When We Grow a Garden Together: A Love Story

Social ecology reflection of a community garden project

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Abstract

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This story moves between a back alley in Montréal and a farm in BC, a mountain in a city and the forests of Ontario. For me it has been a healing and liberating journey. It is a reflection of an unfurling into myself, into my relationship to the earth, and into myself as the earth. It is an exploration of the power of creativity, questions, stories, community, and our wise animal bodies. It is a series of my discoveries to enjoy the process and the mystery of community projects, to take the time to nurture the human connections that provide the foundation for collective projects to flourish, to find balance, symbiosis, and true safety. This story is also my invitation to others into acts of courage, presence, and perseverance to create a life-loving culture of place and relatedness in this time of transition and transformation.

I use literature from permaculture and natural farming, sacred activism, psychology, storytelling, and holistic education; these texts complement my reflections on a neighbourhood project that is transforming an underutilized back alley into a social, artistic, and food-growing space, as well as my own wilderness explorations and farming experiences. The book ends with personal reflections from neighbours who participated in the alley project. "We need new love stories," a friend of mine said recently. This one was ripe with uncertainty, emotion, holy chaos, and heart. Enjoy.

Gratitude

A mes amis sur Wellington et Rushbrooke et dans le voisinage de m'avoir donné l'espace pour apprendre et être. To my friends on Wellington and Rushbrooke and in the neighbourhood for having given me the space to learn and be.

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To the wild earth for my roots, the open sky for my wings, to the mystery and all that surrounds me.

Dedication

To Mom and Dad for growing me with love

WATER

La source[1]

Costa Rica is the happiest country in the world, my circus scholar roommate once told me. Perhaps such things are beyond rank, but I can testify that after six months of *pura vida*[2] in 2002, I felt calm and alive, my habitual tension loosened, my tendencies to melancholy warmed and uplifted. As a culture, it has its flaws, with its fair share of addictions, crime, pollution, and machismo. And I wasn't making piles of money in a high status job. I sold rafting tickets to cruise ship crew members every other weekend and spent the rest of my time cleaning the house, washing clothes, and sitting by the river in a rural community of one hundred residents. Fierce forests of sloths, parrots, and scorpions surrounded me. When I felt sad, my friends insisted their company in spite of my desire to isolate. When we needed limes, we climbed the tree out back. When we wanted lemongrass, we walked next door. Neighbours greeted me on the road and touched me when they spoke. I could feel the gods in the music of rain on tin roofs and the clack of bamboo. We danced at parties, bodies warm, young couples pressed together, elders stepping in grace. At my friend's high school, there were no cliques nor class outcasts. Classmates chose the best students in each subject to lead the class in a highly coordinated system of cheating to ensure that everyone passed. Randy, the art teacher, brought out the boogie in even the shyest students.

When I returned home to Canada, the ample flat lawns of Victoria and large homes in my mid-upper class neighbourhood felt lonely, the earth fenced, boxed, and

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1 Underground spring

2 Pure life (a Costa Rican expression - loosely translated, all is well)

broken like a wild horse, the eternal cultural striving to best others to prove the right to exist exhausting and cold. Around this time, I also began work as a temporary medical office assistant - stamping dates inside charts, booking appointments. I couldn't help but notice the number of people medicated for chronic fear, blues, and malaise. While some of these useful medications correct brain chemistry imbalances or offer refuge in particularly stormy times, it seemed to me a near epidemic. I went home to my basement suite on Pembrooke and wrote DEPRESSION? on the back of a Smarties box. Something seemed awry. I began a nine year quest, first intuitive and then intentional, seeking pockets of green growth, sensuousness, cultures of human relations that valued emotional expression, collaboration, beauty, gift economies, creativity, the arts, joyful movement, ordered chaos and an appreciation of that which is wild and untamed. Was a heartful lifestyle of flow, connection, and earth abundance available here in North America? From my limited exposure to Algonquin, Coast Salish, Mohawk, and Tsimshian teachings, this could be an alignment with the values of Canada's first inhabitants, land-based cultures based on relatedness and stewardship.

My quest brought me to a collective farm on an intentional community in rural BC. I spent my days with carrots fresh from fragrant loam, ripe raspberries, and whistling quail in the garlic patch, my meals with abundant greens and yellow calendula petals in the company of friends, my evenings with trades of tarot readings for Thai yoga massage, my nights in a tent in an alder grove. *Come visit me in paradise*, I told my friends and family. Three years later, I emerged again as my most open, joyful, and confident self, productive and calm. I wanted to know if this state was reproducible, if

this model of collaborative earth creativity could crack open the solitude, fear, and fragmentation of cities to make space for more human and earth connection, union, and love. I was intrigued by Montreal's impressive web of community gardens and their unique emphasis on collective gardens; I had once spent a winter in *la belle vill*[3]*e* and fell in love, like so many before me, with the elegant architecture, the music of its languages, the arts bursting from every street corner. I sent a few boxes of my possessions to my aunt's address and made my way east on a greyhound bus.

EARTH

Fertile ground

May 2009, Verdun, QC

When I first pushed the metro door open onto rue Caisse in Verdun, the energy was different from that of hipster Plateau where I lived. People with backpacks walked at a calm pace towards the metro, stood outside waiting for the bus. A grounded energy, a neighbourhood that knew itself. I walked a loop around the block while I waited for the woman who would introduce me to the site of this research project, a dirt alley between Wellington and Rushbrooke street. The young man walking in front of me wore low jeans and told his friend that he liked to date strippers. Another couple walked a beagle dog. A park with pines and interlocking bricks over the soil, raised beds of treated wood with lambs quarters, dandelions, plantains, green benches, white tables inlaid with tiled chess boards. To the right, down Wellington, the center street, was a print shop, Desjardins credit union, pizzeria, pawn shop, café. The townhouses began

[3] the beautiful city

on my left - maples along the street, a home entertainment shelf left out. On Rushbrooke a crumbly yard with a dead tree in a pot next to a yard thick with hostas and day lilies, white cedar, a red Hyundai parked in the driveway. An old spring box with spiral coils outside one yard, lawnchair legs poking out of a plastic bag. A picket fence mended with string, a man speaking Brazilian Portuguese leaning over his balcony as two men load furniture into a moving truck. A young white man, possibly a student, on his bike, another young man with long hair, goatee, and black t-shirt with an orange dragon.

I learned that Verdun, spread over 9.83 km2, is home to over 66 000 residents[4]. Primarily a French neighbourhood, its population was growing; many of its new residents were allophones, particularly Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, and Bengali speakers.[5] It boasts 25 kilometers of bike trails, many of which run along the St Laurence river[6], an active women's center, a seasonal subsidized outdoor market, a small network of collective gardens, a *Maison de l'Environnement*[7] that offers compost education to residents. It has a higher number of single parents than the Montreal or provincial average and a lack of social housing, elders living alone, a high school drop out rate nearly double that of the provincial average [8]. Its recent addition as a borough of Montreal in 2002 could explain the strong sense of identity I would later perceive

4 (City of Montreal 2011)
5 (Jetté and Paquin 2009)
6 (City of Montreal 2011)
7 Environmental House/Center
8 (Jetté and Paquin 2009)

from *les verdunois.* I learned that there are approximately five hundred residents in the narrow brick townhouses that back onto the alley that would become an experiment in collective gardening and creativity. *Colocataires*[9] outnumbered property owners at about six to one. Through the project and the relationships with people who lived there, I would find connections in disparate experiences - rural farmwork, urban community development, wilderness play. I would live cycles of collectivity and green growing things, conflict and liberty, art and patience, emotion and action. I would learn to tell a new story.

[9] renters

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"You are the mother of this project," my friend France told me. "You are carrying it in your womb."

SEED

How do I balance between order and chaos?

Encourage the new

Say yes

one must be willing to be stone stupid, to sit upon a throne on top of a jackass and spill rubies from one's mouth[10]

Summer 2007, Salt Spring Island, BC

It was my second year apprenticing with Salt Spring Seeds; there was so much to learn, and not just when to plant peas. Farmer Dan played his flutes in the garden, enjoyed the surprise volunteer kales and chards that sprouted from previous crops, and intermixed calendula and anchusa with patterns of red, green, ruffled, speckled, and stippled lettuce. My soul, I discovered, was thirsty. Despite (or because of) his deep concern about sterile monoculture agriculture, GMOs, and the closure of federal seed banks, Dan emphasized the creativity and pleasure of heritage seed saving in his teachings and books. We encouraged lettuce, kale, and mustards to bolt past their demure ruffles to the wild fingertips of dancers, each branching hand holding a garden of babies for the year to come. The damp and slippery straw at the base of the plants, full of ropes of white mycelium, mimicked the leaf blanket of a forest and kept the soil

[10] (Pinkola Estes 1992: 343)

moist and balanced - not too hot, not too cold, but just right. The garden was messy messy messy and so were the gardeners. Respect for the plants and the people was the one true rule once the latch of the gate clicked closed. We wore enormous straw hats or silver down space vests, went barefoot, got dirty. Not only playful but heartful, we watched an evening primrose open at dusk and shared the first strawberries of the season. We didn't pick the plants that were for seed, but we could flirt, swear, sweat, cry, or laugh until we doubled over.

April 2009, Montréal, QC

I met MUG[11] at the *Vivre à L'Echelle Locale*[12] conference at the Université du Québec à Montréal. She stood in a sharing circle, red hair aflame, and spoke of her love for her lifelong community and the children who watered the asphalt behind her house because they had no plants to soak. That afternoon, I told her that I wanted to start a collective garden as part of my research, and she invited me to visit her in the southwest neighbourhood of Verdun.

A month later, MUG was waiting for me across the street from the Lasalle metro, eyes closed, standing in the grass in the sun.

"I was doing my breathing exercises," she said and hugged me.

She showed me the hospital and high school built on contaminated soil and art

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[11] the spiritual name of a key figure in this story - M.U.G. (My Urban Goat), chosen because of her belief in urban agriculture as a healing community practice. Her story weaves throughout the text rather than as a separate entity in Celebrate the Blossoms.

[12] Live at the Local Level

installations in backyards. We walked along the St Lawrence River and talked about plant energy and biodynamic agriculture. She showed me a dirt road alley between two rows of townhouses on Wellington and Rushbrooke and shared her vision of the lane as a place to heal the soil, grow food, make art, and create links in the community. "And do you see where there are already raspberries growing? And this vine that curves up along the telephone wire?" The sun was bright that day and reflected off the deep green leaves. "We'll start where there's life."

Order calms me. Maybe it's my birth rank (oldest daughter of an oldest daughter of an oldest daughter), my astrological configuration (five cozy planets in Taurus, the sign of comfort and predictability), or my family and ancestral background of British Protestant doctors, lawyers and engineers. I claim that my years living with the passionate matador that is Latin America filed the points of my Taurean horns, but truly I still like to feel that I have at least one hand on the wheel turning my world. All my life, creativity seemed like a wild dancer moving always out of my reach. But here in Montréal I have drunk great drafts of barefoot salsa dancing, banjo jams, improv theatre, and circus freak shows. And I have learned that in my heart of hearts I am an emotional creature (Ensler 2010). Maybe it's a controversial claim of gender, or my Scorpio ascendant and Leo north node (signs of passion, transformation, and creativity), or my family and ancestral background of fiery Celts and Scots, of musicians, painters, writers, and theologians. I claim to be a rational, organized woman, but truly I feel giddy to be opening to creative endeavors: this ancient path of goddess-worship, of rituals of

love and pleasure[13], this magic of creation innate in me, innate in all of us.

This testimony of my experience will not be a recipe of how to create a collective garden and green alley (find a *ruelle*[14] in which resides one herbalist, one community planner, one manager, one graphic designer, two artists, one builder, and one urban planner).[15] The fool is the innocent who embarks on a journey with a willingness to make a joyful mess, pick it up, and start over again. This story is an opening to connections and chaos, a life-loving culture, an honouring of wildness and the emotions held in my own animal body. It is an invitation into creation, into patience, into experimentation, release, and love songs of uncertainty, living between the tree and the bark where anything can happen.[16]

to support only one kind of beauty is to be somehow unobservant of nature. There cannot be only one kind of songbird, only one kind of pine tree, only one kind of wolf. There cannot be only one kind of baby, one kind of man, or one kind of woman[17]

September 2010, St Didace, QC

I drove to Les Jardins du Grand-Portage, an hour and a half east of Montréal, with a young couple and their baby girl as I began the second year of my Masters. It was time to start writing about my research on the effects of collective gardening on a community; I craved a little of the juiciness and creativity that I lived with the bees and

13 (Starhawk 1987)

14 alley

15 Warren Linds, personal conversation, June 2010

16 MUG, personal conversation, March 2010

17 (Pinkola Estes 1992: 216)

borage on Salt Spring to inspire the weaving of my experiences into a cohesive whole. The steward of the land, Yves Gagnon, began the tour for the gathering of Quebec collective garden members with several of his own poems. A few of the folks around me shuffled their feet when he said this, put their hands in their pockets and pulled them out again. *Thought this was supposed to be educational!* He spoke about agro politics on Parliament Hill, about plants, and of course about love, some *mots passionnés*[18] from the Quebec organic movement's *porte-parole.*[19] On our walk, his violet amaranths and leggy sunflowers grew bright and fierce with tomatoes and cabbage, protected by groves of trees planted thirty years ago when he and his *conjointe*[20] settled on the property. Sculptures of regional artists hung from trees and blossomed from the ground. *Sacrilège!*[21]

I am fascinated by permaculture, a gardening and ecological design philosophy based on traditional people's forest cultivation patterns. It emphasizes fruit and nut trees, self-seeding annuals, and symbiotic relationships that become more prolific with time. Still, I noticed a spike of fear inside me when I watched, as part of my research, the permaculture documentary *Farm for a Future*, a moment of craving a sunny, bare-earthed little patch from picture books and children's songs. Where was Old MacDonald with his tractors and furrows in this dense, buzzing swath of branches and vines?

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18 passionate words
19 spokesperson
20 partner
21 Sacrilege!

Lehrer, in his writings on the neurology of the creative process, cites Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* as a piece that was described by its debut audience expecting the melancholic beauty of Chopin as "pure noise, chaos without cessation." What seemed to subvert the familiar boundaries of music at the time was in fact "an intricate quilt of patterns."[22] Lehrer says that we learn to hear the seeming chaos of the Stravinsky piece through our brain's unique ability to change itself. When faced with an unknown pattern, our neurons stretch to understand it; such works of art "keep us literally open-minded."[23]

I'm learning that art and creativity may act as bridges between the human and natural world, to see the structures and rhythms of order within chaos (Hosking 2009) in Yves' garden, in Dan's garden, in the permaculture garden. Like comfrey or other dynamic accumulators that penetrate compact soils with deep taproots and draw nutrients from the subsoil, with art we break open patterns of uniformity or predictable expectations to allow space for a more fluid culture of connectedness and surprise (Macy and Brown 1998).

With all this newness, I sometimes question the place of solidity, predictability, and tradition. Westheimer (2008) reflects on the usefulness of blending more traditional values such as service and citizenship with more innovative free expression and individual truth. He writes that this bridging of invention and stability gives our actions a wider perspective and at the same time centers and grounds our ideals and

[22] (Lehrer 2008: 135)
[23] (Lehrer 2008: 143)

values; by looking backwards and also forwards we become effective caretakers of the earth and of each other. In the alley, we have worked to blend familiar offerings like flowers and maple trees that came from the municipality of Verdun with more unfamiliar ideas like permaculture and graffiti art proposals to create a space that feels welcoming in a multitude of ways.

One for the rock, one for the crow
One to die and one to grow[24]

Summer 2006, Salt Spring Island, BC

The first seeds I saved during my apprenticeship with Dan were from a Columbine plant. The ornate curves of the blue petals had dropped away to the ground, leaving a tough brown beak of a seed pod. I bent the stalk; tiny black pearls poured into the creases of my palm, insects of the same shade and size scrambled for cover. Other plants had their time - tender pea pods that stiffened to slender rattles, milky green oats that faded brown, tomatoes that bubbled in their juices before the slippery coating fell away from the seeds. Annuals, biennials, and perennials, clonal, self-pollinating, and cross-pollinating. Some seeds we shook into buckets or plucked to dry in the greenhouse, many more released into the wind or fell to the ground to lay dormant until the following spring.

[24] Traditional English saying

Goldberg (2005) tells the story of writing poems on the fly at a booth at a bazaar - her practice of one page, no cross-outs, no re-reading, letting go of all control in the moment of creation and then giving the poem away. Campbell (2004) writes that during this time of great uncertainty and shift, with old stories in pieces waiting to be made whole again and new stories yet to be told, the best we can do is learn to fall. It means to let go and trust that my world will go on turning without my hand on the crank. It means to release that which no longer serves to make room for the new. Campbell Reesman (2001) writes that the emotional words of stories and mythology teach that change is an irrepressible force that asks us to adapt and adjust. If we attempt to control, suppress, or straighten the messy messy flows and swirls of a living, changing, breathing, and unpredictable world, disastrous eruptions ensue. It is preferable, she says, to find ways to welcome passion and risk back to the table.

It is play, not properness, that is the central artery, the core, the brain stem of creative life.[25]

April 2010, Montréal, QC

Starhawk (1987) writes that a life-loving culture is ripe with creative actions and rich in the expressive language of the arts. For our last day together, my storytelling class declared a random acts of storytelling day at Concordia University. We prepared ourselves to go outside and find our audience. My group convinced an engineer typing

[25] (Pinkola Estes 1992: 251)

on his laptop on the ninth floor of the Hall building to listen to Anita's story about a friend who had passed away. He then told us about a vision of his dead grandmother he had never met. I gave my tale about an impromptu healing with a red-aproned shaman to a man on the fifth floor, Jane told her circus vignette to a video clerk on the third floor. We ran up the down escalator and set up a storytelling booth on the second floor. Only a few people accepted our story offers, but most of the time I got a little smile or flushed cheeks at the suggestion. I saw us as speed bumps in the corridor, little sparks that sometimes caught flame when we could entice someone to take five minutes to listen.

The following week, I was at the Verdun Citizen's Forum at the Monseigneur Richard high school. The forum aimed to open discussion around community issues such as environment, health, transportation, and food security. In researcher persona I attended the food security talk, listened attentively, and took notes. I met MUG near the end of the day; our heads were full of words and ideas. I told her about my storytelling class the week before, and we decided to finish the day with some random acts of creative Goddess energy. We went into the health workshop, already underway. MUG put up her hand and said that community life was vital for health, knowing neighbours, saying hello in the street, as were acts of art or creativity that didn't require permission or grants. After five minutes, we left and went to the environment workshop. She put up her hand and said that green is the colour of the heart chakra and that any talk of greening needs to be connected to this chakra, that the most wonderful green ideas in the world will be ineffective if they are not presented with

love. We left and laughed in the hall. "I'm not brave enough to do this on my own," she told me. "You give me courage."

Stillness is what creates love. Movement is what creates life. To be still and still moving - this is everything![26]

Rose moon in June, 2010. Hot sticky days and rain storms.

Last weekend I was in the alley, plumes of smoke drifting from a neighbour's new BBQ beside the municipality's white tent, a drummer and guitarist on a second story back porch. Today is Saturday, eight am. My brain feels cramped after a week of climbing through the jungles of educational theory. Sara, one of the green alley group members, has invited us to her backyard for coffee and muffins before the action begins. She hands me a plate with slices of croissants and danishes. "In the *ruelle* again! We need to find you an apartment around here."

Thérèse comes over to announce the arrival of the plants and soil. I nibble on my croissant, willing my body to come to my service. When I finish eating, I walk to the North entrance of the alley. The smell of the piles of loamy black earth stirs me. Rows of pots wait to be delivered: Red osier Dogwood *Cornus sericea,* Yellow Twig Dogwood *Cornus stolonifera,* Shadblow Serviceberry *Amelanchier canadensis.* A man rumbles through on a bobcat and digs deep holes for maple trees. Neighbours take up picks and spades for the smaller plants, wheelbarrows run up and down the alley. "It's my first

[26] (Do Hyun Cho, poet - a quote from Dan's office)

time planting a tree," says one. At lunch we drink beer, we eat grilled cheese sandwiches. Neighbours lean over their fences and ask about *la ville*'s project. "It's not *la ville*'s project", says Sara, "it's our project. It's our project!" Dirt is flying in shovelfuls onto the gravel road, potholes shine with rainwater from last week's storm. We pour spadefuls of gravelly clay to fill the puddles. Thérèse sows Echinacea seeds into a new bed next to an old garage. Sara's roommate Guillaume bathes at four, puts on a Hawaiian shirt, and cracks open another beer. "I'm finished!" he says cheerfully. At around five I am poking at a pile of gravel in a puddle with my tip of my shovel. I lean it against a fence, walk up the spiral staircase to Sara's back door, take off my boots, and lie down on my back on her living room floor, my body singing and calm after the transformation of the day's work.

The root of courage comes from the Latin cor, or heart - c*oeur*, in modern French [27], this muscle whose irregular beat in heart-mind attunement sustains the body in exquisite order (Buhner 2004). In this dynamic, ever-shifting life, "the trick is to balance at the very edge of chaos"[28], at that cliff edge with nothing but space in all directions, at the crux of stillness and movement. The herbalist from my car ride walked the tour at Les Jardins du Grand-Portage with her eight month old baby strapped to her chest with a cloth harness. About half-way through the tour, her baby fell asleep, head to Mama's heart.

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27 http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=courage

28 (Laroche 2001: 265)

"*Quel abandon,*[29]" she said and smiled at her cargo when I looked at her child hanging limp in the harness.

Everything in order, new life falling forth.

[29] What surrender

RAIN

How do I flow with what is?

Allow the Unfurling

Stressed is desserts spelled backwards[30]

Relax! Have fun! Slow down![31]

Fall 2009, Montréal, QC

On a crisp, clear October Saturday, Karmen[32] and I went into MUG's kitchen to slice Quebec Pink Lady apples and cheddar cheese for snacks. Despite the phone and email invitations we had extended to community members and interested Concordia students to speak about an alley garden project, I wasn't sure that anyone would show besides my advising professor Satoshi, who I assumed was paid to do this kind of thing. It all seemed so ephemeral. Karmen and I had written out a schedule of sorts, just to have something to hold on to, but it was iffy in the most basic sense of the word - if neighbours agreed, if landlords consented, if the soil was healthy, if we found funds.

When I returned to the living room, two unfamiliar women were sitting on one couch, two Concordia students on the couch against the opposite wall. My heart lifted a little in my chest. Maybe this was possible after all. We were an interesting mix to be sure - a double PhD in economics and sociology, geography and sociology undergrads, a

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30 Rob Brezsny, poet and astrologer

31 My initial response to my advisor Satoshi's question as I began to write. "What are the top three things you learned from this project?"

32 my co-worker, a sociology honours student from Concordia

herbalist, a community planner, our host, a breathing coach and practitioner of healing art, and me. The apples and cheddar and Karmen's rosemary scones helped ease us into conversation. Karmen and I talked about a brief conversation at the Verdun café Lefebvre et Filles the month before with MUG, Satoshi, and a local food activist, and our estimation that knocking on doors and talking to landlords might be a next step.

"While you were in the kitchen, we talked about having an alley winter party to talk to neighbours about the project," said Sara, the community planner. I said that sounded like a much better idea. MUG suggested that we move to her art space and make a collective collage with images about the kind of place we wanted to create. She set down a stack of magazines and invited us to take any of the photos or images tacked to the walls to glue onto the collage. Soon the paper was filled with pictures of carrots, corn, trees, and children. Before committing, Sara asked for some kind of framework for the project, which we promised to send to her. We ended with a round of one word each to crystallize our departing feelings. *Hope,* said Satoshi. *Diversity!* said one of the geography students. My word - *relief*.

February 2010, Verdun, QC

Daisy, Pierre, and I spread out papers on the wood planks of her third floor apartment and puzzled over the logistics of introducing plant life along the length of the block: some 250 residents, stacked three-deep in Montréal's signature brick and spiral staircase townhouses. What kind of compost system could appeal to residents. How to protect the medicinally useful but oft-misunderstood existing alley plants like dandelion

and burdock. How to air out the prolific mud puddles that reflected the poplars and maples. Daisy brought out some kamut-olive muffins with avocado spread and a licorice lemonbalm nettle tea, Pierre a chocolate-orange peel bread, and me some sesame seed snacks. The meeting lasted twice as long as I hoped it would; it contained tangents on twenty types of baking flour and a wander down the alley to procure measurements with a too-short measuring tape.

"I feel like we're going in circles," I said, frustrated, about halfway through.

"I think it's ok," said Daisy gently.

In spite of, or because of, this, we came up with a timeline and points for the next group meeting, and I left feeling sweet in my heart.

Block writes that immediate measurable outcome approaches are not always helpful with human systems or when we are creating something new. Instead we can look to models of emergent design or "the organic and self regulating nature of the universe."[33] Starhawk (1987) tells us in community planning to

> insist on having a good time together. Expect moments of pain, but expect them to be heavily counterbalanced by the joy, the humor, the creative excitement, the added richness of our lives when we can share them. Otherwise, what's the point? (p. 324).

As Block (2008) says, these conversations to encourage relatedness through open invitations are key to building the patterns for heartfelt accountability and commitment and for true transformation. He says that participation cannot be bought with incentives or bribes, rather, that those invited must know the expectations of

[33] (Block 2008: 110)

organizers and the eternal options to say no without punishment or repercussions and to say yes at a later date. Free choice, "another term for engaging the whole person,"[34] ensures that we will constantly be in conversation with the full presence of others, there each time because of their own desire to engage. These first conversations of invitation, he writes, lead to further exchanges of possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment, and gifts.

Be mindful of your walking. Life depends on your peaceful steps.[35]

Sometimes I think that the world is falling apart, and I'm sitting on a chair at midnight in stripped pink pyjamas, tapping my fingers on small squares of plastic. I want to fix things. I want to know it all, not in five years, not in two years. Now. I am easily seduced by the new religion of information[36] and my own tendency to cram every minute of my day with scheduled work or activity. When I learned about permaculture, a design philosophy for human and agricultural systems, I thought I had found the solution for all of the earth's woes and some human ones, too. A way to feed the people, heal the soil and water, and bring back the forests. Like any school of thought, it has its mantras and its poster children. Like with food forest gardening, fruit and nut trees figure predominantly in the practice. Edible plants trump ornamentals. Elements in a landscape have multiple functions - the grape vine climbing up the south side of a

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34 (Block 2008: 115)

35 (Nhat Hanh, as quoted in Johnson 2009: 47).

36 Pam Nicholls, personal conversation, 2010

house shades from the summer sun, allows entry to the winter sun, and swells with juicy mouthfuls of fruit for wine or dessert. Garlic bulbs at the base of the pear tree keep back competitive grass roots and season soup for the winter.

In March I found out the municipality of Verdun would offer us mostly ornamental trees, bushes, and flowers for free for a planting party in June. The week before I had watched an industrial food documentary, my equivalent of a horror movie, right before bed and hadn't slept all night. Oil runs out, Britain has food supplies to last three days, permaculture edible trees save the day.

I was supposed to be the objective researcher.

"But what about food in the alley," I said to Karmen, to my professors, to community members, to my mother. "We decided on food. What about fruit trees?" I was afraid my permaculture peers would disown me.

Finally Sara gave me a gentle verbal shake.

"Not everybody is going to be into permaculture at first," she explained patiently. "First we get people out using their backyards. First the flowers, then maybe some vegetables, then some fruit trees, *then* permaculture."

Even the permaculture principles include *small and slow steps.*

I suppose I got a little ahead of myself. Feenstra (2002) writes that it takes at least two years to really get rolling with a project. Visions of tomatoes and summer squash climbing up the chain link fences that lined the alley gave way to the reality of private ownership and municipal negotiations for land, car thoroughfare, and questionable soil quality from decades of potential motor oil disposal out the back gate. As our first

spring approached, an acquaintance at Concordia asked to include the alley in a summer tour of collective gardens of Montréal. I told her we weren't ready; if I was one of the mothers of the project, I was barely showing.

My friend Jerson says, "It's not Mexican time, it's agricultural time." Macy and Brown (1998) call this rhythm Deep Time, one used by our ancestors that encompasses longer, earth-paced rhythms. They write that even in the ecological urgency of our time, we can still move at a wise pace when it comes to processes like building relationships and encouraging free circulation of information within them for effective self-governance. When MUG told me about her work over the past few years visioning and nurturing connections for her dream of the green alley project, she said she had been waiting for the right moment to set the plan into action, that it is a delicate social process to start such a project. She likened the process to plants sprouting at their own speed. If we pull on them, they might stop growing all together.

our frameworks took into account the clarity (or not)
of the water its speed its dervish its placidity its negotiativity
we paid intimate attendance to geography by the default position
of being unseparated from it[37]

One of my many descriptions of my program of study is the effect of gardens on communities. As I write this, I question what community means today. The days of life-long loyalty to one job, life-long marriage to one person, life-long rooting in one place

[37] (Cole 2006: 29)

seem to be shifting. We talk of communities as webs, but spider webs tear or collapse if we brush by them on a path. What about something fluid, that allows movement in and out without losing its shape. "Water," said my friend Deanna. "The new metaphor is water." Vortexes in rivers keep their form while pulling in fresh water that is churned about and later released to flow downstream again (Capra 1996). Macy (2006) writes that in the systems view of life, separate things give way to flows, streamings, and currents of matter energy and information. These flows gather into patterns, things which were once thought to be separate entities, that are both created and sustained by the flows. "I love the food movement," said my friend Graham. "You can leave for a while and when you come back, no-one's angry at you. They just want to know what you learned while you were away and what you can share."

But is there a place for containment in this process? Rivers flow through and are contained by a landscape. Capra (1996) writes that groups that organize as living systems will be organizationally closed (set decision-making processes, goals, and philosophies) but structurally open to new energy, people, and activities. Freeman (1970) writes that there is always a structure present with human groups; a wise group makes this structure transparent so as to open space for an inclusive and democratic decision-making process. Capra (1996) says that the clarity of the pattern of organization encourages autonomy and self-organization while pulling in new energy and new matter such as people and activities. This oxygenation of a constant flow of energy and matter through the system is necessary for the freshness of self-organizing. Macy and Brown (1998) write that living systems evolve and adapt by opening to the

information and energy around them and by creating new synergistic connections. In this way living systems are able to remain in a stable state even though they seem, and often are, far from a state of balance or equilibrium.

June 2010, Verdun, QC

It was a Saturday, past all hazards of frost. The vegetable starts on Daisy's porch waited patiently for transplanting. The morning clouds were purple and thick - would the rain hold off? Verdun felt far away, and I wanted to stay in bed with a cup of tea. Nonetheless I got on my bike and peddled down du Parc, de Maisonneuve, Guy, Wellington. In the alley, old political signs and stacks of plastic ice cream tubs for the self-watering containers leaned against Sara and Daisy's back fence. We had eighty seedlings that needed containers with reservoirs to allow their capillaries to soak up water fed to the false bottoms directly via plastic tubes. With the hot Montréal summers amplified by the stone and concrete of a city, the containers allowed the plants to sip water over the course of several days and to live on impervious surfaces or questionable soil. We spent the morning cutting up old yogurt containers, tubing, and political signs, experimented with different designs, listened to a CD of a local band. Lunch included bread, black bean dip, blueberries, and Russian kefir soup.

The clouds opened to rain in the afternoon, those heavy Montréal raindrops that fall in bursts, so different from drizzly west coast rain. We moved to work elbow to elbow on Sara's back porch, the smell of wet earth below us and slivers of plastic falling under our feet. Josh left for another engagement, and Malia arrived after a soccer

match (Brazil and Cote D'Ivoire) - it was her first time gardening, and she agreed to take some of the plants home to her porch. I felt comfortable enough to wander in and out of Sara's home, help myself to water, use the bathroom. The ground cherry, kale, pepper, and tomatoes in their ice cream pails, water pipes sticking up like snorkels, began to spiral up the back staircase. I left just before dinner time and biked home.

That June morning, I had arrived early in Verdun. I walked across the playing fields of the Cegep Monseigneur Richard three blocks east and half-slid down the embankment to the footpath beside the drifting Saint Lawrence river. The purple-flowered alfalfa and silver-leafed mugwort led my eyes down their stems to the musky earth. Snails, brown and yellow spirals, tan and rust, the size of my thumb nail, dotted the sides of the path and the bases of poplar tree trunks. The rippled bark under my fingers mimicked the purl of the water, the slurring of waxy leaves overhead picked my mind clean.

I began to visit the river more frequently. To watch the drifting St Lawrence calms me. In some places, the water appears to flow backwards. In other spots it whirls into itself in gentle spirals, or seems to not move at all. But, when I toss a branch into the water, it is soon carried past the shoulder of the riverbank and out of sight.

WIND

How do I create a sense of space?

Breathe in Uncertainty

I'm just telling a story[38]

we had bridges across or through
for traversing difficult geographies as un/in/ob/trusively as possible
but we weren't afraid of getting dirty or wet or mussed[39]

May 2006, Salt Spring Island, BC

Farmer Dan and I stood wide-legged by the strawberry patch the first day of my apprenticeship at Salt Spring Seeds. I had come down early to the garden to pry out the roots of tenacious buttercup that so love to tango with my favourite fruit. There was enough of a bite in the morning air that I still wore my yellow knit jester's toque. I asked him how the year would unfold. "Well, you'll do a bit of everything in the garden, but it's more a matter of doing whatever interests you, herbs or the orchard or whatever. We'll take it day by day." *Day by day?* I thought. Where was my schedule, my itinerary, my list of learning objectives?

Of course, I learned that the plants had their own schedule and their own itinerary, as did the rain, the sun, the soil, and the deer that on occasion jumped the fence. I learned where the huckleberries grew (out of cedar and Douglas fir nurse logs on the southern side of the property), when black turtle beans are ready for seed (when

[38] (Cole 2006: 59)
[39] (Cole 2006: 57)

the pod is dry and the bean cannot be dented with a fingernail), and which were the first apples ready in the orchard (Gravensteins, when a twist of the wrist releases an apple to one's palm or a slice through the middle star reveals fully formed black pomes). My schedule was determined by my presence with what was raining and shining and blooming and dying around me and within me.

This is our birthright, says Buhner (2004), to use this holistic and intuitive perception to engage with the world. For Starhawk, "mystery is what is wild in us, what is never entirely predictable or safe."[40] The poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes, "it is a question of experiencing everything."[41] Patience and patience, listening and waiting, expanding my awareness into the sensory world, moving out into the space beyond my skin with wonder, unknotting all knowing to make space for the new.

Block (2008) says that we as citizens can breathe life into our communities by asking the right questions. Questions that are personal, ambiguous, and unsettling, that agitate, imply a trust in the personal power of the asker and the collective power of the community. There is no need to use forceful questions that seek to control or ask others to change, that limit the future rather than open a path. All that they demand is engagement through possibility, commitment, dissent, and gifts. If my question is, how do I create space for both ideas and emotions in collective conversations, I will start with myself and cultivate this presence to receive, to respond, to feel.

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40 (Starhawk 1987: 231)

41 (Rilke 1984: 34)

tell the story with the breath[42]

Community transformation is not always a smooth process. Somé (1993) writes that in true communities, individual problems are aired and quickly become community problems. Miller (2008) writes that democracy in practice holds a sometimes unpleasant tension as group members integrate varied opinions into decisions or action plans. Feenstra (2002) writes that conflict is inevitable if diverse segments of an opinionated population converge.

When I was an intern at the Sierra Club of BC in 2006 working with a youth group crackling with interpersonal tension, my advisor told me he used to give a workshop on conflict. "I asked everyone to raise their hand and chant, 'I love conflict!'"

I often perceive the bubbling of disharmony before it erupts, and it is not a feeling that I love. As our alley group gained members and lost members and struggled with our diverse approaches and opinions, I found myself moving automatically into activity as a way to dull the discomfort squeezing at my heart. I flipped through books for answers, ate cookies when I wasn't hungry, wrote emails or called group members to jump into apologies without asking questions or listening to responses. Harvey (2009) writes that this western tendency of unconscious doing is one of our greatest obstacles to clearsighted freedom. Wheatley (1999) writes that the ability to see order in chaos requires a step back from individual moments or fragments to take in the whole. By sitting with the breath I could have expanded those contradictions inside

[42] MUG, personal conversation, fall 2009

myself like my desire to have an inclusive process and my discomfort with the intensity when group members expressed their true feelings. ("It's okay," says a healer that I know. "We should have had breathing classes in high school.") I could have asked more questions. I could have opened my body to the wisdom embedded in these feelings to move from responses of fear to greater calm and centeredness. "Create sacred space," MUG once said to me. "Those are your colours." I didn't see the holiness and wholeness of what was unfolding: the liberation of our words, decisions made out of our own authority, the exercising of free will and choice of participation. I learned that if I connect to my breath as an anchor while voices and emotions blow around me, the calm after the storm often reveals the deeper living truth at hand.

story is a medicine which strengthens and arights [43]

April, 2010, Montréal, QC

Karmen, MUG, and I made a presentation on the alley at an interdisciplinary humanities conference at Concordia. A long table with a white cloth, wine glasses of water. The theory was flying thick and fast in the first two presentations. I decided my best bet was to go to the podium and beam out my enthusiasm for the project, hoping this would cancel my terror of speaking in front of various directors of PhD programs with this unorthodox presentation. I would focus on what we had accomplished thus far

[43] (Pinkola Estes 1992: 19)

in the project. Too much theory ricochets off my head - I wanted my words to sink in. Two other women spoke before us, alone. One said that she liked to knit during conferences but that she had been criticized in the past. In her bio, she encouraged audience members to knit or crochet or practice other art forms as she spoke. Both women apologized for references to their personal and emotional lives during their presentations, but I found these were the most fresh and present moments.

That morning in April, I said I would be telling the love story of our project, and that when I said love, I meant a point of view and series of actions that emphasize the profound connections between people and between people and the natural world. Karmen talked about using a nurturing and democratic process to create a nurturing and democratic space. MUG was to talk about creating links between the alley project and other aspects of the neighbourhood. She got up in front of the room and introduced herself as a breathing coach, and that she had been breathing in the back of the room "to open up space." She then recited a simple poem of single words:

Coeur.[44]

Care.

Terre.[45]

Earth.

Heart.

Ear.

Mère.[46]

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[44] Heart

[45] Earth

I shifted my weight from foot to foot. My face felt hot; she seemed so very far off topic as to what we had agreed on. But my whole body settled and my heart smiled when she, glowing, delivered her words so slowly and with so much warmth. There was no barrier between her and the audience. Afterwards, the head of the humanities PhD program came up and thanked MUG for her poem and for the reminder to breathe and connect to our bodies. Another audience member told us there was a corner of her neighbourhood, St Henri, that she wanted to transform to a garden space. We told her that it was possible, that all she needed she would find. MUG was holding her hand, holding my hand, hugging me, hugging Karmen. I felt warm in my solar plexus and tall in my spine; MUG said that I had the look in my eye of a female buffalo.

Handprints kneeprints scramblingprints clawprints pawprints dustbathprints
and not all of them from human beings
and many are prints but not of feet trackings and tracings
we have to learn to read the tracks the traces again[47]

In June 2010, I went to Algonquin Park to visit a friend apprenticing in nature awareness and wilderness skills. He told me that once, trackers knew the story of an animal or person just by looking at a track - how old, when it had passed by, if it was sick, if it was scared, if she was right handed or left handed. Trackers would spend a day looking at just one print and how it changed with time. What might seem to me like

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[46] Mother

[47] (Cole 2006: 322)

imprints "sprawled all over everywhere"[48] hold layers upon layers of meaning.

"If I were in charge of the world," I recently told a friend, "I'd have elders on every street corner telling stories." "Ahh, you're too soft," he teased. "They'd throw you from the throne." Truly, stories do make me soft. I interviewed community members about their experiences of the alley project; with each listen to our recorded conversations, my chest warmed a little more, I reached towards each person's particular brilliance, I clicked together links. The texture and tone of the spoken words left tracks in my inner space whose edges softened and crumbled with the patient curiosity of earth time. Block (2008)'s vision of powerful questions reminded me of the qualities of stories as teaching tools of inquiry - the ambiguity that allows us each to take our own interpretations from the tale, the personal connections of the teller's voice in our ears and the resonations in our body, and the anxiety provoked by archetypal motifs of long journeys, confrontations, changes felt as deaths and rebirths.

If I am to ask such questions of others, to me this implies that I must also learn to embody these qualities. If I ask personal, ambiguous, and anxiety-provoking questions of others, I'll breathe deeper to allow my heart to open more to all that is personal and dear to me, to glide in ambiguity, and to weather winds of discomfort. If I ask others to be honest and to "own their own experience,"[49] I'll learn to read the tracks of my own experiences with candour, patience, and compassion.

RAVEN: what will your readers think when they see your words sprawled

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48 (Cole 2006: 59)

49 (Block 2008: 109)

all over everywhere you can't just have a whole bunch of howling
who's going to understand

COYOTE: understand I'm not aiming for understanding I'm just telling a story[50]

May 2010, Montréal, QC

At my second *Vivre à L'Echelle Locale*[51] conference, a group of about twenty of us, some barefoot, some with painted faces, were seated in a circle around a young maple tree in the grassy pavilion. A friend had asked me to talk in a circle discussion about green alleys. I started my conversation with the story of the giant turnip. In the middle of the story, a baby held by a mother in the circle started to cry. I had a momentary flash to incorporate the baby and mother - "the mother held her baby with one arm and grabbed onto the grandpa with her other arm, and the grandpa held onto the neighbour, and the neighbour held onto the little girl, and the little girl held onto the turnip, and they pulled and they pulled, and finally, they pulled that turnip out of the ground!" My rational mind made short work of that idea. It felt safer to tell my story without factoring in the messy ambiguity of audience reactions. I was speaking to people who expected that I had something useful to say about green alleys, social inclusion, wellbeing, and community, and I needed to be clear, articulate, and practical. Crying baby and mom rushed to leave the circle. I stumbled through the rest of the story and into my next written point, attempting to generalize about social health and green allies, whereupon my co-presenter Michaela from the Plateau municipality

50 (Cole 2006: 59)

51 Live on a Local Scale

interrupted me with her thoughts about the high rate of abandonment of such projects.

Although I learned in storytelling class the rule of three,[52] the importance of beginnings and endings, and visualization, I forgot that in this ancient kind of theatre, a tangible connection with listeners is paramount. I didn't trust myself to depart from the safe perimeters of the story to include what was transpiring in real time. Although I have steeped myself in the Verdun alley project and its social implications, I was reluctant to reveal my embodied knowledge of the project, what I had seen and experienced. It had been an opportunity for me to let go of perfection and rationality, an invitation to take a risk, to be a little vulnerable. The cry of the baby as I perceived its distress through my senses and through my heart brought me back to my body, to a place of feeling. Maybe I was afraid that listeners would be quick to devalue what I had to say as impossible to reproduce, an anomaly of a project with little value to anyone but our group members.

When Michaela finished speaking, I glanced at my notes and realized I was quite lost. Instead, I continued her thread of conversation by offering the example of the web of social connections we had worked to create over nine months and our barbeques that we used as a mobilization technique to link residents to the space. My words felt more sure and more grounded, my hands moving with greater ease as I spoke, this time a testimony of my living experience and the space of possibility.

There is much that I don't know, but I can be willing to sit breathing and brave

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[52] events, structural devices, or symbols are often repeated three times

with a ruffled heart, with sparring thoughts, with a bound body until the calm expansion of clarity arrives, a dropdown into the belly kind of knowing. I grew up in the Alberta foothills, where waves of cool moist air roll across the prairies in springtime. When I was young I liked to go outside and lean into these winds, the smell of bare earth wild and unsettling after months of frozen cover. My hair whipped around my head, my palms opened to feel the freshness between my fingers. When I told my friend Steven that I was writing about breathing and uncertainty, he asked, "Breathing, in uncertainty, or breathing uncertainty *in*?" These winds opening space, revealing shoots underneath the melting snow.

EARTH

How do I decompose my illusions of self containment?

Speak from the belly

The body always tells the truth[53]

wisdom is knowing what is enough[54]

I came to Montréal in August 2008 because of a bodily sensation, an impulse that pulled me east to the fire of the city. Maybe I sensed I had become codified in my island life: a sweet woman, a nice woman, a quiet woman. I was riding my bike in downtown Montréal that bright sugar maple fall when a sort of banner, like those pulled behind airplanes, floated across my mind. *Time to get fierce, Megan.* When I have the fortune to receive this kind of clear directive, it is to be followed.

It was about this time that I was writing and selling my proposal for graduate school at Concordia. This was not the place for sweet or nice. My anger and frustration and sadness about the poisons on our food and soil, the war culture[55] of our social structures, and the muzzling of our hearts refined my actions to a focused point. I would create space for blooming soil and engaged conversation, I would create a connected study program and find the words to write about it. The perennial dull ache in my lower back began to ease; my knees felt warmed and flexed.

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[53] (Colectivo Salsa Descalza, 2010)

[54] Beverly, personal conversation June 2010, just past the east gate of Algonquin Park

[55] See *BIRD :* Where do I put my attention? Pg. 53

June 2010, Algonquin Park, ON

The bear was about two years old, hit by a car on the highway that traverses Algonquin Park. My friend had helped remove the skin from her body, ripping muscle from hide. The knife bounced and cut my friend's arm, hitting an artery which was later stitched up at the hospital. *Even dead she got you.* Now, a few weeks later, the hide lay on a bench to be cleaned in preparation for tanning. My friend had been cleaning for a couple of hours, scraps of the pelt dotting the earth. He climbed off the sawhorse when I showed up and lit a piece of cedar in a tin can; the smoke would keep the mosquitoes at bay. The fat on the hide was white, patched with shiny red muscle. I placed a plastic bag over her and straddled the bench. *Was it a mama bear, a boy bear? A she bear, but no cubs.* A slow breath, a prayer of thanks, the maples all around. I started to scrape. The blunt blade slipped, passed over the flesh without impact. *Really push down, but not so much that it breaks through. Grunt, even!* I breathed out sharp with each push, my belly warming; the hide stretched slow away from me as the flesh eased back from the fur, pieces of her smooth body between my fingers then offered to the ground.

for us orality is about engagement rather than infringement
community rather than 'communication'[56]

In January 2010, Karmen and I helped to organize an open meeting for residents

[56] (Cole 2006 : 51)

of the alley. Block (2008) asks, how will we make this meeting valuable? Karmen and I prepared a short video and a hand out on green alleys, more hand outs on our research, sign up sheets for committees, and a visioning activity for the garden space. We wanted to respect the time of the people present, to be efficient and clear. On the one hand, Alinsky **(**1971) writes that community organizing requires effective and clear communication within people's realms of experience. As Sara once told me, action encourages engagement, and too much talking can dissuade participation. "It might be appropriate for a yoga center or intentional community," she said, "But this is just an alley of regular people living their lives." As I write this, I wonder what a valuable conversation means. Time, ideas, words have value, but is there also a place for feelings, experiences, spontaneous expressions of self, for silence? "Would you tell a story at the next meeting?" I wrote to MUG in December 2009. "Each person should jump in with her own story whenever she feels, to get us out of our big fat heads," she replied.

Despite my quest for ferocity, I remain more observant than active, more thoughtful than chatty. I find that collective conversations, often heady and fast-paced, challenge my ability to contribute to the dialogue in a timely and embodied manner. My natural impulse is to track the energetic state of group members and to reflect on and digest comments as they emerge; interrupting the group conversation to speak requires me to claw past these layers of emotional tracks and unfurling ideas like a wild creature emerging from a thicket. What are conversation practices, I wanted to know, that would create space for a multitude of ways of knowing and expression? I know one

community organizer who starts and ends every meeting with an invitation for participants to take several deep breaths along with him to help ground the energy of the group, to help connect the head to the body. Starhawk (1987) writes about the use of consensus as an inclusive and emotionally forthright decision-making pattern. Palmer (1983) will bring in silence as part of the rhythm by capping contributions at two per person: the eloquent are asked to economize with their words, the quiet take the responsibility to speak. Again, Block (2008) writes that we can create community conversations that evoke intimacy, freedom and creation through personal, provocative, and ambiguous questions instead of explanations and analysis. This, along with attention to the invitation and the creation of a hospitable meeting space, allows for new kinds of conversations. When I am asked a question, it calls on me to respond, on a conscious or subconscious level. As Block says, I no longer have the luxury of being an observer about that which concerns me. He writes that if we can create conversations in restorative contexts that encourage relatedness, we have, for a moment, changed the world.

a series of doors and dreams and poems through which we can learn and know all manner of things[57]

I came to Satoshi, my advisor, in September 2009 seeking support and advice on the zygote of an idea to help launch a green alley. He responded with his characteristic

[57] (Pinkola Estes 1992: 222)

enthusiasm and seemed unperturbed by the scope of the project. "Why don't you ask Karmen to help you?" he said cheerfully. *Flying by the seat of my pants*, I would translate for MUG when describing my experience of the process several months later. Like the permaculture food forest, the action research that I practiced with the alley group is creative (Rahman 1993), messy, and ideally reflective of the complexity and flexibility of human lives (Gah n.d.). Truly, there were days that my shoulders were up above my ears as another conflict clashed between group members, as another community connection surged into the swirling, churning mix, as another of my mistakes (live and on air!) turned into the proverbial opportunity for growth. But, as Wheatley says, "If you're not making it up as you go along, you're out of touch with reality because it's changing constantly."[58] Often, Palmer writes that "we seek knowledge in order to resist chaos."[59] The etymology of chaos is Greek, from a deity that personified the empty space that existed before the creation of the cosmos.[60] We fill the spaciousness with words, facts, assumptions. Instead, he writes, we can allow the vulnerability of openness to change us. We can rest in silence to listen and be challenged as to what we think we know, what we think we want, who we think we are.

For Cole (2006) the knowledge needed for fishing is not hi tech, but rather requires imagination, respectful action, and

> the importance of groping in darkness tactiling feeling for the

[58] (Wheatley 2000: n.p.)
[59] (Palmer 1983: 23)
[60] http://www.eoht.info/page/Chaos

> bottomfeeders with your toes your feet not needing to rely exclusively on visual acuity clarity (p. 30).

Pinkola Estes says that "even raw and messy emotions can be understood as a form of light, crackling and bursting with energy,"[61] something to sit with, observe, and befriend. It's beautiful to write, hard to do. I would rather cook my emotions, refine them, make them clean and pristine, or lock the messy ones with all of my vulnerabilities and flaws behind a heavy cupboard door. They show me to be a disordered human, my cogs and wheels jamming and melting all over the place.

Yet Wilber (2002) and Starhawk (1987) write that this kind of emotional honesty is the only way to be an effective and responsive leader. In my dance movement therapy class, we talked about observing the movement of others and ourselves with a soft gaze, with the light of compassion and curiosity. Bloom (2006) writes that to move from defensive communication patterns like intellectual distancing or verbal purges to more connected patterns, rooted in the senses and emotions, we can let go of the idea of right words. I can learn to speak from the roundness of love for all beings, intimate with my direct experience (Cole 2006, Bloom 2006). I can sink into internal perceptions, into the tissues of the body and the soles of the feet and speak from the "embodied attentiveness" that comes from being in awareness, in "now-ness."[62] I know a dancer who says that the roots of the body reside in the belly. I believe that it is also the safekeep of our truest words. Palmer writes that as we listen to the voice of another, "our own speech becomes clearer and more honest; through the other we learn much

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61 (Pinkola Estes 1992: 381)

62 (Bloom 2006: 71)

about ourselves."[63] When I honour and befriend my body, instead of trying to silence it I can build a trust in the wisdom and words that reside there.

We are Nature, long have we been absent, but now we return
We become plants, trunks, foliage, roots, bark,
We are bedded in the ground—we are rocks;
We are oaks, we grow in the openings side by side…[64]

I think of the current dialogue in environmental activist circles about "helping the earth" as something apart instead of inviting the earth into the midst of our conversations and our communities. Harvey (2009) says that the projection of the earth as an entity that we can save denies our embedded self as part of the earth; our current societal and environmental neglect is, on a deep level, a neglect of the body. It's not that we've lost our connection with nature but that we've lost the connection with our natural selves. Palmer (1983) writes that

> to 're-member' means literally to remember the body, to bring the separated parts of the community of truth back together, to reunite the whole. The opposite of remember is not forget, but dismember. This is what we do when we forget truth, we are dismembering the relationship between us and the rest of reality (p. 103).

Of all the cycles of this love story, I have sat most intimately with this one, the body, the voice, the earth, scratching my head, coaxing myself down to feel these most messy emotions inside my skin, my love and fear and rage and joy, sitting sitting, waiting for

63 (Palmer 1983: 102)
64 (Whitman 1996: 101)

my words to come.

November 2010, Verdun, QC

I attended a meeting with representatives of various community organizations and members of the municipality about MUG's proposed community compost program. Jacques, a manager of several properties on the alley, attended as well, upset about the state of many of his *ruelles*, upset because he had not been consulted about our *ruelle* initiative. There was a charge in the room and we had not yet begun; I made the decision to commit to my breath. When MUG came in, she explained that every five minutes she would move to a different section of the meeting: introductions, explanation of the project, testimonies, further explanation of the project, then a polite closure. For introductions, each person gave their name, their association, and a quality they possessed. I said I was *tranquille*. When Pierre and a Verdun employee gave their qualities in the negative (*impatient, tête de cochon*[65]), MUG asked them to turn the quality to positive (*passioné, perserverante*).

She passed around teaching aids for us to touch and smell - a dry sponge was the current soil in Verdun, a sponge in water was the life that compost brings to the soil, crabapples in a small basket showed the food that is growing and wasted in Verdun, a bowl of sawdust represented the resources available in Verdun. She poured everyone a glass of water. Somehow as she talked she recognized each person, connected with each person while talking to the group. It was like a performance.

[65] pig headed

The landlord gave a *témoignage*[66] about his need for clean alleys. Then MUG asked me to talk about my commitment to the alley project. *Don't think just go,* I thought. I don't live in Verdun but I feel welcome when I arrive, I said in French. I see so many connections now - people talk to each other. I know more about this neighbourhood than my own. Nature is a common language - one friend comments on a plant in Spanish, another friend says the same thing to me in English minutes later. Plants make connections and open the heart. This is why I am passionate about the project. I was surprised to see the landlord smiling at me as I spoke.

I felt the individuals in the meeting approaching each other as the meeting continued, even though no one moved. MUG thanked everyone individually to close the meeting. After, we walked to the river, stood on the earth, and breathed. Chickadees were singing in the branches of the Staghorn Sumac bushes. "*Oh je suis contente,"* she said. *"Oh je suis contente."*[67]

I think about how we are always telling our stories through the way we move, what we say and how we say it, what we do. Pinkola Estes says, "if we could realize that the work is to keep doing the work, we would be much more fierce and much more peaceful"[68]. As a woman I am remembering the truth of my being, remembering my belly, my moving flow, my power in the body (Pinkola Estes 1992) and power with others (Starhawk 1987), a different kind of strength, a different kind of power. I am

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66 personal testimony

67 Oh I am happy.

68 (Pinkola Estes 1992: 274)

remembering a way of being in the world, a culture of trees and poetry and carrying life and holding to this fiercely.

I returned to Montréal with a raw little scrap of hide and hair from that she-bear, tucked in a bag with bright curls of yellow birch. I scraped it down, soaked it in brine for seven days. The hide grew firm, the hair was salty and soft, this messy bit of skin that crackled and burst with light.

BIRD

Where do I put my attention?

Change the Story

War culture to Life-loving culture[69]

To love means to embrace and at the same time to withstand many many endings, and many many beginnings…Death as a dancer, with Life as its dance partner [70]

August 2009, Orcas Island, WA

My friend Tali was interning at the Bullocks' Brothers permaculture homestead, and I wanted to see the mythical place first hand. It didn't disappoint. Outdoor solar showers framed by curved bamboo screens emptied to greywater reed beds that trickled to duck-stocked ponds. The marsh sub-irrigated a series of rectangular *chinampas,* a gardening technique developed by the Aztecs with beds built of layers of reeds, plant life, and fertile muck soil. Outhouses decorated with flowers and write-on chalkboards converted human waste to fertile soil for future fruit tree plantings. The only indoor summer space for interns and guests was a greenhouse with a cedar sauna. Asian plum orchards were interplanted with rows of cabbages larger than my arms could embrace. The land dripped with food, beauty, and laughing, healthy people. It reminded me of the months I spent living and working in villages in Central America - the teasing, the rich fruit trees, the sharing, the outdoor living. The homestead to me told a new story.

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69 (Starhawk 1987)

70 Pinkola Estes 1992: 172)

December 2009, Montréal, QC

Karmen and I arrived early in the alley before an afternoon community meeting, the sun low in the sky. Karmen picked her way through the mud to snap photos of the alley, our "before" shots taken at a most dramatic time of year. Maybe we were cheating a little, like the black and white magazine photos of frowning women juxtaposed with their colour makeover shots. The puddles in the *ruelle* reflected the grey of the sky, the blue plywood wall of a garage, burdock gone to seed, the leafless trees. A low wrought-iron fence extending out from a backyard guarded a space six feet across and twelve feet deep with bushes that pulsed with the voices of chickadees and starlings. They took seeds from a feeder across the lane and flew back to the protection of the branches, the other birds resting there lilting left and right to make space.

Fight for Change is a common phrase in activist vernacular. I'm not surprised; as Starhawk (1987) writes, so many of our interactions and structures in society seem to mimic or reflect a war culture, even if we are lucky enough to be living in a place without armed conflict. I sometimes experience, with a soft gaze, these tendencies in myself: I use words as a shield to hide my true feelings and to avoid real risks for change, I want to retaliate when I feel hurt, I see mistakes as problematic, I retreat from conflict, I obey outside rules and not my own inner code of conduct, I push past the limits of the body. ("It's okay, you can forgive yourself," a healer I know likes to say, "but it's good to notice.") Starhawk writes that the resistance of these patterns affirms

our inherent value, and that of all other beings and creatures; it affirms our right to exist. Power is often defined as something to be given or taken away. In a psychology of liberation, we can cultivate internal power through affirming the self and body, and we can generate shared power through our relationships. Transformation is a different vision for activism, a series of small changes which can have profound effects (Twist 2003). Like a bird pecking and pushing out from a shell, we can lend intimate attention to each small step of resistance and creative liberation.

When the shape of culture becomes a trap, the spirit of trickster will lead us into deep shape-shifting[71]

November 2010, Montréal, QC

I wake up at 5:29 am before my alarm rings at 5:30. A match to light a candle and a stick of sandalwood incense, the rest of my room and apartment in darkness, hot miso soup into my backpack for a sunrise breakfast on the mountain. My friend from Algonquin and I meet at the angel statue and scramble up the steep south side, with rock, paper birch, sugar maple as foot and hand holds. Dawn is creeping in. Then, from the west, a sharp crescendo sound. "I know that one!" says my friend. He runs up the trail like a fox chasing a squirrel. I hesitate for a moment and then trot after him. I stop when I find him on the other side of a grove of maples and follow his finger that points to the top of a red oak. The scarlet head of a Pileated Woodpecker knocks its rhythm in

[71] (Campbell Reesman 2001: xxii)

the silence of the morning.

I returned to the Bullocks' Homestead the following July to study the design principles of permaculture. On day two, Doug, the eldest brother, asked for definitions of this ecological and social framework. "Systems that mimic the natural world," I said. "Yes," he said, "but what's the *goal*?" At the time I was stumped. On day sixteen, a naturalist named Scott talked to us about nature awareness before our bird sit[72] by the pond the following morning. During a past workshop in a city backyard, participants were asked to tune their ears to distinctions between relaxed and alarmed birdcalls. During the debrief, nine out of ten participants were able to hear the distress of a robin perched atop a back fence, confirmed when an alley cat emerged seconds later at the far side of the fence. Scott asked the tenth participant to talk about his experience. The man expressed his dismay at the sound of lawn mowers and leaf blowers. "It was all I could focus on!" We are what we pay attention to, said Scott. The brain's synaptic connections form according to our sensory messages and the focal points of the mind. The more we tune into to the softer sounds and the wildness that remains, the more we pattern and stitch ourselves to a place. We can become more relaxed and more peaceful and start to co-narrate a story with the land as our empathy for our surroundings increases.

Block (2008) writes that new models of community will grow not through retribution and problems to be solved but through restoration and acts of possibility,

[72] An opportunity to sit silently and in solitude and observe the language of morning bird song

generosity, and accountability. We are in the midst of a great cultural shift, equal in significance to the agricultural and industrial revolutions: the Great Turning, from the Industrial Growth Society to a Life-Sustaining Society (Macy and Brown 1998). Starhawk (1987) describes a transition from self-hater culture to life-loving culture, Somé (1993) sees a shift from machine culture to an emotional, spiritual, and soulful culture. Harvey (2009) calls it a welcoming of the sacred back into every element of our lives. Blocking actions of political, legal, and legislative work, as well as forms of resistance such as protests and boycotts, slow the damage done to the earth and its beings by the Industrial Growth Society; however, they must be coupled with alternative creative solutions and a radical shift in cultural concepts (Macy and Brown 1998). As these authors write, it is the work of healing the world that will free us.

in our own essential natures we find the absolute stamina, the necessary libido for all necessary acts of heart [73]

Campbell writes that to affirm life, we must affirm it in its entirety, to the root, "the rotten horrendous base."[74] The bear hide that I helped to scrape in Algonquin Park was my most intimate experience with the death of a wild animal, when I felt the reality of mortality in the natural world so starkly. As I sat on the sawhorse and the bloody, slippery fat of her pelt, my moment of initial repulsion smoothed to a curiosity of her textures and smell, an admiration for the tenacity in which the flesh clung to the fur,

[73] (Pinkola Estes 1992: 261).

[74] (Campbell 2004: 4)

and then a tenderhearted awe for the chance to be in communion with that tremendous creature.

I later found out that the garden in Karmen's photos belonged to Monsieur Robert, a retired nurse. When our alley group was planting perennials and flowers in June, I stopped to chat when he was digging in the soil. When he moved to the space, he told me, he carried bucket after bucket of earth excavated from his basement to his chosen garden site, a soil compact and moribund after years under asphalt and parked cars. He grows lilacs there, magnolias and raspberries beside a wind tower decorated with miniature hockey sticks. He told me that the space grounds him, feeds his creativity, and helps with his chronic pain. Four months after our conversation in the alley, I called him to ask more questions about his plants and his story. His sister answered the phone and told me he had passed away that very day. "His suffering is over," she said, and asked if I was a friend. "A neighbour," I said. She told me she might move into his home, and that I was welcome to come and garden with her in the spring. After the conversation finished, I sat on my bed and held the phone in my hand until I was ready to put it down on the terra cotta sheet.

I'm wrapped in a blanket and brought up to light, they want to cut out my ovaries, cut out my eyes, cut off my wings. I ward them off with scissors, I turn into a bird and fly away.[75]

Wilber writes that in moving towards wellness we can replace our problem stories

[75] dream, August 2, 2010

with more functional ones, for “there are no pathologies, only stories that have gone awry.”[76] In our alley’s first community-wide meeting, we envisioned our intended results for the space - food, social space, art, and beauty, and then traced this vision back to tangibles like fruit trees, benches, and flowers. At the permaculture course, we individually envisioned the place where we live in the year 2030 and a typical day in this new world. Then in small groups we developed radio broadcasts that heralded exciting news from this time. "This just in! Gardeners have found a new way to eat slugs!" "Today's traffic report: there's a backup on the corner of Oak and Pine where Bob's appaloosa has indigestion, but not to worry. Mary's on the way with a handful of mint for the old stead, and things should be moseying along before long."

Atlee (2003) writes that expectations, both positive and negative, can hinder our will to act and disengage us rather than involve us in the life process. As Block (2008) says, explanations and evaluations make for finite, closed conversations. Discussions of possibility hold a much stronger creative power. Atlee (2003) writes that

> like a spiritually healthy person who has just learned they have heart disease, we can use each dire prognosis as a stimulant for reaching more deeply into life and co-creating positive change (p. 1).

Hopkins (2008), in *The Transition Handbook*, points out that environmentalists often seek to motivate change by highlighting the horror of our current planetary damage and asking others to change their ways. He likens this to describing a vacation destination with dirty sheets and soggy toast and telling friends not to go there rather than inviting friends to enjoy a destination with gorgeous sunsets and beaches. He writes that we are

[76] (Wilber 2002: 118)

only beginning to understand the power of vision to imagine the new and the steps to go there. He says, "the telling of new stories is central."[77] For Block (2008)

> healing is really the process of re-remembering the past in a more forgiving way. The willingness to own up to the fictional nature of our story is where the healing begins - and where the possibility of restoration resides (p. 36).

Harvey (2009) writes that we must give ourselves, our capacities, our energies, and our most loving intentions, to this birth of a new kind of humanity. When we do, he says, the profound and mysterious nature of the divine, like a midwife, will bless and encourage this transformation and impart instructions as gentle, unexpected miracles. I feel the mechanics of the structures I built around and within myself chipping and falling away. The new trajectory of my life feels lifted and a little scary, like flight. This morning I walked up MacKay from the downtown Concordia campus to ascend the eastern slope of the mountain. Perhaps it was more like a march, for two birds flew away as I approached with alarmed cries. I stopped, embarrassed, and consciously let go of my thoughts about the words of this chapter, a romantic fling that ran its course, and my train trip to BC the following week. Within a minute, a rust-coloured female cardinal and a blood-red male flew back to a sumac to my left with encouraging calls bouncing between them. I put attention into my steps and followed the meandering trails until I perceived a chorus to my right. I followed the path to a descent of downy woodpeckers singing in deadfall - close, closer, and soon I was in the middle of a grand arc of sound.

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[77] (Hopkins 2008: 94)

January 2011, Verdun, QC

The wind is sharp on the banks of the Saint Lawrence this morning, but the cold air wakes my mind and my senses. As I walk I see a few feathers on the snowy path, black tips fading to grey to white, frozen flesh at the tips. I pick them up, my hands clumsy in my thick pink mittens, like a child. A trail of feathers now, and then two perfect wings, the bases bloody, the tips elegantly pointing, more feathers scattered round. I kneel to look closer. This is all I see. Some creature has since consumed the body and left this quiet offering on the snow.

TREE

How do I connect yet remain free?

Ramble in Wildness
the humanness of humans

it is the greatest genius which is simple[78]

I was first introduced to the Hawthorne tree on a plant walk at Elk Lake, outside of Victoria, BC, in 2005. Her firm red haws, soaked in brandy, yield a gentle heart tonic, said the guide. But the subtle pome fruits and sharp thorns melded with the blue-black osoberries and the plumed foliage of elderberry and I quickly forgot her qualities and appearance. Two years later at the farm, on a whim I asked Dan if this tree grew on the land, if she was included in the line of saplings that stood sentinel just to the east of the raspberries. He said no, but that if he saw a Hawthorne he would point her out. A kind of restlessness grew up inside me. I contemplated roaming the woods with an internet photo, but at the time this seemed frivolous. *Just a tree,* my mind chided me. The following summer I participated in another plant walk, this time at Burgoyne Bay on Salt Spring Island. An hour into the walk, the guide stopped us in the shade of a thorny tree. "This is-"

I've been waiting for you.

My eyes teared up. My mind, ever vigilant, scoffed. *Whoever heard of tree speak?*

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[78] (Cole 2006: 28)

But. *I've been waiting for you.*

July 2010, Orcas Island, WA

At the Bullocks Brothers homestead, Scott the naturalist drew two concentric circles on the write-on board with a stick figure inside. For most of us, he said, our circle of awareness of the natural world is smaller than the actual effect we create in the woods. The goal with naturalist training is to invert the circles and make our energetic impact smaller than our awareness. "This," he said, almost running across the front of the classroom, bent forward at the waist and looking at an imaginary watch, "is threatening to birds. Take a robin. It has immanent death coming at it from above, below, and from all sides. If I'm moving through the forest without recognition of everything else that's there, the birds sense it." He stopped and paused. "Now. After I say this I see folks returning back to their tents like this." He began to creep in slow motion in front of the group. "This freaks the birds out, too! I'm talking about moving at a relaxed pace. I'm off somewhere but it doesn't really matter where. I'm going to see lots of beautiful things along the way." He asked us to reflect on the way the Bullocks brothers moved about the land. It was true - I had noticed their calm pace even in the midst of a busy course. "They accomplished all of this," he waved his hand around, "at that pace." He said that awareness and awe for the creatures and plants around us is one of our most tender and pressing tasks, because "we can plant all the fruit trees we want, but if no-one cares, what's the point?"

every creature on earth returns to home [79]

September 2008, Montréal, QC

After three seasons with my knees in dirt and my nose closing to compost piles, my fingers in washbins of lettuce on frigid mornings and my forehead sweaty as I schlepped hoses during a heat wave, I found a job as a cashier at a Montréal health food chain on ave. St. Lawrence. I noticed a strange sensation of a missing limb in this new environment of white uniforms, air conditioning, and plastic air mile cards. My senses were confused by the flatness of the workspace. It helped that my co-worker Ollie sang Elvis Presley songs to me, and my breaks at a nearby park exploded with my first display of Eastern maple colours. But the contrast did prompt the thought that it is through our senses that we as humans come alive.

Later, in March 2010, I was up in the Concordia greenhouse thinning carrots and parsley in one of the beds when a friend came to join me. I felt my head settle into my body. He began to talk, and I was reminded of chats I had while weeding or harvesting with volunteers at the yoga center farm, light conversation that was at the same time infused with emotion. The plants and motions of thinning seemed to provide a focal point for our senses and bodies, and his stories came out easily from a heartfelt place. I felt like I was listening well, alert and present. Abram writes that in more predominantly oral cultures, which tend to hold an embodied consciousness, non-humans dialogue with humans through an exchange through the senses, and that to

[79] (Pinkola Estes 1992: 287)

block this exchange is "to freeze the body itself."[80] He calls for a revival of storytelling and oral culture to blend with written culture, for us to "trust our sensing bodies"[81] and to "engage cool reason with sensory ways."[82]

My sunrise friend tells me the naturalists he knows are uncanny in their ability to read emotion in human body language through their knowledge of animal movement and behaviour. Levine (1997) writes that humans have almost identical nervous systems and instinctual sections of the brain as other mammals and even reptiles. Animals discharge excess energies that can result from a stressful encounter through instinctual shaking movement. As humans we have often trained ourselves to suppress this kind of motion, intricately linked with emotions and the communications contained there; as a result, we hold these energies of frozen fear and anxiety inside. A balanced nervous system feels alive, embodied, relaxed yet alert, resilient but able to ask for support (Somatic Experiencing Trauma Institute n.d.), able to sway with the gusts of life; when humans allow instinctual movement that stems from the feeling wisdom of our bodies, it works to recalibrate and calm the nervous system. Harper (1995) writes that when our bodies can respond authentically to our environment, we move towards a return to our instincts, our strong emotions, creative expression, and internal wisdom. We are able to come home (Levine 1997).

The impulse to play is an instinct. No play, no creative life. Be good, no creative life. Sit

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80 (Abram 1996: 131)
81 (Abram 1996: 268)
82 (Abram 1996: 270)

still, no creative juice. Speak, think, act only demurely, little creative juice.[83]

My friend Su organized a free dance party in Halifax during the summer of 2010 in a fenced off park as a peaceful reclamation of public space - "Dance! Let loose! Jump in the fountain!" One hundred people came. The police did, too, and politely requested that they stay out of the fountain. ("It's okay," Su said, "it was pretty gross in there, anyway.") A reporter with a microphone spoke calmly about the event while two men twisted and shimmied ecstatically on either side of him.

Fisher (2002) writes that we humans have a hatred of the boundaries of the natural world, but at the same time it seems that we have an obsession with limits. We are passworded, grided, gated, locked, stoplighted, golighted, cubicated, legislated, bureaucrated, and copywrited. Sometimes I think that if we had fewer human-created rules to limit, protect, and restrain, we wouldn't mind Gaia's so much (the delicacy of her soil and water cycles, the time she takes to grow a forest, the slowness of winter, the wetness of rain.) Freedom comes from the Old English freo, "not in bondage."[84] Pryer writes that the erotic current of desire that moves within and through the body is a powerful source of creative energy. No matter how disciplined, efficient, and rational a system might be, wild eros "flows into the cracks in the system"[85] found everywhere, above all in our hearts. As one participant said during my permaculture course, "Freedom of movement is a human right. You can't contain a human being." Our

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83 (Pinkola Estes 1992: 251)

84 www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=free

85 (Pryer 2001: 140)

liberation, write Macy and Brown (1998), lies in our ability to feel, to be able to move from fear to a responsive, vibrant state of being. De Pree writes that instead of rules for group cohesion, we can look at leadership and community building through establishing shared values such as "contribution, spirit, excellence, beauty, and joy."[86]

Another root of freedom is the Germanic frijaz, "noble or joyful."[87] Block (2008) writes that reverence of beauty also encourages human freedom. It helps us move from survival and war culture mentality (Papanek 1995, Starhawk 1987) to thriving conditions of a culture of life, rhythm, harmony, and proportion. Our animal bodies sense and respond to a space: the light, smell, textures, colours, and organic geometry that also governs growth patterns in nature, the organization and proportions of our bodies, music, and the cosmos (Papanek 1995). Block (2008) says that when we pay attention to the hospitality of physical space for meetings, by sitting in circles, by including the arts, in natural sunlight, with healthy food, or better yet, outside, it gives a high priority to human experience. When we work to create spaces that support the feelings of relatedness and belonging and the poetry and harmony of beauty, it will reflect and nourish these qualities in ourselves.

A village by nature has a public space at its heart where organic community building occurs through our intrinsic need to relate and connect (Starhawk 2004). I envision the alley one day as one of many, many spaces for making music and telling stories, for the free exchange of goods and heart-rooted conversation, for open impromptu dance parties with blooming roses, cherry trees, and hanging grapes for the

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86 (De Pree 1989: 112)

87 www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=free

taking. Environmental activist groups often talk about creating an earth culture of sustainability. "Forget sustainable," a permaculture friend of mine once said. "Imagine a marriage that was just *sustainable*. Let's create systems that are abundant, vibrant, alive!"

November 2010, Verdun, QC

When I arrive for our *ruelle* meeting, Sara and Malia are already seated around Sara's round kitchen table. Five pm and the sky through the east-facing window is dark, contrasting with the lights in a few neighbours' homes across the alley. Malia and Sara bubble with Christmas party ideas, planned for the fifth of December: strings of Christmas lights hung along the high clotheslines that cross the alley, balcony decorations, hot chocolate, a free store, a sound system with Josh to dj. This is a potluck meeting: spaghetti squash with beans in the oven, walnut and date pie, beet ketchup, chard with cilantro and ginger. Yves and Thérèse show up with more gorgeous food - tapanade on crackers, semoule-brie bread, couscous and vegetables, falafel. Sara's roommate boils water in a small saucepan and passes around a box with different tea bags inside. He cuts his grilled cheese sandwiches into long thin rectangles to share. We laugh a lot. We tease each other. Yves calls me "*notre amie journaliste."*[88] I forget to take minutes.

Expect nothing. Live frugally

[88] our journalist friend

On surprise [89]

Fairytales, myths, and wondertales, Kane writes, are the "patterns of relationship of the earth"[90] translated to sacred human language. He says that the more we try to understand these earth patterns through dissection, the more tempted we will be to manipulate our assumed understanding of these patterns for our own gain and so often to the detriment of a species, a soil community, a riverway, or an ecosystem. The great natural farmer Fukuoka says that humans cannot know nature, as "in nature, there is no cause and effect."[91] Buhner (2004) writes that another way to gather knowledge is to perceive through the heart field, to see and feel connections with all of our body and senses. During my research I began to let go of the need to be a so-called expert in all fields I was exploring (storytelling, sociology, psychology, permaculture, community building) by hunting down a maximum of information in each field. I confess it was for my mental and physical wellbeing at first, that after my first year of study my animal body began to rebel against so many hours in a desk. But I also began to experience the hand of grace in my work - the right line from the right book at the right time, a deeper investigation of a previously read text that opened new insights, a conversation with a stranger on the metro that helped to clarify a point. I studied in the spring shade of a chestnut tree a block from my apartment, its crown of new leaves swirling in the wind above me; the concepts of my books became the lime green beetle that climbed my arm

89 (Walker 1973: 30)
90 (Kane 1994: 44)
91 (Fukuoka 1985: 5)

hairs, the ripples in the water of the park's concrete moat, and the lovers cradling each others' faces under a linden tree. I began to not just think but feel the invisible connections in the human and natural world, the fluidity of life with its own particular logic. I have seen that these connections happen often and just when I need them, if I can accept and trust these divine gifts, this process of opening to what is waiting for me.

In the rambling and wildness, is there a place for the rationality of form and structure, for direct and linear reason, for objectivity? At about day nine of my permaculture course, one of the participants raised her hand and said that she was struggling to retain all of the rich information we were being fed. Jared, a past participant and guest presenter replied that she was free to take a break when she needed to. "You're the boss," he said. His comment was a good reminder of my own role of gardener as balancer[92] not only of a terrain but also of my own personal ecology. While connecting to our senses can liberate our animal bodies, Pinkola Estes (1992) says that instincts are also arighted by the ongoing practice of clear boundaries and firm responses. The Hawthorne tree offers its abundant and substantial thorns as refuge for nests of small songbirds. As John said during the course, "Take care of your own front yard first before you go trying to start a project somewhere else." Often during my first year of study and the alley project I struggled because it felt like I wasn't doing enough. Enough of what? I was trying to save the planet and the people on it, start a green alley revolution, battle against the bad guys and gals (who are they, anyway?) Maybe it was more of a feeling that *I* wasn't enough, that I was in a competition, a race into which I

[92] from John Valenzuela, another instructor in the permaculture course

had unwittingly stumbled. Instead, I can see all the beings who have "gone on before me who continue to reach out making the journeying easier"[93] and who continue to travel beside me. As my friend Raven once told me after months of living under the massive solidity of a Douglas Fir on the side of Mount Maxwell on Salt Spring, "All you have to do is be," he said. "Just be."

Permaculture wisdom says that a good design uses logic to create self generating systems of abundance. Our instructors in the course emphasized over and over the focus on process over product in this design process. When I returned to Montréal from the permaculture homestead for my second year of study, I saw that the design of my life ecology could use some balancing - more care in the home garden, more rambling in wildness. Macy and Brown (1998) write that a little distance and perspective helps us see our relatedness and the immeasurable and inevitable effects of pure-intentioned actions in the self-organization of living systems (Laidlaw 2004). They write that this calm wisdom combined with the heat of compassion and passion will give us wholesome endurance and hope to continue. I have spent this second year still hard working but with a good dose of play as well.

To love someone deeply gives you strength. Being loved by someone deeply gives you courage.[94]

"Don't go off and buy some pristine forest and chop down a bunch of trees to build your

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93 (Cole 2006: 322), spacing in the original text

94 Lao-Tzu (Chinese Taoist philosopher, author of *Tao Te Ching)*

homestead," said one of our instructors during the permaculture course. "Find some land that needs repair. We need our wild spaces to remind us what the model is." In the context of the conversation, he referred to wild spaces as the model for garden design, but he also could have meant the model for living. Capra (1996) writes that we need to learn to be ecologically literate, to understand the basic workings of ecology, to be able to then use Nature's principles to create revitalized educational, business, political, and other human organizations and communities. Some of these natural guidelines such as small and slow solutions, self regulation and feedback, valuing edge and diversity, and integrating rather than segregating, have been articulated (Mollison 1997). But I believe that mystery is at the heart of ecology, an understanding of how little we understand.

Buhner writes, "ultimately life must be, is intended to be, experienced."[95] I could read about ecology all I wanted, but to live the story with my body and my heart, I needed to be there in the woods, in rain, mud, snow, and sun. It was the same with community building in Verdun. I needed to jump in, never mind if what was unfurling before me made sense, if I understood each step at the time, even if I knew what the next step was. Bringhurst (1995) writes that the original meaning of fairy in fairytales is creature of the wild, or all that is Otherworld and outside of human-instituted controls; it shares its root with the words feral, ferocious, and fierce. Kane writes that if we can retain a love of the mysterious and the invisible, holistic intelligence in the ecology of mythtelling, it opens a door to wisdom about nature and particular patterns that

[95] (Buhner 2004: 32)

"preserve a place whole and sacred."[96] Likewise, I can open to the mysterious in my own life and its invisible, holistic intelligence, the wisdom of my own nature and my innate and holy patterns of being.

Goldberg says that "the deepest secret in our heart of hearts is that we are writing because we love the world."[97] It's true, and it is equally so for any act I perform with faith and dedication. But to continue my work with grace, I can love myself and the animal impulses of my body as fiercely as the world outside of me. I think of my former roommate's foster cat who so yearned to be outside that we would find the creature splay-limbed on the screen windows, claws digging into the mesh and little cat mug sniffing the air outside. Finally, on a warm September afternoon in 2009, he jumped out of an open third story window to land fray-tailed and unscathed, senses blazing, on the grass below.

The maples in the alley are dormant now during their winter cycle. In the spring the water will rise from their roots to the trunks to mix with simple sugars to make sap. I have heard that one can listen to the beat of the rising sap with an ear against bark during this time. I'm learning to hold the wildness of blossoming spring inside me as my program and the alley project shift and grow, another heart tonic in all spaces and seasons.

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96 (Kane 1994: 50)

97 (Goldberg 2005: 129)

SUN

How do I face my fears?

Lead With The Heart

Follow the light wherever it goes[98]

leadership is much more an art, a belief, a condition of the heart, than a set of things to do[99]

During my last year farming on Saltspring in 2008, I worked weekends at a bookstore. There was an old purple couch along one wall where mothers nursed their infants and divorced parents exchanged children. At the oak counter we sold high school improv theatre tickets and accepted donations to save a tract of temperate island rainforest. We distributed reserved copies of the Globe and Mail for the baby boomers and filled orders for Grand Sport Corvette, the request written on the back of a Marlboro pack. A man diagnosed with prostate cancer told me of his trip to a jungle healer in Brazil. When the library across the street was closed, another man who lived in the woods looked at maps of Saskatchewan and asked me where I thought he could find land. Teenagers gawked at tattoo and motorcycle magazines on the racks, and a lonely regular in his black trucker's hat chatted on-line with beautiful young women.

The summer before my studies at Concordia began, I took my friend Adina the bookstore owner out for tea and asked how she had created this welcoming and gentle space.

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98 from an interview on CBC Jan 17, 2010

99 (de Pree 1989: 148)

"I wanted the store to be a community center, so we built it up around that - something for everyone. And we talked to people a lot to learn what they wanted. We did a lot of listening." Her shoes and sweater were bright green and she spoke with the emphatic clarity of a woman trained in theatre and well-rooted in herself.

"And, you've got to believe in what you're doing no matter what," she said. I thought of my work with the garden at Community Services that summer and the frustration I felt with the wild overgrown plants, the politics that boiled around a new fence that knocked down raspberry canes.

"Like holding the torch," I said.

December 2010, Montréal, QC

On this snowy morning, my sunrise friend and I seek a place on Mount Royal that is dry and sheltered. It's our last mountain exploration before we part ways for the winter holidays. Five paces up the mountain slope we find a hollow lined with straw, like a little nest; someone has removed a few handfuls from the bales at the bottom of the hill that protect sledding children from snarling traffic. I climb in and take out a cedar board and hand hold from my backpack, grooved and burnt black from past attempts, and then the spindle and bow. *You can sharpen both ends of the spindle*, says my friend. *Play with the kit, it's dynamic.* I hold the long cedar cylinder, about the length of my foot, in my left hand and press my right thumb on the backside of the blade of a knife, down and away from my body. I place my right knee back, left foot on the board, shin straight, left wrist stiff pressed down on the handhold; the spindle is

perpendicular between the two. My friend paces outside the hollow, shaves a cedar tinderbundle with the knife. I tighten the string on the bow that winds around the spindle. The curling smoke from the friction between the spindle and the board is white, but we are seeking black. *Bowdrill*, the alchemy of sun to wood to fire.[100] The bow sings and sings. *Come on!* The spindle slips from its groove in the cedar board. Slips and slips again, just when the heat begins to scorch the wood. *Pull but don't push on the bow*. A pile of soft sawdust mounting under the notch in the board. The clatter when the spindle slips again. The ends are warm and smell of the spruce sap that sticks the spindle to handhold. My wrist aches. *Well you just keep at it and one day it'll happen.*

Imhoff (2003) writes that to farm naturally, with the wild, requires cultivators to let go of a land-conquering mentality, to look to see what is already growing, and to ask, what does the land want to grow? He writes that this philosophy of land stewardship is intrinsically place-based and asks for a dedication to presence, an attitude of welcome for less than desirable species and the giving of mind and heart over to a terrain. Fukuoka writes that any law or rule that we might devise for farming techniques is really one law, "a manifestation of the great harmony and balance of nature;"[101] accepting what is, or nonintervention, "is the wisest course of action."[102] Similarly, in communities Wheatley writes that we can let go of the questions "What's wrong?" and "How can we fix it?"; instead, we start from a place of passion and creativity and ask

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100 Stephen Fuller, personal conversation, December 2010

101 (Fukuoka 1985: 50)

102 (Fukuoka 1985: 46)

"What is possible here?" and "Who cares?"[103]

when we stop opposing reality, action becomes simple, fluid, kind, and fearless[104]

June 2010, Montréal,QC

I am learning to lead in salsa dancing with the artists' collective Salsa Descalza. Traditionally the male role, they call it "proposing" - in this language of dance, I have something to say, and the other person accepts the message. They offer the dance classes as a form of resisting pain and injustice, bringing joy, love, and communion back into life. We dance in circles, we kiss each others' hands and bellies, we make faces and laugh and yell our names. Women dance with women, men with men, or men and women together. We dim the lights to dance our response to the world and then share the movements. I watch and move with my softest gaze; I feel blooms of energy infuse my body as I offer and witness these delicate and transparent acts of expression.

February 2011, Salt Spring, BC

I write this at a friend's home that overlooks the sea, here for a short visit before a family visit in Victoria. There is a woodburning stove in the main room that heats the house in winter. I put another log on the fire and watch it flare up and fill the cast iron chamber with liquid flame. I notice inside me a moment of recoil at the sudden blaze

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103 (Wheatley 2000: n.p.)

104 (Katie 2002: 3)

roiling before me. I think of my typically cautious responses to the exuberance of the alley group - let's keep the aims small so we know we'll succeed, do things properly, contain and control the chaos. Even as we work to invite in new people and energy, we are few and with much work to do. But if the energy is high, why not throw another log on?

Mark Lakeman, the founder of City Repair,[105] says that the neighbourhood projects are forwarded not by experts but residents contributing ideas and labour throughout in a process, he says, "that is so joyous that it transcends consensus because the agreement is just a big fat yes! yes!" (Mallgren 2007). Our alley group now has a potluck at every monthly meeting, and we laugh much more than argue. Last month we feasted like royalty - shrimps, salads, homemade veggie paté, fresh dates. We want to have a fence painting party for the next *fête des voisins*[106] as well as a second round of tree planting and container gardening. We did a round of appreciation for each other; after the meeting I went home, sat on my bed, and burst into tears. My need for a perfect showpiece project is softening to acceptance and gratitude for our muddy alley and our messy, organic connections within it.

In the first few months of the project I would sometimes call MUG with my brain in a knot, feeling unsure about the next step I was to take in the labyrinth that I was feeling my way along. "You know what to do," she would say after listening to me for a few minutes. "You can be brave." After speaking with MUG, I would sit on the edge of my bed and breathe into my guts to hear their message for me. Mamet writes that true

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105 a creative community transformation group based out of Portland, Oregon

106 neighbourhood party

acting is "an act of selfless spirit. Our effects are not for us to know…Only our intention is under our control."[107] He writes that if we can commit to actions in a place of exposure, despite our fears and reservations, those present will bear witness to moments of unexpected truth and connection, true courage and not just bravado. It creates the habit, "not of 'understanding', not of 'attributing' the moment but of giving up control"[108] to be able to offer communion and the communication of the truth.

MUG once reminded me that the opposite of love is not hate but fear. Block says "real change is a self-inflicted wound."[109] Our freedom, then, consists of choosing to be the creator of our own universe and to "accept the unbearable responsibility" that comes with this task. The act of leadership is to confront people with their freedom, "the ultimate act of love."[110] The heart is the strongest part of the body, a healer once told me, and it is meant to blaze.

Elegant leaders always reach for completeness[111]

July 2010, Orcas Island, WA

John took us down to a strip of grass between the tomato hoop house and the Japanese hardy ginger to talk about animal and insect presence in the garden. As usual, the abundance of questions from participants and the stories and observations of Doug,

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107 (Mamet 1997: 24)
108 (Mamet 1997: 32)
109 (Block 2008: 118)
110 (Block 2008: 21)
111 (De Pree, 1989: 144)

the oldest Bullock brother, ate up the hour, and we still had not talked bugs. "It's 5:30," someone said - time for the hour break before dinner. Members of design teams exchanged looks - we had extensive design projects due in three days, and most of us had banked on that time to walk our land yet again, draw arrow sectors on base maps, or research edible marsh plants. "Just twenty minutes, guys," John said. Our design groups held 30-second consultations; some left to do work and some stayed. After, I was glad that my group chose to stay. "Your role as a gardener is balancer," John said, his ponytail and tie dyed t-shirt lit by the late afternoon sun. He told us that plants are stimulated and grow stronger because of light insect feeding. The first four steps in integrated pest management, he told us, are indirect and do no harm to pests: observe insects and their cycles to "know the players," consider inaction if you can tolerate imperfect vegetables, enhance habitats for predator insects, and use aromatic plants to protect cultivated plants with a scent barrier. In his approach, insects, even problematic ones, were first treated gently and with acceptance. Only later would gardeners move to hand picking, barriers, traps, or sprays.

In order to practice spiritual sustainability in activist work, Starhawk (1987), Macy and Brown (1998), and Harvey (2009) recommend this practice of shadow work, or getting to know and love our perceived imperfections or “pesty” traits that make us human. Bly (1988) writes that our shadow side is just the part that is hidden from us. We uncover and unite these parts through play, creation, art, and all that affirms us as human being; we welcome these parts, invite them in, and become them. Kornfield (2009) says that we integrate our less helpful qualities by matching them with like tasks

- confrontational personalities can expose uncomfortable truths, dreamers have the space to imagine and seek connections. Harvey (2009) writes that through this practice, we open to our fullest selves, evermore free to release that which has lost its spark, move forward, and open our hearts and hands towards what is unfurling before us.

When I was in grade nine, my social studies class voted me the shyest student when asked by a visiting local politician. I wanted to crawl under my desk and disappear. ("You'll be on tv one day," he assured me.) And I remember my indignation when I was called bossy as a child, despite the fact that I loved to order my three younger siblings around into casts of plays and soccer matches. As I grow older and allow myself more spaciousness, it occurs to me that these are not qualities to contain and eradicate but traits to observe and respect. When I spoke with my advisor Catherine about how to influence from a power-with stance and not power-over (Starhawk 1987), she said, "Embody the qualities you want to share and then invite others to join in." Harvey (2009) writes that sacred activism is a merging of the fires of the spiritual connection and focused actions. I watch as these two streams in me come together, my sensitivity as a presence with the subtle and emotional energies, my shepherding as an invitation into collaborative creativity.

Intimacy is at the heart of competency[112]

February 2011, Salt Spring Island

[112] (de Pree 1989: 53)

Heart is not only a physical organ in the body but also the essence, the inmost part, the real meaning, the core.[113] I sit with two friends by the fire burning in the Regency cast iron stove, a lamp lit to my left, mugs of tea from the first tiny nettle tops of the season in our hands. We take turns talking out our stories. My friends' words come fluidly, smoothly, heavy with pain, rich with joy. My story comes in starts and stops, skittering in and out of this depth of feeling I carry inside me. *This is a pointless tangent*, I think as I come to another round of words and truncate the sentence.

"I've been working hard," I say. "Well, not *hard*-" (I think, not hard compared to single mothers, children in Guatemala, surgeons, lumberjacks, and the Prime Minister.)

"Let's *say it,"* says one friend. "This is real for *you*."

I have sometimes felt a boneache solitude during this quest that began before I came to Montréal and will continue after I leave, but I believe it has been necessary to know and touch - the only friend who will accompany me. The sun is alone in the sky, the other stars lightyears away, but it shines fiercely all the same. A healer I know reminds me that the word alone originates from a merging of "all" and "one". Another of life's heart-cracking paradoxes - as I continue to feel out my path, one blind step at a time, holding my beliefs in front of me, I begin to feel this loneliness and grasping for solidity dissipate, replaced by a greater trust in myself and the mystery, a surrender, like the loose-limbed baby with its head on its mother's heart. The shoulder-tapping voice that was afraid I couldn't and wouldn't more often concedes to a deep-resonating *you can* and *you will.*

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[113] Canadian Oxford Dictionary. 1998. ed. Katherine Barber. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press.

I wanted to make gardens that served as community centers. I believed in spaces where everyone felt safe and loved. And I believed in an inherent wisdom in each of our life patterns, a gentle unveiling genius. Campbell defines our bliss as our most present, truthful way of engagement, "what you absolutely must do to be yourself."[114] When this impulse to chart our course, it allows the power of life to flow through us.

> You enter the forest at the darkest point, where there is no path. Where there's a way or path, it is someone else's path; each human being is a unique phenomenon.
> The idea is to find your own pathway to bliss (p. xxvi).

Starhawk (2004) says that will is not impulse, stubbornness, or a need to get our own way; rather, it is our ability to choose to move towards a desired outcome, to act "as if", even if we can't foresee the concrete consequences of our actions. She writes that regardless of the outcome,

> we will have changed and be acting in closer alignment with what we truly value… The more we exercise our will, the stronger it gets; and the stronger our magical will, the more we are able to serve what is sacred to us, thereby realizing our deepest dreams and desires (p. 108).

Hopkins (2006) writes that moving through fear, the dark night of the soul, can also inform and open us. It can help us see the whole picture of our society, free ourselves from limiting beliefs, and open to possibility. We can face these uncomfortable realities and then get on with the work of creating new possibilities. "It's ok," says Harper in wilderness practice when there is a strong reaction to an external

[114] (Campbell 2004: xxiii)

stimulus. "Let this happen."[115] Pinkola Estes writes that when we use this clarity of self knowledge of our internal situation to see and accept the unacknowledged side of an external situation, we gain confidence to question and challenge; this "allows a whole inquiry and far more healing in all directions."[116] Lakeman says that rather than change through persuasion or debate, we can create to give others to chance to

> understand, viscerally…it's that old saying about knowing yourself, who are you, what is it that is your right, what is your nature, your habitat. What is my habitat? That is the place that we are able to create from, out of our nature, and nobody can give permission to do that. (as quoted in Starhawk 2004: 222).

July 2010, Washington State

It is our last night together on Orcas Island, in cool temperate rainforest air. The homestead is dark but for the Aloha lodge: lamps lit, the campfire in the center, people drumming and dancing all around. To the left of the lodge, a few of us linger around a second fire. One of the participants wants to teach us a game. She fishes out a small glowing coal from the fire with a stick, scoops it up, and shakes it between her bare hands. "The motion is what keeps your skin from burning," she says. "Now I pass it to someone else who shakes it and then does the same." She looks at another participant and tosses the coal to him. I wait, my heart beating hard. He looks at me and passes the bit of burning wood. I catch it and shake it between the skin of my palms and fingers. It is an intense heat that demands all of my attention but does not burn; I shake shake shake and toss. The flames in the center, the red coal jumps and flies across.

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115 (Harper 1995: 193)

116 (Pinkola Estes 1992: 266)

When it loses its heat, we throw it back into the fire and scoop out another. The firelight soft on our faces, this rhythm of holding and release moving between our hands.

PATH

How do I open to intimacy with all that surrounds me?

See and be seen

each time, for the first time, for the only time[117]

Keep being you[118]

Spring 2007, Saltspring Island, BC

The nettle plant has a bum rap with her stinging hairs on the underside of her leaves for protection, but she is one of the most nutritious wild plants around, bursting with iron, chlorophyll, and a rainbow of vitamins and minerals. That fine spring I picked the tender tops of this feisty plant from underneath the big leaf maples in the forest on the south side of the property, by the bowlful, by the plastic washbin-full to put in tea, to put in soup, to steam, to dry. I started with gloves and scissors to protect myself from the sting, but as my obsession grew I moved to barehanded plucking of the tender tops.

It was at about this time that I began to frequent Blackburn Lake, the local nude beach on Salt Spring conveniently located just down the road from the Centre farm. Growing up as a salt of the earth prairie girl in Alberta and a shy teenager in Victoria, the idea of public naked swimming was a new and somewhat terrifying phenomenon. But I have learned that what frightens me is frequently what I long for on a level beneath my

117 James Baldwin, American novelist

118 Stephen Fuller, personal conversation, June 2010

comprehension. So I began to peddle down the road from the Centre after work to wash the dirt off in the cool waters of Blackburn Lake. There wasn't much of a beach. To reach water that was swimming depth required a walk over the mud on a plank and down the narrow wooden dock, weaving carefully over and around a variety of prostrate bodies. Strangers I could step over with a quick nod, shuck off my overalls, and jump into the water without further ado. Sometimes, though, my friends and partners in crime from the garden came along to swim and then soak in the sun on the dock. At first I didn't know where to lie, how to sit, what to say, or where to look. I think I forgot to breathe half of the time. This was a new kind of openness and closeness with my friends and co-workers. There we were, all of them and all of me.

January 2011, Montréal, QC

My morning mountain explorations with my friend have been full of magic, but I confess, I don't much like tracking. I got cold staring at one solitary, smeared, and muffled print. The process seemed chaotic and confusing, racing up and over rocks. My friend claimed some were oval and some were round, but I didn't see it. I blew into the indents of the prints to clear away excess snow and had the powder blow into my face each time. I wanted to be excited about this new aspect of wilderness awareness, but when I thought about this archetypal tracking energy, I preferred stalking down images, sentences, and ideas for my writing. I wanted to commune with the birds and he was on a mission to find a fox's den. Finally I called my friend and said that maybe we would need to rethink our weekly play times. "I think it's safe to say that you are more

interested in tracking than I am," I said. We both burst out laughing at the utter truth of the statement. Of course, this is the beauty of true community. We are not obliged to reform or compete on the same paths; rather, we can honour individualism and support each others' passions (Somé 1993) to be able to share the best of ourselves.

Rezendes (1999) writes that the discovery of the next track is less important than the expansion of our ability to see our surroundings for what they are, to increase the quality of attention, which can be equated with love and caring, in our lives. Just as it is possible to read the forest landscape according to the stories of the creatures passing through, Buhner (2004) says that we can also learn the communications of meaning of the interior worlds of humans as living organisms, shown through every aspect of our exterior beings. Sometimes I feel embarrassed when my body language reveals my transparent animal self. But perhaps this is something to treasure. Goldberg (2005) says it can be hard to see what we involuntarily expose, but even harder is to turn cold and opaque, to believe we are machines rather than living, feeling creatures (Buhner 2004). With heart perception, we have the ability to be "in empathy and coherence with the world, to experience the uniqueness and wonder of each thing, person, creature."[119] Pinkola Estes (1992) writes

> Does a wolf know how beautiful she is when she leaps? …Is a bird awed by the sound it hears when it snaps open its wings? Learning from them, we just act in our own true way and do not draw back from or hide our natural beauty. Like the creatures, we just are, and it is right (p. 205).

Love wants to reach out and manhandle us,

[119] (Buhner 2004: 117)

Break all our teacup talk of God[120]

July 2010, Orcas Island, WA

After breakfast on the last day of the permaculture course, our temporary community of fifty gathered under the enormous canvas cover of the Aloha Lodge. We arranged the chairs and benches in a grand circle, and the teachers presented design certificates to students. "What happens next," someone asked. One of the teachers shrugged. "It's up to you guys." A participant suggested a round of recognition of the gifts of the person seated to our right. I admit, I felt uncomfortable with this proposal. I had not shown my most gorgeous and stunning self during the course. My brain, still panting from the information load of my first ten months of study, was now straining to accommodate the wisdom of millennia of traditional peoples and almost a century of practical experience from our teachers condensed into three short weeks. Plunging myself into a group of strangers had triggered my old kneejerk reaction of retreat and hide at every spare moment. While I was reeling in gratitude for the chance to participate in such a course, a part of me just wanted to pull carrots and sit in the dirt. But I cajoled myself to rest in my discomfort as one by one we went around the circle, with the teachers, the students, the children of students, the children of teachers. I relaxed into the long and loping rhythm of appreciation, surprised at the depth of insight we had about each other in a short time. When it was time for me to receive, Caitlin from my design group said, "You are comfortable in your own skin. It gives

[120] (Hafiz 1999: 187)

others permission to be themselves. And I love your fits of giggles." She had peered through my struggles and seen me despite of it. When it was my time to give, I said to Heather from my morning work party, "You give off a constant and steady warmth. It beams out of you like the sun in the morning."

Some neighbours began the alley project in the fall of 2009 with a need to join together against the municipality, speaking of "preparing for battle" because the municipality wanted to buy the alley, our alley. We came to see that the local government and Soverdi, an organization that vegetates spaces for health, were open to collaborating, sharing, helping with resources. Starhawk (1987) says that the easiest way to unite people is against a common enemy, but that this cannot bring liberation. While Harvey (2009) writes that there is a need to recognize truly malicious intentions or behaviours, Starhawk (1987) says that if we can lose the need to see every confrontation or disagreement as a battle, we can better discern the real levels of danger in a given situation.

But what if there is no enemy? External security such as policing (Somé 1993) or armies might act to unify or protect a group of people, and laws and rules can be useful to limit hierarchical power structures; however, these practices do not intrinsically move us towards greater connectedness, openness, caring, trust, or respect of each other or the natural world (Somé 1993). As Block (2008) writes, it's not enough to bring diverse populations together for a project and expect that this act alone will unify. *People care* is an ethical call of permaculture along with *earth care* and *fair share*. Starhawk writes

that emotional honesty in a group can also serve to unite through shared risk and increased trust and equality. This does not mean chronic niceness; indeed, she writes that "the nicer we are expected to be, the less safe we are to reveal the core parts of ourselves that are not so nice."[121] This is easier to say than do when we are used to seeing emotions as weak and inferior to thoughts and ideas, arsenal to use against one another. But Rosenberg has shown that even opposing groups in wartorn nations can come to mutual comprehension and even forgiveness if given the opportunity to express painful feelings to each other and feel heard. Again, Block (2008) says that our community groups can put loving attention into the circumstances and details of *how* we gather and focus on possibility and listening rather than explaining or convincing. We can make use of powerful questions to evoke emotional responses from diverse sectors of community while staying connected to the issue or project at hand. As groups become more familiar, we can use questions and practices of acknowledging each other's gifts. He points out that this can be uncomfortable, as new behaviours often are. But even a simple ritual such as giving and receiving appreciation, with its inherent shared risks of experimentation, emotional expression, connection, and care (Starhawk 1987), is a tool that allows deeper feelings of trust, security, and mutual nourishment (Somé 1993).

September 2010, Montréal, QC

The city steams with heat; The electronic clock on de Maisonneuve reads 31

[121] (Starhawk 1987: 145)

degrees as I ride on my bike past Concordia. When I arrive in Verdun, my arms shine with sweat, but the Marcel-Giroux community center is cool inside. It's just after five pm; middle aged men and women in business attire hold wine glasses and chat. Sara arrives soon after me; we are both in cotton summer shirts and shorts with woven shoulder bags; we joke that we'll be put at a separate hippie table and fed sprouts. Rachid, our Soverdi representative, pours us each a glass of white wine. Citizens, Soverdi workers, and city officials stand in pairs or threes and slides of green alleys flash in the background. After some mingling, a counselor makes a brief speech about the Verdun green alley project. A woman named Louise shares the story of the green alley that her street began in 1995, the children who were playing in garbage, the four tons they removed with the help of the city. Her neighbour Helene shares that before the project, "I didn't talk to anyone and no-one talked to me. Now I walk in the alley and everyone stops to talk to me, I know the whole neighbourhood." Sara shared the story of our alley, our additional objectives of food and art as well as green and social space. Louise and Helene seem interested and later asked for Sara's contact information. I asked Louise what she learned from her experience with the green alleys. "We need each other," she said. "And everyone is important. It's not something anyone can do alone. And tell the city, we need you, we need your help."

Suppose you had had the revolution you are talking about or dreaming about. Suppose your side had won, and you had the kind of society you wanted. How would you live, you personally, in that society? Start living that way now![122]

[122] (Paul Goodman, quoted in Hern 2008: 108)

While not adverse to competition, Nature excels at symbiosis. Squirrels in winter strip bark from sweet-sap trees and in the process, expose the sugars of the cambium that feed birds in the lean months; this modification of the bark stimulates the trees to produce more fruit (Beresford-Kroeger 2010). The alley project has worked in a similar way. My advisor gave funding in exchange for a research paper about the process. The Concordia Greenhouse, through Vert Ta Ville, provides seedlings in exchange for a workshop on biodynamic agriculture. The city lends its name to the project in exchange for a sound system, food, shelter tents. I think of the time and generosity that neighbours gifted to hand out flyers, plant, share seeds, find buckets, lend barbeques and tools, and share knowledge: local plants, sacred meeting practices, consensus and community organizing, management and party planning. From these connections I saw more gifts of bike fixing, collective kitchen cooking, planter building, beer drinking, and greeting on the street. Sara recently told me that someone lent her a video to watch, but that she had no video recorder in the house. "It's ok," she responded, "I can go and watch it at my neighbour's house." "Your neighbour's house?" her friend said, confused. "Yeah, I can go to Daisy's house, or Malia, or Thérèse, or Josh, or Pierre…" In this kind of "pluralistic reality"[123] of this initially involuntary *ruelle* community (assembled by geographic proximity but not necessarily by mutual interests, goals, or blood ties), our connections can be as productive as digging holes and planting trees. As

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[123] (Palmer 1983: 68)

MUG frequently reminded me, the link is love, and "the need to relate is at the core of human experience."[124]

I have heard these alternate economic systems based on ethics of care and reciprocity called social economy, gift economy, economy of affection, solidarity economy, or social permaculture. These kinds of networks of care often exist out of a survival necessity for those living in economic poverty (Germain 2010), but I believe these symbiotic, relational economic systems can also help to right the spiritual poverty (Somé 1993) that is sometimes present in more affluent sectors of society. During my most shy, isolated, or disconnected moments of my life, spiritual poverty has felt like an emptiness, a constant squeezing ache in my belly, a heaviness in my spine, and a brittleness to my flesh. I had feelings of time like a weight pressing me into the ground, a grasping feeling around money and possessions as something that would keep me safe, hiding much about myself for fear of how it would be received. These stories in my head are still there, but they now have less of a captive audience in me. While I have learned to cultivate spiritual wealth solo through prayer and simple ritual, body practices, chosen simplicity, and time spent in the natural world, I also feel warmed and encouraged by my more concerted efforts to cultivate human relationships and my emotional responses within them. There is surely a place and use for cash-paid goods and services; however, in my experience with interactions with a barter or gift economy, I saw that connection and giving become the interface of exchange rather than the god of money. Each time I participate, I am drawn out of my protective bubble and into

[124] (Bloom 2006: 77)

another person's reality with greater possibilities of loving interactions. I can imagine that my connections with others could be as tangible and protective in times of crisis as piles of money in the bank. These alternate economic systems may not solve problems of inequity overnight but may assist a transformation from an economic paradigm of scarcity and fear towards an economy of abundance (Twist 2003).

December 2010, Verdun, QC

Malia, Sara, and I carry cardboard boxes from the living room down into the alley, the frozen puddles there cracked by car wheels. We place future compost bin sides to make a platform for the Christmas tree. Malia and I hang plastic cedar wreaths, lights, wrap gold ribbons, lean a Santa against a poplar tree. I pick up chocolate chip cookies and eight litres of two percent and whole milk from Maxi and cart them home in my backpack and in my willow basket. We carry pants, CDs, and books to trade or give away to a heavy plywood table covered in dresses in blues and reds. Other neighbours bring their old books or dishes. I take a long elf toque to replace my lost yellow jester hat. Friends bearing steaming cauldrons of spiced wine and liquid chocolate descend down the wrought iron spiral staircase. Platters of chestnuts, the skin of each warm brown nugget punctured with a cross, warm hands as the sun goes down. Josh in his red elf hat has found his holiday songs to mix in with opera and jazz. Coloured lights strung along clotheslines help light the party as the sun goes down. Children trundle on plastic ride-on cycles along the dirt road. We have old alley friends, new resident friends, visitors from other alleys, guests from Verdun far afield, adopted into the fold,

like a Cuban doctor who asks for dancing next time to keep away the cold (even if she never danced in her country) and future invitations, please. As the afternoon winds down I bring down boxes and start to stack piles of clothing.

"Are you cold?" asks Malia.

"No, but it's almost five and I have other things to do," I say, shoving sweat pants into a plastic bag.

"*Ah, elle est où la gentille Megan?*"[125] she says, smiling.

I blushed. There were still neighbours lingering in the alley, drinking their last sips of wine, but my head and body felt full to bursting with conversation, the opera notes, the crumbling chestnut meat. I seemed incapable of summoning my politeness of past interactions with alley group members. *I'm exhausted*, I wanted to say, but the feeling was a distant one, on low radar beneath the buzz of the party, and the sentiment stayed inside my lips. I stuffed the rest of the clothes into bags, moved through the people packed into my kitchen,[126] walked into my room, and shut the door.

Corazón cura corazón[127]

In 1999, I volunteered for a community project to build an aquaduct in Costa Rica and lived with a group of nine other people from Australia, Costa Rica, and Canada. I spent three months in the constant company of others, sleeping in the same room,

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125 Ah, where did our nice Megan go?

126 I had moved into a room in an apartment on Rushbrooke in November 2010

127 heart cures heart. (Aurelio (Lakota medicine man), quoted in Avila 1999: 78)

eating meals together, washing our dirty laundry together, working on a trench with community members, eating fresh vegetables and whole grains, watching parrots in palm trees as I washed my clothes. There was no tv, radio, computers, movie theaters, or dance halls. We had the glory of our surroundings, our neighbours, and ourselves for entertainment, eight hours of shoveling and picking the rusty red earth, so we told each other stories of the embarrassing, the heartbreaking, the hilarious, and the divine. These were virtual strangers whom, by the end of three months, I loved like family. It was one of the turning points of my life and I have consciously or unconsciously sought to replicate these connected living conditions around me in Canada.

When I lived at the Salt Spring Centre, I ate, worked, and played with the same people every day. No small challenge. I made out with a gorgeous Brazilian man the first week he was at the Center and then, after he called it platonic, breathed through a tornado of emotions for the remaining three weeks of his stay. I set up my tent in the far back field for privacy, only to find myself the next day surrounded by twenty families, their vehicles, and their fiddling children for music camp. I had a yelling match with a gardener friend in the pouring rain about the placement of a compost bin; when I apologized for my anger and my outburst, he shrugged. "It had to come out at some point," he said. Every month, regular as the wax and wane of the moon, I expressed my anxiety and dread at our community check-ins about yet another influx of new volunteers until I finally decided, two years later, that that none of these kind folks would ever present a threat to my existence or my personhood.

In my storytelling class in the winter of 2010, we each memorized the Blue

Faience Hippopotamus by Alice Kane, word for word, for a group storytelling session. While practicing, I was initially bored by the repetitions and minute memorization. Then I began to see connections in the details - mud banks, caves, eggs hatching, butterflies in themes of rebirth that brought a depth to the story I had not seen before. Palmer (1983) writes that monks, through a practice called *lectio divina*, examine a certain story or text, a line at a time, a passage at a time, and meditate upon it for hours or days at a time. While this practice might seem restrictive, Palmer writes that it provides freedom through the connections that allow for deeper dialogue, listening, and testing for truth, as "only in obedience to truth can freedom be found".[128] As a perpetual wanderer in our current context of mobility, my time spent in Verdun rooted me to place to allow "mutual encouragement and mutual testing"[129] in seeking truth and loving relations.

Community made me face myself, amplified, clarified, humbled, beloved. I came to see that there was no behavior, mine or another's, that didn't have a history to explain it, that sharp words and outbursts always had deeper stories behind them. I began to see my visceral reactions to others as reflections of myself, both the parts of me that I loved and the parts of me that needed love. And, because life is one beautiful paradox after another, this ambiance of acceptance and illumination of my awkward, shy, and tender parts gave me both strength and courage to take the risk to offer all parts of myself, for my whole being to flower.

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128 (Palmer 1983: 65)

129 (Palmer 1983: 18)

let the whole world break your heart every instant of the remainder of your life.[130]

June 2010, Algonquin Park, ON

After crawling along fox trails in a misty rain, my friend and I arrived at a river. We stepped on flat stones in the shallow water then moved to larger stones firm in fast moving water, holding with toes and fingers, Ragged Falls churning above us at our left elbows, a still lake at our right. For our first few paces our grips held. Then one bare foot slipped. I scrambled for contact but found myself released into the movement of the river. It pushed me out to the calm; I treaded water and watched my friend push his body against the turbulence. And then a great splash! He soon was beside me, the wildflower book in his bag now sipping lake water. *Let's keep moving.* We swam to shore and trotted down the road towards dry clothes, tea, and the patient resuscitation of coreopsis and hawkweed, page by page.

I have always felt well in my own company and in the natural world. Despite my deep love for humanity, it is the people world that I sometimes find challenging. Sara first invited me to inhabit a room in the apartment on Rushbrooke when I told her I wanted to move to Verdun for the last months of my thesis. It was perfect, but I had a few reservations. How would I keep a sense of perspective when I was living where I was working? "And I'm a real introvert," I said, my warning that I would often be holed up in my room or wandering beside the river alone.

130 (Gangaji 2008: 183)

Intimate means not only friendship and closeness but also that which is essential and intrinsic, from the Latin intimus, *inmost.*[131] I am learning that my intimacy with the natural world, my ability to keep my own company and my habitual traversing and translating of social spheres can be gifts to my community, a series of pathways between what I have lived in Central America, in the north, on the farm, in the forest, and in the city.

Berry (1993) asks, "(w)hat must we do to earn the freedom of being unguardedly and innocently naked to someone?"[132] Block (2008) says that our desire for constructive criticism about our faults, which we are already often aware of "beyond belief or utility"[133] is really a form of protection against the terrifying challenge to find and follow our natural gifts, to walk them boldly and fully. He says

> these are qualities we have not earned but that have come to us as an act of grace. Our work in life is to know and accept these gifts, for this is what is required to bring them forth (p. 142).

Berry (1993) writes that it is the love cultivated in a community that allows for such frank revelations of self. But as Palmer says, "it is easy to be curious and controlling. It is difficult to love."[134] He writes about a tough love that stitches us into our surroundings, into connections that ask for devoted and mutual involvement that at the same time joyously transform and change us.

Farley Mowat once said, "I never let the facts get in the way of the truth." This is

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131 Canadian Oxford Dictionary. 1998. ed. Katherine Barber. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press.

132 (Berry 1993: 168)

133 (Block 2008: 142)

134 (Palmer 1983: 9)

how I chose the facts to tell this story, lingering where I found it juicy, bright, tender, or illuminated. MUG called me and said that she heard through the Verdun grapevine that I was leaving in June. It was true. Heartroot Farm was just what I was looking for: two women who harvested food and medicine from the forest on the property, the host site of a permaculture course with Starhawk, and a homestead transforming from a family affair to an intentional community. I said yes, and that even though I was excited it was a bittersweet feeling, as I was "*un peu amoreuse de Verdun."*[135]

She laughed. "You are very rational with your love!"

After we finished our conversation, I sat on the hardwood floor of my room and breathed. My feelings of loss welled up past my attempt to minimize them. I think of Thérèse who continues to encourage the group forward through our patches of inertia, of Sara who animates us to bring more people into the group. Malia who makes us laugh, Fernando, Josh, and Yves with their gentle solidity and support. Daisy has moved on to work with wild medicines in the country, MUG and Pierre are still in the neighbourhood. I will soon release myself from this bubbling, churning spiral of community to freefloat with the bends and turns downstream. In my sentimental heart I want to hold everyone that I've ever known close to me. So why leave at all? There are many ways to live, and my current life, as I feel it to be true, asks me to move from place to place, carrying what I have learned with me and seeking new answers by burning in the questions. Someday I will find a place to root down, but not yet. My friend Tali says, "We love each other and we let go." This is what I choose to carry in the

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135 a little in love with Verdun

world.

December 2011, Verdun, QC

Yesterday, it snowed all day. I go down at daybreak to the St Laurence to see if I can catch the moon; instead, I find patterns of animal tracks stitched to the edge of the river, a singular line of trail which sometimes parts ways to then connect again. My tracker friend told me that unlike the uneven tracks of a house dog or human, the gait of a wild animal is measured and rhythmic, observing, conserving energy. I follow the tracks along the river and through the trees to the edge of a canal, to the beginning of a sewer pipe, running along beside at first, slipping and pitching on the uneven snow. Then down to the edge of a reed bed, up the hill to Wellington Street, sinking down, feet steady now and clear, punctuating the morning with song.

MOON

How do I honour abundance?

Celebrate the Blossoms

I need to laugh with you![136]

Why not become the one
Who lives with a full moon in each eye
That is always saying,
With that sweet moon
Language,
What every other eye in this world
Is dying to
Hear?[137]

Daisy's story

Movement

I got involved after [a conversation with] MUG, that's basically how the idea started rolling. On a more personal level it was the need to want to garden, to want to be out there and have projects and garden together. I think I got a major reality check but… that was good also!

I think I allow a lot of space in projects. Some people have a more direct line. I wasn't taking it too seriously. I mean, I was taking it seriously in a sense, but other people were

136 MUG, personal conversation, 2009.

137 (Hafiz 1999: 322)

more into the dynamics of the municipality, more political. I wasn't at that level. The energy was different because they were in a different focus. I think it's also a slow process for me. I'm more slow moving, like a large mass of water. Once it gets moving, it's *moving*! Tidal wave! Yeah… and I think some people were maybe a bit confronted by that. "What was *that*?" (laughs)

A highlight for me was to come back home in September after being away for a while and to water the plants and pick some tomatoes from the backyard and cook them! And to look downstairs and see everything that Sara and Guillaume had planted. The fall was a very stressful time, end of my project[138], and just to get my hands back in the dirt brought me back to - I'm here, I'm happy and available, people can actually talk to me now! Not in this hyper productive run-run-run jumble in my mind which makes me kind of unavailable.

Everybody's creative process is so different. You have to constantly adjust. At the same time it brings you back to understanding your own creative process, what you're willing to give up and what you're really not wanting to give. Mine I'd say is circular. Like putting things there and then coming back and putting a layer on and another layer on. But in the beginning things really don't look like much! So at different times people can be like, well, we're going nowhere with this! Because it's just this layer of nothing! *I* understand that there's going to be other layers but they just don't get it because "Well,

[138] educational material on local medicinal plants

that's really not close to the finish line!", you know?

I find that movement very healthy, movement of the creative process, social movement, people, contacts and such. Different ideas, some variety and change, keep things fluid and flexible. And then, if I say I'll do this ,will I be able to do it? There's this energy of, well, we have until then to do it. Ok, I said I'd do this, I'm doing it, I'm focusing this, there's this that's unexpected. Oh, I didn't know I'd have to do this and feeling not quite great about doing it, like oh my god, I have to do THIS? Hhhooooooo how'm I gonna pull this off? Aaaand finally I get through it and then being satisfied or not satisfied or whatever but to have gone through it is already quite a big treat, that type of thing. Movement.

The rough edges

Before, when I turned onto the street, I didn't really get a sense of the life that was going on there, not being able to visualize the idea that there are people living there. So it was kind of like a dead space. The awareness now is that there's this or that family living there, and it gives it a whole other shade of colours and a whole different awareness. It brought me to different people's realities. It's actually still working at me. Before I wasn't so aware because I'd be in my thing and I wouldn't be speaking to the neighbours, but to see everything that's going on in their lives and to see the rough edges... People have told me they have trouble finding proper food because of money

struggles, that type of thing. It brought me back to what I was learning at that time[139].

I found that it was chaotic, everybody in the group coming together in the beginning. It was intimidating in a way. My mind hasn't been in a process of how to make a model to make it work, it's still in the "WHOA!" (laughs) I'm kind of wondering if a model is possible because there are so many different human factors. The different personalities that go with it, people's goals are so different, to bring it all together - the theory behind it would be very different from the practice. It won't come close to what really will be happening. It takes a core group that's really solid to be able to pull off that kind of balance, a constant core with a certain vision. And a means for new people to quickly understand the background, who don't necessarily have the same kind of education, same views, the idea of composting which might not be everyone's thing - how to bring those ideas also within a democratic process. How to have a preset agenda but still remain fluid.

And when tension's starting to build, it helps that there are actually people thinking of it, taking care of it, and that will actually call, make the manoeuver. "Yeah, we're paying attention to this. We're not going to let it go, sweep it under the rug." That it not be the responsibility of only one person but that everybody feel that they have that responsibility, for the wellbeing and energy of the group. A space of openness. Yeah, a space of openness that you can voice what's bugging you. If you're constantly living

[139] nutrition

with something bothering you, often you tend to get uninvolved or back out of it. And no, I don't think meetings are the place for that. There are too many people involved, and it resonates on too many levels. You can't really get to the core of something. We could bring up the question, how *do* we deal with conflict? That type of thing. But conflict between two or three people, it's not the place.

At different levels with different people, conflict is bound to come up. Sometimes, to have an exterior element of living conflict and go through it with a different group can be a learning process to help deal with other conflicts. To have a space where you can experiment and where there are people reflecting on it also gives a boost to the process. Some conflict would arise, and people would be trying to bring in dialogue to bring some balance back. It was a healthy learning process.

I think that probably the most difficult part for me was security-wise, like when there were different events with everybody there. To really want to be open to everybody but at the same time having that fear of, "Oh no, I don't want to have them *that* close!" Yeah… so it confronted me with myself, with my ideals and what I actually felt, you know? It impacted the way I perceive my relationship with my surroundings, and also to have overcome some barriers that I might have felt with some people. "I've gone through that - yes!" That's a good feeling there.

We carry all the same thing

I think the links that were built between people were strong. I was amazed on the day of the plantation to see the energy of everybody coming together and actually doing it. Actually seeing the different people come out and the plants and us going into their backyards, I found that was really, really amazing. It was what we were hoping for but at the same time I didn't know how it would actually occur in space and time. Even though everybody's so busy and doing so many different things, we actually managed to get together and have meetings and have a focus. Often there are so many different preoccupations and things, things to do in life, this that and the other thing on a list, you know. If you have that kind of movement, it comes to the top of the list to give it the momentum. So having that project and people getting together really helped to bring shape, whatever shape it took.

I think that you brought in an interesting tool in the tool of play, to bring in a story that makes [the composting workshop] accessible to people. For me this project was for the fun of it. So the more fun there is in it, the better it is, whatever the end result is. But if my focus were more on the end result, that there actually be a big garden by next summer, there'd still be a place for play, but it'd be a bit different. I think it's always possible to go with the feeling of the group. Ok, now there's a need for some play time. And people who want to play come, and people who don't want to stay home! So at least it's clear. But if people are coming for a meeting and it's gonna be play instead of a

meeting, I'm not sure it'll fly so well! But then again, sometimes it's good to shake 'em up!

I think all social processes bring a greater awareness of that pallet of colours that we hold within us and how we deal with things. Do we have the tools? How do I manage with this person? It's a challenge! How do we balance this to get to where we want to go? Or, sometimes we are just with people from very different backgrounds, people that we're just not used to relating with. How do we build a bridge towards those people? You want to be building something as respectfully as possible, come to an understanding of where they're at in that moment and what they're coming for. It's not necessarily a tool, but I find it's something you have to be able to juggle.

One thing I felt a lot during the process is how we carry all the same thing. Sometimes different people would be voicing different things, but that it comes from [all of] us. Like just now you and I were throwing across ideas, I'm the one saying it, but it doesn't necessarily come from me. It's that kind of weave of being in a meeting - one person would say something, somebody else says it, and the same thing is happening but through a different vibe. It's a resonance - how things resonate in people, how life is resonating. We're just part of how it resonates. Something flowing through us.

Josh's story

We live here

Over a year ago, Nathalie from the Montréal Permaculture Guild mentioned that there was a project going on near where I lived. It wasn't even a few days later that I received a flyer…

I feel that I know more of my neighbours than most people in Montréal. Just seeing this project unfold has been good for me because I haven't ever been part of a project involving my neighbourhood. It has shown me that it does happen, and it is possible, and that it could be done anywhere. I lived in Arizona most of my life, and this sort of thing just didn't happen in Phoenix. Or maybe there are places in Phoenix where this has happened, but when I was there it wasn't like this. And then when I was in San Francisco - it's a very forward thinking city, but because of crime, people have gates upon locks upon locks, like you're going home to your prison cell. There is a lot of community in San Francisco but not with your immediate neighbours. It's been the first time for me to be involved with my neighbours, with my neighbourhood.

The challenging element is so many different ideas and so many different people wanting to own the project - not literally trying to take over, but they have a vision of the project. They're excited about it and ready to go. Getting those to sync can be

difficult. I've seen it in many community projects, large scale collaborative projects where there's more than two or three decision makers. But with this project, there's not a specific deadline. Say for some reason we don't put in a composter this year. Well, there's no conclusion to this project. It's an ongoing project, more organic, it's a never-ending project if you will. Because it's a never-ending project, it has to move slower. It can be a difficulty, but it's not necessarily a bad thing. It *is* more important that everyone's input is heard. Because we live here.

Talk to each other

Just people meeting each other is the first step. Without that interaction between people, it's difficult to get things done and for things to be sustainable. You could live in the forest somewhere and be sustainable on your own. In order to be fully sustainable in the city, you have to talk to your neighbours. You have to get to know people, to be able to make compromises and work things out. That first step of talking to each other is 90% - after that you have the experts who can come in.

From my background, I've found that most things like this aren't supported by the city. That was surprising, that the city really wanted to get involved, wanting to add more plants to try to improve the community. There was definitely a limitation in terms of plants, and whenever you get involved with a city you have to deal with bureaucracies and things like that, but overall the city of Verdun is a good addition to the *ruelle verte*

project.

Living in a city, people tend to be almost less connected than they do in more rural areas - at least that's what I found. People in rural spaces tend to know their neighbours, to talk to them and even do things with them. In the city, not only do people not talk to their neighbours, they don't *want* to talk to them. I think that leads to this mindset that we don't have to worry about where our waste goes or where we're getting our stuff from or what we're eating. The first step is getting people to meet and talk to each other.

I don't think that people are mean by nature, I think that people get hardened over time. I went to this Native American gathering up north, the Call of the Wolf, did you hear about that? I went to that, and there were different Native American tribes from all over North America, meeting together, a bunch from Québec, some from the U.S., a Mayan elder from Guatemala, a guy from Mexico, the rainbow gathering people, this guy from Ireland who was involved with sustainable homes. There were all these different people, very different groups that all came together at the same time. What was really interesting was that on the night of the full moon, the Mayan elder had this big talk, and at the end of it he got us all into a circle and had us hold hands. His conclusion, his thesis statement if you will, was, "Talk to each other." And that was it. "Talk to each other." (laughs). Hey, we're not all that different. We don't have to dislike each other. Sitting in your corner staring at those other people wondering what

they're thinking, why don't you just go over and talk to them! I've learned that with French. Ever since I started talking to people in French I've been advancing. Before I was like, oh I really want to learn French before I talk to people because I might be embarrassed when I try to talk to them, and I sound like a little child. But I didn't learn it! Even the stuff I did learn, I was like, how do I apply this? I didn't have the confidence to talk to people, but once I began, it started coming.

Little baby steps

In most cities, the soil is not the type of soil in which you want to be growing your plants. There's a rehabilitation process to go through. You're taking a space that has been neglected and maybe is toxic in some ways and rehabilitating that area with the end goal to help sustain the community. This is a first step. Most of the plants we put in were not highly productively edible. It's establishing an ecosystem if you will. As these plants start coming to maturity, we can start interplanting other types of plants or even replacing them with new plants. But those initial plants help to rehabilitate the soil, create an ecosystem, bring in the birds, the pollinators. They're cooling the space. It's a good first step. A lot of times in permaculture, the pioneer plants are not edible plants. Nitrogen fixers, for example. You plant your nitrogen fixing trees before you plant your fruit trees. It's getting community awareness out there, getting compost in, getting people aware that this is a good thing. And leaves are not trash! We can use them, and they're very useful!

It's a long process, especially in the cities. Some people push back. I was going to put a garden in a little spot back there, and then this woman walks up, and it was right behind her house, and she was like, no. I don't want a garden there. There's gonna be some pushback. But as the plants grow, as the birds come in, as the flowers start blooming, as they start to get to know their neighbours, they're going to start to realize, oh, maybe I do want a garden here. Maybe I could plant some vegetables in my backyard and not have to go to Maxi to buy them. It's little baby steps, and I think that's a good thing.

Eventually, the vision I see is that every yard has a vegetable garden, the whole alley covered in plants, some edible, some berries, some trees, an exchange place[140]. Maybe some nut trees, a little community space that's blocked off, every balcony has plants growing, maybe even rooftop gardens. Greening the space, by that I mean plants, not just cutting back on electricity. That's important, too, but we can deal with that later!

[140] A permanent spot to leave or take used books, clothes, household items, etc.

Karmen's story

Build a community to build a garden

I was interested in alternative food networks at the time and studying community supported agriculture and so I thought this would be a really good way of expanding my experience and looking more at community gardens in general. Originally I thought I would use it for my research but it became more of a pet project, more of something that I just wanted to do because I liked it.

I was a little bit taken by how long everything took. I started with this really excited energy, like we're going to go in there and start planting right away, and everyone's going to get on board right away, and we're going to make a plan, and by first thaw we're going to get plants in the ground. I was surprised by the more social process, the social groundwork, getting everything set up and getting everyone on board. Just because people wanted to be involved didn't mean they had the same idea. Just having to watch that get worked out in the group meetings, dealing with different people's schedules, getting everyone together. It's a big undertaking to get people organized and figure out what everyone wants to do and make sure everyone's in agreement! Especially trying to work in a framework of democratic collective decision-making. Especially for someone who's not experienced in that at all.

Just that alone, settling on a decision making process, was a huge deal. I think we could have made a point of establishing a decision-making process before we started making decisions. You know, I think we came into it assuming that others were down with collective decision making, that everyone had the same idea of what that meant, and I don't think people did, and in the end that bogged the process down. Every time a decision had to be made there was a preliminary decision of, are we going to take a vote? We should vote, but some people don't like voting, we should find a decision through consensus, but some people don't know what consensus means, and then someone new would come in and it would start all over again. Coming to an understanding of how the group itself worked. The human aspect of figuring out how to interact with each other and then actually make concrete decisions.

I would say that was the most eye opening part of it. You know, maybe for a lot of people, starting a community garden, you already have been established as a group. We didn't consider that we weren't just starting a garden, we were starting a community. Not to give us too much credit, but you know, trying to build a community to try to build a garden.

Behind the scenes

I see my role more as a helper, in hindsight. I definitely took a more behind the scenes kind of role, more comfortable with the idea of organizing people than actually having

to put myself out there. At the beginning it was necessary, the contacting and that kind of stuff, because there was no one else to do it. I think that might have to do with not really feeling like an authority on anything, just not feeling the confidence of ever having done something like that before! As soon as, you know, Sara got involved, you know she didn't want any direction. But being able to start something real, seeing how people work together and learning how to navigate those situations in a way I never did just being in school, is a really good feeling.

I think not living there was also a huge factor. At the beginning, it was different when we were a smaller group. It just got to a point where it was us and ten of them, and I'm a 22 year old undergrad student who lives on the other side of the city! If I wanted to be a leader in a garden project I'd be starting one on my own where I live. I'd cut out cardboard or be involved because it was fun and because I liked you guys, I would go down there and be planning their garden but I would come home and be like, I want a garden, you know what I mean? At what point do you start insisting that you don't facilitate a meeting, or pass off roles to other people, or stop going to meetings. But then you know there was a part of me that really wanted to see it through.

Plant a flower

And getting to that point where you need to do something. Even if it's just like, accepting the trees from the municipality, even if it was just having a party or like,

cleaning up the leaves, because I think a lot of the people in the group felt the same way that I just described - I've been to meeting after meeting after meeting, we keep talking about gardening in the abstract, are we actually going to do anything? You get to a point where you just need to plant a flower. But on the other hand you don't want to just act without that process beforehand, 'cause otherwise it's not fair, some people planting something and other people end up unhappy. That kind of balance between being fast enough with your actions that you don't feel you're not doing anything, but being thoughtful enough, holding back your actions to make sure they're the right things for the group at the time.

Sustainable food alternatives don't just happen. The food system we're living in is deeply engrained in our social systems, how we think about food and how we think about other people, it's all part of how the systems have developed. So to go in and try to change that, to go in and start a community garden, or to start a CSA, to do any kind of alternative action, requires a complete shift in social process and infrastructure and there's all of these other things that need to happen to make these initiatives a success. It's so much bigger than just planting something or distributing food. I know I definitely didn't think of it that way. I guess we just fell into it, a little bit in the dark and a little bit haphazardly.

It inspired me to, instead of just studying food systems in a vacuum, to look at it from a broader perspective of urban development, public policy, public health, finance - a way

broader perspective and studying food systems in that. If all you're doing is knowing about CSAs and how great they are, it's not enough. To actually make sustainable food a viable long-term option, you need to look at it from a much bigger perspective, how embedded our relationship our food is with every other way that cities and people have developed. There are all of these other things that need to happen before you plant food so people will benefit from it. Are they gonna pick it? Are they gonna eat it? Are they gonna stop shopping at - are they gonna get along with their neighbours because of this garden? If all that mattered was planting a garden, you'd plant a garden. It would take you a weekend. You could hire someone. But that's not the point.

L'histoire de Malia[141]

Les gens complètement à l'ouest

C'était l'année dernière, à peu près la même époque, il y avait Sara qui faisait le porte à porte, et elle venait me voir pour me demander si je voulais participer au projet de la ruelle, qu'il y avait une réunion organisée chez elle.

C'est sur que [le projet] m'a ouvert aux autres choses. Comme ce soir j'ai mangé des tomates de mon jardin. Les bacs de mon jardin, ça je trouvais vraiment mortel. Moi, je suis vraiment pas très jardinière, mais faire pousser les petites choses sur le balcon, des tomates, des choses vraiment basic, basic – ça j'ai adoré. Puis, d'avoir appris à travailler avec les gens qui sont complètement différents de moi, quoi, rien à voir. Apprendre à vivre avec les gens qui sont complètement à l'ouest, qui ont une vision tellement, tellement différente des trucs, et apprendre à les écouter. C'est pas grave, on deal avec. Avant quand il y avait trop de contradiction j'écoutais pas. Dans une rencontre normal, j'aurais du mal, quoi. Ça c'est quelque chose, de travailler avec les gens différents.

On a fait le porte-à-porte pour demander aux gens de remplir le formulaire pour les plantes qu'ils voulaient. C'est là où on se rend compte un peu - de la solitude des gens,

[141] see English translation page 130

la façon qu'ils font confiance. Ça je trouve un peu dangereux, puis au même temps c'est une manière de rencontrer avec les gens, c'était peut-être leur visite du mois. Moi, personnellement j'aurais pas fait rentrer les gens comme ça chez moi que je connais pas, qui ont cogné sur la porte et puis *tac!.* Mais la facilité avec laquelle les gens ouvrent leur porte, avec l'accueil, et puis de raconter leurs vies, des fois c'est trop, mais - dès que tu fais un tout petit pas pour leur parler, la facilité qu'ils ont de pouvoir communiquer avec toi!

Parfois les choses n'avançaient pas suffisamment à mon goût - de demander le point de vue de chacun, ça c'était une nouveauté. C'était bien finalement mais je le trouvais difficile au début, d'avoir un consensus. Parce que c'est sur si quelqu'un est pas d'accord, on se rend compte que il apporte des points pas toujours pertinents, mais ça te permet de t'ouvrir un peu, d'écouter les autres. J'ai l'habitude d'organiser les fêtes - j'ai une certaine vision des choses, et puis d'avoir l'avis des autres, ça m'a permet d'ouvrir. C'est ça qui était difficile mais aussi enrichissant.

Je me sens impliquée, je me sens confirmée, et puis ben, si c'était des activités de bingo, j'irais pas, quoi! Pas les choses qui m'intéressent, mais là, être avec les gens à l'extérieur, à boire de la bière avec les voisins, à manger de la viande, Ça c'est quelque chose que je trouve cool. J'aurais jamais pensé que j'aurais trouvé ça sympathique, mais finalement - c'était cool.

Quand je veux, comme je veux

Non, le conflit, ça me dérange pas! Dans mon travail de gestion il y a souvent des conflits, avec les amis, les gens avec qui je suis obligée de dealer de toute façon, c'est sur que ça prends de l'énergie. Mais un comité de quartier, si ça me fatigue j'irais plus. Donc c'est pour ça que ça me dérange pas! Parce que pour moi, c'est plus une discussion et pas vraiment un conflit, et puis si je suis pas d'accord avec la tournure que ça prends, je pars. Voilà, je participe quand je veux, comme je veux, je ne suis pas attachée en fait. C'est vrai que je trouve ça un beau projet, c'est un peu mon activité quoi, une de mes activités *extracurriculum*. Puis moi j'habite ici, et je trouve ça vraiment intéressant, mais, par exemple, si je suis pas du tout d'accord avec Sara ou avec Thérèse ou avec toi et que tout le monde a un consensus, ben, je m'en vais.

Parfois, il y a des obligations de venir, parfois le dimanche après-midi j'aurais fait autre chose. Je me rappelle on avait une réunion en semaine, puis il y avait un match de hockey. Bon, j'aime pas le hockey, [mes amis] m'avaient proposé une place pour voir le match, j'ai dit non, non, j'ai mon comité de ruelle, j'irai pas, mais c'est sur si ils m'avaient proposé un concert, j'irais au concert! (rire) C'est clair? Mais pour moi, quand j'essaie de m'engager, je prends ça sérieux, et puis je trouve ça intéressant. Je trouve ça vraiment intéressant. Et c'est sur que si ça m'intéresse pas, si c'est lourd, que - que je viendrais plus. C'est sur que je préviendrais les gens…je prends ça sérieux, mais

pas au point de me rendre malade parce que je suis en conflit avec quelqu'un.

Mais, en même temps je trouve que le conflit c'est bien parce que ça apporte la discussion. Donc si c'est dans un minimum de respect, sans s'insulter, juste les propos respectueux, pas les propos racistes, ces genres de choses, je trouve ça bien. Je crois que c'est bien que les gens peuvent s'exprimer. Et c'est plus cas par cas. Je pense que donner une règle, on est pas une entreprise, là, pas trop structuré, cas par cas c'est bien. On est pas nombreux, peut-être quand on était 15, peut-être qu'il aurait fallu donner une règle, mais là… on va avoir une réunion pour ça, quoi! (rire) On a pas le temps! Et voilà.

Quelque chose que je pourrais emporter

Au Martinique? Oui, mais définitivement. Je pense que c'est un de mes raisons pour laquelle je me suis engagée. On a la température, on a le climat… parce que on fait plus tellement d'agriculture comme avant, qu'on n'a pas de jardins collectifs. Il y a quelques grosses plantations, monoculture. On fait de la cane, les ananas, les bananes, comme dans les autres pays sud-américains, et puis il y a des agriculteurs qui font pousser des légumes, les fruits, les choses comme ça. Mais avant, chaque personne avait son petit jardin, avec les fruits et légumes, avec de la coriandre, mais maintenant c'est pas le cas. Les trucs, ils ont pas de problème de pousser - dans le sol, ça pousse. Mais c'est pas quelque chose qui est mis à valeur. C'est de plus en plus aller au magasin d'à côté,

acheter tes trucs - souvent c'est moins cher, c'est moins pénible que faire pousser tes choses dans ton jardin. C'est pas quelque chose qui était encouragé. Je pense qu'on a vraiment besoin de faire ce genre de choses là. Ma famille, on a du terrain, et on a pas le droit de construire sur ça, mais on pourrait faire des petits jardins. Donc j'ai parlé a mon frère du projet – ben, ça sera pas pareil, il manque de l'espace etcetera, mais pour produire quoi qu'il soit, des choses pour la communauté, j'aimerais bien.

Qu'est-ce que je peux apporter… peut-être le fait d'organiser les fêtes entre voisins. On a souvent les fêtes en Martinique, mais - c'est sur que tout le monde se connaît, pas de problème de connaître les gens, ça c'est clair! Tout le monde connaît ta vie, comment est-ce que tu fais exactement, même avant que tu le fasse! Mais peut-être organiser des rencontres, pour que sortent les activités entre nous, parce que des fois les relations entre voisins sont un peu tendues. Le fait de faire les choses ensemble, ça c'est quelque chose que je peux apporter en Martinique.

En général quand je commence une activité j'aime bien y aller jusqu'à la fin, ou jusqu'à ce que je sois écoeurée ou que personne ne fasse rien. Ca veut dire que quand je commence une activité, en général, c'est rare que je le laisse tomber, à moins qu'il reste personne, je veux pas le faire seule! Mais - non, je trouve que c'est un bon projet! Donc, c'est ça, j'aime bien le projet et pour le temps que je reste ici je vais être impliquée.

Malia's story[142]

Way out there

It was last year at about the same time. Gabriela was knocking on doors and came to see me to ask if I wanted to participate in the alley project, that there was an organizational meeting at her house.

For sure [the project] opened me to other things. This evening, I ate tomatoes from my balcony. The containers for my garden I found really cool. Me, I'm not such a gardener, but to grow a few little things on my balcony, some tomatoes, some really basic basic things, that I loved. And to have learned to work with people who are completely different from me, you know, in every way. To learn to live with people who are way out there, who have a completely, completely different vision of things, and to learn to listen to them. It's not a big deal, we'll deal with it. Before, when there was too much of a contradiction, I didn't listen. In a normal meeting, I would have a hard time, you know? That's really something, working with people who are different.

Then [there was the time] we were knocking on doors to ask people to fill out forms for the plants they wanted. It was there that we saw people's loneliness, the way in which

142 my own translation

they trusted us. Me, personally, I wouldn't have let people into my house like that, people I don't know, who knock at my door and *tac!* That I find a bit dangerous, but at the same time it's a way to meet people, it was maybe their only visit that month. But the ease with which people open their door, the welcome they give, and then the way the share their life stories - well, sometimes it's too much, but as soon as you make the smallest step to talk to them, the ease they have to able to communicate with you!

Sometimes things weren't advancing quickly enough for my taste. Asking the point of view of each person was something new. In the end it was good, but I was finding it difficult at the beginning to have a consensus. Because for sure if someone is in disagreement, we realize that they bring something - not always pertinent, but it allows you to open a little, to listen to people. I'm used to organizing parties, I have a certain vision for things, so to have the opinion of others allowed me to open myself. That was something difficult but also enriching.

I feel involved, I feel acknowledged, and, yeah, if they were bingo nights, I wouldn't go, you know! Not something that really interests me. But, to be with people outside, drinking beer, eating meat with the neighbours - I never would have thought that I would find that enjoyable, but in the end, it was cool.

When I want, how I want

No, conflict doesn't bother me! With my work in management there are often conflicts, for sure, or with friends, people I'm obliged to deal with regardless, for sure it takes energy. But a neighbourhood committee - if it's tiring me, I won't go anymore. So that's why it doesn't bother me! Because for me, it's more like a discussion and less a real conflict, and then if I'm not in agreement with the turn it takes, I'll leave. *Voilà*, I participate when I want, how I want; I'm not attached, actually. It's true that I find it a beautiful project, it's kind of one of my extracurricular activities, and I live here and it's interesting. But, for example, if I'm not totally in agreement with Sara or with Thérèse or with you and everyone else has a consensus, well, I'll go.

Sometimes on a Sunday afternoon I would have rather done something else. I remember once we had a meeting during the week, and there was a hockey game at the same time. Well, I don't like hockey. [My friends] had offered me a seat to see the game, I said no, no, I have my alley committee, I won't go, but for sure if they had proposed a concert, I would have gone to the concert. (laughs). Clear enough? But for me, when I try to get involved, I take that seriously, and I find it interesting, I really do. And for sure if it no longer interests me, if it becomes heavy, well - I wouldn't continue to go. For sure I would warn people… I take it seriously, but not to the point of making myself sick because I'm in conflict with someone.

But, at the same time I find that conflict is good because it offers discussion. So if it's with a minimum of respect, without insulting each other, just with respectful intentions,

no racist intentions, that kind of thing, it's fine. I think that it's good that people can express themselves. And [that we deal with it] on a case by case basis. I think that to make a rule about it - we're not a company, you know, not so structured, so case by case is fine. There aren't too many of us. Maybe when there were fifteen of us, maybe would have had to make a rule, but come on…like we're gonna have a meeting about that! (laughs) We don't have time! *Et voilà.*

Something I can take with me

To Martinique? Oh yes, definitely. I think that it's one of the reasons I got involved. We have the temperature, we have the climate… because we don't do as much agriculture as before, we don't have collective gardens. There are a few big plantations, monocultures. We produce sugar cane, pineapples, bananas, like in other South American countries, and then there are farmers who grow vegetables, fruit, things like that. But before, everyone had her own little garden, with fruits and vegetables, with cilantro, but now it's not the case. Things grow there, no problem - you put it in the ground, it grows. But it wasn't something that was valued. It's more and more that you go to the corner store, buy your things - often it's less expensive, it's less work than growing your own things in your garden. It's not something that was encouraged. I think that we really need to do that kind of thing there. My family has some land, and we don't have the right to build on it, but we could make some little gardens. So I talked to my brother about the project - well, it wouldn't be the same, we lack some

space, etcetera, to produce some things for the community, whatever that might be, I'd really like that.

What I can take with me… maybe the idea of organizing parties among neighbours. We often have parties in Martinique, but - for sure everybody knows each other, no problem to meet people, that's for sure! Everyone knows your life, exactly what you're doing, even before you do it! But maybe to organize meetings, to start up activities amongst us, because something the connections between neighbours are a little tense. The idea of doing things together, that's something I can take with me to Martinique.

In general when I start an activity, I like to go to the end, or until I'm fed up or that no-one else is doing anything. What I mean is that when I start an activity, in general, it's rare that I let it go, unless there is no-one left! I don't want to do it alone! But - no, I find that it's a good project. So, that's it, I like the project and for the time that I stay here I'm going to be involved.

Sara's story

I'm a participant

This project made me realize how much community organizing is part of myself now. It's not just a job, it's not just something I learned in school, it's there every step of everything I do with my neighbours. This is my first year with a serious job, where I have to work every single day at the same place. I'm not the boss, so I have to go with the way things work. It's cool to have something that's more creative, open and flexible. It's not just me being a community organizer for others, it's something I actually do for myself as a participant and a citizen. I get my garden out of it, I get new friends. I worked in a collective where we had a container garden, but I've never had water reservoir containers at my own place. I always plan on doing it every winter - "Ok this year I'm going to actually do my own garden" - but I'd never actually done it! So if we hadn't done the alley project I don't know if I would have had a garden like that in the back. (laughs) After years of thinking about it, it actually became real!

I think projects like this can give energy rather than suck energy away. By avoiding certain negative useless things, there's more energy around that you can use for creative and productive endeavors! (laughs). By giving more meaning to existence, it gives a boost of energy. To me, five minutes at the mall will suck all the energy out of

my body! That compared to a two hour meeting in the backyard. It keeps me sane. Compared to other people I know - they'll tell you that over the weekend, they went shopping, and now they're tired. Whereas I can be like, I worked on my garden, I had a meeting, and it was fun, and I'm not tired! It's an overall health improver.

A relic of neighbourly love in the tika massala paste jar

We distributed a little flyer[143], just to people who live on the second or third floor, and invited people to come and see us. It said that we were going to be giving out plants and explaining to people how to grow their own stuff on their balconies. So we had containers that we already finished, we had our demonstration garden on the staircase already done, and we were making containers as we went along, as people came by. There were about ten people who came over the course of the afternoon, people that we had never talked to before who had seen the flyer. One guy called me in the morning to see if it was real, to see if he could really come to the neighbour's backyard and get plants! And he actually brought me a piece of plant from his house. It eventually died because I forgot about it, which is unfortunate, but I kept it as a relic of neighbourly love, in the tika massala paste jar! I think people were curious to see what this random invitation was. There were three of us from the committee there all afternoon, and people would come by, one at a time or a couple at a time, and then they'd go back and get their family to come. We chatted with people. It was fun, for

[143] about a second container gardening workshop in July 2010 to teach how to make self-watering containers

sure.

Some people have a timeline where you have a big goal divided into little parts, but that doesn't work for me! (laughs) Because we could have done that with this project - ok, we want this many collective gardens and this many compost bins, what we're doing this year, what we're doing next year. That works for a lot of people, it helps them keep the vision and work towards it. What I like is having it somewhere in the back of our minds and feeling like we're going towards it, keeping it flexible enough so we can change what we do as long as it still makes sense within the grand scheme of what we'd like to happen. Personally, it's a good way to work.

I've had to learn not to be overambitious with projects like this. We saw that we can't accomplish everything in one summer, or in one year, or even in two years. And that you can't take people where they're not ready to go. There are certain contexts where it's easier to accept than others. At work it's harder to me to accept - I had the idea that people were poor and wanted change and to get involved in all these projects which is not necessarily true. With the alley we all knew there are all kinds of people living on the street, and some people will care about their car more than their backyard. Just to be happy with small results, little things like neighbours talking to each other, not expecting the alley to suddenly turn into this amazing park with gardens and compost and birds and squirrels and kids running around. Not to be too ambitious, not to rush things.

It's not really about slowing down, but coherence is important to me. If it's not coherent with some kind of conscious or unconscious goal, even if I don't realize it consciously, I'll feel that it's wrong. It's good to start with a big dream, especially when you're in a collective, to feel that everyone is working towards the same dream, but as long as everything else we do is coherent with that dream or that plan, then that for me is fine.

Neighbours talking to each other

When I moved here, I didn't really think it was a long term thing, living on Rushbrooke Street in this ugly apartment! (laughs) But then when we got our letter from the landlord asking us if we wanted to renew the lease, I'd say the main reason why I stayed in this apartment was because of the alley project, which is kind of crazy. So it had an impact on me geographically, on my existence!

No one really talks about the importance of doing community projects on your street! You don't learn it in school, you don't see it on tv. I guess volunteering is part of what we put value on, but it's never involved with yourself. You volunteer with kids, volunteer with the elderly, but it's not really about citizen involvement, in your own neighbourhood for a better quality of life. Because there's no money in it! We're a very ambitious type of society that's all about achieving stuff. Kids learn skills in school that

will help them get a good career in whatever professions are in vogue. At my school we didn't talk about neighbourhoods, about connection or little things.

It's the same answer every time I think about it - neighbours talking to each other. Neighbours getting to know each other and doing other stuff together. I like that more than the trees that have shown up in the alley. Trees are nice, but my favourite thing really is the connection between neighbours. And the ideas coming out of it, the idea of the artistic project, just the fact that we're talking about it and imagining it, getting creative together. That's very cool.

Your initial interview about health[144] stayed in the back of my mind the whole time. I observed people's interactions and people's involvement with that in mind. That was fun to think about. Socially, this neighbourhood feels like a healthy neighbourhood. That was the big joke - my friends in Quebec City saying, oh you're going to move to Montréal and not know anyone, but I know the most neighbours ever! Ok, maybe not as many people as communist Czechoslovakia! (laughs) It's amazing to see how safe it feels to leave the apartment for a few days, to know neighbours are around, how safe it feels to be home alone. People talk to each other and there's stuff going on, more and more, and I think it's going to feel even better if we can close off part of the alley and have a real park in the back with benches. It feels good around here.

[144] the initial focus of my research was the healing benefits of collective gardens

Thérèse[145]

Go!

J'ai toujours été toujours attirée par la ruelle. Je sens une espèce d'amour pour la ruelle, attirée par le principe d'une ruelle, peu importe où. Puis, quand Sara s'est montrée ouverte, ok, go. J'avais le goût.

C'est quand-même ma première fois dans un engagement communautaire. Je viens d'une banlieue où il y a absolument rien, rien de tout. Ici quand je suis arrivée, j'en ai pas vraiment trouvé quelque chose que me tenait à coeur, là. Le plus grand défi - pour moi, c'est de m'impliquer dans un projet communautaire peut-être, dans le sens que j'ai toujours voulu faire, mais j'ai jamais trouvé un projet qui me tenait vraiment à coeur.

Et le grand défi de notre projet, c'est que le projet de la ruelle devient pas un projet de la ville, mais qu'il reste un projet citoyen, d'ici. Qu'on le fasse aider par la ville, mais qu'on rentre pas dans une espèce de moule, que ça devient pas la ruelle faite par la ville mais la ruelle faite par les citoyens aidés et soutenus par la ville.

J'ai envoyé une lettre au mois de novembre à l'architecte paysagiste pour qu'elle

[145] see my own English translation on page 146

commence avec une liste de plantes indigènes et comestibles, la liste avec les framboisiers, une lettre courte mais avec un tableau. Je l'ai envoyé le mois de novembre, parce que l'an dernier quand on est arrivé au mois de mars, c'était trop tard. Ok, mais là, le mois de novembre, on est pas trop tard! J'espère… ben, elle s'était montrée quand-même ouverte.

L'an dernier, j'étais comme, ok, on plante les plantes, peu importe cette année quelle genre de plante. Ça va aider au moins, le sol va commencer à être vitalisé. Dans mon idée idéal, c'est, quand on fait quelque chose, on le fait une fois, et il faut qu'il soit, dès le début, parfait! Mais c'est pas comme ça que ça fonctionne!

Tu sais, c'est ça le défi. Tu dis, peu importe, je le fais. (rire) Tu inities, puis - on fait la journée de la corvée, il pleut. C'est pas grave, on le fait pareil! La plantation - peu importe si on en a des gens, on y va pareil, *go*! Mais ça va être encore comme ça dans les prochains mois. J'ai hâte de voir ce qu'on va faire cette année. C'est pas encore fini. Il y a eu un commencement, bien sûr, et chacun avait une idée de ce qu'il voulait. C'est pas un projet qui a une fin justement. (rire)

La présence humaine

J'ai fait un bac en art. Moi, ce que j'aime sur tout de l'art c'est son côté communicatif, justement, ça parle aux gens au quotidien. Je vois que ça manque beaucoup à

Montréal, l'art public, la manifestation artistique spontanée des gens dans leur milieu. Cette ruelle là pourrait être un lieu intéressant pour ça, un endroit de partage. Aussi pour créer un sentiment d'appartenance chez les citoyens à l'endroit ici, aussi un sentiment de sécurité, puis quelque chose plus artistique dans le quartier.

L'art, c'est une forme de communication - un message, un sentiment, une expression. Et dans la ruelle, c'est que l'art transmet la présence humaine, l'échelle humaine de la ruelle. De peindre les clôtures, de faire les motifs sur une porte, d'installer les photos, c'est vraiment de donner à la ruelle quelque chose d'humain, quelque chose très près des gens, pour communiquer dans le fond que c'est un lieu pour eux, à eux. C'est comment les choses interagissent ensemble, que ça soit un être humain, que ça soit un humain avec son environnement. Ça crée des liens, visibles ou pas, entre les choses. Et le côté vert, le côté végétal, pour moi c'est très important. C'est le lien direct de l'humain avec la nature, surtout quand on parle de une ruelle avec les plantes indigènes. C'est encore plus près de la nature du Québec, ce qui pousse ici. Ça crée les liens forts.

Ça a été un projet nourrissant, ah oui, certain. D'avoir un sentiment de sécurité dans le voisinage, une tranquillité d'esprit - l'investissement communautaire puis l'inversion vers les gens qui t'entourent. On peut pas dire qu'on était tout le temps en train de planter, tout le temps en train de faire les activités ensembles, mais quand même un projet commun. Ça rend juste heureux de rencontrer les gens dans son voisinage, de les connaître, t'es reconnu - oui c'est bon pour la santé! (rire)

C'est *ongoing*

Ben, d'apprendre à connaître les voisins, ça c'était vraiment important. Apprendre à travailler en groupe. Dans ces types de travail, on apprend toujours à mieux se connaître. Oui, j'apprends à mieux comprendre qui je suis là -dedans, quelles sont mes intérêts, tu sais.

Si je continue dans cette voie là, apprendre beaucoup de la patience avec les autres. Une ouverture, aussi. Parfois - je suis pas quelqu'un qui est fermée d'esprit, mais parfois je pense que je peux paraître fermée d'esprit. J'ai une idée, puis là, c'est comme je suis bloquée là-dessus. Dans le fonds, je suis pas bloquée là-dessus, mais j'ai besoin des gens qui viennent me mettre en question de ce que je pense, tu sais. En tout cas, j'ai pas trouvé que, lors de ce projet là, j'étais toujours ouverte et réceptive à ça. Donc ça j'apprends. Ça c'est vraiment au niveau personnel. Aussi j'ai appris les plantes, beaucoup, d'apprendre à communiquer avec la ville, apprendre c'est quoi aussi faire des projets communautaires. La nécessité d'avoir la patience de parler avec les gens, de répéter, ouai! (rire) J'apprends, dans le fond, à connaître les gens autour. C'est rare que je passe à la ruelle que je rencontre pas ou que je vois pas quelqu'un qui me dit bonjour, ou hello. C'est vraiment le fun. (rire)

J'ai la tendance à m'engager dans les projets, puis, le stress! Tu sais, tu oublies tout le

plaisir puis l'intérêt puis la spontanéité, l'envie que t'avais de faire. Sara m'a beaucoup enseigné là-dessus. Donc j'ai appris à dire, R'garde, c'est pas grave, si c'était pas parfait, c'est *ongoing*! C'est une expérience qui change tout le temps, c'est un projet avec plusieurs ramifications qui est construit par une synergie, toutes sortes de choses ensemble.

J'ai hâte à cet été. J'ai vraiment hâte à ce printemps, j'ai vraiment hâte de faire le ménage puis de semer, j'ai hâte d'aller semer, j'ai hâte d'aller peinturer, avec les clôtures, tu sais, j'ai vraiment hâte. L'an dernier, le projet était plus stressant. Cette année, j'ai hâte parce que je sais que je vais m'amuser. Si j'ai appris quelque chose, oui, c'est ça!

Thérèse's story[146]

Vas-y![147]

I was always attracted to the alley. I feel a kind of love for it, and an attraction to the principle of an alley, no matter where it is. So when Sara seemed open to it, ok, *vas-y*. I was into it.

It's pretty much my first time as part of a community commitment. I come from a suburb where there is absolutely nothing, nothing at all. When I arrived here, I hadn't really found something that felt close to my heart. Maybe the biggest challenge for me was to get involved in a community project, in the sense that I had always wanted to, but I had never found a project that really felt close to my heart.

The big challenge for our project is that it not become a project of the city, but for it to remain a citizen's project. We do it with the help of the city, but that it doesn't mean it fits into a kind of mould [of green alleys]. That it doesn't become the alley made by the city but the alley made by the citizens helped and supported by the city.

I sent a letter in the month of November to the landscape architect so she could start

146 my own translation

147 Go!

with a list of indigenous and edible plants, the list with raspberries, a short letter but with a chart. I sent it in November, because last year when it arrived in March, it was too late. Ok, now, the month of November, we aren't too late! I hope… well, she had seemed open at least.

Last year I was like, ok, we're planting these plants, it doesn't matter what kind of plant. It's going to help at least, the soil will start to be revitalized. In my ideal world, when we do something, we do it one time, and it has to be, from the beginning, perfect, you know! But that's not how it works!

You know, that's the challenge. You say, it doesn't matter, I'm doing it. (laughs). You start something, then - we're doing the cleanup day, and it's raining! No big deal, we're doing it anyway! The planting day - it doesn't matter if there are lots of us, we're doing it anyway, *vas-y!* It's still going to be like that in the upcoming months. I'm excited to see what we're going to do this year. It's not done yet. [The project] had a beginning, that's for sure, and each of us had an idea of what we wanted. It's not a project that has an end in fact. (laughs).

Human presence

I did my bachellor's in art. Me, what I like most of all about art is its communicative side, that it speaks to people about their daily lives. I see that is really missing in

Montréal - public art, the spontaneous artistic expression of people in their surroundings. This alley here could be an interesting place for that, a space for sharing. Also to create a feeling of belonging for the citizens of this place, a feeling of security and something more artistic in the neighbourhood.

Art is a form of communication - a message, a feeling, self-expression. And in the alley, art transmits human presence, the human side of the alley. Painting the fences, making drawings on a door, hanging up photos, it's really to give something human to the alley, something that's very close to people, to deeply communicate that it's a place for them, by them. It's how things interact together, be it a human being, be it a human with her environment. It creates links, visible or not, between things. And the green aspect, the vegetative aspect, for me is very important. It's the direct link between humans and nature, especially when we talk about an alley with indigenous plants. That's even closer to Quebec's natural world, what grows here. That creates some strong ties.

This was a nourishing project, oh yeah, for sure. To have a feeling of safety in the neighbourhood, a tranquility of spirit - the community investment and the *inversion towards the people that surround you. You couldn't say that we were always planting, always doing activities together, but still it's a common project. It just makes you happy to meet the people in your neighbourhood, to get to know them, you're recognized - yes, it's good for health! (laughs)

Ça continue[148]

Well, to learn to get to know my neighbours was really important. To learn to work in a group. In these kinds of projects, you always learn to know yourself better. Yeah, I'm learning to better understand who I am inside, you know, what my interests are.

And if I continue on this tangent here, I learned a lot about patience with others. There was an opening, too. Sometimes - I'm not someone who is closed-minded, but sometimes I can seem closed-minded. I have an idea, and ok - it's like I'm hung up on it. Really, I'm not hung up on it, but I need people who can come and challenge me about what I think. In any case, I didn't find, with this project, that I was always open and receptive to that. That's really on a personal level. I also learned about plants, a lot, and learned to communicate with the city, and what it is to do community projects. The need to have the patience to talk with people, to repeat. Yeah! (laughs). I'm really learning to get to know people around here. It's rare that I walk through the alley without seeing someone who says *bonjour* or hello. It's really fun. (laughs).

I have the tendency to get involved in projects, and then, stress! You know, you forget all the pleasure and the interest and the spontaneity, the desire that you had to act in the first place. Sara really taught me a lot there. So I learned to say, look, it's not a big deal if it's not perfect, *ça continue!* It's an experience that changes all the time, it's a

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148 It's ongoing

project with many ramifications that's created by a synergy, all kinds of things together.

I'm excited about this summer. I'm really excited about this spring, I'm really excited to do the clean up and the seeding, I'm excited to paint the fences, you know, I'm really excited. Last year, the project was more stressful. This year, I'm excited because I know I'm going to have fun. If I learned one thing, yeah, it's that!

FIRE

Sparks

The day I moved into the apartment on Rushbrooke, I saw Malia on the street in her red winter coat. Now when I return from the countryside for a weekend I visit with Therese in the alley on my way to the river as she walks back or drink an impromptu morning coffee with Yves. When Sara decided she needed her own apartment, she moved to Daisy's old place one floor up. She told me that she wanted to stay on this block. Daisy now rents the office in my old apartment, just for the occasional weekend. Malia decided she wanted to buy her own place and stayed in the neighbourhood, a few blocks away. *Don't worry*, she assures us, *I'll still be involved*. My mother says it's a biological need to feel connected, safe, secure. This was the role of the tribe, then the extended family, and now, community.

A friend told me that when asked what makes Portland an unusually connected, creative city, the writer and community activist Jane Jacobs responded, "Because Portlanders love Portland."

September 2016, Verdun, QC

Even in the middle of a hot Montreal summer, the air temperature in the alley is comfortable and the earth is shaded. Several benches recuperated from the waste recycling centers in Montreal and painted by neighbourhood children at a past block party sit flush against backyard fences; two neighbours sit on one of them and drink coffee as the sun comes up. Raspberry bushes line the path between Rushbrooke and

Wellington, and a local graffiti artist was recently commissioned to paint a mural with high school students of a giant spiral snake on the side of one of the brick townhouses. Two cherry trees block off the middle section of the alley. Two children hide in a tiny house made of living sunflowers. Most of the backyards have raised garden vegetable beds or herb spirals; some neighbours removed the fences between yards to maximize garden growing space. The balconies crawl with climbing beans and tomatoes. An older woman flips through a book in the cobb hut that holds the tiny free store. To the left crouches a round outdoor bread oven in the shape of a dragon. The night before, there was a lantern festival to mark the autumn equinox; clotheslines overhead are strung with small paper lanterns in yellows and reds that sway and spin in the wind.

September 2021, Verdun, QC

All of the alleys now have raised beds along the borders with native plants (coneflowers, nettles), cultivated plants (tomatoes, beans), and flowers (sunflowers, poppies, roses). Each alley has a unique feature which showcases the residents' collective creativity, often situated in a space that was once a private yard now donated to the block - a ministage for performances, a large chess pattern painted onto the concrete with pawns and knights created out of scavenged scraps, a small pond, meditation space, and altar dedicated to a resident who passed away the previous year. You can buy or trade for wood-fired cob oven bread from Marie-Eve in the alley between 1st and 2nd ave every Tuesday afternoon and Jerson's pupusas from the mosiaced tea stand in the alley between 4th and 5th ave. Small businesses that begin in the alleys (basketry from planted willow, cobb oven bread, juice from backyard cherries and apples) often grow

so popular that they eventually move into storefronts on Wellington, replacing Dunkin' Donuts and other multinational chains. A citizen's group initiated a fruit and nut tree planting campaign - the elementary and secondary schools and the hospital now have small orchards on their properties. Citizens can also buy trees (subsidized by the municipality), and volunteers will teach basic tree planting and tree care. The municipality is so enthused by the idea of urban agriculture that it established three small urban agricultural consultation stations scattered throughout the neighbourhood where citizens can go to ask advice about growing food. Another citizen's group began a yearly river clean up party and water education program and plants irises, bulrushes, arrowhead, and duckweed every year on floating islands made of recuperated waste; the plants create habitats both for bacteria, algae, and zooplankton which degrade water toxins and for minnows and nesting water birds[149]. The city agreed to fund a bioremediation project for the contaminated soils on the hospital and secondary school grounds; quarter acre parcels are marked off with signs to explain the process, layered with oyster mushrooms and sprayed with worm casting tea to break down PCBs, pesticides, and petroleum products and planted in mustards and scented geraniums to pull up lead, nickel, and cadmium.[150] The church on Boulevard Lasalle that was for sale ten years ago is now an arts center for youth. Monthly performances by the youth, as well as other artists, take place in the auditorium. The building is a safe place for youth to learn clowning, pottery, carpentry, dance, or to just hang out. A greenhouse on the top floor produces microgreens, mushrooms, and worm castings to generate income for

149 (Kellogg and Pettigrew 2008)
150 (Kellogg and Pettigrew 2008)

the project. Neighbourhood citizen coalitions formed in some of the alleys to strategize to keep rents low to protect against gentrification and ensure stability for their living situations. They created conversation times and spaces and invited citizens, municipal government members, and even a few landlords. Two citizen coalitions decided to create a cooperative housing model and, with the support of the municipality, fundraised and purchased sections of the alley townhouses to be collectively owned. The landlords liberated themselves from the management of these properties, which neither of them enjoyed, and pursue their respective dreams of beekeeping and lutherie. Other coalitions persuaded the municipality to establish units of subsidized rental housing. Another coalition envisioned a green housing education site, built their community connections, found a grant and a receptive landlord with adjacent buildings, knocked down a few walls, and created a collective housing unit for eight residents with a greywater system, rooftop garden, toilet with worm waste composting, passive solar heating and thermal mass, rocket stove, and backyard chickens.

AIR

The breath

July 2011, St-Hubert-de-Audet, QC

I write this on a homestead near the hamlet of Audet in the Eastern Townships of rural Quebec. From this window I see the swishing of a cow's tail, a pile of two by fours that was once a feeding trough, motherwort, buttercup, and strands of a spider's web, one of the thumb-sized white orb-weavers that live here, a tiny cabin and a defunct ride-on mower. We are the only Anglophones in the area; the other inhabitants speak a rooted

joual, singsongy that mimics the dips and curves of the Appalachian mountains that surround us. Tractors and balers rumble by every hour or so on the gravel road by the clapboard house. At first glance it seems another world from the brick townhouses and the Montrealais stacked three-deep within, public parks full of accordions and guitars, sunbathers, and birthday balloons on Sundays, Franglais spiced with Arabic, Mandarin, Spanish, or a myriad of other languages, the drivers that speed up at yellow lights and kamikaze bikers on the sidewalks. But I learn that both city and country underbellies are the same - alcoholism, depression, isolation. My friend that I live with here in Audet comes home and tells me of a CBC broadcast that reports high levels of farmer suicides - decreasing food prices, increasing debts to compensate, the loss of a dream. Neighbours who are very different don't talk to each other. I learn that my experience of communal farming is currently the exception to the rule, the irony when both my neighbour and I work on our separate gardens alone all morning

I like Stephan Harding's vision of the future of a web of thriving ecovillages with plenty of wild spaces in between, in symbiosis with the cultural cauldrons of small cities with colleges, libraries, museums, theatres, and cafes[151]. As one of my professors pointed out, the alley in Verdun could be any alley in Montreal, any neighbourhood block in a city, the collective farm I worked on in BC any farm. Building community resilience means a number of simple acts with profound implications. "We have no life," joked one committee member to me, "work and this alley project." "What else is there to life, flowers and backyard barbecues!" I joked back. But it is these simple acts

[151] As quoted in Hopkins 2008:102

that build community, not grand council five year plans and strategic interventions but actions and conversations of love and creativity. Despite the urgency of our times, we can choose to act with joy and celebration, making time for the flow of information and the relationships that sustain the projects.

After our permaculture course here in Audet, we are left with detailed plans lovingly created by students. We decide to start with the conversion of the shell of a house extension to an artistic and social community space - clay floors, wool-insulated walls, and wood-burning stove - to invite city dwellers to the country, to create a central gathering space for the vision of an ecovillage here. As we begin, I notice I become tight in my body, sleepless in my tent as I scheme to move the project forward to finish by the time the snows come, a detailed plan, with all players acting accordingly. *It's up to us!* I think*, to create this space, to bring the people to grow the food, to bring new life to the townships! I need to do this, to stay busy, to say, look what I have achieved, look what I am worth!* But. Martyrdom is a lonely road. I am here to spread light. So I say to myself, *say yes* and encourage these symbiotic unfurlings with others that bust through plans like vines through concrete. Slow down. Enjoy. Relax. Breathe in this uncertainty. Speak about it from the belly. Let the project ramble into new hearts and hands and fill with light and love. As an intern from the Bullocks' Homestead writes, these tasks would seem overwhelming to do alone; community holds us and encourages us onward[152]. I look forward to the harvest.

[152] (Sawyer 2011)

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