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**MASTER'S PROJECT: TENDING THE WEB OF RELATIONS:
LEADERSHIP FOR GATHERING AND GROWING IN MORE-THAN-
HUMAN COMMUNITY**

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MASTER'S PROJECT: TENDING THE WEB OF RELATIONS:
LEADERSHIP FOR GATHERING AND GROWING IN MORE-THAN-HUMAN
COMMUNITY

A Capstone Project Presented

by

Evan Carlos Hoyt

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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for the Degree of Master of Professional Studies
Specializing in Leadership for Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This report discusses a six-month-long experiment in community gathering and growing, and the people, practices, and processes that supported it. These gatherings were an inquiry into right relationship – a web of relations characterized by mutual care, solidarity, and willing accountability – and an attempt to create a space where humans, vegetables, soils and more might discover surprising ways to nourish and support each other. In addition to convening these bi-weekly gatherings, this project included regular check-ins with my co-leader and partner Erika. This practice at vulnerable, open-ended sharing was a chance for reflection and mirroring that have allowed some loving light to shine onto my learning edges and pitfalls on the path towards right relationship. This report explores the combination of that reflexive practice with the gatherings themselves and chronicles my slowly emerging understanding of the listening and humility required for relational leadership and to receive the wisdom of humans, plants and the land.

ABBREVIATED GRATITUDES

Thank you, Mom, Leslie for giving so much life, such a firm launch pad for this journey I've been on. Thank you, Dad, Carlos Jr. for your bottomless, non-prescriptive support of this project, me, and my Vermont community. Thank you for continuing to teach me what fatherhood can be.

Thank you, Sayra Pinto. There are few gifts so precious as an invitation to humility. Thank you for offering them over the last two years – I'm sorry to have required so many! But I pray you will never hold them back when they are needed.

Thank you, Pam Alexander, Beverly Littlethunder, and the people of Kungsi Keya Tamakoce, for hosting this project and trusting us with that beautiful, soggy meadow, where thousands of seedlings now drink in sunlight and mountain breezes. Your unflinching generosity made this project and all the relationships, joys and challenges that have resulted possible. Thank you for showing us how to share the land.

Thank you, Lauren Akin, for paving the way for this project with your 2019 Capstone. This report's methods, questions and presentation have inherited much from your beautiful work.

Thank you, Matt Kolan. Your many modes of generosity and institutional wizardry have for me amounted to a living, breathing invitation to a type of deep inquiry that refuses to

squash the big mysteriousness of this life!

Thank you Sherry Pachman, Guthrie Smith, Adam Wilson, and so many others who made this project possible by showing every day what loving community can feel like.

Lastly, thank you, Erika. Living together with you – collaborating with your heart and mind to navigate this wild world – has brought forth possibilities of love and joy and depth I couldn't have imagined before we began our journey together. I reckon that as much as anything else, this report is about our love.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Six Crop Gatherings

This Capstone Project is the implementation and observation of an ongoing community growing experiment called Six Crop. Started in January of 2022, Six Crop is essentially a series of gatherings at which participants are invited to share food, conversation, and the task of collectively tending to some plants that might in turn tend to us by feeding us. Like a hybrid between a community garden and a series of small food festivals, Six Crop was imagined by myself and my partner Erika as a simple experiment in inviting humans into deeper relationship with their food and each other. So we have gathered our neighbors and friends every other Sunday since the ground was still frozen to plant the seeds of the concept and gain the fertilizing input they offered. As winter ushered in spring, we have continued to gather, prepare soil and plant seeds. Importantly, it's never been the intention for the biweekly events to gather just human gardeners, but rather to create conditions for a gathering of many types of bodies: of soils and vegetables and wind and weeds, of babies and songbirds. In response to our modern habit of self-centering, the project is designed to explicitly invite centering the other: in this case, six very generous plant crops: Corn, Beans, Winter Squash, Cabbage, Potatoes and Garlic.

1.2. Questions and Approaches

This project's main question was: How might I collaborate in leadership with humans, foods and the land to create conditions for right relationship and building beloved community? Within the context of this project, I understand right relationship to

be a web of relations characterized by mutual care, listening, and willing accountability: accountability invited and engaged on one's own terms. The gatherings and reflexive practices surrounding them are the modes of inquiry into what right relationship *feels* like in my body and mind – and what it feels like when it's not happening.

The main method for doing so was helping to host these bi-weekly gatherings and observe what unfolded: what happened at the gatherings, what the human participants have had to share, and how the many non-humans were impacted. This was paired with regular check-ins with Erika, which attempted to observe what was happening internally for me throughout the process. These check-ins and the loving support and course corrections from my father Carlos Hoyt, this project's coach Sayra Pinto, the friendship of Matt Kolan and others have made the gatherings possible, and provided a chance to begin tracking when my leadership is in right relationship, and when it is off balance.

This project is an attempt to engage deeply with the living Earth, and does so in part by way of food. In my ongoing re-connection to the land, food has offered me a material but relational way to begin to understand this valley in Vermont and the land at large. Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that plants can “wordlessly in leaf and vine embody the knowledge of relationship” (2013, p. 140). The many foods that keep me alive have taught me an immense amount about what it might mean to live as a human in right relationship. The Six Crop gatherings are an effort to continue that learning, alongside friends and neighbors, by creating a space where plants, soils and humans might get to know each other better and offer their unique gifts.

1.3. Inspirations

There are many voices who have inspired this project, only a few of which appear here. This community's new participation in seed saving and learning to ask the seeds to feed us is inspired in part by Rowen White, who invites a "culture of reverence where people understand the sanctity and reverence of a handful of seeds" (Young, 2020), and my budding reverence for plants and the living world has been strongly bolstered by the many offerings of Robin Wall Kimmerer.

This project's attempts to critically engage in questions of power, leadership and changemaking have been inspired by the ways of being Dr. Sayra Pinto and her conceptual framework of Nanopolitics. Nanopolitics has helped me start shifting my understanding of power to being "not only conscribed to the body but rather to the webs of relationship between individuals and their communities" (Pinto, 2015, p. 35).

This project's efforts to collaborate with non-humans have been inspired by the friendship and brazenness of Adam Wilson (2020-21), as well as the writings of Annemarie Mol (2021), Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) and Donna Haraway's invitations to "make kin" and embrace our entanglement with all of life (2016, p. 99-103).

My understanding of right relationship and willingness to inquire after it with my full self have inherited much from Lauren Akin's 2019 Capstone Project *Coming Into Right Relationship: Shame, Creativity, and Awakening into Sacred Obligation* (Akin, 2019).

Lastly, this project enacts one of the most obvious and old activities imaginable: humans gathering to grow and share food together. In this sense it is neither inventive nor

novel, and is potentially radical only for the modern, suburban context in which it is embedded.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

2.1. Convening as Creating Conditions for Emergence

This project applied two main methodologies in its longing after right relationship. As an experiment in regular gatherings, the first is well captured by Peter Block in *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, who writes about *convening* as a way for leaders “to tend to our social fabric” (2008, p. 87). Convening in this sense does not include prescribing what happens in a space or enacting a vision, but rather creating “a context that nurtures an alternative future, one based on gifts, generosity, accountability, and commitment” (p. 85). In addition to aligning with my understanding and inquiry into right relationship, Block’s methodology of convening and its sub-methods of *hosting*, *initiating conversation*, and *paying attention* provide context for how I engaged the gatherings every other Sunday.

Throughout the project my partner and I helped convene over a dozen gatherings with between five and forty friends and neighbors. At the gatherings, I hosted conversations and posed questions, my friends and I prepared food and welcomed shared foods from others, and we seeded many beds of beautiful plants.

2.2. Critical Reflexivity: “What’s Challenging You?”

The second methodology applied by the project was a practice in critical reflexivity consisting of regular sharing sessions with Erika. These check-ins, with which we began our mornings every other day throughout project implementation, were a consistent attempt at open, honest, vulnerable reflection in pursuit of deepening understandings of ourselves as leaders, humans, and small parts of the big lifeweb. These

conversations, which usually took about 45 minutes, were comprised of Erika and I asking each other four questions:

- What have you been noticing in your body over the last two days?
- What has been engaging your leadership?
- What has been the impact of your leadership?
- What's challenging you?

When Erika asked me the questions and it was my turn to share, the recorder was turned on, and the result is over 40 hours of transcribed conversation taking place between February 9 and May 11 of 2022. In an effort to gain further insight into meta-cognitive and behavioral patterns, I then listened to the transcripts and annotated with notes the things that seemed in that moment to highlight learning edges. Some of the themes and learnings that this process generated are available in Appendix B, and the raw highlights and notes from that annotation process are available in Appendix C.

This practice was an application of critical reflexive methodologies in that it attempted to inquire not only into how my “social locations and positions affect research relationships, processes, and outcomes,” (Nobe-Ghelani, 2018, p. 413) but also into my “conceptual baggage:” the assumptions, blindspots and discursive modes involved in my understanding of myself and my world (p. 415).

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS AND LEARNINGS

3.1. Impacts on Leadership

The outcome of this work on my leadership is not an arrival at a finished state. Rather, it is a budding capacity to locate myself at the beginning of a lifelong journey from the ambition and common narcissism I still often embody. This requires returning again and again to a practice of listening with openness and acting in service of others. Through the check-ins with Erika and continuing conversations with coaches and mentors, it is clear that this requires an amount of “getting out of the way.”

The iterative and illuminating gatherings, the check-ins with Erika, and the guidance of Sayra Pinto, Carlos Hoyt and others, has helped me notice habits towards vision-driven leadership, valuing scale over depth, and a stubborn pattern of impatience. Indeed, each gathering was an opportunity to become aware of expectations I had unknowingly carried into the encounter. Patterns of urgency, over-analysis, fear of failure, and more were explored over and over again during check-ins with Erika, and I’m grateful to notice myself aware of those behaviors sooner and sooner, and to practice navigating them without shame. More reflections on these patterns and learnings from the check-in annotations are available in Appendix B.

In place of these slowly composting habits are germinating practices of deep listening. The practices have been an opportunity to decenter what I think is right or what I want, and start orienting more around the many beings I’m in relationship with. I’ve been able to notice that when this is happening, leadership feels less like running the show and more like continuously offering whatever little I can, responding to ever-changing conditions, and inviting support from the humans and non-humans in my life.

The gatherings and reflexive practice created space for me to re-understand leadership as an act of ongoing, willing participation in a web of care for the myriad beings whom I impact. And importantly, it's helped me notice sooner when that is not the leadership I'm embodying.

3.2. Relational Outcomes

One result of this work is a biweekly space that is explicitly dedicated to mutual care and nourishment. When asked in an introduction circle what drew them to the June 5th gathering, one participant said, "I am here because of the way I feel in these spaces. They make me feel human" (personal communication, June 5, 2022). This emergence is ongoing as gatherings continue to be held every other Sunday even as this report is written, and its future generativities are entirely unknown. For some depictions of the relationships this work has fostered by some of the humans involved, please see Appendix A.

CHAPTER 4: EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

4.1 Evaluation Processes and Artifacts

The appendices for this project contain some artifacts from the evaluative processes that Erika and I undertook. As an example of an assessment of the impact of Six Crop, Appendix A contains artifacts that resulted from my asking human participants if they'd be willing to make a map of the relationships that make up the Six Crop project, as well as an answer to the question "What are you learning?" These open-ended invitations were one way that Erika and I assessed what was happening for folks as we continued to gather. The results offer a glimpse into some people's experiences throughout the spring and one of the ways we attempted to invite feedback and evaluate impact.

The other main tracking method was my recorded check-ins with Erika, which have resulted in the check-in transcripts. The record that's been created from these conversations has been my main avenue for evaluating myself as a leader and the feelings and patterns that motivated the Six Crop project. Part of that reflexive practice was reviewing the transcripts and annotating them, looking for patterns and learning edges in the many hours of conversation. Instead of including the extensively long full transcripts, the highlights and comments from that annotation process are included as an appendix (Appendix C: Annotated Check-ins). They tell a story alive in my heart and mind, chronologically, throughout the spring, as well as what was most important to me during the annotation process. They also offer a window into one of the ways that the project underwent ongoing assessment, for the conversations themselves were a practice in co-leadership and regular, honest evaluation. To make their patterns more accessible there is

an introductory appendix (Appendix B: Learnings and Themes from Check-ins) which offers a summary of how themes of Stress, Control and Patience each appear and shift throughout the three months of check-ins.

4.2. Incommensurability in the Web of Relations

This project engaged with explicit and regular evaluation and assessment by way of a bottomless amount of loving support from Erika, my father Carlos, my coach Sayra Pinto, the generousities of Matt Kolan, and others. This resulted in countless course corrections, refocuses, rememberings and surprises. One of the four questions that my partner asked me every other morning just after we each finished our coffee was, “What has been the impact of your leadership?” Of the course of the 44 conversations, which I listened to during the synthesis of this project, it seems that I settled, unconsciously – along with my partner – into a deep acceptance of the many immeasurable aspects of this work. Unwilling to decisively pass self-judgment on the rigor or consequence of the project, and entirely unable to aggregate the voices and assessments of all those beings impacted by it, we eventually embraced the general unverifiability of our labors. Far from being disaffecting, this disposition has led me to listen more closely to more beings than I knew I was capable of just a few months ago, and to recognizing the importance of being honest about who is being listened to. What has emerged is a practice of ongoing assessment that is, ultimately, grounded in humility and the need for deep and diverse listening.

To demonstrate this multiplicity of truths and discuss some impact of the work, I will speak to three of the *types* of beings impacted by and engaged with this work: humans, seeds and the field.

4.3. Assessing Impact on Humans, Seeds and the Field

Throughout discussion, shoveling and dining with the Humans of Six Crop, there have been many types of impacts, and very much shared joy and gratitude. The impact is complex in its diversity, but assessing it has a certain ease: these relational subjects speak English. The Relational Maps and answers to the question, “What are you learning?” that can be found in the Appendix A of this project are one window into the impact on humans.

However, when working with the Seeds of Six Crop, the impact becomes harder to evaluate. The work has attempted a point of contact and impact with very long lineages of plant beings in an effort to slowly cultivate a culture of reverence and gratitude between humans and plants, as well as unique plant genetics suited to this hillside and group of human gardeners and eaters. This work is literally still germinating, so assessing the results of this project’s aspirations requires a very different set of tools than assessing impact on humans. It might require what Rowen White describes as “leaning into that idea of seed time,” which is “the bigger, longer game vision of the work of now, which will feed the imagination of what’s possible in the future” (Young, 2020).

As a final example, this project has impacted a Field – really, a meadow on a hillside in north/central Vermont – and discerning how to assess my impact there has been and continues to be my most generative edge. At first, discerning what was best for

the field seemed impossible due to my incapacity to honestly understand anything nearly as complex as the long-term ecology of a meadow, or the historical contexts which explain its current way of being. Throughout this project, that intellectual, disempowered and ultimately false humility eventually gave way to a deeper understanding that there are voices in that field, and that they have perspectives and agencies which might have little to do with human conceptions of ecology or even wellbeing. This is not to say I can hear those voices clearly, nor that I'm practiced at letting the meadow lead.

Luckily, this incapacity does not *feel* disempowering or misaligned with right relationship. Rather, it has resulted in a rigorous questioning: *Who am I impacting, and how deeply can I listen to them?* with an expansive “who” that includes beings and bodies far away and yet to come. Settling into the multiple truths present in the landscape of this life has been the most significant impact this project has had on my way of being. In this sense, the results of this project were aligned with the project's aspirations in ways I never could have known to ask for.

CHAPTER 5: NEXT STEPS

Next steps for Six Crop include tending to the plants whose lives we've helped set in motion, and continuing the practice of tending to each other and those who make our gatherings possible. These efforts on my part will be aided by continued check-ins with Erika and openness to the loving corrections and invitations of Carlos, Sayra, Matt and others.

The journey ahead includes listening to others: listening to the humans in this community as well as the places and many beings whom those humans increasingly rely on for their livelihood. In many cases, this will be a practice in modes of listening that I am only now learning are even possible. Indeed, the listening itself still sometimes feels impossible, and my attempts to do so feel as challenging as ever. My internal conditions and conceptual baggage can still make any such attempts feel fantastical, immature, and sometimes shameful. More important than the "success" of these attempts though is a budding awareness of when I am in right relationship: what it *feels* like to be in humility and empowered service of things larger than myself - and when I am merely talking or writing about those things but not embodying them.

CHAPTER 6: APPENDICES

The appendices for this project are hosted on the project's [website](#). There you can find:

- Appendix A: Relational Maps and Human Learnings
- Appendix B: Learnings and Themes from Check-ins
- Appendix C: Annotated Check-ins

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