

Finding Our Way

How to Move Beyond Trauma
to Serving with Love

Peggy Dulany • December 2021



An aerial photograph of ocean waves crashing onto a sandy beach. The water is a deep, vibrant blue-green, and the foam of the waves is bright white and frothy. The waves are moving from the top right towards the bottom left, creating a sense of motion and energy. The sandy beach is visible at the bottom left corner.

Contents

- 3 Introduction and Context**
- 7 Deep Listening**
- 8 Finding Our Way There**
- 10 Preparing to Make the Choice**
- 14 Setting the Stage**
- 16 Settling In**
- 18 Building the Container**
- 23 Encountering and Updating
the 'Protectors'**
- 29 Alone In the Arms of the
Mother – The Natural World**
- 38 Taking Our Wholeness
Out Into the World**
- 40 References and Links**

Introduction and Context

We have heard before that this is a critical moment for heading off further climate disaster, reducing poverty and reuniting humanity to create a more sustainable, just and, yes, loving world. And the urgency of it is absolutely true! The task is larger than any one individual or group or government can solve. It is so huge that each of us, *every one of us*, must play our part, individually and together. But to get to that place where we can reach out across the divides that exist across the many polarizations, each of us needs to explore the obstacles inside ourselves that prevent us from bringing our whole selves to the table to address whatever role our soul calls us to play in the healing process.

This paper builds on other aspects of the work of Synergos where we, with our partners in several countries, have successfully engaged in large-scale partnerships to address critical problems like nutrition, health and safety, education and increased agricultural production of small farmers. *Here we address how to build our inner resources to overcome our own traumas to find the courage to play our most effective role in our fragmented societies to create greater trust and harmony.*

A significant premise of Synergos' focus on what we have referred to as 'inner work' is that, by resolving the obstacles that keep us stuck in judgment, fear, rage, grief or shame, we can more easily act from our 'best selves.' This means we become more able to work effectively, love consistently and be courageous enough to dare to do what is right and good for ourselves and others. We become more trustworthy and trusting. And there are ways to work through these obstacles. We can come to feel freer, more whole and more impactful in the world, our communities and our families.

There are of course huge external factors that make it difficult to create a more loving, sustainable and equitable world: entrenched power structures that maintain and expand the widening gap between included and excluded, rich and poor; local, regional and global conflicts; climate realities that affect the health and wellbeing of the planet and its inhabitants.

None of the following story of how people can recover the fullness of their soul's purpose is to deny the horrors of the traumas people suffer nor the impardonable aggression humans inflict on each other, the Earth or its other creatures. In the context of the enforced isolation that the Covid-19 crisis caused, the effects may be even more difficult to overcome. Those of us who have the privilege of experiencing such retreats may sink into denial, guilt or despair. And those without such a reprieve suffer even more deeply the injustices of scarcity, violence, exclusion and the impacts of the climate disaster.

The only way through this is to build inclusive communities of trust and strategies for creating a sense of belonging that bridges divides. And to do that each of us needs to strengthen our internal capacity to withstand our own traumas, to be able to reach out across divides and offer what we can to put out the literal and figurative fires that rage around us and around the world. Like the hummingbird who, in the story about a huge forest fire, buzzed back and forth to the river dropping tiny droplets of water on it, said to the lion who lay by and asked what on earth she was doing, “I’m just doing my part.”

For the moment, the kind of intensive retreats described below are not available to large numbers of people. But we at Synergos have seen, in convening and facilitating large partnerships that affect the economic, nutritional and health wellbeing of millions of people, how important the inner work methodology is to producing these results. Providing local bridging leaders the opportunity to internalize and employ these methods has created the underpinning for achieving the impactful and sustainable solutions to the complex problems we have been collaborating with them to address over the past thirty-five years. The integration of the inner work component over the past 17 years has complemented the systems thinking, development of bridging leadership skills and partnership strategies we have adapted and applied.

More recently, with support from the Fetzer Institute, colleagues at Synergos have generated case studies that explore the role of inner work in the larger partnership-building work we have done over nearly two decades in a number of countries.¹

This paper complements that work, focusing on the methods used and theory of change applied to the personal retreats for change makers and philanthropists that my colleagues and I have led since 2004. We have participated in and led over 30 such retreats for hundreds of people – philanthropists, social activists, business leaders and government officials from 25 countries around the world.

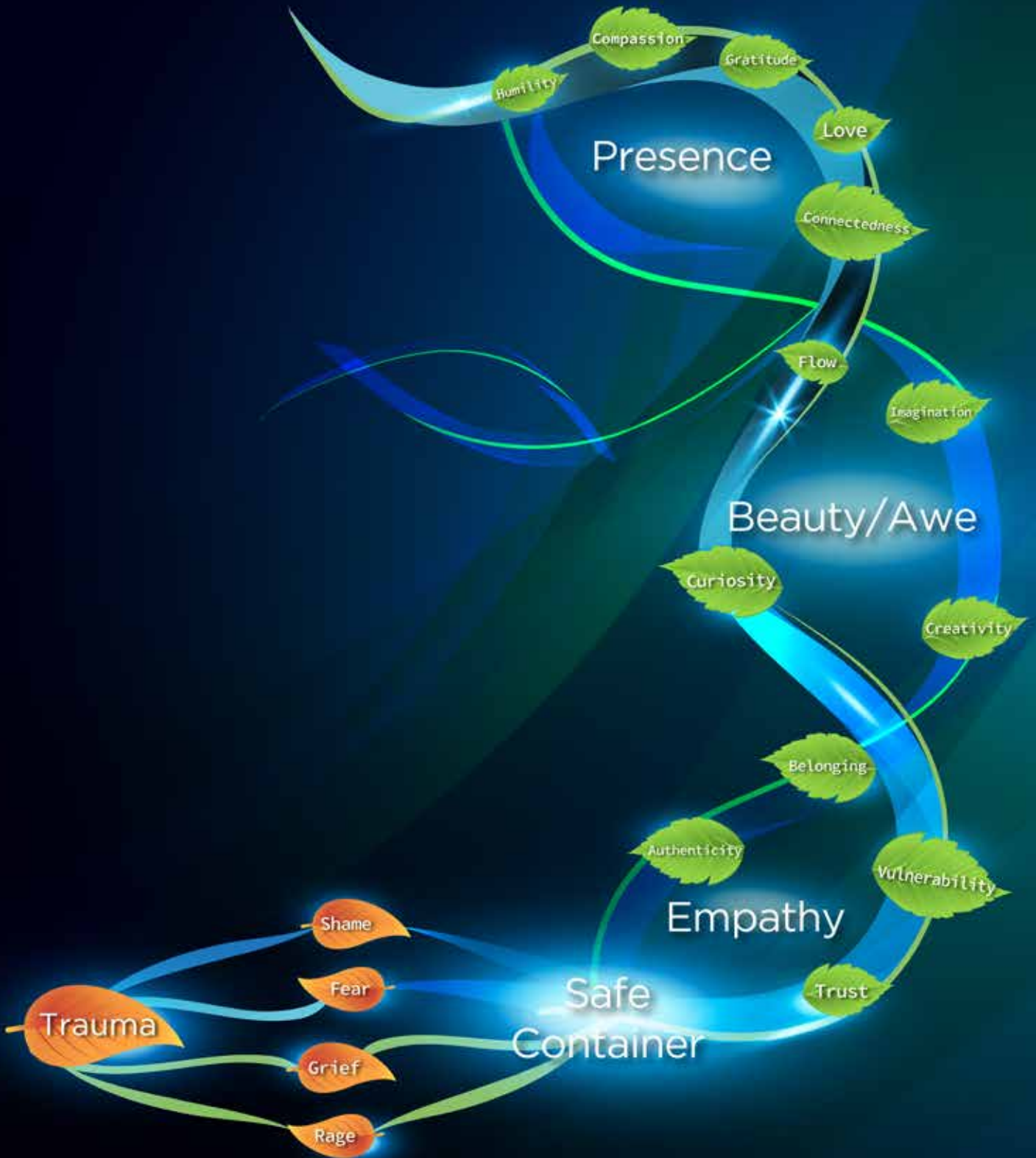
This builds on a 2012 paper I wrote called *Approaching the Heart of the Matter* and another in 2017 called *Building Trust Works: Why Inner Work for Social Impact*.² The latter paper can be summarized in the diagram on the next page.

This spiral leads from the effects of trauma to becoming fully able to serve with love. The process used leads people out of the experience and effects of trauma through the creation of a ‘safe container’ and onward to an outcome of serving with love. But the actual steps of how to create that safe container and then move beyond it were not clear to me when writing the previous papers. The intervening years of practice have led us to understand the steps needed to get to ‘serving with love’ and all that means for those bridging leaders who wish to contribute to addressing complex problems in holistic, heart- as well as mind- and spirit-centered ways.

1 Learn more about the Inner Work for Social Change project at www.innerworkforsocialchange.org.

2 You can download *Approaching the Heart of the Matter* at syngs.info/sa08 and *Building Trust Works* at syngs.info/wiw.

Serving with love





Deep Listening

Perhaps the most critical capacity of a bridging leader is the ability to listen deeply to other people without their own inner worries distorting what or how those others are expressing themselves.

All of the experiences described in the next part of this paper constitute elements of how to become able to listen to, understand, feel and express one's self. This makes it possible to witness, rather than act out, the voices of fear, doubt or judgment that get in the way of truly listening to others. Listening to one's own inner voices and being listened to in a compassionate and safe environment makes it possible to reconcile the cacophony stemming from those voices competing with or negating each other. This allows for self compassion and for the recognition that those sometimes disruptive voices – mostly born for protection at a very young age – no longer serve to help them to live their fullest self.

For each participant, the exquisite honor of having the full attention of the group members, the guides and the landscape around their campsite, generates a new source of safety: a **trust** that the vulnerable and authentic self they have shown is truly seen, valued and loved. This generates a sense of **belonging**. The protection of **judgment** can then transform into **curiosity**, which opens into imagination, creativity and flow. The natural setting of **beauty** and the **awe** it inspires leads to the easing of **fear** (of not being good enough, of failing, of being rejected) and releases them from the terrible isolation of feeling **separate** from everything and everyone to a sense of **connectedness** to others and to a larger whole. And this shift allows for **presence** – to one's self, to others and to the world we inhabit. **Gratitude, humility, compassion and love** follow closely behind. And remarkably, in nearly every instance, the desire to **serve with love** arises, in whatever direction our soul's purpose guides us to manifest it.

Otto Scharmer of the Presencing Institute has developed a framework to understand and deepen our ability to listen deeply to others.³ To go beyond listening to simply confirm what we already know or believe (what Otto describes as the first level of listening) or even to learn new facts (the second level). With the right intentions, and with practice, we can reach the third level: listening with empathy. This is striving to see the world through the eyes of another.

The fourth or deepest level of listening is creative listening, sometimes called generative listening. This is listening with a focus not just on the other person as they are now, but on their potential and the possibilities you can create with them. Due to its power for creating change, bridging leaders should strive to master creative listening – and they must also be skilled at factual and empathic listening.

3 Learn more about listening in the Synergos video “Listening: An essential leadership skill” at syngs.info/sa56 and at the Presencing Institute website presencing.org.

Finding Our Way There

In 2017 I wrote about how people often start feeling safe in the group when one person, in a sacred Council circle, shows a feeling, rather than just an observation, usually accompanied by tears. This expression of vulnerability, often unintentional and even against the person's attempt to hold it back, has the effect of opening the hearts of the rest of the group – the listeners. This is because the genuineness of the expression inspires trust in the other's authenticity. Even the apparent feeling of shame on the part of the teary one resonates with the others in its authenticity.

We all learn to wear masks to protect ourselves from experiences that trigger our vulnerability: shaming, anger, fear, grief. That same 'protective gear' can inhibit the full, free expression of our 'true' self that lies underneath. But so much needs to happen, in that individual and in the group, to allow for the crack in that one person's 'mask' to appear, and for it to affect the other members in a way that permits them to allow for the softening of their own masks. Our protective gear, which perhaps saved us as a child encountering challenging or traumatic circumstances, can also keep us 'small' to stay safe and hidden from others in ways that may lead them to mistrust us because we may appear inauthentic. They can see that there is more to us than we are revealing, and that can trigger fear or suspicion that what lies behind our mask might be scary or unpleasant.

I want to share with you the ways that we as individuals, in the context of a guided group with access to a natural setting, can begin to look behind our own masks to face the traumas that have caused us to form them, at the same time as we observe and interact with other members of the group and the guides. It is the feeling of the pain in a supported context – and then the releasing of it – that allows us to begin feeling safe, belonging and open to flow and presence.



I am in the opening session of my first Nature-based retreat in July, 2004. Eleven of us are seated in a circle and the facilitators have made some comments based on the neuroscience of the brain, showing how different practices affect the frequency of brain waves, ranging from multi-tasking thinking, through meditation (single point focus) to the calm connectedness of a mother nursing her baby.

We settle into a guided 'Council' in which one person speaks at a time, uninterrupted by the others, about whatever comes to mind – or rather, to heart. Suddenly, and well before it is my time to speak, I find tears streaming down my face, unbidden and embarrassing. When I do speak, I flounder around for 'reasons' for the tears, coming up with how exhausted I am after the preparation for the retreat (on the land I steward in Montana) and how it must be from stress. That explanation makes me feel slightly less ashamed. But the tears keep coming! I am only comforted by the fact that one of only two other women in the group is also weeping continuously. When Michael, one of our guides, says to me later "It is because you have such a big heart!"; as though that were something good, I am able to let go of the shame. That and the fact that it doesn't seem to bother the other members of the group. I don't even remember whether Anne's and my crying opened others up to allowing themselves to become more vulnerable, so absorbed was I in my own flood of feelings. But the group did progress to greater levels of intimacy, self-revelation and mutual trust as the week progressed.



Preparing to Make the Choice

Committing to dedicate an entire week (or in some cases four days) to a wilderness experience in which we agree to examine our purpose in this life is a big step which requires courage and commitment. Even before attending the retreat, a churning begins as people contemplate the invitation to participate, weighing a perhaps not-yet-conscious longing against a fear that manifests all kinds of real reasons why it can't happen (too much work, the children, too far to travel, too expensive).

My brother Richard told me about his experience on a 2002 'vision quest'. Admiring and impressed, I dismissed the possibility that I could do such a thing because I was convinced I could never fast for four days, as he had. Behind that, though, was a fear that I might confront something that would make me change my life. I had recently moved onto a ranch in Montana and was sinking deeply into my love for the land.

What if I had to choose between my lifelong passion for my work with Synergos, with all the travel that implied, and my finally feeling at home on this wild land?

The prospect of having to make such a choice was too scary to allow it to surface for more than a moment before letting the exigencies of daily life to submerge those thoughts for another year and a half. At that point, the conflict felt too acute and the longing too strong, so I took the leap of not only scheduling a vision quest for September, but also agreed to participate in the first Synergos retreat at my ranch the same July.

And sure enough, on that first day I was greeted with a flood of tears that felt like they would never end – but which eventually washed clean the stuck energy that had prevented me from facing the magnitude of such a choice.

Learning from this retreat and my own vision quest with Animas Valley Institute which followed, the letter of invitation we at Synergos send to prospective participants does not try to minimize the magnitude of the choice. Some people, like me, take several years before deciding to come. Accepting the invitation often requires multiple exchanges during which the person considering it begins asking questions of the guide or organizer. And for those who take the leap, the longing eventually outweighs the fear of the consequences. Often the person will have talked at length with people who have participated before,

hearing the stories of camaraderie with the group, the sense of accomplishment and pride in having survived the time alone on the mountain where they shared the landscape with wolves, bears and mountain lions (almost never seen but a perfect foil for whatever other fears stalked them).

Chains of trust – in the friend who went before, in one of the guides, in love of wild nature – help make this possible. All these steps are part of a process leading to the courageous decision to risk looking inward at the effects that past traumas have had to divert, diminish or try to extinguish what I call the true ‘soul’s purpose’ in being in this life, in this world, now.

To stay ‘safe’ – at least in the view of our internal ‘Protector’ – we give things up as well. We give up doing things we used to love or once wished to do to accommodate to a relationship and its different priorities. We trade off the wild idea for the safe salary. We develop fears that won’t permit us to take certain risks, often not knowing where that fear came from in the first place.

It is understandable that the original dream that we were born to live gets suppressed or diverted by events in our lives: the need to make a living however we can, the years of child rearing which cause us to modify what we long to do outside that enormous and critical role, the death of important figures in our lives that leaves us crushed by grief, an accident or assault that cripples us physically or emotionally. The list is long.

And to stay ‘safe’ – at least in the view of our internal ‘Protector’ (a concept further developed later in this paper) – we give things up as well. We give up doing things we used to love or once wished to do to accommodate to a relationship and its different priorities. We trade off the wild idea for the safe salary. We develop fears that won’t permit us to take certain risks, often not knowing where that fear came from in the first place. Or because of a traumatic experience that led us to decide never do X, Y or Z again.

But as author Bill Plotkin says in *SoulCraft*, there may come a time where our soul’s longing for what we did not dare to reach for becomes apparent in subtle or increasingly obvious ways (sometimes known as a mid-life crisis).⁴ And if that urge to find out what it is

4 Bill Plotkin. *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*. (Novato, California: New World Library, 2003.)

becomes strong enough, it may propel us into trying something out of the ordinary – like going into the internal or external wilderness, alone or with a guide or a group of friends.

We may become willing to take the risk that, by peeling back the layers of the protections we had erected around ourselves to stay safe, we might discover something that now does seem possible, if outrageous; that yes, we might have to give up something precious, but in doing that, something more beautiful, more satisfying to the one we always wanted to be will emerge: a true purpose in this life for which, one way or another, everything else has prepared us.



Setting the Stage

Reflecting on the fifteen or so retreats in which I was a participant, I see how important it is for the guides to have done their own inner work – as opposed to just having been trained in technical guiding skills. The quality of their presence was critical to setting the context in which participants could begin to trust and feel safe. Or at least safe enough to reveal some small intimate detail of how they were feeling (as opposed to thinking) about something.

It is ideal, although not always possible, for a retreat to be held in a beautiful natural setting where participants can wander off on their own for moments of reflection on what is coming up for them. Guided interaction with the natural world helps reflect back to us what is going on within. It allows us to see, through metaphor and guidance, what is hidden to our rational minds.

Explaining the neuroscience behind the importance of letting go of what many call the ‘monkey brain’ (the multi-tasking, planning, worrying, counting, self- or other-incriminating judgments that the brain engages in) is a good way of helping scientifically-oriented people rationalize meditation, when just practicing it might seem too ‘woowoo’. But the guides’ – and other group members’ – attentive listening with interest and compassion to what each person said is even more important.

Allowing people to introduce themselves as they might do in a work meeting and then telling them that from now on they were not to talk about their work life or other external aspects of their ego identity is another way of setting the context that this precious time together is not for casual chit chat. One of my teachers even disallowed any such self-introduction from the beginning of the retreat – highlighting the intention to go below our external self-definition – cold turkey.

Creating an inviting, cozy indoor space also helps participants feel comfortable and cared for: a circle on the floor with cushions or mattresses or on chairs; having herbal tea and plenty of water available (preferably no stimulants like caffeine); having a sacred place either on the side of the room or in the center of the circle with flowers, candles, objects the guides might bring, with an invitation to members to add their own objects as they come across them; playing alternatively soothing and enlivening music as people enter the room at the beginning or after breaks; and having multiple opportunities to get up and move around, dance, go outside. All these contribute to releasing tension and moving through any stuckness at the beginning and throughout the retreat.

It is ideal, although not always possible, for a retreat to be held in a beautiful natural setting where participants can wander off on their own for moments of reflection on what is coming up for them. As I explain in greater depth later, guided interaction with the natural world helps reflect back to us what is going on within. It allows us to see, through metaphor and guidance, what is hidden to our rational minds. This is all part of creating space for the imagination to flow.

But I am getting ahead of myself, for it takes time and repeated experience for this kind of activity to loosen up the stuck places, particularly for those who find safety in believing in the sanctity of the rational mind.

Settling In



People arrive from a long distance away (often from other countries, crossing multiple time zones), meet up with strangers at the local airport to rent or share a car to drive a hundred miles to the ranch (the last 20 miles on a dirt road with scant road signs through a huge landscape of wide valley surrounded by mountains and populated with a multitude of birds, wild animals and cattle). They often arrive in some form of shock – exhaustion, anticipation, overwhelmed by both the beauty and the remoteness. We guides make a point of being there to greet them on arrival (and to take the frantic calls or messages from those who lose their way). We are overjoyed to see them, that this moment has finally arrived when we will embark together on their courageous venture. This is the same for retreats we have held in the Atlantic rainforest in Brazil, in the rural mountains of Mexico, on the Cape in South Africa, on the Canary Islands of Spain and in the outback of Australia.

Because they will most likely soon feel uncomfortable, perhaps ungrounded and almost certainly nervous, we offer each person the comfort of a cup of herbal tea, a snack, show them to the cabin where they will retreat with their cabinmates at night. We give them a bit of time to wander around the landscape, unpack or visit the cats and horses before gathering them in the first circle in which they and the guides will introduce themselves. We lay out very basic guidelines, safety information and a framework for the week ahead. These will not allay the fears they bring with them, the true source of which they may not even know; but for most it may create the beginnings of a sense of trust in the guides as competent and caring people who are willing to stand by them in whatever they encounter during the week.

After a healthy and delicious dinner, we encourage them to go to sleep soon as we will begin the next morning early with meditation and yoga before breakfast.



Building the Container

There are many ways to remove the blockages that keep us stuck in a mental framework, physical tension or emotional protection that no longer serve us. One of my teachers says that the process goes: Decide, Breathe, Move, Sound and Feel. I would only add that before Deciding we must Notice that there is something hindering our ability to move past what I will call trauma-related blocks.

Noticing

Having the idea to sign up for the retreat is a clear sign of Noticing that something is missing or wrong. There is a numbness or a constant pain that we realize needs to be addressed.

For many years I had taken the structure of my life for granted: I juggled between my sacred role as mother of a young son, my commitment to work, my marriage, my friendships and exercise routine. I did not know that the level of anxiety with which I lived was anything other than just how life was. As I approached turning 50, several things changed: my son went to college, my marriage fell apart, my mother died and I burnt out from working too hard. Feeling an urgent need for a break, I spent some time in Montana, supposedly to write a book while I took a mini-sabbatical from Synergos.

*It was only when I got there and began settling into a totally unaccustomed routine of living alone in a tiny cabin, dividing my time between writing, riding and hiking in the mountains and getting to know new friends that I began to **notice** how regimented my former life had been, and how devoid of apparent choices.*

*This felt terrifying because in some way the 'lack of choices' had made me feel safe. I used to say that I moved to Montana 'unbeknownst to me', meaning that I did not right away own the decision to do so. It was as though it happened to me and later on I noticed it and only retroactively **decided**, or ratified what had been an unconscious decision.*

Deciding

Signing up for and coming to the retreat is an act of Deciding, although the participant may not yet know what that decision entails. The intent of this retreat is not to blast through the defenses that have kept people 'safe' from the things they fear the most. It is a delicate dance between inviting them to try out the modalities mentioned above to experience how this can allow them to soften as they are ready and providing a safe enough context for them to take the risk of facing what has kept them from doing so before.

Breathing

This is why we begin with meditation and yoga. Breathing deeply and slowly is a pathway to releasing fear and anxiety. The vagus nerve, which reaches from our gut to our neck, is beyond our conscious control, responds to fear and trauma by causing our nervous system to react in ways that restrict and, in some ways, protects us. Our breath becomes shallower as the heart races, leading to a sense of panic as the amygdala, the more primitive part of the brain that triggers the fight or flight response, signals danger.

Breathing deeply and slowly is a pathway to releasing fear and anxiety. The vagus nerve, which reaches from our gut to our neck, is beyond our conscious control, responds to fear and trauma by causing our nervous system to react in ways that restrict and, in some ways, protects us. Our breath becomes shallower as the heart races, leading to a sense of panic as the amygdala, the more primitive part of the brain that triggers the fight or flight response, signals danger.

Those who have experienced trauma at some point in their lives – which is pretty much all of us – are vulnerable to anything that reminds us of the old trauma and triggers the response I described. This is the work of the sympathetic nervous system. In order to counter this, we need to not only become aware (i.e. Notice) that this is happening to us, but also understand how the countervailing parasympathetic nervous system can help us calm down. Deciding to take slow, even, deep breaths is one way of inviting it to work on our behalf. A meditative practice that focuses on the breath can help us get there. But it is a practice that requires frequent repetition.

Moving

A key aspect of a yoga practice is precisely the slow, deep breathing. And the gentle stretching while breathing deeply that we begin with encourages *moving* all parts of the body, a second method for getting unstuck. Taken together, moving and breathing for a period of time produce a relaxation of tension and reduction of anxiety that can last for

several hours, allowing people to sit more comfortably in the circle where other parts of the work take place.

But it is too easy for habitual tensing of muscles to return, so we incorporate some movement into nearly every hour of the day – taking a walk outside between discussion sessions, playing dance music for their return to the meeting room to help speed up the breath and heartbeat while moving more energetically before sitting down again or engaging in somatic exercises that call attention and awareness to different parts of the body.

During the entire 13 years I lived on wild lands in Montana, I took frequent breaks outside from whatever writing or other work I was doing. Although I didn't think of it that way at the time, I exerted myself enough to deepen my breath through movement so that when I would return to my more stationary work writing, my anxiety lessened and I experienced a flow of creativity that verged on euphoria.

This sense of calm and euphoria is caused by a release of endorphins, natural hormones from the pituitary gland. It is stimulated by vigorous exercise that raises the heart rate for a few minutes at a time.

Sounding

As the group exercises in the retreats become more emotionally intense – in the full group or in pairs which we create early on – we introduce the notion of releasing different sounds that correspond to feelings that come up. We may do this through a breathing exercise where the out breath includes a sound of increasing volume or by inviting them on one of their frequent solo walks on the land to go to a place where they let out a loud sound no one else can hear into a landscape that can hold all the emotions that might accompany the sound.

Part of the trauma of being a conflict-avoidant middle child in a family holding strong and often conflicting opinions was that I became almost mute in group settings. I developed a soft voice (that still afflicts me to this day) when I did speak at all and felt as though my silence hid me. When I began doing this kind of retreat work, even under instruction to make a loud sound, even when out of earshot from others, it felt nearly impossible to do. The shame and fear were too great. The sounds stuck in my throat.

During a brief time in high school when singing was a passion, I was able to counter this impulse to produce a loud, clear sound – until I was told by the choir director that my voice was too big for the others in the group I aspired to join, who then declined to admit me to it. The message being “don't speak or sing too loudly or you will be excluded.” Needless to say, that further discouraged me from projecting my voice.



Not until the guides got us to make increasingly loud sounds together, often with loud music accompanying us to partially drown out each of our individual voices, was I gradually able to try yelling at the top of my lungs. And over time a voice I had suppressed for decades began to come out. Its message was “no, No, NO, NOOOO!” I finally began to feel – and free myself from – the rage and the grief of feeling muzzled for so long.

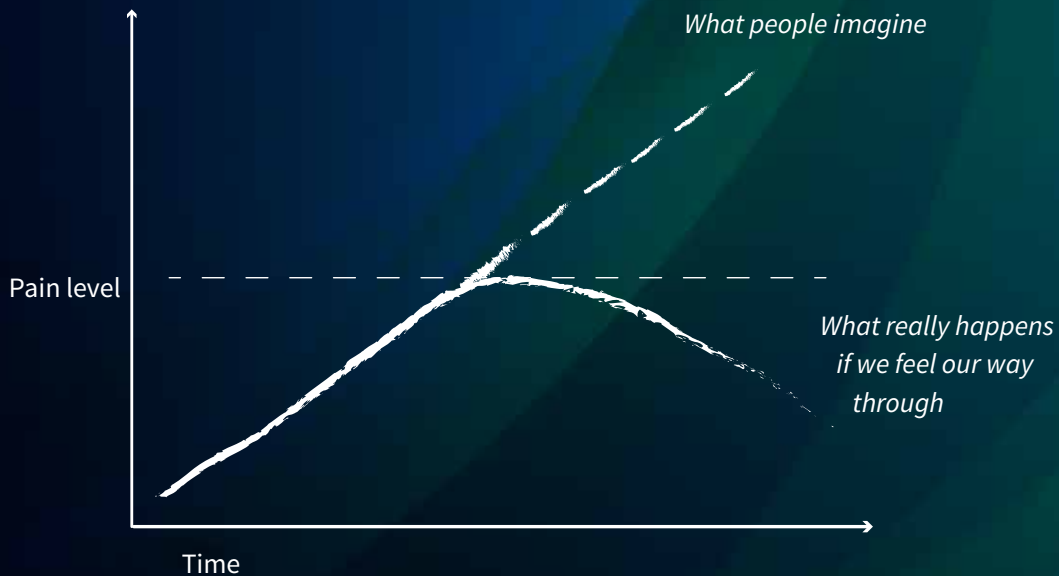
Feeling

One of the ways we try to protect our selves from reenacting earlier traumas is to shut off feelings. The cost of that is that we don't get to choose which feelings we shut off. It works a bit like pharmaceutical medicines designed to reduce depression or anxiety: many of them reduce the whole range of feelings, including joy and amazement.

Building trust in the group, the guides and the surrounding land is important precisely because the sense of safety that trust provides us is the container that gives us the courage to risk feeling and expressing what lies behind the protections we have created. It is an important precursor to trusting our self.

Dealing with psychic pain

from Kiyoo Morimoto



One of my teachers in college, Kiyoo Morimoto, showed a graph which had level of psychic pain on the vertical axis and the progression of that level on the horizontal. He drew a diagonal line trending up to indicate the increasing level.

As our pain intensifies, we tend to believe that it will just keep on going up, which leads us to try to cut off feelings by whatever means available – alcohol, drugs, pharmaceuticals, even suicide. He drew an imaginary horizontal line across the upward one to represent when feelings became unbearable and were cut off. But, he explained, “The straightest way through pain is right through the middle.” And he showed how the upward line naturally arched downward into a bell curve if the pain was allowed to be felt all the way through.

This affected me deeply and, while not always understanding how this could work, I resolved to try not to cut off the feelings of pain (which were considerable in those days), but to ride them out.

Encountering and Updating the ‘Protectors’

Developing a sense of trust in others and in something larger than ourselves (be it our concept of the Divine, the Earth on which we live or some other philosophy) allows for a temporary safe shelter within which we can allow the pain to flow without having to shut it off by stuffing it down inside our self.

The exercises that help build this trust create space for the participants to honor the ways that early-formed protections kept them safe when they were needed. But they are also designed to allow people to feel the cost of maintaining them now that they are outdated. It is in leaving room for each individual to feel the grief of having limited their feelings for so long and to understand the reasons why they had to do that the group container is so important. To let out such feelings without trust in the guides, in the group, in a higher power and, most of all, in oneself – through Breathing, Moving or Sounding – could be too scary to bear. Amazingly, it does not take so much time, once the safe container is established, to get there.

We ask participants to commit to only engage in ‘soul talk’ – which helps them maintain their connection to the deepest parts of themselves and each other. This entails paying attention to and telling their dreams, attuning the ‘ears of their heart’ to truly listening to the person holding the ‘talking stick’ during the ritual of Council, keeping a journal of their experience and engaging in the poetry reading, dancing and yoga/meditation we offer. Doing this enlivens their hearts’ response and creates a circle of empathy and love that quickly enhances their trust in each other.

Trusting one’s self often requires a larger step that may take the entire week and beyond to achieve. And it forms the basis for a sense of internal safety that will hold beyond the safety provided by the group. There may be many reasons for not trusting our self, some hidden and others easier to see.

I remember when I was about 15 sitting for a moment with one leg on one side of a fence and the other on the other side. It was a beautiful spring day and the grass was green on both sides. A thought came to me that I didn’t know who I really was: I was sometimes one way and other times another way, apparently in accordance with who else was there. I didn’t want to displease people and so I would adapt my words, my thoughts, even my attitudes to fit the situation.

I condemned myself for this seeming inauthenticity.

As a middle child, I abhorred conflict and tried to stay out of the way of the intense arguments that thundered across the dining room table. My tendency was to shrink into silence or make bland statements that couldn't be interpreted as taking one side or the other.

My sisters didn't trust me and thought I was shallow. My mother labeled me sneaky. As I went to college in the '60s, the conflicts became political and, even though I began to believe in certain principles, I kept myself ignorant of the issues so that I couldn't engage in arguments in an 'informed' way (that might offend or damage my relationship with the 'opposition' – my parents). I didn't know or trust who I really was and the labels I earned did not help me build the self-confidence to explore.

One reason for not trusting our self is that we sometimes behave in ways that diverge from whom we think we are: a sudden outburst of anger, a shying away from commitment, a depression we do not understand. Another teacher, Tony Weller, introduced me to the notion of what is often called 'voice dialogue.' This is a way of inviting different aspects – voices – of ourselves that we might not have recognized as distinct to speak out. There are some archetypal 'voices' that most of us carry, such as the critic (of ourselves or others), the 'wounded' child, the angelic, the judge, the angry one/Witch or Demon, the Protector (who might have been born when we were three or five to ensure that we didn't get into too much trouble) or the nurturing parent of our self. Guides can help us to recognize the polarities that create a schism inside, the more dominant of which often keeps the less dominant suppressed until it becomes emotionally possible to speak out.

By inviting a group member to take a seat as the self they present in everyday life and to move physically to a different position for each voice that is invited to speak (standing behind, sitting on the floor or beside), it is remarkable how not-previously recognized voices can emerge. And the often-conflicting messages each conveys help clarify why certain confusions or conflicts exist inside. Daring to do this exercise witnessed by others who respectfully listen to the 'dialogue' can relieve any shame for inconsistent behavior (that could come across as inauthenticity) and allow for greater awareness – and then greater consistency and trust in self. This often elicits insights for the witnesses too, as they begin to understand how their different voices have impacted their decisions, lives and conflicts.

This represents another step in creating trust among group members as well as self-trust for the person daring to reveal these previously disowned voices. It generates insight into how and why each voice might have been born, allowing for curiosity rather than shame or fear. The group's admiration for the courage it took to engage in the process is reaffirming to that individual. When such disowned 'voices' suddenly speak out without awareness, it can be frightening and alarming to their 'owner' and to others.



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On the contrary, understanding and allowing others to understand the source can lead to compassion for oneself and from others for the pain that caused it. This, then, further fosters a sense of group safety such that the other members are willing to risk more exploration of the ways that previous traumas have caused them to close off parts (voices) of themselves.

As the group bond strengthens, and access to all kinds of feelings – joyful as well as painful – grow, people even laugh and joke with each other about, for example, “Oh that was just my Witch speaking up to protect me!” Or “Don’t mind me, I’m just bumbling around in my Wounded Child today.” Once the vocabulary of these voices is learned, we can become witnesses to them – recognize them and give them the attention they need – rather than be consumed by them and act as though whichever one is in the ascendency at the moment is our whole self.

The increasingly safe container of the retreat becomes a practice ground for trying out new ways of being one’s full, vulnerable and authentic self, able to live the purpose one has been longing to manifest. Ways that allow more fully inhabiting the body through different kinds of movements that stretch and flow, for reveling in rather than feeling ashamed of what is, after all, our home.

Another source of lack of self-trust is low self-esteem: we were not treated with respect as a child or young adult and were blamed for mistakes, leading us to believe we are not good enough. We internalize these beliefs and compensate either by appearing arrogant and all-knowing or by not taking risks that might expose our ‘unworthy’ self by remaining silent, joking our way through complicated situations, reacting harshly or being hypersensitive to criticism. All of these ‘strategies’ or forms of self-protection are likely to lead others to mistrust the self they experience as inauthentic. The others, in turn, might avoid seeking greater intimacy with us or engage in their own protective behavior to prevent themselves from feeling unsafe.

But this potentially negative spiral can be counteracted as the person who feels unworthy comes to feel safe enough in the presence of the guides and, increasingly, with other

members of the group, to own and express the underlying reason for the behaviors that protect them from exposure. This can have an immediate effect on the listeners, as they feel the truth of the insight expressed. And the person expressing the feelings and the resulting insight is reassured by the support of the group.

The role of the guide is not to interpret so much as to facilitate the emerging understanding through questions and empathic body language. This protects space for the person's feelings to emerge while guarding against too much unintentionally smothering support from group members. By this time, their hearts are liable to be so open from witnessing the risk taking that they want to surround the person with love and encouragement – but thereby risk disallowing the full expression of the pain being released that must precede the relief. There will be time for hugging and celebration later.

To be willing to take such a risk, however, especially after living for years with the belief that one needs that particular protection, the cost of hiding behind it must have become unbearable. My husband and co-guide Barry Walker, after hearing a person tell how she has tried to keep herself safe all that time, congratulates her on executing such a successful strategy. For it has protected her.

But these strategies are often constructed by a younger self when there really was no other way of ensuring protection. So his next question, depending on the circumstances, may be “So what is that costing you now?” Usually, the fact that she decided to come to the retreat means that something is not working for her, even if she doesn't know exactly what it is. And often it is that she has indeed outgrown the need for that protection that had served her well for so long and is feeling suffocated by it. Then this becomes the moment and the setting to explore alternatives that fit better with the purpose and person she is becoming – taking off that clunky old armor, as one participant characterized it, and designing more of a sleek, close-fitting chain mail singlet that can be worn comfortably under clothes, and even shed sometimes.

The increasingly safe container of the retreat, then, becomes a practice ground for trying out new ways of being one's full, vulnerable and authentic self, able to live the purpose one has been longing to manifest. Ways that allow more fully inhabiting the body through different kinds of movements that stretch and flow, for reveling in rather than feeling ashamed of what is, after all, our home. Ways that allow full and deep breathing and becoming aware when a stressful situation causes the breath to become shallow and short. Ways that allow verbal expression, through song, shouts of joy, pain and rage, tears of shame, whispers of endearment, to lessen the holding of all that inside a sort of prison. Ways that allow for intermittent tears and laughter to flow, sometimes one right into the other.



Alone In the Arms of the Mother – The Natural World

All of the above practices and exercises could technically be done inside the confines of a room. But having access to the world outdoors, especially a part of the world that resounds with insect and bird sounds, the flow of water in a tiny rivulet or rushing river, the sweep of sky that changes constantly, the nearness of trees, the whiff of breeze or the pelting of rain – this expands the palette of possibilities exponentially! For back to the time when our predecessors were single-cell creatures, this planet has been our home, on whose belly we were born, from whose plant and animal creatures we have been nourished and on whose body we draw our last breath and disintegrate back into her ample abode.

For those millions of us who spend our lives in boxes built upon cement that mostly cover up her spongy or rocky exterior, the rich biodiversity of textures, sounds and smells which comprise Her can feel alienating, frightening, even offensive. And for anyone who has experienced the violence of her fiercest storms, volcanic explosions or unexpected floods, She can be a source of terror.

If we are able to surrender to the mysteries of that which we cannot know, relax onto Her body as a child nestles into the soft breast of its mother, open all our senses to Her messages which the logical mind cannot comprehend, then we can find a source of comfort and safety, open our selves to new ways of knowing much deeper than the messages that our constricted and often-frightened minds can offer us.

This is not an easy place for most of us to reach, especially if we have been separated from spending time in Her realms. But arriving there is part of the process of finding a deeper, longer-lasting sense of safety – in our self, in the group and on the land.

We begin the first day of the retreat with invitations to go outdoors, to breathe deeply the delicious air, walk to the river or any other source of water. From the beginning we introduce rituals and ceremonies of gratitude as we go out – inviting people to create a threshold for their walk which we encourage them not cross until they receive a sign from Her that she accepts our presence on Her body: the buzz of a bee, a bird's sound; anything that our **imagination** can interpret as the affirmation we seek. For it is the freeing of the imagination to take in messages beyond those the rational mind can comprehend that opens our hearts and minds. It is a return to the imagination of the child – the Wild and Magical Child that has survived against all odds somewhere inside.

We prepare to awaken the imagination through the work of moving from judgment (based on fear) to curiosity, creating a safety in the group that accompanies us out of doors. We

do this through reading poetry, loving kindness meditations, dancing to music that energizes the body. Anything that calms the logical mind and leaves space to begin to **flow** with the larger “Is-ness” of everything.

And then we invite people to take a question or an issue that has been worrying or paining them out onto the land with them. It could be something as abstract as “What am I going to do with the persistent Wounded Child of myself that keeps pestering me?” Or as concrete (and scary) as “What shall I do about my seemingly failing relationship with my partner?” We guides offer cues as to how to understand the language of the Earth and Her creatures: not to expect the response to come in the language we speak every day; to soften our gaze, open our ears and pay attention to anything we see: a dragonfly flitting across our face, a red stone glittering at us on our path, the way a breeze makes the damp spider web sway and its strands shine in the sun.

In his marvelous poem “The Guest House,” the Sufi poet Rumi says that “for each has been sent as a guide from beyond.” As people return from their walk, we ask them to tell of these encounters with the beyond. The meaning may not be clear to them at first but we encourage them to write these ‘messages’ down nonetheless.

The emphasis is not on the walking but on *being* on the land, listening deeply to it and to ourselves, paying attention, expressing gratitude, asking for permission, for advice, appreciating.

The first three days of the retreat are preparation for the deep dive in the days camping alone in the mountains. This challenge becomes less frightening as the walks in the days leading up to it familiarize them somewhat with the landscape. By then they have walked alone and in pairs, sometimes for just a few minutes, others for an hour or more; the emphasis not being on the walking but on *being* on the land, listening deeply to it and to ourselves, paying attention, expressing gratitude, asking for permission, for advice, appreciating.

All but the most resistant to letting in the magic of the wild will have had at least one experience of something that has given them an insight, that seems like a sign, that feels like proof of the great love our Earth has for us by that time. And that in itself provides a layer of safety that goes a long way toward finding the courage to take the leap into what initially may feel lonely during the subsequent days.



Being Alone

“Being alone is a difficult discipline: a beautiful and difficult sense of being solitary is always the ground from which we step into a contemplative intimacy with the unknown, but the first portal of aloneness is often experienced as a gateway to alienation, grief and abandonment. To find ourselves alone or to be left alone is an ever present, fearful and abiding human potentiality of which we are often unconsciously, and deeply afraid.” — David Whyte⁵

For some people, being alone may be a source of safety while being with others can bring on fears or anxiety. But for many, the prospect of being alone, especially in a strange new place, arouses a whole panoply of fears as widely ranging as being attacked, getting lost, feeling that what may come up can’t be dealt with without external support or of not knowing how to handle the exigencies of daily life. Hence the prospect of time alone in the wilderness can bring up all sorts of old traumas.

In the spring of the year 2000 I once again followed my brother Richard’s lead and signed up for a weeklong meditation retreat led by Jon Kabat-Zinn and Saki Santorelli. It was torture for most of the time. Every time I closed my eyes I felt consumed by anxiety. We were guided to breathe, which eventually helped, but it wasn’t until the very last meditation that this poem, which explained the source of the anxiety flowed out through my pen:

5 David Whyte. *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*. (Langley, Washington: Many Rivers, 2014.)

ALONE

*“Go to bed”, the voice
so cold. It’s dark in here
and I’m alone, don’t want to sleep
or close my eyes. “Don’t close
the door!”*

*I am alone. I turn
to toys or slip the hidden book
into my bed. They are my friends.
A sudden noise, the door ajar.
I’m caught! A naughty girl.
My friends are gone. I am
alone.*

*I stumble into bodily
delights. A hole appears
inside the wall. A window glass
with curtains only on the other side.
The eye that peers at me
from time to time is not a friend.
I am alone. I touch myself
and smile. A beating on the glass.
I’m caught! A naughty girl.
Now I am gone. I am alone.
I close my eyes to meditate.
It’s dark in here. I am alone.
My thoughts and worries
comfort me. I rap quite sharply
on the pane, tell them to go away.
I am a naughty girl. I am alone.*

*But every now and then a hand
reached out, not to surprise
me with an opened door nor catch
me, curtain pulled aside.
Just every now and then that voice
would comfort me with soothing words,
that hand caressed my back and then
I let the toys go, didn’t mind the dark.
I wasn’t naughty or alone, but loved.
Now, panicked by the dark, my throat
constricted against crying out, I fumble
for my toys: my worries, lists and fears.
I say them to myself again, again.
A voice appears. It is the one that came
To me just every now and then.
“Darling,” it says, “I’m here with you.”
It is my breath. She comforts me.
She’s always there caressing me.
She sweeps in at the slightest cry,
calming my very airways with her warmth.
And then: I let her go. But she comes back
again, again. She’s with me even in the dark.
My toys no longer cling to me or I to them.
I let my breath sweep in, ease out;
I let her go. But she returns.
I choose to close my eyes and she’s still there.
I am myself and not alone.*



The memory of being inexplicably separated from Richard into different bedrooms at age six came back to me with all the pain and terror I had felt at the time. For years afterwards I could not stand to be home alone. This affected my choices – including needing to stay in one relationship long past its expiration date until I could shift immediately into a new one. It even pursued me into this retreat where I was, in fact, in a room with others – but alone behind my closed eyes. With the help of the guided breathing and the week of practice, this association that had been hidden from me until the poem erupted, arose and took away the old trauma of a young child.

Having already been living alone in Montana for several years by the time of my first wilderness retreat, and with this insight behind me, helping me connect the original trauma of being separated from someone with whom I felt safe with some of my former compensatory behavior to avoid being alone, I was able to fully immerse myself in the amazing deliciousness of feeling accompanied by myself – and the land around me.

We encourage people to leave behind anything that would distract them from their time alone on the land – including electronic toys and even food. Fasting eliminates the need to spend time preparing or eating food. And as hunger transforms to a dreamlike state from which meditation is easier and the urge to ‘do’ recedes, so do impediments or defenses against insights surfacing disappear.

Rituals, such as reading poetry, singing and dancing, help free us from the logical brain’s constraints and harsh judgments. We offer an array of these to support people to peel away the layers of what might be called ‘ego’ to get to the deeper levels that invite rediscovery of our deepest purpose – before traumas, obligations and needs for navigating everyday life interfered and the shoulds and oughts came to dictate life decisions.

While all this ‘nothing’ is happening, of course so much is going on. This is on the inside, as people get used to being in a tent and the area immediately surrounding it. It is equally true outside the tent, where they soon realize they are not alone at all, if only they can change their definition of what/who qualifies as company. From this state, some chronic fears simply evaporate. One person who had lived with a terror of mice and anything resembling them, found herself surrounded by chipmunks, often viewed as adorable little creatures. Initially feeling she could not leave her tent, by simply observing them and their daily patterns, she allowed to blossom a feeling of familiarity and comfort – that they were simply fellow creatures on this Earth.

Many others place their initial fears on the fact that they are sharing the ecosystem with animals like wolves, bears, even reclusive wolverines and mountain lions. In all the years of holding these retreats, only two mountain lions have ever been seen, very few bears and no wolves. The initial startle reflex triggered by any cracking stick or unaccustomed sound almost always is transformed to a sense of wonder – *that we are actually a part*

of Wild Nature rather than separate from it; that there is a larger whole that surrounds us, even protects us and helps heal us from traumas that have gone before. Sinking into deep meditation, prayer, chanting, singing or drumming further calms our nervous system. This, then, makes it easier for us to remember to return to the deep breathing, sounding and moving to free ourselves to feel whatever is left for us to explore (in this infinitely supportive and loving environment) that has been preventing us from becoming our fullest, most compassionate, grateful selves, available to serve with love.

This is not to say that this part of the journey is easy. The surrounding hills often vibrate with the brave and difficult inner work people are doing – their tears, shouts, laments and beating of drums. But by laying themselves bare to allow pain and remembering to surface and be fully felt through, many shed it into the body of the Earth, free themselves from much of it and become more available to understand and pursue their rediscovered soul's purpose. For they come to see that they are *really not alone but surrounded by the life force of the Planet and its creatures.*

The Earth and however each one of us defines the Divine, do not love us back and take care of us for the amount of love and devotion we show them, but because they embody Love itself. That Love is infinite and as we learn to feel it and its infinite nature, we learn to let it replenish us over and over.

The kind of love they receive and then are more able to offer is transpersonal: not dependent on human conditional, personal love, wherein our offering love depends on getting back what we receive. The Earth and however each one of us defines the Divine, do not love us back and take care of us for the amount of love and devotion we show them, but because they embody Love itself. That Love is infinite and as we learn to feel it and its infinite nature, we learn to let it replenish us over and over. This then becomes the reassurance to our Wounded Child, for whom even our adult human love will never provide enough comfort.

The Return

The images the participants bring back in their stories of time on the land – whether of the small herd of deer that resided near their campsite and appeared each day, or the gloriousness of the setting sun on the day they finally felt freed up from underlying worries, or



even surviving a sudden hail- or snowstorm, once even an earthquake, while remaining cozy and warm inside their sleeping bag in the tent that has temporarily been their home – become permanently engraved in their memories. These serve as images to return to when the old stories threaten to return them to the stuck place from which they are in the process of escaping.

For no matter how much transformation happens, the old patterns and fears are still somewhere engraved on our very cells. The traumas did occur! The difference is that we come to understand them, often by reliving them in the context of the safe container of the group, the guides and, mainly, the land. We update our Protectors to allow more fluidity of response. We carve out new brain pathways that allow the images of what we have learned is a larger truth through this time on retreat to override the old stories which no longer hold the whole picture.

But to do this, we need to commit to engaging in the practices we have learned that can get us out of the holes that were dug into our psyches and bodies: the noticing and deciding, the breathing, moving, sounding and feeling. And we commit to ongoing engagement with people who have shared their journey by communicating in ‘soul talk.’ This helps us stay away from the superficial and sometimes not completely authentic chitchat that could cause us to slide back into the old patterns.

We spend a day together in the mountains telling the stories of their time alone and experiencing having them reflected back by the guides. The guides have been tracking the deeper meaning of the images from the wild they have recounted since the beginning. The mirroring of their stories is intended to ground them through imagery in how they have traveled into this new way of being, feeling, listening and speaking.

Over the last two days of the retreat participants make commitments to practices that will create space in their daily routines to enable them to continue on the path of growth toward **servicing with love**. And the chat group established as the group disbands, as well as occasional in-person or virtual reunions (including those from other retreat groups) serve as reminders of where they arrived by the end and how to return to that place when they get retriggered or fall back into the demands of daily responsibilities.

This is not a one-time fix, however. Rather it requires continuous practice to reassure the old (young) voices when they arise that that is the old story and that now we have new ways to calm our fears, surface and face our shame, work through our grief with patience and self-compassion and honor our rage by letting it out in safe ways that do no harm to our self or others.

Through these ongoing practices, we can increasingly manage the circumstances which trigger the old traumas and return to the place of servicing with love.

Taking Our Wholeness Out Into the World

By coming to a place of wanting to serve and by learning to listen deeply, we prepare ourselves to participate in the healing that we all so need. We become bridging leaders with the capacity to reach across divides to bring others together to co-create innovative solutions.

A Gift

The song “How Could Anyone”⁶ by Alaskan singer/songwriter Libby Roderick exemplifies the words we all need to hear and the stance we become able to take with others who are seeking to arrive at or return to this place:

*“How could anyone ever tell you
You were anything less than beautiful?
How could anyone ever tell you
You were less than whole?
How could anyone fail to notice
That your loving is a miracle?
How deeply you’re connected to my soul.”*

These are the words we needed to see reflected in the eyes of a loving parent when we were born. And to the extent that that didn’t happen, they are what we need to feel from others – be they pets, family members, teachers, beloved friends or partners. Ultimately, they are words we need to be able to communicate to our self.

But given the imperfection and conditionality of human love, it is our connectedness to a Larger Whole that allows us to find safety and refuge in the unconditional nature of that Infinite Love. Having received that love at birth or later in life, we become able to embody that with others – at least some of the time – in ways that build trust and confidence that it is indeed possible to do in small groups and communities.

And eventually, as more and more humans build the kind of safe and loving communities where this is true, we will be able to bridge across the larger divides in the world. We will be able to come together and heal as humans, to overcome poverty, injustice and exclusion and to collaborate with Earth, our Great Mother, to recover what can be saved from the loss of biodiversity and the effects of carbon emissions we humans have wrought.

So let us come together as hummingbirds, as ants – and yes, as humans – to each do our part, for ourselves, for and with each other, future generations and our planet.

⁶ “How Could Anyone” was first recorded by Libby Roderick on her album *If You See a Dream* in 1990 and is now available on the recording “How Could Anyone”; listen at syngs.info/lrhca. Learn more about the song and its use worldwide at libbyroderick.com/how-could-anyone.



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TEXT

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HOW COULD ANYONE

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From the recording “How Could Anyone”

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