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Master's Project: Cultivating Sacred Relationship: Learning Through Love and Tension in an Interconnected World

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CULTIVATING SACRED RELATIONSHIP:
LEARNING THROUGH LOVE AND TENSION IN AN INTERCONNECTED
WORLD

A Project Presented

by

Colin Arisman

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science Specializing in Leadership for Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This capstone project is an experimental inquiry and storytelling process focused on building relationships within a participatory learning ecology centered on love, mystery and reciprocity. Through personal experience, I explore how engaging with tension and equity protocols in our relationships can challenge forces of oppression.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT AND GOALS

1.1. Introduction

When I was five, my father and mother made the decision to move from Washington D.C. to rural Vermont. My parents say that they saw something in my love of this new wooded landscape and could not imagine me sitting in a classroom all day. My mother worked from home as a professional artist and decided to homeschool me. For the next eight years I spent the bulk of my time exploring alone outside, playing deep in my imagination, creating, drawing, reading or talking with my parents. Our family didn't have aunts, uncles, grandparents or cousins around, and we lacked community connections in our early years. I had a few childhood friends, but with my brother in college and my father at work in Montpelier, most of my early years were either alone or with my mom.

I believe that this spacious period was deeply formative. Without the constraints of schedules, social pressures of school culture and a fixed curriculum, my sovereignty and “ways of knowing” blossomed in a personally unique and tender way. This period instilled in me a particular understanding and loving connection to the land, my parents and myself. However, this learning took place in isolation, and what surface area I had with community outside the home was in homogeneous, white, rural Vermont.

My family is deeply skeptical of the values and politics of white, mainstream America. I think this shaped a particular way in which I came to view our family as outsiders, examining the pathology of a human system that we saw ourselves as separate from. This shaped an unconscious way in which I came to see the world through the lens of a researcher. I believed that most of what I wanted to learn about the world or change

in myself could be achieved through personal experience, discipline, observation or research via reading and films. However, I failed to understand how deeply my lens, behaviors and epistemology was shaped by this white cultural system in which I was rooted.

I was grateful for my circumstance and independence but my childhood was deeply melancholy in a way that I couldn't put my finger on. For all the abundance in my family, there were limited forms of community capital and I had a painfully barren awareness of myself as a detail of the human collective, landscape and cosmos (UVM Masters in Leadership for Sustainability, 2018). My way of being was rooted in individuality.

When I was eighteen years old, I had an unexpected encounter with “mystery”. Lying in early winter snow under an intensely starry sky, I felt for a few brief moments my being expand beyond the confines of my body, beyond the limitations of time, form and space into a sense of oneness and connection with all life. While it remains clear to me that the wisdom and beauty of this encounter are not to be decoded or interpreted, the gifts of this experience have fueled my curiosity, learning, aspirations, wellbeing and relationships over the last decade.

This experience opened up new possibilities and dimensions of relationship between myself and the world around me that I had never before imagined. I understand now that this moment was an invitation into a new way of being connected to a community of life that is much larger than my ego and individuality. This launched me on a decade long learning journey. And yet I am coming to understand that I have followed this thread with a mindset still deeply informed by white, settler epistemologies.

I have believed that the primary way to continue honoring and embodying this encounter of oneness was to absorb more experience and knowledge, often from cultures outside my own and wisdom traditions that embraced visionary experience. I brought this approach to my capstone project, with the hope of engaging with “ways of knowing” that could be of service to healing a settler culture that I viewed as toxic, and with the aspiration of deepening my own relationship with mystery.

However, I sensed the limitations of this approach, and sought relationships that could challenge my existing mental models with the goal of more powerfully expressing the gifts of that encounter ten years ago, and “my own unique potential to create conditions for all life to thrive” (UVM Masters in Leadership for Sustainability, 2018). This capstone project has profoundly challenged my existing beliefs, epistemologies, and goals. I have gained a new awareness of the way in which my own transactional patterns perpetuate oppression and limit my relationships.

My goals are shifting from self-improvement to deepening relationships through trust and reciprocity. Critical to this process has been prioritizing patience, equity and relationship protocols of introduction, invitation and permission (Kolan, 2017). The curriculum and core practices of UVM’s Masters in Leadership for Sustainability (2018) program has also deeply influenced the development of this relationship framework. The biggest turn for myself has been in trusting that, if I am in reciprocal relationship with all life, that the teachings, wisdom and relationships that I aspire to embody, are gifts that will reveal themselves on their own time, and on their own terms.

This work is incomplete and will be lifelong, but this capstone process has been an opportunity to build rich relationships, gain self awareness, disrupt old patterns, practice new ways of being, and track my new learning edges.

1.2. Core Aspiration

My capstone project aspiration is to cultivate sacred relationships with humans that are centered around love, wisdom and mystery within a participatory learning ecology that prioritizes equity and reciprocity.

1.3. Goals

My goals include growth and inquiry in the following focus areas, and are influenced by the language and framework of the Leadership for Sustainability Masters Program or MLS (UVM Masters in Leadership for Sustainability, 2018). These are:

- Strengthen networks of human relationships rooted in the sacred, spiritual practice, gratitude, the unseen, and a beyond human-centric connection with the web of life
- While engaging in complex cross-cultural exchange, understand my positionality as a white-male-settler, and attend to dynamics of power, privilege, historical trauma, cultural appropriation and white supremacy
- Identify and utilize alternative research methodologies that prioritize reciprocity, while also reducing the risk of extraction, transactional exchange and objectification
- Engage with tension, incommensurability and difference across relationship as generative opportunities for growth and transformation
- Practice patience and moving at the speed of trust in relationship

- Chronicle blind spots and European cultural patterns, including binary comparative thinking, individualism and perfectionism, and track the intellectual, spiritual and creative breakthroughs that allow me to move beyond these relational limitations
- Enhance my ability to communicate the value of liberatory leadership that integrates spiritual practice, social justice and sustainability
- Activate the heart and animate the spirit in pursuit of the greater aspiration of restoring ecological balance and ending human suffering (Kolan & Sullivan TwoTrees, 2014)

1.4. Relational Context

I will look back on my capstone as being a marker of a rigorous period of inquiry, practice, growth and relationship building. However, it is not useful to view this project as an intellectual endeavour, separate from the rest of my personal, spiritual or community life. These friendships, challenges, musings and revelations are core to who I am, and will continue to be at the heart of what I honor and wrestle with well after my graduation.

In this paper I share my reflections and experience engaging with teachings tied to long lineages of wisdom. This report is not meant to convey new findings or research, rather it is intended to tell some of the story of my transformation through building trust across difference, and incorporating new protocols in relationships and new forms of spiritual practice into my life. I am grateful for those who have kept this wisdom alive in the world, and taken the time and care to share teachings with me that are helping me to show up more fully in relationship.

The stories and conversations that I share in this paper are grounded in mutual understanding that all life is connected and that my individual actions and conditions are linked to the wellbeing of the whole. Within this relational perspective, a person's understanding of humanity is tied to awareness of the landscape in which they exist. With this ecological perspective there is evidence that “greater diversity often correlates to a more healthy, resilient, and flexible ecosystem” (Kolan & Sullivan TwoTrees, 2014, p.3).

Within the MLS community, this shared appreciation of diversity is critical context for not only approaching cultural and spiritual difference, but also engaging with tension within coaching relationships. My self awareness and understanding of positionality are deeply informed by the reflection and feedback of my community. As Sullivan TwoTrees & Kolan (2016) write, “It Takes Two to Know One” (p. 4).

It is challenging and risky to explore non-Western wisdom and spiritual practices within academia and white settler spaces. There is uncertainty and danger in bringing such personal beliefs into a public space. Additionally, the relationship of white researchers with wisdom traditions has been fraught with abuse and extraction. Addressing this colonial legacy of trauma and harm within my inquiry process was a major consideration in my capstone and coaching relationships.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith has provided important contributions to this topic and explores the inextricable link between research and European imperialism and colonialism in her book “Decolonizing Methodologies”. Smith (2012) writes, “The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. The ways in which

scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. (p. 1)"

A potential pitfall of my capstone relates to the way in which growth, transformation and learning can become distorted through the ego centered process of self-improvement. Chögyam Trungpa (2002) offered formative teachings around this concept in the book "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism". Chögyam Trungpa (2002) stated, "We can deceive ourselves into thinking we are developing spiritually when instead we are strengthening our egocentricity through spiritual techniques. This fundamental distortion may be referred to as spiritual materialism. (p. 3)"

To minimize perpetuating spiritual materialism and extraction of spiritual techniques, it has been important to establish protocols around the exchange of teachings and relationships between myself and coaches. Additionally, it was crucial to have clear boundaries between the capstone project and dimensions of my own spiritual practice. My project was deeply influenced by the teaching that "spirit does not follow a timeline." Initially, I had articulated goals for developing certain relationships and engaging in ceremonial practice in connection with my capstone project. However, academic requirements and deadlines are often incompatible with the mysterious, nonlinear nature of the sacred. This teaching was an influential protocol in fostering human relationships that were multidimensional and deepened at the speed of trust. The risk of building relationships via research tied to deliverables is that these relationships can become transactional, and objectify those who support the inquiry process.

I was challenged to think critically about intentions, practices, protocols and creative expressions that were appropriate given the academic housing of this project.

The book “Of Water and the Spirit” by Malidoma Patrice Somé (1994) has been influential to my understanding of the way in which magic and mystery can be diminished and constrained by the English language, and the singular, rational lens of many white scholars. Thus, great care must be taken if there is to be a generative public conversation and scholarly analysis of sacred terrain. For this capstone it was important to distinguish which of my aspirations extended beyond the scope of this project, and which aspects could be engaged appropriately in scholarly inquiry.

My perspective was influenced by Shadiin Garcia (2018), who contends that deep scholarly analysis can be sacred. I agree with her perspective that articulating our thoughts, research, inquiry and reflection can be a sacred process when it challenges forces of oppression and honors multi-dimensionality. I believe that there is potential to disrupt patterns of oppression within academia by prioritizing relationship protocols, rather than the ideologies of capitalism and whiteness that most often receive the greatest weight and space within the university.

As Kolan and TwoTrees write in their article “Privilege as Practice”, the work is “most effective when used alongside intercultural skills and learning experiences that activate the heart and animate the spirit.” Exploring equitable approaches to activating the heart and animating the spirit are core to my capstone project.

1.5. Intellectual & Spiritual Inspirations

This capstone project is deeply informed by the coaching of Kaylynn Sullivan TwoTrees. I am grateful for TwoTrees’ patience, generosity, reflections, feedback and loving support. Additionally, I would like to express gratitude to Matthew Haar Farris, Matt Kolan and Emil Tsao for sharing teachings, coaching and reflections. Through

numerous email exchanges, calls and in-person meetings with these gifted individuals, I have been challenged and inspired by new dimensions of learning and perspectives on relationship building.

My thought was also informed by TwoTrees and Kolan's collaborative writing. In "The Trees Are Breathing Us", TwoTrees & Kolan (2016), present a beautiful example of the strengths and gifts that can emerge from engaging with "difference" while building relationships committed to the thriving of all life. Their paper "Privilege as Practice" presents a framework to understand how "diversity, power and privilege operate in social-ecological systems" (Kolan & Sullivan TwoTrees, 2014). Also foundational to this capstone inquiry is the curriculum and public aspirations of the MLS program (UVM Masters in Leadership for Sustainability, 2018).

Additionally, my relationship with Matthew Haar Farris has enriched this capstone project. Matthew's dissertation "Participatory Wisdom In Religious Studies" powerfully explores "the art of living" in a sacred world, while illuminating the limitations of contemporary academic norms (Farris, 2010). His aspiration "to promote scholarship as spiritual practice or philo-sophia, i.e. the love and pursuit of wisdom" (Farris, 2010, p. i), is deeply intertwined with my own capstone inquiry.

I have become more aware of the ways in which academic citation can perpetuate the theft of knowledge, teachings and personal sovereignty. Tuck, Yang, & Gaztambide-Fernández (2015), have challenged academics to think more critically about the ways in which citations can perpetuate patterns of inequity within scholarly work. In their "Citation Practices Challenge", Tuck, Yang, & Gaztambide-Fernández (2015) state, "Consider what you might want to change about your academic citation practices. Who

do you choose to link and re-circulate in your work? Who gets erased? Who should you stop citing?”

In conversation with my coaches I have carefully considered the dynamics of referencing “teachings”, and casting people as informants within this project. Thus, I have prioritized honoring the lineage and relationships through which the teachings were transmitted, rather than repeatedly citing the source of an idea through referencing personal communications.

CHAPTER 2: STRATEGIES & METHODS

2.1. Theory of Change & Leverage Points

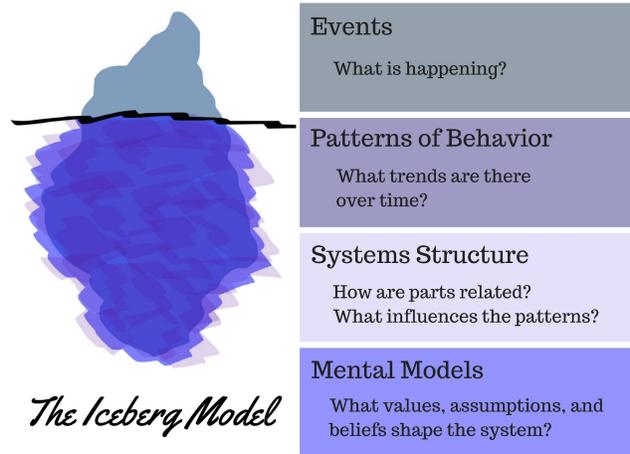
I believe that to disrupt the forces of oppression that harm ecological communities in the land defined by the political boundaries of the United States, settlers must become consciously aware of the ways in which relational patterns of occupation, domination and extraction continue to perpetuate white supremacy within the mainstream. I believe that one way to disrupt these harmful patterns is by cultivating sacred relationships centered around spiritual practice, reciprocity and trust. This belief is influenced by the writing of Martín Prechtel (2013), in his book “Secrets of the Talking Jaguar. Prechtel’s experience as a community leader in a Mayan village, illustrates the way in which love, healing and magic were powerful forms of resistance against the genocidal campaign of the government of Guatemala during the Guatemalan Civil War (Prechtel, 2003).

Since the beginning of colonization in North America, European settlers have accrued power and unearned privilege through the exploitation of resources, including human labor, land, water and non-human creatures (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Inherent

within this history of domination has been a strategic effort by colonizing forces to create a homogenous capitalist culture. This transactional system prioritizes competitive individualism and favors the wellbeing of self over the other.

George Monbiot (2016) contends that today, neoliberalism has become so pervasive, that many white people in the U.S. fail to recognize it as an ideology. Monbiot (2016) writes, “Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. We appear to accept the proposition that this utopian, millenarian faith describes a neutral force; a kind of biological law, like Darwin’s theory of evolution. But the philosophy arose as a conscious attempt to reshape human life and shift the locus of power.”

Systems theorists like Donella Meadows recognize that mental models (cultural beliefs and values) are the bedrock that dictate both individual patterns of behavior and collective actions (Meadows & Wright, 2009). Across the diversity of human cultures



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exist thousands of distinct mental models and unique ways of relating to the seen and unseen world. It is clear in nature that diversity and symbiotic relationships create vibrance and resilience within systems, but totalitarian structures of supremacy seek to convert complex relational cultures into ideological monocultures (like neoliberalism) that better serve the central state.

While relational cultures are unique and highly differentiated in their expression, characteristics such as gift economies, reciprocity, trust and a cosmology of interconnection between all life can disrupt the ideologies of white supremacy. In her book “An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the U.S.”, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) provides numerous examples of the ways in which european settlers have attempted to oppress reciprocal ways of being through cultural genocide, destabilizing communities of resistance, and repressing the emergence of mental models that prioritize the principles of interdependence, differentiation, and compassion.

The erasure of relational cultures in North America has been systematic. There are many examples of this oppression, including repression of native language, utilizing boarding schools to disrupt the transmission of indigenous culture, repressing the gift exchange of potlatch ceremonies, and dismantling multicultural maroon communities of Africans, European laborers and displaced Native people during the early colonial era (Dean, 2018). However, white supremacy is not relegated to these historical examples. Today, efficiency, cash economies and exploitation of resources and labor have been normalized and preferenced within white, neocolonial culture in the United States. Within the mainstream group, good intentions are not enough to prevent the perpetuation of these internalized colonial patterns. The mainstream, white settler group that I am part of is often unaware of the transactional and extractive motives that underlie our relationships, and the extent to which we have internalized this colonial ideology.

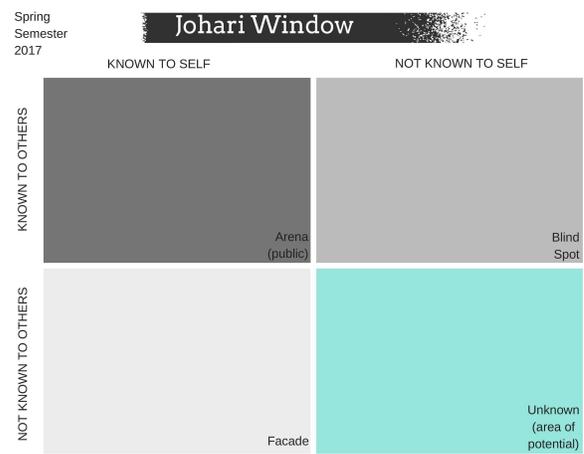
As a white settler committed to collective liberation, my intention through my capstone practice was to become more self aware of my own deep mental models. I want to interrupt my own patterns of behavior related to competitive individualism,

transactional exchange and the extractive tendency to ask “what will I will get out of this?” (Sullivan TwoTrees & Kolan, 2016). Today, reciprocal ways of knowing and relating are alive and thriving within marginalized subgroups. However, members of the white mainstream often lack awareness of the history of erasure and the survival of relational ways of being that exist within communities at the margins.

Through this project I have become more fully aware of how I continue to perpetuate systems of oppression by embodying transactional and extractive patterns within my relationships. The internalized mental models that lead me to perpetuate extraction are often unconscious and insidious. Becoming consciously aware of these patterns is a challenging process that requires artful reflection and tension within a loving community.

For a white male like myself it has been especially challenging to decouple from these destructive and limiting relationship patterns because of an ingrained identity of superiority. Shifting deep and often unconscious mental models requires the humility to accept that my experiences, education, and good

intentions do not absolve me from the culture of domination in which I am nested, or from the capitalist patterns that I was normalized into. I found it critical to build connections with trusted coaches who could serve as mirrors and help me explore my relational blind spots (see the Johari’s window framework). The Johari window is a



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heuristic tool that was developed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955 (Self Awareness, 2013).

2.2. Methodology

My methodology was shaped by considerations of equity and reciprocity within relationships and the dynamics of my personal positionality, power and privilege.

Positionality refers to the notion that personal values and aspects of identity like gender, race and class influence how we understand the world. The scientific process is inherently influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher and it is essential to take into account personal positions before engaging in research, especially qualitative (Sánchez, 2010). Given the dynamics and subject area of my capstone inquiry, it is important to explicitly state a few aspects of my positionality. My identity markers include:

- European ancestry, white skin color
- Cisgendered male, hererosexual
- Educated through the graduate level and skilled in a professional trade
- Economically stable and mobile
- Citizen of the United States, a politically dominant country
- Mentally and physically healthy

These identity markers reveal that I have enormous unearned privilege. I need to attend carefully to power imbalances, equity and exchange in the context of cross-culture, historically charged subject matter. A major theme in my project was discerning

appropriate protocols and boundaries between myself and my coaches, and avoiding an extractive informant-researcher binary.

Audre Lorde (2018) lucidly stated that, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” There are powerful movements of resistance which exist within academia, including the work of indigenous scholars who are re-affirming indigenous perspectives and actively disrupting patterns of extraction inherently linked to colonial research methodologies. Important texts include “Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods” by Shawn Wilson’s (2008) and “Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples” by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012). As a white settler, I come at this work from a radically different background and perspective, but I aspire to be in solidarity with the inquiry of these scholars.

TwoTrees’ and Kolan’s framework “Privilege as Practice” has been influential as a methodology of “tending to the impacts of historical and present day forms of oppression and trauma.” I have tried to lean into the tension of this work, and that process has expanded my understanding of how I can utilize my position to benefit the health and well-being of the systems I inhabit.

I have also incorporated storytelling as a methodology within my capstone project. Methodologies that are centered on storytelling are relational and linked to participatory action research. Storytelling can circumvent limiting, singular Western worldviews that include dichotomous thinking, rationality, and individualism (Datta, 2017). Ranjan Datta notes “that traditional storytelling as a research method could lead to culturally appropriate research, build trust between participants and researcher and build a bridge between Western and Indigenous research”.

The field of participatory research has been developed to address dynamics of power and privilege between researchers and participants. There are numerous ways for researchers to hand power over to participants, including transferring control of the research agenda, process and actions (Participate, 2018). Similar to participatory research, my capstone project included primary inquiry, but also meta-level reflection on my own process and personal transformation.

Ultimately, while participatory research can reduce imbalances and extraction, the inherent relationship of a researcher and subject was inappropriate in many of the circumstances of my project. Throughout my project my methodological approach shifted as I received feedback from my coaches, and became more attuned to what was appropriate in the moment. My decision to move away from certain research methodologies was due in large part to dialogue with my coaches through which we clarified boundaries and re-iterated agreements.

Coaching remained an appropriate way to cultivate relationships and build trust, while continuing a collective inquiry process that resulted in insight and growth. Ultimately, my project was a hybrid of many of the methodologies described above. I often existed as both a researcher and participant as I explored my own blind spots and gained self-awareness.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

3.1. Coaching

The heart of my project was building relationships and gaining relational awareness through coaching. This practice was rigorous and consisted of eighteen phone

calls, four meetings, and three email exchanges with coaches, including TwoTrees, Matthew Haar Farris, Shadiin Garcia, Matt Kolan, Emil Tsao and Darcy Ottey. I would like to thank these individuals for the time, energy and love they put into coaching, dialogue and relationship building. I tracked these twenty five coaching sessions through note taking, and in order to process learnings, created space to reflect on conversations and harvest additional insights and emerging questions.

Throughout this process I not only paid attention to feedback and the intellectual exchanges taking place, but also to my internal conditions, including the challenge of working with tension, the bodily feeling of learning edges, my psycho-spiritual wellness and the abundance or deficit of love.

There were several significant turning points in my project that shifted my methods, action steps and deliverables. I think that these pivots reflected my willingness to work with tensions and feedback in a constructive way, remain open to emergence, and prioritize a commitment to my relationships and aspirations over predetermined outcomes.

I originally proposed for my capstone to be a personal rite of passage that I intended to document and share through my project. My proposal was very ambitious, expansive and sensitive culturally in its scope and context. However, I began to understand how the constraints of an academic timeline, setting and deliverables could take priority over the deep relational and spiritual practice that I had proposed. I ended up revising my proposal to focus on a series of interviews that explored my core questions and aspirations.

However, it was reflected to me that conducting an inquiry process into the sacred through an interview format would be fraught with issues. A critical moment in my project came when I was preparing to coordinate interviews and invite participants. I had consistently received feedback from coaches that due to the sensitivity of my project, I needed to ensure that my inquiry did not become extractive. While attention to flows of power, dynamics of privilege, reciprocity and equity were core intentions, I butted up against my own limitations in embodying these protocols. I attempted to invite TwoTrees to be a “subject” in the proposed research, and TwoTrees declined to be part of an interview in the form I described.

In retrospect it was obvious to me that the dynamics of an interview and the invitation I sent were not inline with my project protocols or my agreements with my coaches. These experiences were full of learning, but also uncomfortable for me. Staying committed to my aspirations for my project was much more emotionally demanding than I had anticipated. Revealing my blind spots brought up internal tension and emotions ranging from shame to frustration. An example of this was becoming consciously aware of, and grappling with, with my pattern of repeatedly creating researcher-informant dynamics, and being confused and disappointed with my failure to intervene in this pattern until after I would receive feedback. The tension in relationship through this project ended up being rich, humbling and generative. I can track myself becoming more consciously aware of internalized patterns and gaining a greater sense of discernment.

One of the hardest parts of the project for me was grappling with perfectionism, incommensurability, incompleteness and deliverables that felt intangible within the Western academic framework that I am accustomed to. There were moments of deep

confusion where I felt disoriented within a cloud of “unknown-unknowns”, grappling with intellectual frameworks that I had never navigated before. There were also moments of levity, clarity and happiness.

What allowed me to hang in through this process was the loving support and trust that I felt between myself and my coaching circle. Below are a few of the significant protocols that I embodied within my capstone project that increased my awareness and allowed me to cultivate stronger, more equitable relationships. I aspire to carry forward these practices into my future relationships:

- Transcending transactional relationships through an awareness of power flows and a commitment to avoiding extractive dynamics
- Moving at the speed of trust, practicing patience, prioritizing relationships over efficiency or outcomes, and attending to power and privilege in cross-cultural exchange
- Shifting from an ego centered “me” understanding to a “we” perspective and tracking how transformation ripples through the network of relationships around me

3.2. Creative Expression

A core part of my project was processing through creative expression and communication that was more than verbal. A culminating outcome of my capstone project was creating an ink and watercolor painting that mapped my inner spiritual landscape, positionality and relationships to the unseen and nature. This work includes coded markers of visions, dreams, and power symbols within my life. There are

overlapping and intersecting layers of meaning within the work that transcend dualism and linearity.

I wanted this work to convey my relationship to an ecology of spirit, in which forms of meaning and vision are not detached elements but rather intertwined, cyclical and simultaneously present. Making this piece was personally significant for me and many of these symbols and visions have never been expressed by me in the physical world before. Because this work of art conveys so much of my personal medicine, I don't feel it is prudent to share the work publicly by including it in an appendix. I believe that publicly displaying this work would risk endangering sacred relationships and aspects of my essential self. I am open to discussing viewing this work upon request.

3.4. OwnMostPlace Practice

Matthew Haar Farris introduced me to the OwnMostPlace practice. Building trust and relationship with Matthew has been a powerful opportunity to practice "Cultivating Sacred Relationship". We have had a series of call sessions and I have developed my own daily practice which has been consistent, powerful and transformative. I have logged my insights and experiences while practicing this spiritual technology.

Developing this internal practice has brought more grace into my life and allowed me to deepen my self awareness, connect to guidance larger than my ego, clarify my aspirations and focus my intentions. This spiritual technology has also deepened my relationship with mystery and given me a new avenue to be in conversation with the web of life. I have primarily utilized this practice in longer form, similar to sitting meditation. I have also begun employing this technology while running, and more spontaneously in

public moments (in meetings, before presentations or getting pulled over by the police) where I feel off center emotionally, anxious or in need of support.

The OwnMostPlace practice has increased my wellness through a greater awareness of the gifts in my life, rather than focussing on the deficiencies. I believe that acknowledging the abundance in our life is an important aspect of disrupting patterns of extraction and colonization that are rooted in a perpetual consumptive drive.

Additionally, this practice has oriented more deeply to an interconnected awareness of my position as one detail in the great web of life. I believe that living life within this relational orientation is integral to “Expressing my unique potential to create conditions for all life to thrive” (UVM Masters in Leadership for Sustainability, 2018).

CHAPTER 4: EVALUATION & ASSESSMENT

While writing the first iteration of my proposal, Shadiin Garcia advised that the measurable deliverable of my project will be the growth of my leadership skills. At the invitation of my coaches, this project has deprioritized the type of results that one can hold in their hands, and prioritized exploration and growth of leadership practices.

Mainstream culture often prioritizes the evaluation of effort through the lens of perceived quality, quantity and external recognition of a final product. Within this “results focused” criteria of evaluation, I could view my project as a failure. By shifting evaluative criteria to focus on measuring relationship building, it is evident that this

project has been intensive, focused and rich. In this way, I can see that shifting the criteria of evaluation is linked to shifting mental models.

Throughout my project my coaches reflected choices I made and language I used that perpetuated forms of extraction or domination, and which were not in alignment with my aspirations and goals. I tracked these assessments of my capstone as the project evolved, and I made an effort to work generatively with the tension of these constructive learnings. Some harmful patterns and blind spots continued to emerge throughout my project, the most significant of these assessments have been noted in this project report. A significant pattern that I wish to state here is around integrating reciprocity. I lean on this term consistently, but my full understanding of the ways in which reciprocity can show up in my life and relationships is limited. There were many times when my coaches reflected that my aspiration of relationship reciprocity was not showing up in the structure of my project. This pattern illustrates that I am still at a learning edge around this concept and that there are numerous layers that are yet to be revealed in how I can integrate reciprocity into my relationship protocols.

Below are a list of choices which I tracked and which I believe indicate my commitment to my capstone project:

- I was open to emergence in my project. I held my proposal loosely and allowed the project to grow and transform based on the feedback of my coaches.
- I was vulnerable and took healthy and appropriate emotional risks in relationship.
- I leaned into tension in my relationships with my coaches and practiced stamina and resilience. I engaged constructively with challenges that resulted in growth and insight.

- My project was consistently at my learning edge. I designed and followed through on a project that distanced me from tangible results and prioritized an attention to relationship.
- I was rigorous in my engagement with coaches and tracking, through reflection and harvesting these experiences.
- My spiritual practice linked to the capstone project has been powerful and transformative.
- My relationships grew through reciprocity and vulnerability. New connections emerged, and trust and resilience strengthened within existing relationships.
- I gained more awareness of relational blind spots. These learnings will aid me in showing up more equitably in future partnerships across difference.
- My coaches and I centered wellness and love within this inquiry process.
- I paid attention to dynamics of power and privilege and worked to correct course by honoring feedback, boundaries and protocols.

CHAPTER 5: NEXT STEPS & KEY LEARNINGS

At the heart of this project are a relational way of being, an interconnected orientation to all life, and a framework of relationship protocols. These learnings will take diligence, persistence and time to integrate more fully into my life after I graduate from the MLS program. These principles can be applied in nearly every facet of my life. Reciprocity is a lens through which I am re-shaping my understanding of my position in my relationships. How can I show up, shape my expectations and give in a way that is in balance and integrity with my privilege and the gifts I receive in life? As a documentary filmmaker, how can I continue to disrupt extractive patterns, and reshape my working relationships and process to challenge forces of domination and oppression?

I also aspire to continue shifting from an “I” to a “we” centered perspective that more richly makes meaning of the ways in which my life, learnings and experience are shaped by, and nested in, the greater context of community and landscape. How can the humility of the realization that I am a small aspect of the cosmos shift me away from individualism, and marry me to the collective thriving of all life?

Additionally, tangible next steps I can take to carry on the learning and aspirations of my capstone include:

- Continuing to invest energy, love and attention in the relationships that I have cultivated through this project
- Continuing coaching sessions with Matthew, and relationship building related to OwnMostPlace practice

- Continuing to discuss artistic collaboration with TwoTrees

Lastly, I wish to make clear that I have not come close to embodying the immense aspirations concerned with protocols, teachings and ways of being that I lay out in this paper. This is life-long work. I believe it that will take the commitment of many future generations within my lineage to undo the patterns of whiteness that perpetuate harm and extraction within the human and non-human world.

CHAPTER 6: REFERENCES

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