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The cover image is courtesy of Michelle Garvey from her article in this issue.

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MOVING SPIRITS THROUGH WATER TOGETHER

By Stephanie Lindquist

frozen

On mornings when it is 17 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, it is hard to crawl out from my warm sheets. I see the frost on the window panes, and I feel the cold draft radiate from my home's walls. The water in my backyard chicken coop is undoubtedly freezing. If the water is not frozen solid yet and the chickens are desperate, they will peck through the slushy top layer for a few precious sips before it hardens entirely. If I don't tend to them soon, I will hear them clucking. Or worse, I risk their health and production of fresh eggs. If I don't bundle up before going out, my body will freeze and lose sensation. If I don't weatherproof the chicken coop, they will suffer. Numbness to the elements may be a protective mechanism in the short run, but in the long run it leads to death.

The Mississippi River at night near Sunshine, Louisiana, with a faint glow from distant industrial lights reflecting on the water. Image courtesy of Stephanie Lindquist.

And so I get up, get dressed, and start moving to take care of them and me. My chickens keep me grounded in a daily rhythm of feeding them treats of mealworms, kitchen scraps, and their own egg shells, and, most importantly, changing their water.

It is even more painful to tune in to what is going on around us when the news is hard to weather and we lack any protective gear. We are sensitive creatures after all. I wonder how to confront these daily traumas. Listening to current news of the U.S. executive branch's relentless dismantling of our society's broad social supports for the enrichment of a few, I often feel incapacitated and numb with depression, frozen by the feeling that I can't change anything around me, and sometimes even reluctant to feel my own sorrow. While freezing, like running or fighting, may be an instinctive response, if endured for too long it removes my agency.

I fear that my numbness may be a dissociation not only with current events, but with the natural world, the universe to which I belong and am a small part. So how do I keep feeling and moving while confronting my own and others' grief in hard times? How might I ground myself in something unchanging or at least seasonal? I'm not seeking a quick high, fix, or distraction, but something that satiates my deep desire for connection, beauty, and meaning while also acknowledging the world's pain.

When I first moved to Minnesota, the frozen lakes in the winter looked impenetrable and dead to me. But deep below, the water is still moving with life. The first time I walked onto a frozen lake with my nephew, we were scared of the sound that ice makes when it is being made. We dropped and rolled off the ice as quickly as possible. Now, dressed in layers on warmer winter days after a hard freeze, I have learned to trust the lake to be my ground. This, only after manually drilling 2 feet deep holes through the ice to catch black crappies lurking 30 feet below. Even the frozen lakes support and connect me to the world.

Thousands of miles southwest of this water that reflects the clouds (Mni Sota Makoce) is a sea believed to be dead by some, cut off from restorative sources with nowhere to flow. And while many are incapacitated by the toxic sediments discharged there and widely dispersed in the air, others continue to flock to its shores made of bird and fish bones.

flowing

Three years ago, I visited the Salton Sea in Southern California. While driving around the sea I was struck by dystopian scenes of spray-painted furniture amongst collapsed structures being reclaimed by the desert sand. Over hundreds of thousands of years this body of water has intermittently been filled by the Colorado River, remained for many years, then evaporated into the desert. Before this place was settled by Europeans, the much larger, biologically vibrant Ancient Lake Cahuilla and its lava domes thrived; last filled around 1400 and drying in the late 1500s, the lake held and still holds great significance to the Cahuilla people.[1] In less than two centuries, the river was dammed and canalled, cutting off the sea's replenishing flow. In the 1950s and 1960s, the remaining Salton Sea briefly became a tourist destination for Hollywood celebrities. The rich soil to the south in the Salton Trough was inundated with massive farms sending their salty discharge to the sea. Despite this causing massive die-offs of birds, whose finely ground bones you walk upon along the southern beach, the Salton Sea remains a critical stop in bird migration. And with little water to replenish this place, the dusty dry seabed

is picked up by wind storms, becoming a far reaching asthma attack.[2]

In the face of windstorms that spread dangerous pollutants for miles, I was surprised to watch people visit, camp, and walk along the Salton Sea's shores, a place where some scientists recommend wearing an N95 mask. I was perplexed and impressed. I had never seen anything like this. Whether they were tourists from far away or local Cahuilla people celebrating this sacred site, to my eyes, they confronted this sacrificial zone with love.

The people there reminded me of Anishinaabe nibi (water) walkers closer to my present home in the Midwest, people like Nokomis Josephine Mandamin or Sharon Day who physically confront man-made trauma on the land and water by walking immense distances around the Great Lakes and along the full length of the Mississippi River. Over a Zoom call, Day told me that while they walk with prayer and ceremony in each footstep to heal the water, they are in turn being healed by the water.

Two years ago in the fall, I had the opportunity to sail down the Mississippi River with a group of college students, professors, activists, and artists on Augsburg's River Semester organized by Joe Underhill. I was excited and also full of

Abandoned buildings covered in graffiti at Bombay Beach near the Salton Sea. Image courtesy of Stephanie Lindquist.

trepidation to face this riverscape and travel to the south for the first time as a person of color. There would be no reasonable way for me to hide or close my eyes from the pain humans have carved along the river's banks, or dumped and trafficked up and down its currents. I joined the crew in Greenville, Mississippi for the last 8 weeks of their journey. I quickly integrated into their daily rhythms of early rising, group discussion, watching the wind in our sails while singing shanties, carrying supplies off the boats for the evening, setting up tents, collecting firewood, rinsing our dishes with the river water and sand, and generally checking in with one another. On sunny layovers I would watch the students swim in the river. The further south we meandered, the more overwhelmed I felt. The entirety of the river was surrounded by old plantations now converted to industry, prisons, or wedding rentals except for the Whitney Plantation, the only site dedicated to retelling its history. One afternoon we happened to camp across from the Louisiana State Penitentiary known for holding three wrongfully accused Black Panther Party members—Robert King, Albert Woodfox, and Herman Wallace, known as the Angola 3—in solitary confinement for 29 to 44 years each. [3] The next day, some of us visited the prison's museum, which had no mention of these three men who organized prisoners across racial lines

A desolate landscape near the Salton Sea, with scattered vehicles and sparse vegetation under a cloudy sky. Image courtesy of Stephanie Lindquist.

to advocate for prison reform to improve the abysmal conditions in what was known as "The Last Slave Plantation."[4] Instead we looked upon displays of famous escapes, prisoners' tradition of handmade coffins for those on death row, photographs from the longest running prison rodeo to entertain locals, and merchandise including reused license plates and hot sauce for sale made by prisoners. Nearing Baton Rouge, the start of Louisiana's chemical corridor that extends south to New Orleans and is also known as cancer alley to some, we were told to no longer swim in the water.[5] We even stopped using the river water to wash our dishes. Confronted by this tragic landscape of refineries, smokestacks, discharge sites, old plantations, and prisons, I lost all feeling.

Not knowing any rituals to ground me, I found solace in coming together as a group in ceremony through weekly water blessings, a format we adopted from Day. When alone, I meandered the batture—this land of seasonal flux between the river and the levee, where the water beats the land (stemming from the French word battre). There I greeted the plants—invasive, native, and naturalized alike. There was still unexpected beauty to be cherished as we drifted and sailed in two homemade catamarans between informal campsites. Thankfully, the river carefully carried

Tents set up under an abandoned structure at Lincoln Beach, Louisiana, during a rainy day. Image courtesy of Stephanie Lindquist.

our bodies safely to the Gulf. And the river connected us with a wide swath of people—activists, gardeners, educators, naturalists, residents, fishermen, partygoers, even the prisoners laboring on tugs who were looking to trade white bread for oreos. Despite all of the wounds settlers have inflicted upon this place in recent history, water continues to nurture us spiritually and physically.

Sometimes these lessons of facing pain with love are years and months in the making from California to Louisiana, and sometimes they are sitting right in front of you in your backyard and experienced in the intimacy of an epsom salt bath. I nearly panicked one evening this winter when I came home to find one of my chickens was egg-bound. Who knows how long poor Chanteclair was standing on the roost with an egg stuck halfway out of her. Watching the other chickens begin to peck at her, I became terribly worried that the egg might break in her and possibly cause an infection. Unsure what to do, I called my partner, then some local vets, and eventually consulted Google. That night, we prepared two warm, 30-minute epsom salt baths to put Chanteclair in. As we held her bottom calmly in the water, we massaged her belly downwards, and I sang to her while her muscles began to relax. After about 3 hours, she finally released the egg. It was soft, a mark of calcium deficiency. The next night we performed the same warm water treatment to help her pass another soft egg. For the next few days we continued to bathe her bottom with a little soap to keep her clean. After acknowledging her pain and the healing power of water, I am glad to report she has safely rejoined the flock and is healthy and laying hard eggs again.

All thanks to water, the great connector, cleaning and caressing our bodies and souls—the chicken's, mine, and everyone on that river, sea, and lake.

steamy

I'll never forget listening to Nick Tilsen, founder of the NDN Collective speak at the 2022 National Tribal and Indigenous Climate Conference.[6] He spoke about the importance of ritual, and not just that of his ancestors. He reflected that while his ancestors could predict future events, they never knew what it was like to actually live today like us. Because of that truth, it is imperative for all people today to not only continue their traditions, but also invent new rituals born from the present reality to create the future they want. I can't say that I have ever been taught any rituals to manifest a joyful collective future, but I felt inspired by this invitation to create new rituals for myself that might nourish my joyful future with others. At the time I didn't know what they might be.

Late that summer, I gained an appreciation for how warriors recoup their strength between fights, individually and together, at the former Welcome Water Protector Center (WWPC) in Palisade, Minnesota. Upon meeting this group of activists and water protectors for the first time, I could feel, see, and hear their exhaustion even months after their battle against Enbridge ended in the rerouting of the Line 3 oil pipeline from Alberta, Canada to Wisconsin, passing under rivers like the Mississippi. Given Enbridge's culpability for the largest inland oil spill in U.S. history in 1991, which was along Line 3, this group of water protectors, along with hundreds of other people, had organized to try to prevent this from happening again.[7] The weekend I visited, WWPC was hosting a cultural camp led by Anishinaabe cultural specialist Jim Northrup and his brother, Jeff. The two of them instructed 22 of us in building and participating in a sweat lodge. For a few hours after sunset, we sat in a dark, canvas-covered lodge supported by Ironwood saplings, sweating and singing together. Our firekeeper carefully brought in red-hot stones that Jeff then sprinkled with a special decoction

he prepared. When we finally reemerged into the light of the night, it felt like a rebirth into the world! This was a beautiful experience that promoted the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical health of all of its participants, and it used a minimal amount of water.

As I later learned from Mikkel Aaland's book *Sweat*, sweating together is an ancient activity from all over the world that maintains public health.[8] This ritual has taken on different meanings for different people and cultures. For some, it may simply be a water efficient bath; for others, it may have social, spiritual, and medicinal significance. On a biological level, when we sweat our bodies remove toxins through our sweat glands that we have collected in our trashed environments.[9]

Deeply inspired by my first sweat at WWPC, I, too, wanted to practice both pleasurable and sustainable ways of interacting with water. After this experience, and still inspired by Tilsen's call to ritual, I decided to host an experimental herbal sauna series that honored water and considered how participants might take their health into their own hands. I had started studying herbalism under Erica Fargione at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, so I was very intentional about the infusions, decoctions, lotions, and scrubs I prepared for these gatherings. My partner learned where to find clay from her ceramics professor and brought me to the banks of the Mississippi River to gather some. Under the white sand, she touched a vein of clay. We each gave thanks for the clay which would become a small soap dish shaped like the river's current

Ingredients and tools for the first herbal sauna, including sage, apples, and cedar tips, arranged for a community workshop in St. Paul, Minnesota. Image courtesy of Stephanie Lindquist.

and a scrub for our bodies in the sauna. We each then filled a small container with the clay. The first sauna I hosted was behind an auto shop in St. Paul, Minnesota and involved mostly artists. Later I hosted students, teachers, nonprofit workers, activists, community members on the northside of Minneapolis, and even environmental studies classes with their instructors, all in mobile, wood-burning saunas that I rented with the support of Second Shift Studio Space and Macalester College.

Collective rituals like this, ones that promote profound feeling and mindfulness, are powerful tools. I would argue that they not only benefit our health as a society, but also slow us down and tune our spirits to the world around us—cooling our ravenous urges to selfishly extract, hoard, or steal without considering our environment and other living beings. These rituals are diverse, as are people. They may be as personal as a prayer or poem, as sensual as a sweat or sauna, as expansive as traditional plant knowledge diligently passed through the generations, or as simple as intentional breathing, body movements, and drinking tea (an act of inviting plants to heal different parts of our body and spirit). For me, these rituals may be playing cards and listening to jazz with my partner while sitting on a frozen lake waiting for the crappies to bite 30 feet below the ice, changing the chicken's water, or collecting their eggs to boil for sandwiches. What each of these practices has in common is a deepening of our internal feelings and our external awareness. This tunes us to the world, empowers us to act with mutual respect, and fosters balance around us. In her essay *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Audre Lorde says that "once we begin to feel deeply all of the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from all our life's pursuits that they feel in accordance with the joy we know ourselves to be capable of."[10] When we share these experiences and feelings together, Lorde tells us that these activities may lead us to genuine change.

Discovering our collective fulfillment—what genuinely satisfies the needs of you, me, the water, the land, and everyone that lives there—will lead us to our strongest political solutions. Imagine how regularly slowing down together with others, sharing fresh eggs, a sauna, tea, a swim, walk, or paddle along the river may begin to shift and align our values together. Imagine how collective rituals can then attune and inspire us to move together toward a common goal. Discovering our collective fulfillment takes time together and respect for each other's limits. Overharvesting or extracting each others' gifts without permission or thanks isn't mutually pleasurable. There is beauty in recognizing the natural limits of what each of us can offer. There is honor in recognizing the natural laws of interdependence and our delicate position within the world.[11] Whether or not our institutions can successfully move towards recognizing these laws, I believe that individually and collectively we can shift our own cultures. We can be in the flow. Authentic collective practices of care, inherently beautiful and pleasurable, can slowly build a passionate consensus. Our shared values will support our ability to commit over the long term to sustainable solutions. Our collective depth of feeling is reparative for us and all those around us.

Footnotes

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About the Author

Stephanie Lindquist is an artist and educator, who is originally from Los Angeles and transplanted to Minnesota by way of New York City. Her work is inspired by our relationships to the natural world and often uses materials like soil, Cottonwood seeds, and medicinal herbs.