for longer (Terr, 1984). Researchers concluded that these time perceptions may be protective or defensive mechanisms in the role of the human psyche. These time disorder theories would also explain the nonlinear nature of stories; time is intangible, especially in Indigenous storytelling, and it makes one let go of their current reality to be brought to a new place.

Just as healing through trauma is non-linear, the stories of Indigenous wisdom seem to take their own pace: “plots seem to travel at their own speed, defying convention and at times doing away completely with recognizable beginnings and endings” (Erdoes & Ortiz, 1984, p. xii). Joy Harjo (1990) writes often of this struggle between the past and the present for Indigenous people. These two, “both pull at a member of marginal worlds by shouting to be remembered and begging to survive for the future” (Harjo & Leen, 1995, p. 2). It is in this motion of weaving and letting the boundaries from time, cultures, realities, and histories go, that Indigenous storytelling takes place.

Joy Harjo’s (2019) memoir *Crazy Brave* is a beautiful example of this; the story seems to be telling about a specific time in her childhood, then seamlessly changes to her being in her

mother's womb, waiting to be born, then brought again to her parent's marriage, and so on. This non-linear storytelling may be at first confusing to the Western mind, but can flow with ease and grace as the story takes the reader down the river of life's journeys.

Application

Two of the story artifacts (Appendix G and J) are non-linear stories. They bounce from place to place. These stories are the unedited ways that the mind bounces from one feeling, one experience to another. The mind, like healing, is not always linear. As described with the time disorders, sometimes the mind and the story flow at a rate that is all its own.

Using two of my own stories, especially my story called *From the Earth/Held by the Earth* (Appendix G), I showcase two unedited narratives. I let the words flow. When storytelling is happening in real life, it cannot go back and be edited again. When telling a story for the first time, the storyteller may find it beneficial to let it come out as the mind thinks - letting it be unedited. In many ways, it wanders as the storyteller's mind does. This is one way for application for all - to let stories flow in non-linear ways. This may be telling a story and finding resilience in front of others, or in one's own journal. Either way, letting the story come out is one of the first steps in application towards resilience. The storyteller might be surprised - as they let the story flow naturally, they might also have connections with other elements of storytelling. Delving into earth-centrism next, it is easy to see how these four elements of storytelling connect.

Earth-Centrism

Professor Eugene Halton (2019) at the University of Notre Dame explains that as people evolved from foragers to modern times, they have moved from knowing *the philosophy of the earth* and instead moved to *the philosophy of escape from the earth*. Humans now idealize other

humans and machines; long forgotten are the original teachers that were found in nature. As humans have moved towards progress and a never-ending cycle of expansion by trying to control nature, “the great progress in precision came at the cost of cutting off other realities which did not fit its precise but limited perspective, as well as removing ourselves from them” (Halton, 2019, p. 62). Halton argues that as people have narrowed their focus towards a *mechanico-centric mind* (escaping from the earth and having humans and machines at the center of one’s thoughts), humans have built their own cage. It is this disconnect and turning away from nature that could explain the concept of burnout. Although burnout does not have an official diagnosis in psychology, burnout syndrome is connected with the cycle of stress and working until depletion or collapse often leading to symptoms of depression and exhaustion (Muheim, 2012). Using the resilience protective factors of mental agility, self-awareness, and connection, it is important to break out of the cycles of burnout and see the world from a different perspective while connecting with the nature around them. Looking at the earth from its own perspective, people can change the communication and connection with the earth and shift their thinking to that of earth-centrism.

Only recently is Western science catching up with Indigenous wisdom and turning toward an earth-centric approach. Dr. John Ratey (2014), a clinical associate professor at Harvard Medical school discusses the term biophilia, which is the innate human connection to all other living organisms. Ratey believes that the evolutionary ability to succeed at adapting to environments as humans were only possible by knowledge of nature. He has gone so far as to find studies that show nature creates well-being. Not only does a walk in the woods make people smarter, decrease cortisol, and improve alpha waves (which positively effects negative emotions like anxiety and anger), but even just one walk in the woods can increase “killer-cells” (our

natural immune response to infections like the common cold and the flu) by up to 40% (Ratey & Manning, 2014). Ratey would agree with Halton. When our ancestors lived by foraging and being in the animate mind, they had to continuously learn “relations through attunement to habitat in practical and reverential ways, as well as progressively inclusive sociality, from parenting to foraging to ritual life” (Halton, 2019, p. 63). Ratey believes that everything from sleep disorders and vitamin D deficiency epidemics is caused by something called ‘nature deficit disorder;’ a term coined by Richard Louv to explain the gap between children and nature (Louv, 2008). As the biologist E.O. Wilson saw it in 1984: “the brain evolved in a biocentric world, not a machine-regulated world... when human beings remove themselves from the natural environment, the biophilic learning rules are not replaced by modern versions equally well adapted to artifacts” (Wilson, 1984).

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2015), a professor of environmental science and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, beautifully turns Western science back toward earth-centrism in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Here, she “braids” together Indigenous wisdom, scientific evidence, and her own stories into a collection of scientific information and native knowledge. For example, in one chapter Kimmerer explains the Native American story of how maple trees came to be, then dives into her own experience of harvesting maple water and staying up all night to keep a fire going to make just a quart of maple syrup, all while weaving in scientific knowledge about how maple water is made and how the trees even know it is time to start producing the sweet sap. Kimmerer’s writing could be an example of bringing any writing, even that of scientific knowledge, back to an earth-centric perspective.

Professors like Halton, Kimmerer, and Ratey make one stop to consider the confinements of a burnout cage. On having a dialogue with nature, Kimmerer writes:

To be native to a place we must learn to speak its language... Learning the grammar of animacy could well be a restraint on our mindless exploitation of land... [it can] remind us of the capacity of others as our teachers, as holders of knowledge as guides. Imagine walking through a richly inhabited world of birch people, bear people, rock people, beings we think of and therefore speak of as persons worthy of our respect, of inclusion in a peopled world. ... Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives, the things we might see through other eyes, the wisdom that surrounds us (Kimmerer, 2015, pp. 57-58).

The message here is that humans must be in dialogue with nature - come back from the mechanic-centric mind to earth-centrism, the animate mind and animate earth. As Halton reminds: “the loss of wild attunement represents a tragic escape from the informing philosophy of the earth that nurtured us into being and that remains tempered into the human body, psyche, and developmental needs” (2019, p. 54). As the science on biophilia shows, humans are connected to nature. What happens to the earth, happens to each person.

The loss of connection to the earth, some believe, is what has led to what Halton (2019) calls the *progressive confinement of mind*. Think of how much devastation the earth has had in the past several centuries; most people now have heard of the acidifying ocean, bleached coral reefs, rising water levels, and animals like polar bears who are at extreme risk (Halton, 2019). Although modern science is catching up with sustainable practices, Halton points out that many of these scientists, although their practices may look sustainable, are still working through the mechanic-centric mind of progress. With some Western medical doctors like Dr. Ratey looking for an earth-centric approach, there is still hope for this change. Indigenous knowledge and now Western science are both urging a connection with the earth; with this integration, it seems that

both, “the relation to the sustaining properties of the earth, with its limits and possibilities, is the key to long-term human flourishing” (Halton, 2019, p. 67). In this way of applying earth-centric narratives, a natural element of Indigenous storytelling, we can all find flourishing and resilience.

Application

Although the best application of earth-centrism in storytelling may be from Robin Wall Kimmerer’s (2015) book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, my own earth-centered stories (Appendix B and G) show an easy way of applying this concept. For example, in my story called *Into the Muck* (Appendix B), I describe a story about harvesting a yellow pond lily which is used in helping heal from sexual trauma. My story in many ways is simple, but I also make it seem like the lily and the pond have their own animacy. Taking an earth-centric approach means looking through the lens and perspective of the earth. This concept may be difficult at first for those in a mechanico-centric mind, so any connection with the earth itself may be beneficial in cultivating this approach to storytelling.

In Indigenous stories, storytellers tell tales through characters like a coyote. Coyote is a trickster in many Indigenous legends throughout North America that plays multiple roles and sometimes may be told for entertainment and sometimes for lessons or explanations of natural phenomena (Erdoes & Ortiz, 1984). It is the lens of the coyote and the focus on him that is how new storytellers should look at an earth-centric perspective. Kimmerer also speaks of learning the earth’s language and taking on the perspectives of all the nature that is alive around humans.

In my other earth-centric story called *From the Earth/Held by the Earth* (Appendix G), I tell about a time I cried so hard on the bare earth that I felt like I could feel its heartbeat.

Connecting with the earth and finding the animacy and its sentience is one way to speak the

earth's language. It is this importance of connection, whether that be with the land or with other people, that will be investigated next.

Connection and Community

Possibly one of the most important components of storytelling is the connection it builds within communities. It allows communities to pass down their lessons, journeys, and life's wisdom. Just as each person is connected to the earth, they are also connected to every other person; what each person does affects others. Directly connecting with the resilience protective factors of connection and positive institutions (a place that could be as organized as a school, or as organic as a group of friends), it is important to connect with others and with something greater than oneself. These can both be enhanced in a storytelling intervention. In a study done from 1983 to 2003, Fowler and Christakis (2008) found evidence that a community of peoples' happiness can spread for three degrees of separation. In other words, what someone's friends' friends' friends' are doing can have an impact on them. In tight-knit communities, these three degrees of separation can be tangibly felt. Within storytelling, what one person does with their story will create a ripple effect outwards; if resilience is found within one story, how can others be positively affected by this?

We do need relationships or some type of community to flourish in life (Haidt et al., 2008). By spending time promoting relationships and well-being rather than focusing on the negative, people can empower individuals in their relationships (Prilleltensky, 2005). These connections will be especially important if people are able to practice both *bonding* and *bridging* (Putnam, 2000). Bonding, or getting closer with those who are similar, will be helpful for bridging communities and people who have been through trauma. Research demonstrates that

humans not only need relationships to flourish in life but that relationships need to be “bound into a community that shares norms and values in order to flourish” (Haidt et al., 2008, p. 5135).

When stories are told in Indigenous nations, they are told in community. Tom McCallum (2019), a Sundance chief also known as White Standing Buffalo, describes a ceremony called Sundance in his personal narrative. In this ceremony, there is community and connection, not just to other humans but to all living beings. In ceremonies like Sundance, McCallum shares how, after days of fasting, dancing, and sharing space with others, he was “transported to somewhere else and had no sensation of dancing” (p. 203). It is this losing oneself to a greater experience that researchers explain as the hive hypothesis (Haidt et al., 2008), as detailed in previous sections.

McCallum (2019) also explains that in Cree culture, there is a *hierarchy of dependence* where, in a spiral of interdependence, humans are connected to the animals, plants, minerals, spirits, and the Creator. This spiral of connection shows humans at the center, not because they should be human-centric, but to show that humans cannot live without each of these other relationships. This Indigenous wisdom also has merit in the Western academic world, where researchers agree that human relationships are connected to well-being (Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Haidt et al., 2008; Prilleltensky, 2005; Putnam, 2000).

Although stories can be powerful on their own, the positive benefits of storytelling may not resonate if they are not shared with someone (Donnelly & Murray, 1991; Lepore et al., 2000). Part of what alchemizes stories into medicine is the chance to share them with others and find common humanity. Some researchers believe that only from a place of secure attachment in a safe community could individuals work on self-expansion and find flourishing (Bowlby, 1969; Gable & Gosnell, 2011). This can be the challenging part of storytelling. In Indigenous

storytelling, there were communities that would come together and be heard; in today's world, many cultures may go days without seeing someone physically, let alone share stories of meaning. Creating a way to find these "positive institutions" will be the greatest challenge of bringing a concept like Indigenous storytelling into the mainstream in order to help others flourish.

Application

This connection with others – even with the earth – is easily applicable through communal storytelling or writing about the experiences of relating with others. As explored above, stories are powerful when shared. However, that is not always a comfortable method for people, and so it is also applicable to have stories be tales of connection. Many of my own narratives (Appendix H-J) are stories of finding connections with others. Writing these stories reminded me of those connections and brought me joy in remembering them, even making me feel less alone. In times when Western culture feels isolating, it is important to look again at how important well-being is to connection (Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Haidt et al., 2008).

Looking at my stories of friendship, the connection usually came from an unlikely person or circumstance. There was an Airbnb host named Bent-Willy in Norway (Appendix H), a front desk woman at the CentralBadet in Sweden (Appendix I), and many girls with trauma at a meditation center in the Rocky Mountains (Appendix J). Each of these people happened to be an unexpected connection; this does not have to be the only form of application, but it ended up being true for my connection stories. Having perspective on these relationships was crucial, and is easily applicable as a writing intervention. Not all stories need to be of the darkest traumas, but there is resilience in remembering joy and relating with others. The application of connection can also be simply sharing a story with other people. These connections of joy may even lead to an

upward spiral, which has been studied to increase elements of well-being like stronger social connections and better physical and mental health (Fredrickson, 2009; Fredrickson et al., 2008). This all connects back to how stories are healing, which will be explored in this final element of storytelling.

Stories are Healing

Above all else, Indigenous stories are healing for both those who listen to and tell them. Just as listening to stories can increase dopamine (Boyd, 2009; Brown, 2013), speaking or writing stories can have therapeutic effects (Brewin, 2001; Donnelly & Murray, 1991; Lepore et al., 2000). Although writing down stories can be powerful and can help someone feel better in the moment, it is specifically talking to someone about their concerns that can decrease the negative emotions over time (Donnelly & Murray, 1991). When experiencing something difficult or traumatic, it is talking aloud or talking to someone who empathizes that can create the most potent relief from painful emotions (Lepore et al., 2000).

This connection to storytelling and healing can even be seen in the brain. One study describes the phenomenon of how, when someone speaks about a traumatic experience when they are in a safe context, they are able to move the traumatic memory into “verbally accessible memory” (Brewin, 2001, p.381) to the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex then acts as a psychological protector by letting go of a fear response from the memory. However, if a traumatic event is met with silence, it remains in the “situationally accessible memory” (Brewin, 2001, p. 381). This can be moved back further into the limbic system which can become activated by environmental cues, causing emotional and physical triggers.

As the Western perspective can corroborate, stories can be healing. Cornthassel et al. (2009) share how, from an Indigenous perspective, storytelling can be a salve:

We need to get back to our grassroots and our traditions and cultures and the wealth of a person and the wealth of a community is family, is the culture, is the traditional teachings. It is the land, the sea, the resources—that is what we talk about when we say how “rich” a chief is! Because a chief can be very rich if he has access or practices his access to the resources in his territory. There is an abundance of it! The wealth is our culture, it is our naming ceremonies, our potlatches, our wedding ceremonies, our memorial potlatches, it is our masks, it is all the wonders of art that come from an artist who has great teachings and knowledge of practice of what mother nature has given us. To me that is more real, and we need to get back to those ways and those kinds of teachings are the ways we are going to be able to move forward as a person, as a family, as a community (pp. 150).

The data on why storytelling is healing, especially in a community, is there (Smith et al., 2017). It is getting back to these storytelling practices that are most important. Many of these aspects are how storytelling’s healing is connected to the resilience protective factors. One has to have the self-awareness to find their story, the self-regulation to write or orally share their story, and recognize the agency beyond their biology to heal from the story. This is also where the protective factors of optimism and self-efficacy come in; these factors do not mean that you need to only look at the good, but it means looking at the good and the bad and using one’s skills to get through the adversity (Reivich & Saltzberg, 2021). It is through oral or written word that others can share in this ‘story as medicine’ – it is truly an accessible form of healing.

Application

The application of healing may look different for all those using storytelling for resilience. All of my stories represented various modes of healing (Appendix B-L). Writing

down the victories *and* the pain is crucial for the healing from my own narratives. Part of the application is letting the stories heal you, letting the stories come out. The alchemy of letting stories heal may be the most difficult or easiest part of the application; for some, the healing will flow with ease, while others may find they have more healing once they get their story out. Within all of my story examples, I share the healing that has happened or is happening. Even in the more painful instances, there is also growth; I feel better after I've written or shared these stories.

Some of my own stories did not make it into this paper: they are still a wound and not a scar. The scars were easier to write from and did not cause negative emotions to emerge, but rather put healing into perspective. This is also part of the application: knowing what stories are still triggers, and which are ready to be shared. My own stories that have yet to be told were still documented in my last story artifact (Appendix L) and can be used as an example for even naming the wounds that have yet to heal. This is why this paper focuses on resilience – it is realistic. Not every wound must be turned into post-traumatic growth, as not every wound is ready for healing. It is up to the storyteller; given this agency, this is why stories can be medicine for all people.

How Stories Can be Medicine for All

Indigenous storytelling may not only help individuals overcome their struggles, but it may also help mankind as a whole. Indigenous storytelling organizations like Turtle Island Storytellers Network in the Northern Plains in the United States, the Indian Storytelling Association, and the Manitoba Storytelling Guild are already set up to start this work of passing down indigenous wisdom through storytelling (Fernández-Liamares & Cabeza, 2017). It is time for these ancient practices to be available for all that will respect and honor these teachings.

Two researchers out of Finland at the University of Helsinki have linked Indigenous storytelling to environmental and cultural conservation practices (Fernández-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2017). Indigenous people have sovereignty over 22% of the world's land surface which contains 80% of planetary biodiversity (Brondizio et al., 2019). In these areas, storytelling could save cultures and environments by passing on biocultural knowledge (earth-centrism) and indigenous worldviews, creating a greater sense of home or place, and bringing community together. In turn, this knowledge passed down has been studied to increase the dialogue over conservation by creating a place where discussion can happen between indigenous communities and conservationists (Fernández-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2017; De Groot & Zwaal, 2007). This biocultural approach to conservation not only helps to save Indigenous people's culture and homelands, but in creating a sense of cultural purpose leading to conservation conversations, communities can start to take greater participation and find local solutions for cultures and places at risk.

As the wisdom of Indigenous knowledge becomes more widely recognized in spaces like Western psychology, it is vital to protect these teachings to honor the people and the planet. Western psychology can benefit from Indigenous knowledge, but Western psychology should not simply copy Indigenous storytelling. Storytelling needs to be unique to each situation as it honors how the healing medicine of stories has been passed down. It would be unethical to take the value from Indigenous approaches (also known as cultural appropriation). Instead, there should be a collaboration between Indigenous and Western ways, each keeping their "uniqueness of its contribution" (Katz, 2017, p. 241). Going forward, each person needs to respect, honor, and uphold these teachings if they are to carry them into the Western world.

One extraordinary way Indigenous storytelling could make a difference in the lives of others is by bringing storytelling into a space where displaced people, and refugees, can tell their own stories of resilience and have them heard by people in their new homes. For example, in an experiment by Dr. Salma Mousa (2020) in post-ISIS Iraq, communities torn apart by war and religions were able to find tolerance for others of a different religion within the container of a soccer league. What if, in place of soccer, researchers could use the elements of storytelling to help communities connect; could refugees in Sicily curate a storytelling experience for Sicilians to create tolerance and acceptance? When looking at a study on perspective-giving and perspective-taking, marginalized groups were able to feel heard, and groups in power were able to have a positive change in attitude (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). This created a greater chance of finding common humanity and a possibility of acceptance for healing. By having participants be immersed in an experience or reflect on that experience, there could be studies done on sharing stories through written, oral, or an art medium that could have profound changes on the acceptance of others in an intergroup conflict.

Storytelling can make a marked difference in people's lives. While Western research has many benefits, there is much that can be learned by studying Indigenous storytelling in greater depth and how it is distinguished from the Western way of research. Harvard professor Richard Katz (2017), believes Western culture researches for knowledge and for the sake of research. However, an Indigenous approach strives to make a difference in this world and in people's lives, inviting social justice and change. The Indigenous approach brings us to "our deepest inner spaces and places where we are at one with the animating spiritual forces of our world" (Katz, 2017, p. 225). Research in the Indigenous perspective is solely for the sake of learning and helping others, and research can change from the Western perspective of isolating and

controlling phenomena to instead focus on the mass of knowledge and experiences that bring new meaning to life.

Conclusion

Indigenous communities have been using storytelling as medicine for years before history began documenting these stories and their knowledge (Erdoes & Ortiz, 1984; Nguyen et al., 2016). A central part of Indigenous communities, storytelling has been passed on as a universal activity that may have served evolutionary purposes (Boyd, 2009). Today in tribes in the Philippines, people prefer to live with good storytellers more than foragers (Smith et al., 2017). In one study, tribes with storytellers positively correlated with group cooperation, gender and social equality, and inequality aversion (Smith et al., 2017) illustrating part of the reason why storytelling is so important and how it was possibly passed on for generations (Boyd, 2009; Fernández-Liamares & Cabeza, 2017; Harjo & Leen, 1995). As storytelling became dynamic to fit the needs of people over time, it has stayed a mode of healing and a path of resilience.

Using Positive Psychology as a lens, Indigenous storytelling can be seen as a vehicle to resilience. Looking at storytelling's four elements of nonlinear storytelling, earth-centrism, connection, and how stories can be healing, all can be intertwined with the resilience protective factors. Nonlinear storytelling is connected with mental agility and self-efficacy: intentionally using one's skills to let the story flow at its own pace. As earth-centrism has the storyteller work with connecting with the earth, it can be associated with mental agility, self-awareness, and connection. Connection and community are easily linked to the factors of connection and positive institutions (Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Haidt et al., 2008; Prilleltensky, 2005; Smith et al., 2017). Healing, more than any other element, is associated with the most factors; using the protective factors of biology, self-awareness, self-regulation, optimism, and self-efficacy to find

healing through storytelling. All of these connections with the resilience protective factors are part of understanding how storytelling can lead to resilience and be used as a powerful intervention for trauma work.

Indigenous communities have used storytelling for thousands of years; throughout the genocide of Native Americans, colonizers tried to take away this tool making it even more important to honor the medicine that comes from storytelling (Corntassel et al., 2009; Smith, 1999). Just as people have been doing for years, “the storyteller can at once celebrate, mourn, and honor the past – and look ahead” (Erdoes & Ortiz, 1984, p. XV). Indigenous people saw stories as an extension of themselves, interconnected with all life. In looking ahead, it is crucial for those coming from a Western background to view storytelling as medicine: honoring Indigenous wisdom and finding a way to understand, honor, and connect how storytelling leads to well-being.

The Indigenous author and psychotherapist Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1992), who inspired this thesis, spoke of this concept of story as medicine. She once wrote, “there is an integrity to story that comes from a real life lived in it” (p. 505). Similar to how Indigenous storytellers like Joy Harjo and Robin Wall Kimmerer spoke from their own lives, I chose to include my own stories as a form of honoring these teachings and creating examples for vulnerable application. As Indigenous storytellers spoke their truth, honored the earth, let their stories have their own rhythm, and connected with others, they were able to create healing. In honoring these teachings, it is the hope that storytelling can be used as medicine for all people; not just for research, but simply for the goal of helping others heal.

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Appendix A

For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in its Human Feet

By Joy Harjo

Put down that bag of potato chips, that white bread, that bottle of pop.

Turn off that cellphone, computer, and remote control.

Open the door, then close it behind you.

Take a breath offered by friendly winds. They travel the earth gathering essences of plants to clean.

Give it back with gratitude.

If you sing it will give your spirit lift to fly to the stars' ears and back.

Acknowledge this earth who has cared for you since you were a dream planting itself precisely within your parents' desire.

Let your moccasin feet take you to the encampment of the guardians who have known you before time, who will be there after time. They sit before the fire that has been there without time.

Let the earth stabilize your postcolonial insecure jitters.

Be respectful of the small insects, birds and animal people who accompany you.
Ask their forgiveness for the harm we humans have brought down upon them.

Don't worry.

The heart knows the way though there may be high-rises, interstates, checkpoints, armed soldiers, massacres, wars, and those who will despise you because they despise themselves.

The journey might take you a few hours, a day, a year, a few years, a hundred, a thousand or even more.

Watch your mind. Without training it might run away and leave your heart for the immense human feast set by the thieves of time.

Do not hold regrets.

When you find your way to the circle, to the fire kept burning by the keepers of your soul, you will be welcomed.

You must clean yourself with cedar, sage, or other healing plant.

Cut the ties you have to failure and shame.

Let go the pain you are holding in your mind, your shoulders, your heart, all the way to your feet. Let go the pain of your ancestors to make way for those who are heading in our direction.

Ask for forgiveness.

Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.

Call your spirit back. It may be caught in corners and creases of shame, judgment, and human abuse.

You must call in a way that your spirit will want to return.

Speak to it as you would to a beloved child.

Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It may return in pieces, in tatters. Gather them together. They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.

Your spirit will need to sleep a while after it is bathed and given clean clothes.

Now you can have a party. Invite everyone you know who loves and supports you. Keep room for those who have no place else to go.

Make a giveaway, and remember, keep the speeches short.

Then, you must do this: help the next person find their way through the dark (Harjo, 2017, pp. 189-191)

Appendix B

Into the Muck

By Siena Loprinzi

As my foot got caught in the muck, my waist dropped into the leach-filled pond. In that instant the pond sucked me down, a yellow pond lily came rising up from the depths. The herb I had been trying to harvest on dry land for hours finally floated up to greet me.

↔ ↔ ↔

The sun does not shine on chilly September days in the Pacific Northwest, but today (September 21st, 2019) we got lucky. I was seven months into a nine-month Western herbalism program in Portland, Oregon. A few months earlier, my teacher brought us to a pond high up in the mountains on a camping and harvesting trip. He let us meditate next to a lake full of yellow pond lilies, a relative of the lotus flower (Appendix B, C). They are commonly used in the treatment of sexual trauma. When the roots dry, lilies can be brewed to make tea or fermented in strong alcohol for a month to make a tincture. It's best taken in ceremony or meditation with an experienced healer or guide.

Upon seeing the yellow pond lily for the first time, I knew I needed to harvest it for my friends still healing from trauma at the meditation center I lived at months earlier. This was before I'd figured out my own childhood trauma, and before my female cousins and I began discussing our collective sexual trauma from a suspected family member.

The first time I saw the lily, my teacher told us we wouldn't be harvesting it. It was a full-day excursion to rent a boat and get the lily; a trip he wouldn't lead unless a student organized it. So, naturally, I did.

With the blowup kayak rented (not used), and tools in hand (overused), two students, my teacher, my mother, and I made the long drive into the Gifford Pinchot forest. Besides my teacher, we were all women and I was the youngest at 24. As we found a good place in the pond to harvest, we sat down on a decaying log to meditate, give thanks to the plant, and see if we got a “yes” to harvest (a meditation our teacher passed down to us). And so the harvesting began.

Our teacher went in first. He was a hefty white man in his 50s, balding with two long dreadlocks at the back of his head. He dove into the pond, finding the closest lily and shoveling out the intricate root system, which is where the medicine is held. It came up within two minutes, and he came out pulling off two leeches from his legs and saying, “oh I didn’t realize this place had leeches, oh well, at least I got mine.” Then waited for his three female students, all as thin as aspen trees, to follow suit. We hadn’t expected leeches or that we’d have to do this without his help. Months later after talking with another herbalist in Portland, I would hear the story about how five herbalists all went to collectively harvest one and split one root system. Even with five trained herbalists, they had a difficult time getting the roots up, and their pond had no leeches. This apparently was not our instructor’s idea.

The oldest student, who said she was there for her own healing, went right in and tried for three hours to dig up a lily. Continuously removing leeches from her torso and getting deeper in the cold water, she had to eventually give up after starting to experience symptoms of hypothermia. The next student followed me onto a floating log where we tried to cut out some of the roots from above, hoping to avoid leeches. Nothing happened for hours. Lunch came, and I decided to try one more time on my own.

I had one foot on the floating log, the other on the slippery bank. It was so physically exhausting that I didn’t know how long I could keep trying to cut and dig out the roots. Although

I had very few symptoms from my chronic illness at this point, I still didn't want to push my body overboard. Dozens of leeches were skating like silk through the water, and I remember thinking they'd actually be beautiful to look at if I wasn't afraid of them latching onto me.

Then, my foot slipped from the log. My whole lower body submerged into the water. I yelled but also saw something bubbling to the surface. My foot must have hit the root I had spent hours loosening. The yellow-scaled, dragon-looking root came up to the surface (Appendix D). My instructor, who finally decided to help, hit me on the back saying, "I knew you could do it!"

I grabbed the rhizome out of the water, pulled the single leech off my ass, and sat on the floating log beaming (Appendix E). Half in the water, half on the log, I dug the rest of the lily out with help from my instructor. I gave half my lily to that girl who never could get in the water, and my instructor grudgingly gave up half of his to the woman with hypothermia.

My mother watched everything from the bank. In my mind, healing others and healing myself is the same. I went in to get this lily for my mom, for my friends, for all those who needed to heal from sexual trauma, and I had unknowingly also uprooted this flower of healing for myself.

Appendix C



Appendix D



Appendix E



Appendix F



Appendix G

From the Earth / Held by the Earth

By Siena Loprinzi

The moment when everything became too much, I laid face down, heaving into the raw earth. I let myself cry for hours, letting my tears turn into mud when mixed in the dirt.

It reminded me of three years earlier at a yoga class in Hawaii when the teacher told us to lay on our bellies at the end of class and “feel the womb of mama earth holding you” - my partner and I laughed at the time. His first yoga class, and he was suddenly being held in a womb. It wasn't until November 2019 at a mountain center in the Colorado Rockies that I fully understood what that teacher in Hawaii meant.

I was lucky that day, crying into the earth. No one came by to disturb me, no one came to the greenhouse next to where I was crying, no bugs crawled on me in the wilderness of the Rocky Mountains. There was a bench I could have sat on to cry, but I needed to be on the earth. I had been told so many times before that day that the earth is Mama or Mother Earth, but I never understood until I cried into her. She held me that day, and I almost felt as if I could feel her heartbeat, then her breathing. Maybe, if you lay with your chest against the ground for long enough, you may start to feel it too.

As the tears dried up and the sun and earth cradled me, I was able to fully view and piece together the puzzle that had found its last piece the night before in an AA meeting. I had gone to

feel closer to my mom, whom I had thought continued to go to these meetings. Instead, I found this group of six Buddhist meditators sharing their deepest traumas, and mine leaked out.

The trauma of sexual abuse from a family member when I was a baby, the trauma of rape in me and the women in my family, the trauma of knowing who caused it all and how we could never get him.

So I cried into *mama earth* (Pachamama as the Shamans in Peru told me). When the tears stopped and I stayed, I fully let my heart rest on the earth. When I felt strong enough, when the earth had taken my troubles into her arms and held the burden for me, I got up. I thanked the sky and the earth for holding that place for me. It was time to honor this, and move on.

My name, Siena, comes from Latin meaning “from the earth.” That day, I returned.

Appendix H

The Tales of Bent-Willy

By Siena Loprinzi

Touching down in the arctic circle on the Lofoten Islands in Norway, I had no cell reception. No wifi. I was supposed to meet my Airbnb host who had offered to drive me from a shopping mall near the airport to his property an hour and a half away.

Having no more information from my host other than his name, Bent-Willy, he said that he had to drop off sheets at the Airbnb so he didn't mind driving me from town since the bus system in Lofoten can be, eh, interesting. Being a short, white, blonde woman, this was possibly not my best idea. However, I had traveled to almost 30 countries by this point and had not had a problem. Yet.

After finding a pizza place in the airport mall that would accept me buying a salad for the wifi password, I touched in with Bent-Willy. He said to meet him outside. Looking at his Airbnb profile picture I knew I was looking for a bearded white man, possibly taking the shape of a lumberjack. What I found in the mall parking lot was a man who looked like an ex-Russian mobster, completely tattooed to the brim and standing in front of a white passenger van. Yes, the kind of van that young children are told to stay away from for fear of being kidnapped.

He waved curtly at me and motioned that I should put my 30 pound backpack in the back. This is when I realized he spoke very little English. This is also the time I realized, I need to figure out how far I can run with a 30 pound backpack and a worn-out body. Not far.

I walked closer to the van, my brain bouncing around to find what excuse I could make up to get out of this situation. But then Bent-Willy opened the van door, and I saw the sweetest sheltie dog to ever exist. Immediately I noticed this dog had the same gear that I bought for my

dog back in the States - expensive and one normally had to research to find this brand. This was the moment I knew I was going to be okay.

I threw my heavy-ass backpack into the back next to the dog and hopped into the passenger seat. What happened next was a semi-awkward hour and a half ride. With broken or simple English, I started to get to know Bent-Willy's life. He worked on overseas construction projects as a mechanic in places like Shanghai and now the Lofoten Islands. We connected over dogs and the brand Ruffwear that we both bought for them. His dog, I quickly learned, was named Turbo and he was a sweetheart.

At one point, Bent-Willy stopped at a lake overlook and said, "this is where Instagram stop - you want Instagram?" Over that hour and a half drive, he really took care of me.

Then we got to the part where he asked me why I traveled to the Lofoten Islands and Norway. I felt so comfortable with him at this point, I told him the whole truth - someone I thought I was going to marry ended our relationship three days after I moved back to our hometown for him. That had been only a few weeks ago, culminating in my canceling our couple's trip to Bolivia and booking a trip for one to Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

Bent-Willy became quiet for a time after that. Then he shared, "you know, I came home one day and my wife said, 'I'm leaving' and she never came back. I was never there. I got sad after, and I had to find passion again. So now I take photo with Turbo."

I cried, trying to hide it, but felt so grateful he shared this difficult moment with me. How he was able to share what helped him - his joy of photography and love for Turbo. How he found something worth living for. When he finally dropped me off at his family's old cabin, I hugged him and Turbo goodbye.

Then I went inside the cabin, and cried for three whole days. Heartbreak, I learned, is a universal language.

Appendix I

The Keychain Story

By Siena Loprinzi

Months before I found out a diagnosis that would take hold of my life for years to come, I was sick in Sweden. After a week of traveling through Norway and getting run-down faster than usual, I was freezing in Sweden's summer. Then I stumbled upon the Centralbadet (all the rage in Rick Steve's travel books for Sweden), which promised sauna and steam rooms as well as pools that promoted health and relaxation. You were naked with towels, and it was co-ed. At 23, I had already been to nude spas in my hometown of Portland, Oregon and this last part did not deter me from wellness in the slightest.

After hurriedly booking this trip I was on, I had not anticipated the high costs and I was becoming cheaper as I went. I allowed myself two activities for the rest of my trip, and I chose Centralbadet to be one of them.

I got there and it was beautiful, old, and cozy. The woman at the front desk looked at me and instantly knew I was a tourist, probably also knew before I even spoke that I was American. I knew I looked like a sick, lost puppy at this point and I was beyond caring what my American appearance looked like. Somehow, she just knew what I needed. She must have been 10 years older than me and she looked like a hard-worker, but her face softened into kindness when she saw me. Like a mother hen, she shooed me into the spa and didn't let me pay for all the supplies she gave me.

What I experienced changed my health to this day; I soaked in hot pools and cold pools, I sauna-ed with Himalayan salt all around me and a fan that was perfectly crafted to create the sacred sound of HU, and I steamed with crystals and fresh herbs. I came out feeling like myself,

actually better than my usual self. Years later, my doctors would still be sending me for hydrotherapy sessions to get my body to start functioning properly. At the time, I knew nothing of the mechanics of what had just happened, but I felt like sunlight and fresh dew. I felt a lightness and energy had returned to me - these Swedes really knew what they were doing.

I wanted to offer the lady at the front something, a thank you for taking care of me when I knew no one in a foreign country and was clearly sick and in pain. I had nothing, but I did have a keychain that I bought before this trip. I took off the keychain and had it waiting. As I was heading out, I stopped for just a moment and said, “thank you” and handed it to her. I was still beaming from the badet, so maybe that’s why I stayed for a moment longer. She read the keychain, surprised, and then looked up with tears in her eyes. The keychain read:

GOOD THINGS HAPPEN
LOVE IS REAL
WE WILL BE OKAY

All she could say with tears was, “really?” like she couldn’t grasp that those words could be true, and rushed out from behind the counter to hug me. Now I was the one to be surprised and have tears come to my eyes. She needed those keychain words as much as I did, she needed to believe them just as much as I needed to.

I came back to the Centralbadet twice more before I left the city (skimping on food so that I could spend my money there), but I didn’t see her again. I just was left with the fact that there are always kind people in this world, someone to always make a connection with, and people that have much more going on than they would ever let on.

For me, that day she ushered me into the spa, I wasn’t just in physical pain. I had been working with suicidal ideation off and on for years, some days and moments worse than others. There was no way for her to know what pain I was in, and vice versa. In my toughest moments,

it is the random acts of kindness from strangers that keeps my light in me going. For that, I am grateful. For that reason alone, I believe in the keychain words.

Appendix J

Trust the Body

By Siena Loprinzi

I still remember the first time I trusted my body.

I was 24, living at a meditation center and she, my body, woke me up in the middle of the night.

“Sutten, I needed to talk to Sutten,” was all I could think.

Why was she waking me up to tell me that I needed to talk to the security person on land? Why was this the third night in the row with nightmares and the need to talk to Sutten?

The next morning, sleep-deprived and emotional, I sought Sutten out. I asked him why the person I had been with for a month at the meditation center really had to leave. Why was there so much confusion around his story? I knew he walked into an older woman’s tent, drunk and incoherent. That was reason enough to kick him off the land, but there was something more. I had gone to visit family that weekend and I was missing something, my body was telling me something didn’t add up; I had to follow that inner tug, that inner string.

“Sutten, what happened?” That was the only question that could pour out of me, and Sutten couldn’t tell me. Confidentially.

Days earlier I had accidentally been caught in a rainstorm with the woman whose tent he, Bill, had wandered into that one night. He said that people were spinning stories about that night, and with the gossip of the meditation center being stronger than a season of BBC’s *Cranford*, I believed him. But being caught under a building with the stern 60-year-old volunteer, she said that Bill had been naked and she had heard he had come from someone else’s tent. It was Bill’s last day on land when she told me this news, and I asked him about it before we said goodbye that day. This was my first relationship that I always knew I didn’t want to continue after I left the center, and I made that clear, but I didn’t understand why there was all this confusion around his leaving.

He denied everything she said, said she was making things up. But a week later, as my body had been waking me up night after night, I couldn't let myself be in the dark anymore.

"Sutten this affects me - do I need to get tested?" This caught Sutten off guard. He didn't realize this would come up and his only answer was that it's never a bad idea to get tested. "Sutten, he walks in his sleep especially when he's been drinking, was he with anyone that night?" Again, Sutten couldn't, or wouldn't, tell me.

So I left Stutten's little office, crying and confused.

A friend of mine, another volunteer, saw me crying. I finally told her everything I had been suspecting. "Let's go find some place to talk," was all she could say, and I just had to keep pulling on that inner string. I had to know, whether I was ready or not.

The girl was 19, but acted like someone years ahead of her. And that was when she told me. Everything. The guy she was with at the time was the one who found Bill in the older lady's tent. Bill had been naked, and drunk, and sleepwalking. When the volunteer got Bill out of the tent to bring him back to his own, he found a naked girl in Bill's bed.

I cried. It was someone, the last person, I expected. I knew this specific girl had been recovering from sexual abuse, and she barely said a word to anyone. It was the last person I ever suspected to be in that tent with him. I felt betrayed. Not heartbroken, but just so confused.

Then I was told about two other women, one of them being the 19-year-old herself. Bill was 30 at the time.

So I kept following the string. I made peace with the 19-year-old who was my friend at that time, I talked with one girl that was older than us all and ended up being possessive of Bill, and finally, I talked with the girl that Bill was with that night that got him kicked out.

I went right up to her and asked if we could talk. I was hurt and shaking at this point. I asked if she knew I was with Bill when they slept together and her face fell - he had told her I left him for someone else. That I had cheated on him. She had no idea we had still been together.

That one girl and I talked for what felt like hours; we talked about our pain as women, and finally I said I knew something that might help us both. I was becoming an herbalist at the time and I knew the plant that could help heal the heart. So we went up to my room and I gave her a tincture of hawthorn. We sat in silence for a few moments, drinking in the medicine in more than one way.

A few nights later, I would run into her late at night on our way crossing the center campground. We both were looking at the stars and stumbled into each other, so we stood together and basked in the stars. Seeing a shooting star for each of us. For mine, I wished that our hearts would be healed.

↔ ↔ ↔

I still stay in contact with most of the girls and women from that experience. Every girl I talked to that day shared how Bill reminded them of their abusive ex-boyfriends. I had never had an abusive ex-partner, I had never been cheated on.

The day after I listened to my body for the first time, I was still in pain. So I made my body a promise - we wouldn't go through this again. I would listen next time, I would check in with my body.

So now, I talk and listen to my body - I find the Bills and wish them well, but stay away. I wait for my body to decide, and I'm grateful I had the courage to follow its string.

Appendix K

The Program
By Siena Loprinzi

When I think
About this program

I think about the life it almost took from this world
My life

I think about the unyielding requirements
That feel like a ban of spears around my arms,
My heart

When I think
About this program

I still get the gasping anxiety
That makes me feel paralyzed

That keeps me
From moving on in this world

I think about the person I told
That I was suicidal

I asked what could be taken off my plate
“Nothing”
Was their response, “I can only give you more time”

When I think
About this program

I think about fear
My fear

That “you’re out or you’re in” mentality
That drove me to hold the blades in my hands
That drove me to the hospital
That drove me to inpatient treatment
That drove me to hurt myself beyond belief

When I think
About this program

I only feel hurt
Shame
Regret
Anger
Self-loathing

For a program
That was supposed to be about embracing life

I never expected
That it would push me towards my death

I still feel dead inside

When I think
About this program

Appendix L

The Ending
By Siena Loprinzi

For all the stories that pour out of me, there are many that are still stuck in my body. And may remain there for a long time.

The shaman in Peru that carried around llama fat with him and saved my life one day.

The Buddhist Lama in Bhutan who told me “that’s not good” to be a free spirit.

The early miscarriage.

The six concussions.

The assault in an alleyway in Nepal.

The grey-area sexual assault from two people I loved.

The family incest when my cousins and I were babies.

But most of all, the Lyme. The mold that turns me suicidal. The MCAS that makes my bones feel like Jell-O. The POTS that makes me collapse and blackout in Post-Office lines. The way society doesn’t trust any of these illnesses in me because they simply cannot see them. The way sickness almost extinguished the light in me; the way that I have to work every moment of every day to keep that light aflame.

I acknowledge these. Whether they come out or not. I acknowledge these stories that are here, and those that have yet to come.