To Pause, to Notice, to Wonder:

Living Love, Teaching in Relation

by

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To these storytellers of my heart: Matthew, Nora, and Adeline.

And to all my young, heartful teachers through the years: the "Kindies."

And with that, I sing …

"Do you know I love you?"

(Yes, you know I love you.)

Abstract

This thesis is an autobiographical narrative inquiry into my everyday stories from years of teaching and learning in Kindergarten in an urban elementary school in western Canada. These are stories that pulled at me to pause, to notice, and to wonder at the tensions within—at the embodied wisdom, the uncertainties, and then the new emergent and generative wonderings that they surface. The research puzzle that emerged from these stories is: Who am I and who might we become if we centre our relationality, if we live love? What does it mean within the school system to be present to and to live in alignment with relationality and love? Who might we become as we live into such possibility? There are three main threads in the inquiry that carry relational possibility: a thread of practising presence and attending to embodied wisdom of self, a thread of a needs-orientation that serves relationships, and a thread of equity and how systems are both shaped by and shape relationships. I hold these stories in conversation with others who bring a relational and love-oriented focus, such as Dwayne Donald, bell hooks, and Marshall Rosenberg; and who contribute to practising presence and embodiment—such as Maxine Greene, Prentis Hemphill, Oren Ergas, and Thupten Jinpa. The voices of all of the thinkers/writers/speakers/teachers/practitioners included in this thesis offer expanding possibilities and meaning potentials when their contributions are held in conversation together with my stories.

Keywords: relationality, love ethic, contemplative studies, autobiographical narrative inquiry, kindergarten, presence, embodiment, Nonviolent Communication, equity, reconciliation

Acknowledgements: Making Space for Gratitude

What a beautiful protocol to include in a thesis—my *acknowledgements*. I am delighted to notice that the very act of sitting here to consider what and who I might acknowledge is creating in me notable expansiveness. I am considering now the web of relations and experiences that have brought me to this thesis work. I am considering now the deep gratitude I feel for them.

I have long said that I'm "an apple that hasn't fallen far from the tree." So in this inquiry into love and relationality, I begin by considering the profound impact that my parents have had in my journey. Mom and dad (Elsie and Gareth)—I am grateful for the childhood you offered—a childhood filled with love nested in community; a childhood rich with conversation and ideas, with hikes and camping trips, and always with plenty of hugs at the ready. I am grateful for the support you continue to offer as I grow as an adult, a mother, a teacher, a wonderer. I endeavour to live into and grow the love and the relational view you started all those years ago.

As I consider how I might acknowledge the role of my Contemplative Studies advisor, Wayne Serebrin, the first thing that comes to mind is an image of pathways—infinite pathways of possibility heading in all directions, perhaps criss-crossing one another, and extending beyond my capacity to presently see. This image perhaps depicts the gratitude I feel for the ways in which you, Wayne, have consistently worked to **see** and **hear** me, and then responsively illuminate new pathways where my ideas and understandings might grow, where they might intersect with other ideas and understandings or other thinkers who are on similar pathways and might offer new perspectives along the journey. You have often referenced "the authentic self," and I want to acknowledge your role in helping me to encounter bits of my authentic self throughout this work, helping me to recognize how my practice might help or hinder others from doing the same. You recognized my conviction for love early in the thesis process, and you strategically mirrored back my own agenda at important points on the journey. I am so grateful

for your ability to recognize my authentic self and to help me recognize it as I have continued to ever become. So many of the ideas I have written about began as seeds that you planted that then grew and shifted with the stories as meaning emerged.

A huge thanks to the rest of my committee as well: Kathy Toogood and Jennifer Watt. Thank you both!! Kathy—your confidence in my ability as a storyteller and inquirer, your consistent interest in these Kindergarten stories, and your steady words of encouragement buoyed me throughout. Jen—I am so grateful for the perspectives you brought to my inquiring and writing. Your noticings and wonderings, your joyful enthusiasm, and the artistic considerations that you surfaced for me were truly invigorating.

Others have offered so much to these stories as I have lived, remembered, retold, and inquired into them—all the Kindergarten students and families over the years, Kim Crass and the rest of my "Kindie Crew" colleagues in our school division, colleagues in my school, Monica Martens and other classmates at university, career-long mentors Beth Albers-Jones and Lisa Siemens, and countless neighbours and friends. A big thanks to my larger family too—Simon and Judith, Kathleen, grandpa, and all my extended family. So many folks have jumped into conversations with me over the years about the meaning of life, love, and our interrelatedness.

In my life, a silver lining of Covid was the creation of an online lunch hour gathering of researchers: "Research Issues," hosted by the Centre for Research of Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. I am grateful to University of Manitoba Education professor Yi Li for introducing me to both the methodology and also this group of compassionate researchers. In these weekly, then semi-weekly informal gatherings of 10 to 20 narrative inquirers located around the world, I heard how others were considering their own work, and I read aloud and received responses to my own writing. The more than two years I have spent with this community—not having met even one of them in person—has shaped me as

both a researcher and as the storied person I continue to become. A deep thanks goes especially to Jean Clandinin who met with me regularly at the start of my proposal process to help me better understand the nature of autobiographical narrative inquiry and the foundational question, "Who am I?" Jean—thank you for helping me to perceive the power, the expansiveness, and the possibility of this question. Thank you for helping me to trust my stories to lead.

The writing of this thesis has truly been an embodied experience. As you will read, there are moments when my writing environment informed my wonderings, or when the emotions coursing through me as I wrote invited a pause. In one of my more disheartened moments, I happened upon the speech of musician Jon Batiste as he accepted a GRAMMY award. He referenced that "the creative arts are subjective and they reach people at a point in their lives when they need it most" (Recording Academy, 2022, 1:13). His speech moved me. I needed those words, and in my tears, I searched his music and watched the music video for his song "Freedom." This video, in all its colour and embodied joy and infectious rhythms, became a companion on my writing journey that I came back to often. I want to acknowledge the wisdom—both in word and music—of Jon Batiste. "When I move my body just like this … I don't know why but I feel like FREEDOM!" (Batiste, 2021, 0:28). I am grateful for the infusion of joy he provided, as I danced my heart out whenever (and wherever) I needed it most.

And as I hold that image of myself dancing, I recognize that I'm rarely dancing solo. I want to make space to acknowledge my main dance partners in this life: my family—my partner, Matthew "Djavid" Broeska and our two children: Nora and Adeline. Not only my dance partners on this thesis journey, you three are cocomposers of my life story as it has intersected with the stories of Kindergarten. Matthew, Nora, and Ado—every day you helped to shape me in my **becoming** as a storyteller and story inquirer—by leaning over to glimpse if I'm tearing up to offer me a hug, giggling at a new Kindergarten anecdote, cheering me on if I'm pooped, or

digging in the garden or baking cupcakes with me during much needed pauses. I am so thankful to have had you dancing alongside me on this journey.

Finally, I want to make space to acknowledge the land and the web of relations who share it. An acknowledgement of land is, itself, a piece of the larger thesis, so in this section dedicated to gratitude, I will just acknowledge my hope to continue to expand my active awareness of my interrelatedness to the land which sustains me. I am grateful. My heart is full.

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CHAPTER 1: IT BEGINS WITH A SENSE OF DISCOMBOBULATION …

"Teeeeeeacherrrrrr! She stole my ball!!!!"

I think back to the fall of my first year of teaching Kindergarten, nine or so years ago. It seemed a far cry from the start of my teaching career working with children in Grades 7 and 8. I was outside with the "Kinders" at the end of our morning, while the rest of the K–Grade 5 school was also out on the playground for recess. Two children from older grades came running up to me with both anger and expectation.

"No, **I** had it first!"

"No, **I** did!"

I remember trying to stifle the urge to look over my shoulder to see if someone else was around who might support these two children. I remember wondering: "How am **I** supposed to be the big discerner of truth? How am **I** supposed to know who had it first?" I didn't like this. I didn't want it. I felt uncomfortable. I didn't like what they were asking me to do, who they were asking me to be. This wasn't how I wanted to be relating to these children. Thinking back on it now, I was likely also feeling inadequate, ill-equipped to respond. The children were coming to me with such urgency. Such big feelings. I realize now that I don't even remember how I responded. Just my discomfort.

I held on to this feeling of discomfort in the months and even years to come, even re-enacting the imagined look over each shoulder as I hoped someone else might "deal" with the situation, recounting to others the twisting in my belly as I faced these children, not knowing what to do. This experience, remembered and returned to and retold again and again, held embodied wisdom, and I realize now how much I trusted its importance. The twisting could not be ignored, even if I couldn't yet interpret the wisdom. It was calling my attention, calling me to stay awake (Greene, 1995). How is it possible that even as I don't remember the details of the

experience—how I responded, how we resolved the situation, who the children were that approached, nor whether the object in question was even a ball—that the embodied discomfort, the tension has stuck with me? I had no idea at the time that this tension would continue to pull at me in the years that followed. I have come to understand the tension as dissonance. Something about this experience did not align with who I wanted to be or who I understood we could be as a school and community, even if I couldn't name any of it at the time. I was in the midst of a beginning of sorts, on a journey of better understanding what is important to me, what I believe about who we can become as a school and even education system, a journey of how I might live and practise in alignment with this belief. I began collecting these embodied stories, these experiences of alignment and misalignment, resonance and dissonance, excitement and tension. These stories have brought me to inquire into them as an autobiographical narrative inquiry. As I narratively inquire, I am conscious of Dewey's (1938) ideas that each experience exists only as it interacts with the world around me—and as a narrative inquirer I approach the stories in terms of temporal context, place, and social context.[1] Each experience is mine, and mine alone—just as others' experience of the same moment is theirs. So who am I and who might we be, and how do we get there? What exactly was it that was so misaligned for me in that moment?

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[1] Narrative Inquiry is both the phenomenon, that is, a particular way of understanding experience, and a process of inquiring into experience. Dewey-inspired understanding of experience (1938), with the criteria of interaction and continuity, underpins narrative inquiry. In narrative inquiry, we study this understanding of experience through the three dimensions: temporal, social, and place. In this autobiographical narrative inquiry, therefore, I am exploring the temporal dimension of my experience—considering when it occurred, when it is retold, and even when it is heard or read; the dimension of experience situated in *place*—considering where this experience occurred and even perhaps the place in which the story is retold and heard or read; and the dimension of *sociality*—the turning inward to what is happening for me and outward to the events—considering who I am in this experience, and with whom I am in relation—those inside the story with me as well as the broader social landscape, and those reading or listening as the story is remembered and retold. (Clandinin, 2013, pp. 12–13; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 50)

Centring Relationality, Centring Love

"When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—

against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—

to find ourselves in the other" (hooks, 2001, p. 93)

It strikes me now that this moment started a particular journey for me of noticing, of being present—noticing my discomfort, noticing experiences in my life when I felt my practice wasn't in alignment with my beliefs of who we could be with one another, noticing when fear and alienation threatened connection with one another. What might I learn of who I was in that moment in all my discomfort? What might I learn of who they might have expected me to be, and who I might have imagined we could become? I did know that connection was important to me. Understanding love as a choice to connect, as described be hooks (2001), resonates with who I might have wanted to be, wanted **us** to be, and I continued to explore the role of love in the classroom in the years that followed. While I will explore hooks' concept of love in more depth in Chapter 2, I do wonder now what it might have looked like to choose love then—to connect and to find ourselves in the other. This moment was the first in a larger pattern of being present to moments of alienation—particularly when adversity strikes and when our needs are threatened. My discomfort was so visceral. To what was this embodied wisdom awakening me to attend? What might emerge as I inquire further into this narrative? How might I have responded in ways that offer alignment with my belief of what might be possible? Was I even able to articulate at the time what those beliefs or possibilities might be?

So … It's Not About the Ball

I was so uncomfortable in that moment. I remember that the children were inviting me to bring my attention to the ball, asking me to decide who would walk away with it. I have come to

realize that my discomfort began with perhaps the very invitation itself—to decide on who should have the ball. I have come now to realize that I don't think that I wanted to talk about the ball. I would have preferred to focus on their relationships—with the ball, sure, but perhaps even more so their relationship with one another, with their own interests during recess. It seems to me that very different wonderings and pathways present themselves if we encounter adversity centring relationships rather than possession and firsts and determining the facts. But I couldn't articulate that then. I knew that love was important to me, and so was connection, but I wouldn't have known what it looked like here.

Relationship Denial

Dwayne Donald, a descendent of the amiskwaciwiyiniwak (Beaver Hills people) and Education professor at the University of Alberta, writes in his 2022 article "A Curriculum for Educating Differently: Unlearning Colonialism and Renewing Kinship Relations" about the relationship denial inherent in the colonial worldview from which education systems here in Canada developed (2022). He writes about renewing kinship relations as a way to unlearn colonialism: "The founding principle of colonialism is relationship denial and the centuries-long predominance of this principle has resulted in the creation of educational practices that perpetuate relationship denial in mostly subtle and unquestioned ways" (para. 5). He goes on later to offer:

> When someone is educated to accept relationship denial as a way of being in the world, it becomes part of how they are as a human being—how they live—and this acceptance has a very distinctive bearing on how they understand knowledge and knowing." (para. 5)

His ideas resonate powerfully for me as I think back to this story with the two children, the playground, and my remembered discomfort. While Dwayne Donald is referencing the larger system of colonialism and the impact of relationship denial inherent in this supremacist

arrangement of power **over**, I wonder at how these dynamics permeate beyond the systemic and in what ways they can be found in the personal and social as well—how we live in relation. I think about that day on the playground and hold my memory of it in conversation with Donald's words and wonder about how relationship denial might have informed the children's (and my) very framing of the conflict. I notice that Donald's use of the word "denial," perhaps implies that relationship does exist, but that the colonial worldview invites a denial of these relationships as **if** they don't exist. Similarly, his use of the word "renewing" suggests to me a growing or regeneration of the relationship, rather than an establishing of it. With this understanding, we are in relationship whether we acknowledge it or not, and Donald's words of renewal invite me to understand that it is in the denial of relationship when harm is done. Is this what was happening on the playground that day? Would I have been contributing to relationship denial by choosing one child to get the ball?

As I inquire into stories, Donald's focus on relational denial or renewal offers pathways to awaken to both the pervasiveness and harm of relationship denial and to the new possibilities of relationship renewal. He points to "an urgent educational challenge facing educators today," that of "first decentring, denaturalizing, and unlearning colonial logics of relationship denial as curricular and pedagogical common sense, and second, honouring other ways to know and be" (para. 8). As I inquire into these narratives, what meaning might emerge as I awaken to patterns of alienation and endeavour to both notice and then unlearn relationship denial? Who might we become as we (re)centre our relationality within learning, within schooling? How might relationality and choosing love allow us to connect, to "find ourselves in the other?" (hooks, 20221, p. 93)? What might we find? Who might we become?

The Dimension of Place

The embodied tension I felt about who I thought these children wanted me to be, and likewise the larger patterns and systems within which the experience is embedded—these aspects of my experience are affected by the dynamic of place, the third dimension of narrative inquiry alongside the social and temporal dimensions.

This experience was situated in a school yard, in a neighbourhood, on land that has held stories and relationships for generations. A Deweyan understanding of experience places this moment in relation to the world around it, as I draw my attention to place, I open to new possibilities of meaning held in the narratives (Clandinin, 2013, p. 14). What impact does place have in my stories of Kindergarten, and how can I be mindful of this dimension and the meaning it opens up in the stories?

As I have come to know it, this K–5 prairie school, with a student population of only about 160 children in any given year, is located in a residential neighbourhood in Winnipeg, a city on the Canadian prairies. It is situated just off the Red River, which flows from south to north, crossing the border from the United States and continuing through farmland and nature before cutting through the city and then on to Lake Winnipeg.

This is ancestral Indigenous land, Mikinaak Minising (“Turtle Island” in Anishinaabemowin). Being so close to a river that was once a natural transportation and trade route, the specific area on which the school sits has a long social history. Indigenous communities who have lived on this land long before colonial arrival include the Anishinaabeg (Saulteaux/Ojibwe), Ininíwak (Cree), Anishininiwak (Oji-Cree), Dakota and Dene Peoples, and this is also the homeland of the Red River Métis. This land is also known as Treaty 1 Territory, a treaty which was arranged in 1871 between the British Crown and seven of the First Nations who lived in these territories. The school is named after a colonizer of the early 1800s who is

increasingly recognized as responsible for a conflict with the Métis that resulted in many deaths.

When I first began working at this school in the fall of 2014, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was nearing the end of its formal process. Its mandate

> was to inform all Canadians about what happened in residential schools. The TRC documented the truth of Survivors, their families, communities, and anyone personally affected by the residential school experience. This included First Nations, Inuit and Métis former residential school students, their families, communities, the churches, former school employees, government officials and other Canadians. (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2022)

I remember that when I first read the TRC's Calls to Action I wasn't sure where to start or who I was within the work of reconciliation. The larger school division in which I work had begun to place greater focus on Truth and Reconciliation at a systems level, centring it at almost every annual divisional professional development day each October, which all employees attend—school staff, divisional administration, and maintenance alike.

Dwayne Donald references the "rush" that has followed the TRC's 94 Calls to Action (2022, para. 4). Work is actively being done within our local school to reflect on our practices and to work to align them with reconciliation. We are working to make authentic the daily territorial acknowledgements we do with students. We are deepening our engagement with Orange Shirt Day (now officially declared National Day for Truth and Reconciliation). We are addressing the tension that our school is named after a colonizer. Many of us are finding ways to build sustained relationships with community, and regularly integrating Indigenous language and teachings into daily curriculum and school-based activities. But I pause to think about Donald's caution, that

> the rush to Reconciliation facilitates an active disregard of the Truth of colonial

> ideologies and structures that continue to block possibilities for the emergence of healthy and balanced Indigenous-Canadian relations in Canada. Before Reconciliation can even be considered as a possibility, a broad social, cultural, and educational reckoning process must be undertaken that focuses on unlearning colonialism. Colonial ideologies remain mostly uninterrogated in Canadian educational contexts and continue to be "in the way" of meaningful Indigenous-Canadian relational renewal. Such relational renewal is only possible if colonialism is unlearned. (2022, para. 4)

What does it mean to unlearn the relationship denial of colonialism and move toward reconciliation? How does our history as a school system on Treaty 1 territory affect how we "do school" now? What does it mean to be a settler teacher on Indigenous land? How does the history of residential schools impact relationships between home and school, and who am I in that relationship? How can I be awake to these tensions? How does place and my relationship to it impact the narratives I hold as valuable, and how I inquire into them?

Change is needed, and there is much work to be done—personally, socially, and systemically. Jinpa (2015) suggests in his writings about compassionate change, that change requires a shift in perception. I wonder about strategies to shift perception from within when I am constrained by the very perceptions that perhaps perpetuate the colonial structures. How can I attend to tensions of injustice and my part in them if I cannot even perceive them? How might I practise expanding my perception, a perception that is shaped by my own positionality, which is in turn shaped by the three dimensions of experience that narrative inquiry surfaces—time, sociality, and place? How might I live and teach in alignment with reconciliation, attending to the role of place in my teaching experiences and narratives? It seems to me that cultivating relationality is a response of sorts to the limits of my own perception, which perhaps iteratively opens to deeper relations. Who might we become as we centre relationality in our school

experiences in this place, at this time? How might I contribute to the spaciousness required to collectively imagine possibilities of school that are informed by these aspects of place?

Our little school building is about a 10-minute drive north of downtown in a neighbourhood that I know to be diverse in many ways. There is a mix of housing from riverfront property to apartment rentals. The families in our school community also come from diverse cultural backgrounds, some are Indigenous, while most are settler families, some having only recently arrived, and most with a multigenerational family history here. Many families speak languages at home other than English, such as: Tagalog, Ukrainian, Russian, Mandarin, and Arabic. The adults in some households might work a mix of day or night shifts, go to school, or might be impacted by un(der)employment. Many children attend before and after school day care, and grandparents also help with childcare needs. A small number of children at our school live with foster families.

Our small school staff of around 30, while it changes somewhat from year to year, is predominantly white, with some Indigenous and Métis staff, and some staff members of colour. As a staff, we are beginning to have professional dialogue about the dynamics of race and power in education. There are multiple initiatives in the school division to support the training and hiring of newcomer Canadian and Indigenous teachers. I continue to work personally and with colleagues to inquire into who I am as a white teacher in this context. What does it mean to serve relational allyship within a system riddled with power imbalances? How do I align my actions with equity when my perceptions are framed by my various identity positions of privilege?

The impact of place permeates my understanding of experience as I inquire into these narratives, and I want to hold in my awareness that the threads of place that weave in and out of relevance for me are not fixed. I endeavour to remain open and awake, to be comfortable with uncertainty and my own discomfort with my limited perceptions.

A Narrative Beginning: Early Memories of Relationality

There is a photo from my childhood. If I am remembering it clearly, the focus of the photo is on me and a friend; we are perhaps 7 or 8 years old. We each have toothpicks gripped between our teeth and without the use of our hands, we are trying to slide a Lifesaver candy from one toothpick to the other. In my memory, my friend has face-painted rosy cheeks, and I am in a soda can costume made of red poster board and white paint. A few parental adults are in the background, looking with anticipation at us, the memory of their costumes confirming for me that this was at a Hallowe'en party. And as my mind stays with this photo, I can feel a clutch in my chest as I sense that this photo somehow encapsulates a part of who I understand myself to be. Not about the candy or the costumes, but about the community in which I knew myself to **belong**. This photo was taken at one of the many gatherings of a group of which my family was a part called Olive Branch. It was a community of about 10 Mennonite families in Winnipeg who, when I was three years old, wanted to offer support to small-scale artisans from around the world by selling their Fair Trade crafts in a collectively owned non-profit gift shop here in Winnipeg, Canada.

As I remember it, during those formative 12 or so years, my family picnicked with the group on Monday evenings when the weather was fair, we went on winter retreats, and celebrated together, like that Halloween party. I knew even then, as a child, that this non-profit Fair Trade Gift Shop, of which my family was a part, was symbolic of our globally oriented lens, a lens of equity. A peace dove was our logo, and I knew its symbolic significance.

On days when I would help my mom on a volunteer shift at the shop, I remember positioning myself in front of the large mirror wall, holding up earrings from around the world and imagining who I might be wearing them. I loved cruising the panel of information cards about the products, looking at the black and white photographs of artisans around the world, imagining what life might be like where those artisans lived. I felt my relation to them, even as

they were so far away. I remember a volunteer shift when a local Indigenous artisan arrived with a shipment of moccasins, and how soft the fur trim was, how beautiful the beadwork. I always wished I could have a pair myself, but I knew with my growing feet, such a special foot warmer would have to wait. Instead, I would comb the sale shelf at the back to find the ornaments that I might purchase with my allowance money once in a while, such as a carefully carved miniature animal made of onyx, so smooth to the touch.

I remember the smell of the shop. Located on the first floor of what was once a three-story residential home, one whole room was filled with hand-woven baskets, and the smell of the grasses would permeate the store, along with the scent of beeswax candles that we would roll from textured sheets in the basement on worker-bee days, filling custom-ordered gift baskets that also held wild blueberry jams or Fair Trade coffee and chocolate.

I understood my family's participation in this project to be linked to our understanding of our lives as intertwined within a larger web of global community; that the choices we make in our lives have impact on the lives of others. My social context widened to include a global scope.

I wonder now about the role of place in this story, this memory. While I was cultivating a broader understanding of my individual self within a close-knit community of families and simultaneously within a larger global network through the products we were selling, I don't remember there being attention given to where we were, there, in that moment, in that place we were familiar with only as Winnipeg, with its grid of paved streets and ice cream shops and little neighbourhood parks. I have wondered at the relationship that was developed with *place* from my specific position as a Euro-Mennonite settler on other peoples' traditional ancestral lands.

Land played a large part in the arrival of my own ancestors to this place. Two major waves of Mennonites immigrated here—one in the 1870s and another in the 1920s. They were fleeing persecution, and as farmers, they responded to a promise of land that was otherwise

"unoccupied." How has this storied upbringing—that my ancestors came on a pretense of making a life owning "unoccupied" land—shaped my own relationship with this place?

Another wondering that has been growing more recently within me is about the impact on my own identity, and on my ancestors' relationship with place generally, that they felt they had to flee their land and cross an ocean in order to honour an essential aspect of their collective identity, namely of being pacifists? If they chose to leave a place behind in order to protect a particular and essential part of their identity, how did that affect their relationship with place, with land? Might place then become devalued in order to come to terms with such a decision? When we leave familiar land, how does that affect our relationship with new land? How does it affect our perceptions of others' relationship to this new land? How might I endeavour to understand the importance of land in kin relationality if my own people removed themselves from their land? It seems to me that opening myself to the expansive network of relationships in which I am enmeshed—human, more-than-human, and land—is perhaps a start to relationship renewal with land.

About Form: The How and the What

> *All that we are is story. From the moment we are born to the time we continue on our spirit journey, we are involved in the creation of the story of our time here. It is what we arrive with. It is all we leave behind. We are not the things we accumulate. We are not the things we deem important. We are story. All of us. What comes to matter then is the creation of the best possible story we can while we're here; you, me, us, together. When we can do that and we take the time to share those stories with each other, we get bigger inside, we see each other, we recognize our kinship—we change the world, one story at a time … (Richard Wagamese, 2012, p. 103)*

The How: Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry

Stories have drawn me back to university, calling to me to find meaning in them as a way to notice tensions and excitements and to then wonder at who I want to be and who we might become together. What new reality might we imagine into being through the stories we share and tell together? It is in the stories where I find meaning, and this thesis is a manifestation of my commitment to the stories. In some ways, this thesis began long ago as conversations before I even returned to university, as I shared stories that were pulling at me, sometimes in response to stories or wonderings that others shared with me. Friends, colleagues, or families at school would then reciprocate with still more of their own stories or noticings or wonderings in response. Their stories would weave with mine as meaning took shape and new spaces opened. My understanding of myself and the world in which I move was shifting with each sharing. I was inquiring into story both on my own as I walked around the neighbourhood or sat at the riverside reflecting, and also with others through story sharing. Autobiographical narrative inquiry as a methodology, then, was a formalization and deepening of a process I had already begun. It was recognized in me, and named by other narrative inquiry researchers as we regularly shared writing and ideas from our different spots around the world at weekly Zoom meetings. Learning the frameworks of the methodology—like Dewey's three dimensions of experience as place, sociality, and time—gave me tools to surface meaning within the stories I was holding, within the stories that were holding me. The autobiographical nature of my inquiry is because it's what I was already doing and trying to expand. I had been returning to and retelling stories, trying to find the threads. I was trying to find myself and who I wanted to be within the stories, to find my past and present self as well as the future self that emerged from them. Autobiographical narrative inquiry, then, is a frame which supports my ongoing journey of inquiring into story in order to know the **becoming self**, embedded in a network of relations.

Early in thesis planning, extending from our weekly group narrative inquiry meetings online, I was grateful to spend some Zoom time discussing my thesis proposal with Jean Clandinin, one of the founders of this methodology, and I remember how she slowed me down to attend to the meaning emerging from each narrative. “Follow the story, Sara. Follow the story” (personal communication, December 3, 2022). I remember having a hard time processing what it meant to follow the story, but I have endeavoured to do this here, and I have held her words close, trusting in the stories to direct the writing, and trusting the meaning that emerges from my time spent inquiring into them. The structures of narrative inquiry as a methodology cannot be teased apart from the stories themselves, and so there is not a separate methodology chapter in the thesis, but rather references to the methodology that are led by and embedded within the stories. By following the story, I left space for the threads of relationality to appear, not knowing in advance what they might be.

The How with the What: Contemplative Studies

Something that also emerged as I was planning and writing this thesis was a deepening and expansive understanding of the unity of the *how* and the *what* of my work. As I inquire into “Who am I and who might we become as we centre relationality?” it becomes clear that this is both a question that emerges from within a methodological framework of autobiographical narrative inquiry—the “who am I?” question, as well as from within a field of contemplative studies—of being present to who we are and are becoming in our many layers. Being awake and present are central to both contemplative practice as well as narrative inquiry. Attending to embodied wisdom is as well, and the centrality of understanding ourselves as relational. This compatibility of “what” and “how” actually served as a point of confusion, even tension, initially. Now though, there is comfort in knowing that the two are linked, not fragmented, and in the stories I see myself as a narrative inquirer as well as a contemplative practitioner, practising

presence and honouring embodied wisdom as I inquire into who I am and who we might become. “Who am I and who might we become?” are wonderings of both *how* and *what*; of both my methodology and my field of study.

Reflections on Literature

Similar to the embedded nature of explaining methodology within story, the role of scholarly and professional literature in this thesis is positioned in conversation with stories. In some of these same early conversations with Jean Clandinin (personal communication, December 3, 2022), she offered a lens on the use of literature: “Whose conversation do you wish to join?” With this question in mind, I hold these stories in conversation with those who bring a relational and love-oriented focus, such as Dwayne Donald, bell hooks, and Marshall Rosenberg; and others who contribute to practising presence and embodiment—such as Maxine Greene, Prentis Hemphill, Oren Ergas, and Thupten Jinpa. All these are thinkers/writers/speakers/ teachers/practitioners who surface yet even more meaning in conversation with the stories. Rather than offering their ideas as a preamble to set the stage for an inquiry into stories from Kindergarten, I want to honour that it’s the stories that brought me to this place, and bringing my stories into conversation with these other thinkers and practitioners has deepened my learning from these stories. They have brought profound value to my life as a teacher, researcher, and person **in relation** to the narratives that have pulled at me. As I “follow the stories,” I invite you into the conversations that are woven between the narratives that I relive through their retelling, and those who have reflected on some of the same threads that emerge.

This decision to embed both methodological explanations and literature within the meaning held in the stories is made with intention and care. I honour those who have developed narrative inquiry as a way to make meaning, and I honour the people who contributed to conversations of love and relationality, embodiment and presence, long before I came alongside.

I am grateful to be in conversation.

I am excited to consider that these conversations on love and relationality will continue long after this thesis is deemed "finished," and in my imagination, this thesis would be one of conversation—yes, with other literature like you'll read here, but also with you, the reader. It is my hope that you have a sense of my intention to be in conversation with you. Perhaps these stories might provoke new noticings and wonderings, new conversations in your world as you, as I, as **we** ever become—in relation.

Relational Threads

Only after spending time inquiring into stories did common threads between them appear. While my lens was already focused on "Who am I and who might we become as we centre relationality?" it was not clear to me what common ideas might carry through the stories. These threads appeared as almost an "inward moving out." From the stories emerged three threads: a thread of the more personal expression of relationality: that of practising presence and honouring embodied experience; then I recognized a more social thread as supported by a feelings and needs orientation; and finally there was a thread that touched on the systems that shape and are shaped by our relations, within which was a focus on equity.

Relational Thread: Practising Presence, Honouring Embodied Wisdom

"What Do You Notice? What Do You Wonder?"

I was walking through the classrooms of Opal School, a student-centred school run through the children's museum in Portland, Oregon. Years had passed since that day on the playground, but only a few months had passed since my initial inclination to return to university. In fact, I was actively putting together my application for the master's program in Contemplative Studies in Education concentration in the Faculty of Education.

I was continuing to deepen my understanding of my interests while at Opal School,

participating in a visitation/workshop around literacy, agency, and democracy. Along with photos and scribed text of children's thinking, strewn about these curiosity-driven classrooms were play provocations like pinecones and magnifying glasses with nature books, mirrors, and geometric shapes at the light table. And at each spot, little picture frames housed the simple invitation: "What do you notice? What do you wonder?" This was an "aha!" moment for me. I had long articulated "wondering" as a central part of my love of teaching and learning, and here was the simple extension, calling attention to the noticing that precedes the wondering. I began using those words explicitly in my own teaching practice, coming alongside children in their play, "I'm noticing how the yellow and blue paint touch each other here … I wonder why the colour seems to change," and also in their conflicts with one another, "I'm noticing that your eyebrows are pretty crunched up … I wonder how you're feeling right now." This framework allowed me to slow down and be present in the moment, articulating my own observations and related wonderings and making space for children to add their own or articulate their experience for themselves. The words "notice" and "wonder" became common vocabulary in our learning community.

In my university coursework in contemplative studies in the years that followed, I came to recognize this framework as that of a contemplative practice, and "practise" then became a powerful verb to accompany both noticing and wondering; so did the word "pause." Just as I had recognized the power of "wondering," and only afterward did I realize the importance of "noticing," now I was recognizing the critical importance of slowing down and pausing in order to more deeply notice. It was truly a practice, done with intention, and it became clear how much it was serving not only student learning in things like colour mixing, but also our culture as a learning community. We were practising presence with one another by pausing, noticing, and wondering. It was a tool that made space for relationships by noticing and wondering at one

another's experiences. It was a tool that could serve empowerment.

This framework of pausing, noticing, and wondering also helped me realize that this was precisely how I had come to collect these and other narratives for inquiry—that I was attuned to my embodied experience of tension in these moments, and I knew there was something inside each experience that needed inquiry, something that called me to better understand who I was and who we might be together. In the playground, I was noticing my discomfort, but didn't yet have the wonderings that would bring me to my longed for relational focus, nor the strategies that might get us there. Perhaps in that moment on the playground, I hadn't yet found a way to be comfortable to pause—to cultivate the possibilities within my noticed discomfort.

As I have now been inquiring into these and other narratives from kindergarten, I have been growing to understand this embodied aspect of these narratives. In the years that have followed that day on the playground, I have been cultivating the process of pausing, noticing, and wondering as a practice of presence. I am drawing awareness to and valuing my embodied experience, trusting that there is wisdom to be found in that embodied experience, in the tension. As I retell and inquire into narratives that held tension, I want to inquire into how I attended to the immediate needs of my embodied experiences, and what larger tensions the embodied experiences called to my attention. From that day on the playground, as I stayed with the embodied tension in the months and years that passed, new possibilities and wonderings have opened. I have continued on a journey of expansive wakefulness. How might practising presence and attending to my embodied experience in these kindergarten narratives inform my inquiry? How might such a practice open up new not-yet-imagined possibilities, new wonderings of being in relation, particularly in moments of tension?

Relational Thread: Honouring Feelings, Orienting to Needs

Feelings as a Bridge Back to One Another

The embodied tension that began that day in the school yard awakened me to be present to other moments of tension, of uncertainty. New narratives were coming alongside, pulling me to understand who I wanted to be among children, who we could be together. Flash forward a few months and the tension of both uncertainty and possibility bubbled again as I spoke in the hallway with our guidance counsellor. Teaching Kindergarten was still so new then. I was still drowning in the unfamiliar waters of Kindergarten logistics (running to colleagues daily to mooch the pipe cleaners I didn't think to have, frantically searching for relevant songs to learn in response to children's emerging interests, adding new pattern collections for our growing monthly calendar, cleaning up 5-year-olds' messes that we didn't get to during our time together!). Our guidance counsellor at the time was sharing with me the importance of overtly teaching about feelings in the classroom. I was skeptical—children need only be immersed in a heart-filled environment and they will develop feelings-awareness naturally! Love is but an immersive experience! Tension tickled in my belly, my body's wisdom poking at me to stay alert to possibility.

In these early months of working in Kindergarten, my awareness of the role of feelings was growing as I worked with the children. My initial skepticism and the tension it triggered in me was yet another invitation to be awake and to consciously attend to feelings and how and why they manifested. As I continued to reflect back to that day in the playground—"I had it first," "No **I** did!"—it seemed that a focus on feelings might have served as an antidote of sorts to the habitual patterns of alienation that we may follow. Feelings might have been a place to start noticing and wondering together. There emerged such power in a focus on feelings. Difficult emotions like anger seemed to dissipate when we named them and heard them. Why

was naming our difficult emotions (and hearing others') so powerful?

I began buying every book about feelings I could find for our Kindergarten library, and layering a feelings focus into books we already enjoyed. We would pause when reading Robert Munsch's book *Hugs* (2014), "Oh!!!" We might notice the little girl's anger in Michael Marchenko's expressive illustrations, "Look at her shoulders and how she's leaning forward! Look at her face and how crunched up her eyebrows are!" I was consistently amazed at how articulately children could identify the markers of emotions in these stories, if only we make space and build awareness for them to do so. Embodied emotions were our anchor, paying attention to our own bodies and the physical signs in others and in books to help us interpret and guess at feelings. We would often "try on" the feelings of characters in picture books, mirroring the arched back or the furrowed brow of someone's anger or their arms extended in an invitation for a hug.

And while I couldn't go back to that moment in the playground, in conflict situations now, I was using feelings to try to bridge children back to one another. We would slow down and use this feelings-noticing when conflict would come up between children, awake to body signals and making space to express and hear one another's feelings before trying to sort out how to move forward with one another. I notice now that implicit in all these strategies was my own awareness of our interconnection. Our lives were intertwined in our Kindergarten community, so conflict could not sever our interrelatedness. There was no room for relationship denial. I was trying to help us find our way back to one another given our shared community. I was consistently focused on what I now might refer to as Dwayne Donald's (2022) framing of relationship renewal in the context of our Kindergarden classroom.

Alongside my expanding wakefulness, my wonderings were growing to more deeply understand **why** centring feelings was such a powerful approach, and similarly why our habits

don't seem to lead us that way. What purpose did it serve to centre feelings, particularly in times of adversity or conflict? Why did centring and moving through our feelings seem to result in a sense of ease?

Feelings as a Window into Our Needs: Snow in the Face

Another day comes to mind. A winter day. A little boy, a flash of orange across the vast expanse of white, slows to a stop in front of me in the schoolyard. His face is wet and crunched up in indignation.

"He threw snow at me!!!"

I glance up, noticing that the target of Alex's pointing arm is a good 25 meters away.

"Oh! You seem pretty unhappy. I want to better understand why it is you're coming to tell me about it."

He pauses, unsure how to proceed, then reiterates: "Well, Mark threw snow at me!"

By this time, I had been learning more about feelings and needs by learning about Marshall Rosenberg's framework of Non-Violent Communication (2003), and I have been supporting children by orienting our interactions that way, especially in moments of adversity.

"He threw snow at you. I just need to better understand what you're needing from **me**." I make this statement gently, hoping to shine a light on his own capacity to direct how we proceed. My hope was that he might both identify and articulate what he needs from me.

A quick pause confirms that he's not sure how yet to independently articulate his needs. I offer "Have you spoken to him already?" No. "Did you need my help in connecting with him about it?" Yes. Yes, he does. This may not be what he initially wanted from me as he may have experience with adults "fixing" the situation **for** him, but this is my opportunity to show him that **he** can own the journey and I am there to help support his work, in part by bringing my needs orientation as we connect with the other boy. I should add here that, as with all the narratives in

this thesis, I am conscious of the fact that I don't have verbatim transcripts of this moment in the playground, but it strikes me that the very act of reflecting on my memory of it, and even the ways in which my memories skew into what I **hope** I said or **think** they said, can equally serve to align my practice with relationality and love.

By this time, Mark has arrived, ready to contribute to the dialogue as well. "Mark—Alex brought me on board to support the two of you. Alex, can you tell Mark how you're feeling?"

"I'm feeling upset because you threw snow on my face!"

I continue: "Were you expecting to feel snow on your face?"

"No."

"So was it kind of shocking?"

"Yah."

Mark now interjects—"I didn't try to!!"

"YES, YOU DID!" There is a pause.

These two children have lots of experience playing with one another, and there is a good deal of shared positive experiences with one another.

"It sounds to me," I begin again, "that Alex—you are feeling really upset because you're worried Mark **tried** to throw snow in your face, and you need to trust that he isn't **trying** to hurt you. Does it help to know that Mark didn't **try** to get snow on your face?"

"Yah. I didn't like it. It's cold."

We then talk about ways we might play in the snow that might reduce the chances of snow inadvertently landing on each others' faces again, and the boys happily resume playing again. "Connecting people," states Rosenberg "is the core of mediation because when you make the connection, the problem solves itself most of the time" (2003, p. 163). These boys connected in terms of their feelings and needs. The conflict, it seems, **wasn't** in fact about the snow in the

face, but rather the worry that perhaps connection had been severed in some way when Mark appeared to not care for Alex's safety.

My awareness was growing—of the alienation felt in moments of conflict and of the connection felt in resolution. Also growing was my longing to understand these dynamics and my role in these experiences. My collection of stories was growing too—turning and turning in my heart and as I spoke with others. Why, when I support a focus on feelings and we articulate our needs, does conflict result in a euphoria of sorts between the children, why does it result in deep connection? Why does centring blame or "what happened" seem to derail resolution and foster resentment? And then—why do we seem to keep focusing on blame?

A larger wondering was bubbling up at this point too—it seemed to me that these same conflict dynamics exist beyond Kindergarten. How might these experiences in Kindergarten, of finding connection in conflict, of hearing one another's feelings and our impact on one another, of cultivating a community where connection and agency was central—of our relationality—how might these experiences in Kindergarten inform an understanding of social interaction generally and provoke wonderings of how we all might **be** together? In discussions with others, I began to refer to Kindergarten as a "distillation of humanity," a place with perhaps the same dynamics as those found in the global arena, just in a smaller—and notably more accessible—way. In Kindergarten, we can perhaps see the feelings and the needs and the relationships with less effort, and therefore address them … provided we are looking for them. The wonderings and the longing to understand grew.

I resonated so powerfully with a focus on feelings in the classroom—with its power to bring me—to bring all of us—deeper into relationship, deeper into community. While the excitement was building, tensions remained. I longed to understand—to understand why I was so excited, to understand why I found it so rewarding, to understand why it seemed so profound

within the larger school experience. I talked about it with colleagues, with friends, at home with my partner as we parented our young daughters, and I talked about it with other parents as we picked up our children from school. I didn't really know how to even articulate what I was interested in. It was something about feelings and needs, something about being in community. Something about connection.

During the winter break of my fifth year working in Kindergarten, I woke up with a start. "Wait! People sometimes go to **university** to learn stuff!"

Relational Thread: Awake to Equity and New Possibilities in the School System

It was in my university coursework in both compassion and contemplative studies that I began to notice patterns within the larger school system which could surface meaning in the narratives of Kindergarten. I now could bring a more systemic lens to my inquiry into relationships within school—into patterns of relationship denial and possibilities of relationships renewal.

Adult and Child Relationships

"She stole my ball!"

"No! I had it first!"

"No! I did!"

In coming back to this playground story from early in my Kindergarten career, I'm quite sure that I had not yet met these older children, nor could they have had more than a cursory knowledge of me, given my recent arrival at the school. I had a sense at the time that to them, I was not Sara, but rather simply the nearest adult on the playground. I could have been any other adult on duty that day. I wonder then at their relationship with adult school supervisors, and perhaps with adults more generally, before our experience together. As I wonder at the stories these children hold about adult supervisors in their lives as perhaps "fixers" and "discerners of truth," I wonder if I was uncomfortable with these children seeming to want me to be an external

enforcer; someone with the rank and therefore the power to declare a victor (and likewise a loser). What made the label of "adult" desirable to them in that moment—was it that I would have indisputable power given my age and position? I am so uncomfortable with the expectation that I (or anyone) can be expected to hold power of omniscience, to be somehow outside an experience looking in. I think I must have sensed the separation of me from them, an alienation between us given the power I was expected to hold. It seems I was filling a rather narrow role in their lives—a role that would seemingly end as soon as this problem was "solved."

What would it actually achieve that a separate and unfamiliar adult would simply decide on which child got to walk away with the ball? Something wasn't working for me, and perhaps not for them either. If these children needed support, perhaps specifically adult support, I wanted another way if I was going to be that adult. If they were going to recruit me as an adult in a difficult moment, I was uncomfortable with the recruitment being due to my indisputable adult power, and perhaps would have preferred that it be because they figured I had skills to help get their needs met, to renew their relationship as they shared a common interest in the ball. I didn't want to fill the role of a separate powerful adult outside-looking-in. I see now that I wanted alternate possibilities to this one of alienation of children from adult, though what they might be, I didn't know at the time.

Relationships with Agency

I also wonder now at the relationships they had with their own sense of power in the moment. I can picture them running toward me. Certain of their problem, it seemed. Certain of who they needed. There is more to this than simply seeing me as a somewhat anonymous adult "fixer". Why, in this moment of tension between them, did they race to me using a phrase that implies that while **they** can relate to the problem—"**I** had it first," that they understand someone **else** to have the solution—their gaze was cast not upon one another, but upon me—that **I** might

discern who had the ball first, and therefore who should continue to have it. Is it that these children had a narrative of adults in their lives where adults were generally the ones who held the agency in resolving problems? If so, why? Did adults not trust children to play active roles in the problems they experienced? Did these children not know themselves to be agentic within their own story of school, particularly when adversity arose? As I came alongside them in that moment, the experience was nested into a social setting, which held power dynamics. In my discomfort, I see now that I longed for alternative possibilities to come alongside them that did not reinforce a denial of children's own power, but one that connected them to their own agency, that cultivated their relationships with themselves and what was important to them. While I couldn't articulate it then, I could feel the embodied tension of not wanting to live further into this alienating narrative.

Binary Framing and Colonial Systems

Or. In remembering their phrasing now, I notice not only alienating patterns of the children from me as an adult, or alienation from their own agency, but the alienation or relational denial of themselves from one another in the very framing of the problem: "I did"—"NO, I did!" While it's admittedly all in my own mind now, I can imagine these children, their fingers thrusting toward their own hearts with each utterance of "I," metaphorically pushing themselves further away from one another as they claimed their right to personally possess the ball. I think now of Dwayne Donald's reference to the nêhiyaw (Cree) concept of wâhkôhtowin,

> Wâhkôhtowin is generally understood to refer to kinship. In a practical way, wâhkôhtowin describes ethical guidelines regarding how you are related to your kin and how to conduct yourself as a good relative. Following those guidelines teaches one how to relate to human relatives and interact with them in accordance with traditional kinship teachings. Importantly, however, wâhkôhtowin is also extended to include more-than-human kinship relations. The nêhiyaw worldview emphasizes honouring the ancient

> kinship relationships that humans have with all other forms of life that inhabit their traditional territories. This emphasis teaches human beings to understand themselves as fully enmeshed in networks of relationships that support and enable their life and living. (Donald, 2021, pp. 58–59; Donald, 2022, para. 9)

In this conflict into which I had been recruited, it seems to me that these children were not inviting me to understand them as enmeshed in a network of relationships that held them together. They were inviting me to understand them as separate, perhaps even more—they were inviting me to understand them in opposition to one another.

"The men in black robes brought 'or' to a people of 'and'" (Sinclair, 2019). I was at a small workshop led by Niigaanwewidam Sinclair around reconciliation and settler-Indigenous relations. Sinclair, an Anishinaabe (St. Peter's/Little Peguis) Associate Professor in the Department of Indigenous Studies at the University of Manitoba, spoke of the colonial people of "or" encountering a people of "and," and the simple power of this framing has stayed with me. With this framework in mind, it seemed that I was expected to reinforce for these children in the playground a relationship with the ball based on "or" with no room for "and." Did this binary of "or" align with my beliefs around how we might be together, around what I hoped was possible? What other possibilities were out there, other than declaring it one child's ball **or** the other's? What does it mean to live in a culture of "or"? How might I, steeped in a culture of "or," a culture of binaries of first or last, right or wrong, how might I live into "and"? How might we renew rather than deny relationship?

Ranking. "I had it FIRST!"

I can hear that phrase being used in countless other contexts too, and it strikes me that in addition to the alienating focus on "I" vs. "I"—is "first" really the singular variable that needed attention in achieving resolution? As I think about the role I was playing in their lives, and they in

mine, I wonder at what contributed to an understanding of first as being of greatest import—when trying to navigate conflict, or in life in general? I think this word, an aggressively uttered claim for title, twigged an aversion in me and exacerbated the already alienating strategy of "I" focus. It seems to me this is part of what Donald (2022) references of "practices that perpetuate relationship denial in mostly subtle and unquestioned ways" (para. 5). Implied in the use of the word "first" is its binary opposite—"last." As if we are separate. These binary opposites, while I hadn't yet put a finger on the root of my aversion, are constructs that I have come to try to both better understand and unravel. This is part of the larger story of colonial frameworks within which I am trying to situate myself as I work to centre relationality. I understand that I am both of this colonial culture while trying to contribute to its undoing within the experiences of schooling. Brooke Madden (2019) refers to this tension in her use of the word *de/colonizing*—that in the work to decolonize colonial institutions, one is simultaneously perpetuating systems of colonial oppression, "de/colonizing calls for consistent examination of colonial logics and productions that seep into settings like Indigenous education and teacher education, which, our intentions and plans notwithstanding, often become hybrid experiences of colonizing and decolonizing" (p. 287).

Perhaps I can join a "consistent examination" of the colonial system that perpetuates patterns of oppression in this narrative inquiry, like the alienating focus, the relationship denial reflected in concepts of first and last. What does it mean to be present enough to even notice "colonial logics and productions" in order to then examine them? How might I "examine" with an ever-widening lens to notice the very colonial structures that shape my perceptions? If "first" is a construct of "or" people, what, as I came alongside them, might I have instead considered from a perspective of "and"? What other possibilities might open up for us if we turn our attention away from "first"—and therefore also "last"? How might we notice habitual patterns of alienation and relationship denial and centre relationality in schooling?

Possession. Implicit in the framing of the problem, and never questioned, was the matter of whether the ball were something to be possessed at all. It strikes me now that the focus of "whose" it is, is perhaps at the root of the problem. What might be possible if we turn our attention away from possession completely, which seems to me, as it happens, to also be a binary of mine or yours? How might we reframe the conflict all together? If possession is not a lens that aligns with who I want to be with children, and what I believe we can be in education, why is it so pervasive ("That's **MINE**!"), and what does it mean to dismantle it? Can it be dismantled in some aspects of communal life like shared school resources while we continue to reinforce it in others, like through ownership of "possessions" like bikes or homes or backpacks? How do we decide which aspects are communal and which aren't? And who is the "we" that gets to do the deciding? Is there a way to have a personal relationship with something without necessarily *possessing* it? Do the words "my" or "mine" necessarily imply possession, or can we understand it to be relational—"Yes, she's my cousin!" What ways of being and knowing are shaped by a language that conflates concepts of both possession and relation in the one word—"my"? "That's my ball" can aggressively denote possession and "or," while "You're my friend!" is a relational use of "my" and many others can describe someone as their friend too. It's an "and" use of the word "my."

In considering the role that language plays in our relationality, I catch a glimpse of possibilities in the words of Marshall Rosenberg (2003) when he reflects on language patterns, like many found in the English language, that serve relationship denial or alienation:

> Life-alienating communication both stems from and supports hierarchical or domination societies. Where large populations are controlled by a small number of individuals for their own benefit, it would be to the interest of kings, czars, nobles, etc. that the masses be educated in a way that renders them slave-like in mentality. (p. 23)

It seems to me that possession is yet another element of the colonial relationship denial. Miki Kashtan (2019) points to the system of capitalism as a manifestation of colonialism, which is "based on exchange and on extracting as much as possible for our own, largely individual, benefit" (para. 12). This capitalist lens brings a more specific awareness to the colonial agenda and how it affects relationships and our perceptions—that if two children are arguing about a ball, we must determine who has claim over its benefits; that each child would look out for themselves as individuals rather than "fully enmeshed in networks of relationships that support and enable their life and living" (Donald, 2021, pp. 58–59; Donald, 2022, para. 9). It is a relational understanding that fits the "or" framework of relationship denial. Who might we be together if we centre our relationality? If we renew our relationships? Who might we be if we choose to connect—if we choose "to find ourselves in the other" (hooks, 2001, p. 93)? Who might we become if we choose to love?

The Research Puzzle

This thesis is an autobiographical narrative inquiry into my everyday stories from years of teaching and learning in Kindergarten. These are stories that pulled at me to pause, to notice and wonder at the tensions within—at the embodied wisdom that they surface. I am inquiring into narratives where uncertainties and wonderings and centring our relationality open up into possibility, narratives where "living love" offers renewed relationships. Emerging from these stories are three main threads carrying relational possibility: a thread of practising presence and attending to embodied wisdom of self, a thread of a needs-orientation that serves relationships, and a thread of equity and how systems are both shaped by and shape relationships.

Who am I and who we might become if we centre our relationality, if we live love? What does it mean in education to be present to and to live in alignment with such possibility? Who might we become?

Relational Commitments

> Narrative inquiry reminds us who we are, and are becoming, is always in relationships … and so we need to attend to our storied lives … and, perhaps, to the lives of others in changed ways. No one leaves a narrative inquiry unchanged. (Clandinin, 2013, p. 201)

While this narrative inquiry is autobiographical, inquiring into who I am in relation, I want to continue to hold relational ethical considerations at the centre as I tell these stories, stories that intersect with others who are living their own stories. I want to attend to who I am in this moment and what stories have brought me to this moment. I want to attend to what attributes of my identity and my history might inform how I notice and frame meaning emerging from the stories. I want to stay awake to the spaces that open from wondering at the stories, comfortable that wonderings carry value and I need not claim any certainties about the stories and experiences of the others with whom my stories intersect. I am inquiring into my stories from Kindergarten, and I hold in my awareness that these stories have emerged alongside others who are simultaneously telling their own stories.

Positionality

As a teacher, I am moved by John Dewey's idea that for teachers "It is the ability to see in the child's babblings the promise and potency of a future social intercourse and conversation which enables one to deal in the proper way with that instinct" (1929/2004, p. 18). I am energized by Dewey's idea that by awareness-building as an educator, honing my "ability to see," I might enable children to more fully live into their promise and potency in our social landscape. But in his words, I am reminded of my own positionality: "the ability to see …"

These are words that hold (sometimes ominous) wonderings and bring my attention to my own positionality, my subjectivity. I delight in the hope-filled work to expand my own capacity to see potential. There is incredible responsibility here.

As I inquire into the stories that shape who I am and who I am not yet, I know that I must also consider my own personal identity within larger structures and systems and histories that shape my perception as a teacher and researcher. I know my perception to be fluid, shaped by the very dimensions of narrative inquiry: time, sociality, and place. I know myself to hold identity only in relation. However fluid, my perception, my ability to see, is also affected by markers of my identity.

These are Eyes Through Which I See …

I am a white, English-speaking settler of Mennonite heritage;

a cisgender, heterosexual woman—my pronouns are she/her,

a partner, a mother—of two girls (who identify as such, aged 9 and 11).

I am the daughter of a retired teacher/principal and a retired counsellor.

I am able-bodied. I am neurotypical.

My schooling from Kindergarten to Grade 8 was designed for critical thinking and agentic learning. Our family values supported and were reflected in my experience of school.

I grew up in a diverse neighbourhood—racially as well as socioeconomically.

We were financially stable enough.

We had multiple communities where I had a sense of belonging—our neighbourhood, our church, and a handful of like-minded families who ran a non-profit Fair Trade gift shop together.

I am a teacher, certified by the province of Manitoba. I also have a degree in International Development Studies.

Today, I teach in an urban school in what is now known as Manitoba.

I can bend the ear of a colleague in the moments before the bell rings to tease

through a pedagogical tension.

My voice is valued.

My wonderings have space.

I feel safe both physically and emotionally there.

My growth as a professional is supported. My job is secure.

I am seen, I am heard, and I do not feel

personally,

socially, or

politically under threat in my home or professional life.

It is from this list, by no means exhaustive, that I position my current "ability to see," knowing that each statement holds its own stories. It's important to note here perhaps, that no collection of attributes of my identity—however extensive—can render accurate others' assumptions about my values, my ideas, or what might be important to me.

There are so many stories I am holding, each shaped by my ability to see, however fluid and changing this perception may be. While the stories are of my own experiences, I cannot and do not wish to claim possession over the moments themselves, but rather to honour these moments as intersection points of many lives—themselves complex and filled with stories, across many places and times. Each story has provoked growth in me as a person and teacher. I want to acknowledge my own positionality within the stories I have lived, and that this subjectivity affects my process of reflecting, retelling, and reliving them. The work of stories is subjective.

I want to acknowledge that this positionality has shaped which of my stories are even noticed and valued by me and which are inadvertently rendered silent, or how my positionality

affects the wonderings and "knowings"[2] that emerge as I inquire. I am drawn to moments in my practice and my life when I have been present to the ways in which we are in relation, and also those moments when relationship denial surfaces, where some are privileged within systems while others are oppressed. Who am I within narratives of oppression or inequity involving individuals and groups whose identities I do not share—like those of Indigenous peoples, newcomers, children and families with disabilities or neurodivergence, 2SLGBTQI+[3] people, or of the many community members whose identities don't fit predominant socially ascribed categories.

I want to acknowledge my positionality in relation to the stories into which I am inquiring as a researcher and member of a Kindergarten learning community. These limits are by no means rigid and I endeavour to ever-expand my lens of perception through practising presence, and actively inquiring into my own perception as it shapes experience, which in turn shapes my actions (Jinpa, 2015, p. 63).

Responding to my Subjectivity

"Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience. It is nothing more and nothing less" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 13). My positionality and the stories of my life to this point affect my inquiry into these experiences. I do not see my subjectivity as a weakness—it makes me the storied researcher that I am, as I come alongside these stories and consider others with their own stories of those moments. Just as I have acknowledged that my perceptions

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[2] I use this word instead of knowledge, as one of the aspects of narrative inquiry that resonates so powerfully for me is the valuing of uncertainty. "The knowledge developed from narrative inquiries is textured by particularity and incompleteness—knowledge that leads less to generalizations and certainties and more toward wondering about and imagining alternative possibilities" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 52). I play instead with the word "knowings," as it holds for me this sense of expansiveness and possibility.

[3] Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and additional sexually and gender diverse (2SLGBTQI+) people.

are both fluid and also limited by my positionality at any given time and place, I also want to make explicit some of the strategies—some formal, others not—to expand my lens of perception as I inquire into my stories of Kindergarten.

My committee members, particularly my advisor, Wayne Serebrin, have consistently offered guidance as I have remembered, retold, and relived stories of Kindergarten. From Wayne, Kathy, and Jen, I have been given wonderings that have helped me notice assumptions I might be making, or new possibilities that I might explore.

The Centre for Research of Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta in Edmonton hosts weekly lunch hour gatherings that went online in Covid, and even after restrictions lifted and in-person weekly gatherings recommenced, many narrative inquirers in Edmonton and around the world have continued to meet semi-regularly to share our research and receive responses to the writing we read aloud. These online gatherings have broadened my capacity to see possibility in my stories, and to better understand my position within them.

So many of these stories resonate at different moments throughout day-to-day life, and casual conversation in community has also helped me to notice the limitations of my subjectivity. Colleagues and mentors, university classmates, school administration, families at school, and also friends have all contributed to expanding my capacity to perceive meaning in these stories. These conversations have grounded me throughout the writing process.

Inquiring into these stories has been an inquiry into the self, only as the self exists in relation.

The Stories I Followed

I might understand my research puzzle to have started in those early months of teaching Kindergarten as I tried to get my bearings in my new position, though of course the beginnings have no finite starting point, as we are always “in the midst” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 82). My *field*

involves the three dimensions from which the stories emerge—the time, the lives, and the places that shape the stories. My *field texts*—the term used in narrative inquiry for *data* (Clandinin, 2013, p. 46)—emerge from this field. They begin with those early narratives that tugged at me to be awake, to delve for meaning, narratives of moments that had me seeking new possibilities that did not involve relationship denial and alienation.[4] Since those early moments of dis-ease with paths of alienation have come many others, some bringing new dimensions to the experience of relationality, while other moments may have involved a pull toward familiar paths of alienation but have been navigated with a commitment and with the skills to centre our relationality. These moments—both those of disillusionment and those of relationship renewal serve as field texts in this narrative inquiry. I am following each story, and some stories lead me to then inquire into others that share a common thread.

Many of these stories began as oral narratives as I tried to inquire informally with others, trying to glimpse the meaning they hold. Some of them have been documented through professional journaling as part of my Kindergarten job. As part of my university coursework, I have also journaled and written assignments whose narratives have also been considered for this inquiry. There are also stories from earlier times in my life that have pulled my attention as I inquire into who I am in relation. From these stories I have attended to the tensions I feel as I retell and relive them, and it is this embodied tension that calls me to follow those stories. In this thesis, the collection of stories used does not include all the stories that could have added to the conversation. I understand this thesis to be but one conversation about relationality, one among many that may have been and may yet to be. The stories included here are a handful of stories

[4] "The texts we compose in narrative inquiry are experiential, intersubjective texts rather than objective text." (Clandinin, 2013, p. 46).

that have held meaning for me as I better understand who I am and who we might become as we centre relationality, and I am thankful that other stories can continue to surface meaning as I become and we become together, as new conversations emerge and new possibilities open. The stories included here are therefore not the "best" stories, but rather the stories that surfaced as I followed the embodied wisdom and moved with the conversation that was unfolding.

The stories are all written in dialogue form, and they are written this way in order to transport us back to the moment. None of these stories, in fact, were recorded, but rather held in my memory. The dialogue is therefore not verbatim in any of the stories. But there is meaning to be found in the very act of remembering the moments, inquiring into them regardless of their accuracy.

Stories Withheld

While some stories didn't enter the conversation of this thesis because that's simply not where the tension and stories took me, some stories will be left silent in this written space with intention. There will be purposely withheld stories, secret and sacred, that while having shaped me profoundly as a teacher, mother, and person, will remain private, as I honour those with whom I shared the moment. These stories are not mine to share with others, but rather to hold and reflect on privately. I acknowledge my subjectivity to discern which stories can be shared or instead kept secret and sacred. With a spirit of reciprocity, I endeavour to honour all the stories that shape who I am, and to honour those who have a part in them. I hold these ethical considerations throughout the iterative process of remembering, retelling, reflecting, and writing this autobiographical narrative inquiry.

Inquiring into Stories of Children

Most of the stories that have pulled me to inquire have emerged from my experiences with children—children who weave their own home experiences, their own stories, values, and

identities into the moments we share together. While these are my stories of the moments; stories I have been holding and sharing now through my written voice and perspective, they are stories I share only as myself **in relation**. While the children who shared the moments don't share my perspective, while they may not even remember them happening at all, they are still stories in relation and I commit to honouring the children as subjects in their own lives, without attempting to impose myself or my interpretation of their part, but rather to return to my personal experience of each moment and move further into wonderings and understandings of who I am and who we might be becoming. This is not a study of the children, but a study of myself. Others cannot be subsumed by my rendering of a shared moment. I remember again the strength of narrative inquiry to not strive for answers to questions or to declare certainties, but to be in pursuit of transformative wonderings as invited by the stories, "imagining alternative possibilities" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 52).

While many of the stories that hold tension for me are as non-descript as the first one shared in this proposal—"I had it first!" there are also stories from my eight years of teaching Kindergarten with details that might render a child identifiable. In these stories, I have been careful to alter identifiable aspects of the story while working to retain the meaning they hold. In all stories, the children's names I use are pseudonyms. I am thankful for the knowings these young teachers have offered me, and I hope to honour these teachings in the sharing of stories.

Why Share These Stories?

I think of the power of story and of inquiring into it as I share my experiences with readers through this thesis:

> our hope is to create research texts that allow audiences to engage in resident remembering as they lay their experiences alongside the inquiry experiences, to wonder alongside participants and researchers who were part of the inquiry. … These texts are

> intended to engage audiences to rethink and re-imagine the ways in which they practise and the ways in which they relate to others. (Clandinin, 2013, p. 51)

My experiences in Kindergarten, retold, relived and explored through narrative inquiry here, are stories that have awakened me to who I am in relation, have invited me to consider how these narratives might breathe possibility into who we might become. Perhaps such an inquiry might serve the journeys of other teachers and pre-service teachers. Why are paths that alienate so well trod? How might we unlearn relationship denial? How might we notice alienating patterns, seeking and renewing relational pathways while developing the courage, skills, and persistence to keep going? What does it mean for school to provide space for our full selves, and to see one another in this fullness? What does it mean to be present to new possibilities that align with relationship renewal and how do we cultivate this presence? Who might we become?

Through inquiring into these stories, I am deepening my knowledge of self-in-relation, ever more conscious of our interconnectedness—the ways in which each of our lives and our needs and our strategies to meet those needs intersect with the lives of others, with the lives of children. Perhaps a reader might come alongside me as I wonder (Clandinin, 2013, p. 24). Perhaps for readers, as has happened for me with these stories, expansive wonderings about school, about community, about self in relation, will emerge. Who might we become as we centre relationality, as we live love?

CHAPTER 2: PRACTISING PRESENCE, HONOURING EMBODIED WISDOM

Practising Presence

Wisdom of Weeping

I was in the midst of working on my thesis proposal when I stopped and slumped over. I was sitting in what had become my makeshift office—our sunny kitchen. I had been reading literature about contemplative practice as well as compassion. I had immersed myself in various threads that resonated with me, but I didn't feel like I had found traction. I was spinning my wheels. My partner Matthew came down from our "office" office, likely to get a snack. What he got instead was a vision of me, deflated. I expressed my dismay. I acknowledged that this work needs to be messy, that it's not linear, that the creative process takes time and involves a lot of uncertainty, but that I felt like I was ready to dig in and run with something and I wasn't sure how. I wasn't quite sure what "it"—what "this work" was all about, even as I had so many stories that excited me, and literature that resonated.

Matthew must have had some pretty good presence of mind in that moment. He hunkered down himself, on the other side of the kitchen, and after a moment of pause, offered something along the lines of, "How about this … Can you tell me … Why would someone want to spend time in your classroom?"

I hardly considered his words before I blubbered "To feel love!" And I cried. I think my bottom lip even turned out. This seems to be what it often comes down to for me lately. Both love and crying.

It strikes me now that I wasn't necessarily clear who he was talking about—students or perhaps, in an effort to get at "who would read your thesis," he may have been wondering why other teachers might visit me in my classroom. It strikes me that I might not have even been clear who **I** was talking about, or whether the distinction between students and adult visitors is even

important. But I knew it was about love. What wisdom in the weeping. What relief in arriving at the longed for vulnerability of finding my authentic self in an idea. Love.

Oren Ergas and Jason K. Ritter write about the possible impact of teacher self-study in the field of education, and my partner's attempt to probe what is important to me resonates here: "if, as Palmer (1998) argued, 'we teach who we are' (p. 10), then we might say that if we don't know who we are, then we don't know what we're doing (Bai et al., 2020)" (as cited in Ergas & Ritter, 2020, p. 4). Was this moment with Matthew a moment of clarity of who I am, of what is important to me? This wondering prompts me to further wonder … what does it mean to teach (to live, really) in the service of love? "The greatest thing that we can do is to let people know that they're loved and capable of loving" reads my e-mail signature; a quote from Fred Rogers (1994, p. 8). To help someone know that they are loved and capable of loving. When I sit a while with this phrase, I notice a powerful opening … loved **by whom**? Capable of loving **whom/what**? The implication is there, even if not included in the sentence. To love and to be loved is a relational experience, it seems to me. Might I resonate with the concept of love alongside its implicit relational nature? Can one love without a sense of relationality? So then the wondering expands—relation to whom/what/where? Might we understand, as Dwayne Donald (2022) offers, that this lens of love goes beyond human; that from the teachings of wâhkôhtowin, these relations, this kin include the land and more-than-humans?

The writings of bell hooks (2001), in her book *All About Love,* surface again—that love is an ethic, not a feeling—"A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well" (p. 87). She goes on to offer that living by a love ethic means "we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet" (p. 88). So our freedom, living fully, living well, comes alongside an appreciation of shared freedoms and of opportunities for everyone else on the planet to live fully and well. It is part of the web of our

interconnected lives, and I might consider it to be part of the systems that shape and are shaped by our relationships as well.

If **love** is a story that I tell of what is important to me, what does it mean for me to live in alignment with love—personally, socially, and within systems? It seems again, that this understanding of love aligns with centring relationality—that perhaps centring relationality also "presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well."

Also in bell hooks' words, I notice her use of the word "see." That we "see our lives." Perhaps then, if living a love ethic, we need to be able to have the capacity to **see** our interconnection, to **see** the moments where living with love might be hard or require some complex considerations. It also makes space to consider that our lives are connected whether we see it or not, but that living by a love ethic means endeavouring to **see** our interconnection. Love is a lens through which we cultivate our awareness of interconnection. A lens by which we renew relationship.

I also consider love's manifestation in moments of adversity, however small. In moments of adversity, when love is hard, where there is harm, where alienation threatens, perhaps centring relationality itself is what I know to be love. Living by a love ethic then, means living with compassion when we encounter suffering. Living by a love ethic means being moved to understand another's intersection in my life even if I am experiencing suffering, or another is. It means sustaining a desire that they too are able to live fully and freely. It then means that I continue to endeavour to expansively **see** adversity that I might not otherwise even notice, if love requires that all are able to live fully and freely.

So, in my blubbering that someone in the Kindergarten room might "feel love," perhaps I was referencing that in our classroom community, members might sense the web within which they are held and which they too hold. That in this community, living love means that our

freedom to live fully and well necessarily interconnects with others who are doing the same—that we understand ourselves "as fully enmeshed in networks of relationships that support and enable [our] life and living" (Donald, 2021, pp. 58–59; Donald, 2022, para. 9).

So, what allowed me to encounter this aspect of my authentic self? What offered me the clarity to know love at centre and the relationality that serves it? I think back on that moment and sense the power of **presence** that I was practising. In a moment of adversity, deflated by my struggle to find traction, I had been able to **identify** the source of my discomfort: that I couldn't get at the core of what this work was about, and thinking back now, I realize that I was using at least one strategy to resource the embodied experience of this discomfort—I took some distance from it all to just sit. Away from my readings, away from my computer. And when a compassionate someone came along, I resourced my problem further and made myself vulnerable, inviting him in to wade in the messiness alongside me. I think to the words of Oren Jay Sofer in his conversation with Eric Zimmer (2019) and the power of practising presence with the body in order to be present to a conversation. In this same way, I wonder if my presence with the body was first allowing me to be present to my own agitation. He also speaks of the importance of a pause to gather our attention and tune in to what we need. He offers that harnessing presence is what gives us access to choice and access to our power. Reflecting on that moment in the kitchen, I was slumped over, and at the same time, I was present, trying to find the pathways to my choice and power.

So my partner came alongside at the start of a moment of distress for me. What happened in that moment that surfaced that bit of authentic self? I notice that in my memory, I was sitting at one end of our long, narrow kitchen, while he was standing at the other, perhaps 15 feet away. When he understood that he might want to settle in, I remember that he stayed over there, sitting at a stool at the counter rather than approaching me at the table. I wonder what led to those

decisions for him. Did he sense that this was important self work? That my state was raw in a personal way? One might have expected him to come closer as I began to cry, but he didn't. We know each other well. I think that perhaps he sensed that this was an insight that, while triggered by his probing, needed personal space to process. Perhaps he was holding all kinds of considerations as he navigated this emotional moment—how he might be present but not overtake the story that is emerging; how this vulnerability was not about my relationship to him, but that it was my relationship with what is important to **me**. To my own self study. His choice to offer presence at a bit of a distance reminds me of Cori Doerrfeld's (2018) picture book *The Rabbit Listened*. A child is building a large structure with wooden blocks when a flock of crows knocks it down unexpectedly. Seeing the child's sad body language, different animals file through, offering their ideas of support … to talk it through together, shout about it, put it back together, knock another's down, but none of these ideas land for the child. It's only when a little rabbit quietly settles in alongside that the child begins to open up and process. Doerrfeld makes a point in the story of having the child then consider and replay with the rabbit each of the other animals' suggestions before deciding to make something new. And what I sit with here is that the rabbit made space for the child to be in relationship with their own experience of the event. And my partner did the same for me. He offered first a probing question and then simply offered presence, at a physical distance even. And like the child in Doerrfeld's book, in my memory, I was sitting taller after connecting with Matthew, after pausing, being present to and connecting with what was important to me. I was ready to keep going.

Love Means Space, People

A handful of years ago, we had an ongoing thread in Kindergarten that wondered at what love is. We realized that swooping in to clean up play materials when another child isn't quite ready to put it away might not be received as help, or as love. So, if we are wanting to cultivate a

community that centres love, that centres relationality, we need to consider how others are impacted by our actions; that sometimes the impacts of our actions are not received as they were intended; that love is complex because it is relational. Sometimes a hug feels like love, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes receiving help to clean up the animals at the play dough table feels like loving help, and sometimes it is received as sabotage. Intention of the helper is important, but it's not the whole story. It's also about the receiver and what their wishes are.

At the end of one morning, when we had joined the rest of the school to play outside, a kindergartener had scraped her knee and was sitting on a bench beside me to examine her body. A small crowd had gathered around her, and I drew her awareness to all the concerned people who were coming to check on her. She looked up from her knee and, stretching her arms out in front of her, confidently declared "Love means space, people! Love means space!" In those words, I heard an acknowledgement of what she knew was the intention—that of love. I also heard her offer some direction as the injured one, direction as to how they could express their love in a way that worked for her. I was so moved by her quick ability to honour her community's need to love, while also holding on to her own need for space as she assessed her body. Holding this story, I wonder how I might build on moments like these.

Turning my awareness to what possibilities **might** have been in this moment perhaps makes space to consider more habitual patterns of alienation or relationship denial in moments of adversity. I can imagine a scenario where a child in a similar situation might react to being overcrowded and simply yell for everyone to leave, or that I as a teacher might tell everyone to back away and make space. I can hear possibility that our voices could take on an edge of shaming the rest of the children with a tone of "you should know better than to crowd her." On that day though, this child was able to see that in her own distress, she was still nested in a web of relations and in that moment, she had the capacity to choose to acknowledge the needs of

these relations even as she tried to meet her own needs. I am so grateful to have noticed meaning pulsing in that moment.

How might it affect my practice as a teacher to centre relationality in moments of distress, to support children in fostering relational awareness in these moments, to empower children to identify and meet their own needs without alienating their relations? In remembering that moment, I only now attend to what I remember was my part—that I noticed the crowd and chose to draw her awareness to it, that I chose to frame the attention as an expression of care and concern, I framed it as an expression of our relatedness. I realize now that how I **chose** to frame their presence leaves room to consider that I could have framed their presence otherwise. I was certainly framing their presence through my own interpretation. Filtering their actions through a lens of "ambulance chasing" might elicit more of a critical lens with respect to the act of standing by someone who is hurt, so I realize that my role in this story is not only connected to the child who was hurt. I might also wonder at my role in the lives of the children in the crowd. Who was I to them? Who did I want to be? Who might we become as I centre my awareness on their role in this story? What possibilities open up if we slow ourselves down to **notice** those with whom we are in relation? And then, what possibilities open if we consistently centre our relationality as we wonder who we might be with one another, if we choose to (re)frame behaviours to draw our awareness to our capacity to offer care and concern for those who are suffering? Perhaps there were children in that crowd who didn't even know this young child, but now their action of standing by has been framed by me as care, and by the little girl herself it has been framed as love. And I wonder now if this might contribute to a bigger understanding of what it could mean to **be together … as a school**. How might consistent care-oriented messaging affect how we respond to others in distress in the future; how we respond to others' presence in moments of our own distress?

I am conscious now that this moment happened when the whole school was on the playground. How might it have been different had it only been our own class community outside when the injury was sustained? Might the little girl have responded differently if the crowd had been smaller, familiar, made up of only her peers? In remembering the moment, it seems to me that she had the confidence to declare her needs to this group of people even though some of them were older than her. I'm inclined to be even more intrigued by this age consideration—that she had the confidence to request a new behaviour from children who might have been considered "higher status" in the school, just by virtue of their age. This child is a younger sibling, so perhaps being cared for by older children is familiar. Perhaps having people hovering nearby is more readily interpreted as care in her life. Knowing that this isn't the case for all children in my care, how might I hold relationality at centre, how might I bring the wisdom of this moment into moments supporting other children in distress, conscious that not all children will consider crowding as care, or consider attention as positive. Perhaps my role in these moments is about being ready to guess at the child's needs myself. To be ready to be their surrogate voice to show their own capacity to lead their experience: "Look at all the children coming to check on you. Is space important to you right now? Because we can let them know what you need as they offer their care." This series of wonderings on what **might** have been, makes space to notice what is important to me, and to not drift toward a false sense that there is a "right" way to come alongside a child in distress. How can it inform my practice to endeavour to be comfortable with the uncertainty of how something is going to unfold, grounding myself in awareness of relationality, of love, of emerging possibility as we develop togetherness? It is this noticing, this reflecting on experiences and holding with care the wonderings that emerge, that serves me in my inquiry, and I endeavour to equip children with this same framework of strategies in their own growth as learners and humans—to pause, to notice, to wonder, and to be open to all that emerges as we

cycle through these powerful tools of presence and relationship renewal.

Just as I draw my awareness to knowing what is important to me—relationality and love in the bigger scope of things, what does it mean for me as a teacher to cultivate experiences where children can be in touch with their own emerging needs and their full selves **even as** they grow their awareness of how their needs intersect with others' lives, even in those little ways like declaring that "love means space, people …"? Ergas and Ritter offer that

> How we define self affects who self is in relation to, … there is room for an ontology that opens the inner sphere of the relation to ourselves. Such relation lends itself to various framings (e.g., body/mind, narrative/core self, thoughts/emotions, true/false self, me/I), which can then affect the self-other relationship. (2020, p. 18)

Was this moment on the bench a moment when the hurt child was in touch with her own needs, her own self, and this gave her spaciousness to affect the ways in which she was in relationship with others? Who am I as teacher in this personal journey she is on? When my partner offered his provocation that allowed me to access my focus on love, was he, while an "other" of sorts to me, actually serving my relationship to self, which is why staying at a physical distance felt so natural? Was the rabbit, as "other" to the child, actually **making** space for the child's relationship to self by remaining a quiet presence? Who might I be, who might we become as we make space to know our own selves, to be aware of others doing precisely the same thing, and to build our relationships with that in mind?

Who are we, who am I, as I come alongside others in moments of vulnerability; how might I serve "the wisdom in the weeping" for others and myself? How might I slow down and create the spaciousness to recognize those moments? How can I live into who I might be in those moments? What world might my words, my body, my **self** as teacher imagine into being alongside the words, bodies, and selves of others?

The Pause: How He Got Some Shade

Another narrative surfaces now, and I see myself in a mid-crouch, frozen for a moment above my stool at the front of our meeting carpet. My body is quite literally paused in motion. A little boy is sitting on a small chair at the edge of the carpet, settling in just before our morning meeting begins. The morning sun is blazing in through our wall of east-facing windows and his hand is clutched over his eyes, moaning intermittently in my general direction. It is clear he is uncomfortable with the sun in his eyes, and I notice. I have just begun to hop to my feet, intending to close the blinds as I interpret his need. And here is where I stop myself mid-crouch, then make a spontaneous decision to sit back down on my little wooden stool, my full body responding to a stirring in my belly, and possibility opens up.

Prentis Hemphill, a teacher, writer, therapist, and founder of The Embodiment Institute, speaks about embodiment as being "aware of what is … being aware of what is in your own body, and being aware of what it is that you think, how you act, how you behave … bringing your awareness to your body. Not what you think your body is doing, but what your body is actually doing in real time in your life" (Hemphill, 2022a). Their introductory statement on their embodiment website also strikes me here, "The kind of change we are after is cellular as well as institutional, is personal and intimate, is collective as well as cultural. We are making love synonymous with justice" (Hemphill, 2022b). This reminds me so much of bell hooks' (2001) idea that living by a love ethic requires that we **all** "be free, to live fully and well," (p. 87). As I pay attention to the memory of my body in this retold, revisited moment, I am aware now that I am in mid-crouch, my legs tensed as they hold my weight, and that it is in this position that I pause. I draw my awareness to my body in relation to myself in that moment, my body as it serves love. Might it also then serve justice, that we live fully and well?

I give myself pause then, hovering over the stool a brief moment. In that pause, triggered

by a tickle in my belly, I give myself the spaciousness to consider that he may not be working with only one need in this moment. While he certainly has a physiological need for comfort in the blazing sun, as a teacher, I am conscious that he has other needs wrapped up in this moment. I think about Maxine Greene's words about agency in her essay on teaching as possibility,

> Without a sense of agency, young people are unlikely to pose significant questions, the existentially rooted questions in which learning begins. Indeed, it is difficult to picture learner centered classrooms if students' lived situations are not brought alive, if dread and desire are not both given play. (1997, p. 3)

What might Greene's words offer this tiny little moment? How might these words of agency relate to the tickle in my belly as the sun beats down on the children? It seems to me that I was about to miss an opportunity to uncover this little boy's agency, to cultivate skill in meeting his growing need for independence, for autonomy. In this moment of spaciousness, paused above my tiny stool, I am discerning to which of his intersecting needs I will attend as I come alongside him. It seems perhaps obvious that he was not in any major peril, so I am able to make a decision that his need for physical comfort can be met **after** we cultivate his skills to meet his need for independence and choice, **after** we deepen his relationship with his discomfort and the strategies he could access to change his own situation. Also informing my spontaneous wisdom, my decision-making capacities in this moment, is my specific relationship with the little boy, and my sense of his stamina to work through his discomfort at this slow pace that I offer. In that short moment of hovering over a stool, I need to spontaneously decide which of his needs I will prioritize in my support, and gauge his readiness to come along with me, comfortable with the uncertainty of this trajectory. In choosing which of his needs **I** will attend to, I am simultaneously directing **his** attention as well.

Greene (1997), in the quote about agency above, references "significant questions," and I

offer this moment to show that those significant questions are perhaps built upon agency in even the smallest of life's moments.

"It looks to me like you're pretty uncomfortable," I begin, supporting him in **naming** his struggle as he experiences physical discomfort. I phrase my interpretation of his behaviour as a guess rather than a statement of fact, giving him space to define his experience for himself.

"Yah! The sun is in my eyes!" By the look he is giving me, it seems that now that he has named the source of his discomfort, he expects that I might take over. Instead, I want to continue to build on the **possibility** of the moment, drawing his attention to his own capacity for independence and choice.

"Oh!" I begin again, "Yah, that does sound uncomfortable." After empathizing with his discomfort, I pause a moment, testing the waters of leaving the situation in his court again, relying on my relationship with him to discern how much I can stretch this out and leave him to take the lead. "Let me know if you have any possible strategies you can think of that might help."

"The blinds!!! The blinds!" he exclaims.

"That sounds like a solution for sure!" I am nearing the edge of his stamina, but there is still a bit of room for stretching out *possibility* as I consider the complex web of needs and growing choice of strategies he has in his life, expanding his awareness of his own agentive capacity. I offer one more guiding statement to help him hold on to the agency in the moment "Let me know if you need anybody else to be part of that solution."

"I do! Can you close the blinds please?"

I hop up (finally!) and close the blinds, inviting him then to pause and attend to his embodied state now that this strategy has been tried. I want him to determine whether he has, indeed, now met his need for comfort. My life has intersected with his in his moment of discomfort, and drawing his attention to his own power within the dynamic, I have perhaps

cultivated a relationship grounded in compassion, where I have noticed his suffering, and walked alongside him until his comfort has been met. I have worked to alleviate his discomfort, but have chosen to do that by first activating his agency—his relationship to self. I do wonder now how this experience might inform his future experiences, and whether my role, by inviting him to take the lead on each step that I guided him through, might open new possibilities for him as he encounters discomfort again. I wonder how this experience might trickle into other moments where I am able to perceive a plurality of needs manifesting in a moment, and the choice involved as to which need to attend to or support.

In reflecting on it further, I notice now that while I invited him to reflect on whether his physiological need had been met, that I didn't invite him to reflect on his relationship with the process we went through to cultivate his independence—whether he could sense his own agentive capacity. I wonder how I might do that … Is it enough to have guided him through it, or might there have been yet more possibility to explore together? Might I make space for him to attend to his own feelings after having designed the strategy himself and met his own need for comfort? I am excited at how this **present** wondering of a **past** experience might inform my **future** practice (my, what a fickle thing is time …).

I am suddenly conscious that had I jumped up and closed the blinds for him, he still would have met his need for comfort, and one might even suggest that he took a lead in meeting it, as he strategically moaned in the direction of someone who could respond to his discomfort. Were he alone in the room, he may well have chosen a different strategy to find comfort in the sunny room. He likely would not have sat in his chair moaning. What is therefore important about the process I guided him through? It seems to me that in the process I guided him through, I was making space for him to notice his own relationship with his unmet need, and through this process of noticing (what's the source of the discomfort, what are potential strategies to attain

comfort, is anyone else needed?), I am cultivating **his** access to choice in how his life unfolds and which strategies he might use to meet his needs. These are skills that might just transfer to other parts of his life.

It also seems to me that, knowing that I would likely be recruited to close the blinds, I was offering him an opportunity to honour **my** humanity in his experience. Rather than motivating me to close the blinds by moaning, he is acknowledging that his need is going to impact my agenda, and by overtly requesting my help rather than implying it, we are bringing attention to our relationality in each of our experiences of the blinds being closed to offer him comfort. Our brief correspondence invited a **seeing** of one another.

While my focus has been on myself and this little boy in the story, I am conscious that many other children were buzzing around at the time. This story, while depicting a specific moment, is not particularly unique in our room. Children are often being blinded by the sun! So I will add that in our little learning collective, moments like these have resulted in others sensing their own interconnection with those in discomfort, jumping in with their own suggestions,

"You could turn your body a little!"

"You could sit over here so the sun is behind you!"

"I just cover the sun with my hand!"

As these suggestions fly toward whichever child is bathed in sunlight on any given day, there is a cultivated awareness that the person who is "in need" retains the choice, the agency, of deciding which strategy to try in order to meet their need. Perhaps this is part of the *love* to which bell hooks (2001) refers, that we **all** "be free, to live fully and well," (p. 87) and that "we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet" (p. 88). Perhaps the "planet" might begin together at the carpet, sharing sun and story, present to one another and our intersecting needs.

Noticing our Interconnection: How She Got Some Shade … for a Friend

I had to chuckle upon reading a little two sentence journal entry from another year some time after that sun-bathed moment on the carpet. I had clearly continued to practise strategies that kept the children in charge of meeting their own needs. If a child invited me to do the zipper of their parka by simply standing in front of me expectantly, I would offer "I'm noticing that you're standing in front of me with your jacket open," which might prompt them to articulate what they are asking of me. In this little journal entry, I was documenting an interaction with a child a few months into the school year. I simply wrote down what I remembered her saying:

"Over there!" (she points to the snack table). "She has sun [in her eyes]. And I am standing in front of you because yooooooooooooou are a part of the solution and you will put the blind down." She had been through the awareness process enough times to know everything I might ask of her as she recruits me to help another child to meet her already identified need and the chosen strategy to meet it. She drew my awareness to the problem by describing what she noticed—that a classmate has sun in her eyes. She explained why she was talking to me about it, and I notice now that she has begun that statement with " I am standing in front of you," which shows the history of our journey together as a learning community. I had already demonstrated in weeks and months past that I am going to make space for the children to hold agency in their problems, prompting them along, as I had with the boy on the carpet years before. She then made a request as to how I might support her declared strategy. Remembering the child now, you might imagine her finger wagging gently, the other hand on hip, and some wide, emphatic eyes accompanying her request.

It strikes me now that while I have referenced agency, it's not actually the person who was experiencing the discomfort who requested the strategy from me. I also notice that I didn't document any direct correspondence with that child sitting in the sun. What had struck me that

day was the thoroughness of the request. That is all I had documented. Now as I consider the experience, I do wonder about the social dynamics involved—between the children, and also with me—both in that moment and also in the months leading up to it. Why didn't the child with the sun in her eyes come to me herself? Was there a moment there when I might have suggested that she come to me directly? If not, why? And I notice now again that in a moment like this, there are intersecting considerations for me as their teacher. I was struck then by how, without any prompting, the approaching child delivered all necessary information "right off the hop." Perhaps I was aware of the potential relationship building that was happening through this compassionate response to another classmate's discomfort; perhaps I was noting that the child who approached was able to attend to the needs of others, that her capacity to see the needs of others was perhaps growing as she felt compassion for her classmate and saw her potential role in the child's life. Thupten Jinpa (2015) references compassion as arising from empathy, that there is an emotional response to someone's feeling, a cognitive understanding of their situation, and a wish to see the release of suffering with an urge to do something about it (pp. 9–12). So perhaps what I held in my awareness was, in part, that this kindergartener, sensing her interconnectedness with this child sitting in the sun, felt alongside that child, perhaps from having experienced the same thing in the room before. Perhaps I wanted to honour that she saw her own capacity to do something about it. I am noticing my own excitement now about the child having an opportunity to sense her interconnection, as well as her motivation to alleviate the other child's discomfort.

I don't have a memory of these two children playing with each other particularly frequently, and that gives me pause as well. Their social circles were different. What strikes me then is that this lack of strong relationship didn't inhibit her from helping to solve the problem. I wonder now whether the lack of strong relationship might have inhibited her involvement earlier

in the year. Would she have noticed the discomfort? Would she have attended to it? Would she have sensed a role for herself? Jinpa (2015) writes that

> findings from neuroscience also indicate how, at least in our human experience of empathy, there is an intimate connection between our perceptions and attitudes on the one hand and our emotions and motivations on the other. So if we change our perception of and attitudes toward someone, we can actually change the way we feel about [them]. (p. 11)

Exploring the thinking further, he goes on to say that "there is an intimate and dynamic link between how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world around us on the one hand, and how we *experience* them on the other. This, in turn, influences how we *act*" (p. 63). As I inquire into my story here, it's not so much that I wonder whether this little girl went from **dis**liking a classmate, to now **liking** the classmate, but that **how** she felt about and perceived her classmate affects her experience alongside the classmate, which in turn affects her motivations and actions.

If she sees herself as interconnected with others around her, Jinpa's statement on empathy suggests that it will influence her feelings. Perhaps then as she changes her feelings toward others in the room, it shifts her ability to even perceive the discomfort, and then her motivation to act to alleviate it. Perhaps her compassion grew. There is so much possibility in my role there—yes, in that moment itself, but also more broadly in terms of how we are in relation—with our perception of self embedded in community, with our own capacity, with one another, and with our environment.

I didn't document it, and I don't remember now, but I imagine how I might have responded to her request to close the blinds. I would have closed them, to be sure, but what I want to sit with here is who I might be, who we might become as we centre our relationality together, if we centre love. I might have drawn our awareness to how she showed empathy toward another classmate's situation, perhaps making space for her to reflect on her motivations

to deepen her relationship with her own choice in the moment— "I'm noticing that you're making a request for someone else's discomfort. Were you maybe remembering when **you** have felt that way and the strategies that helped you?" Or perhaps building the child's capacity to be a teacher to her classmate, "I wonder whether you might tell the other child what you did to help her meet her needs … that might help her if this kind of thing happens again and you aren't around!" Who do I want to be to these children, and who might we become as we centre relationality? As we serve love as freedom for all to live fully and well?

Jinpa (2015) writes of the compassion training at Stanford University as a way to "make compassion our basic stance, the very outlook with which we perceive ourselves and the world around us, so that we engage with the world from that place" (p. 63). As I reflect on compassion as a "basic stance," it becomes clear how aligned such a stance is with Dwayne Donald's relationship renewal to unlearn colonialism (2022) and with bell hooks' (2001) love ethic where our freedom and fullness is dependent on everyone else's. Jinpa suggests that we tend to react with compassion "in response to the suffering or need of someone we love," but that with training it can become our stance generally (p. 63). One can say the same of relationality and love, it seems to me. I can understand my family to be my relations, but what does it mean for me to regard all—self, others, the land, and more-than-humans—as relations? What does it mean to practise compassion—as an expression of our relationality—in all we do, as a basic stance? Perhaps identifying it as important to me helps keep it front of my mind as I engage with children throughout our time together. Articulating this **inner curriculum** as I engage with others (part of my **outer curriculum**) might allow access to ever new relational possibilities.

Embodiment, Attending to Inner and Outer Curricula: Building Blocks

One morning in Kindergarten, Jared had spent the end of play time making a building at the light table with interlocking blocks. He had worked on it by himself, deeply engaged in the

process. While in Kindergarten we don't usually "save" these particular structures from one day to the next due to their size and our limited number of blocks, I recognized the importance of it for him that day, and he placed it on a shelf beside the light table. He declared, "Tomorrow, I'm play this whoooooole time." The next day, we were mid-play time, and I was sitting near the unattended light table playing a game with some children. Ana, in deciding where she might play next, went behind me and picked up Jared's structure from the shelf, moving it to the light table.

Recognizing the emotional investment that goes into these projects, in our classroom we have little laminated paper tents with hand-drawn stop signs with a message of "Still working." Children use them when they zip to the washroom, or when they save their work from one day to the next. It's a way of honouring our interconnection—that we share this space with others, so we want to use clear communication about our intentions with our projects, knowing that others may otherwise integrate these materials into their own story visions. Jared's little structure did not have a stop-sign-tent perched atop it.

Thinking back to Ana, with Jared's structure in her hands, I wonder what might have transpired had I had the luxury of pressing "pause" and considering with care the various needs and relationship dynamics that I might have, with this extra time, more easily perceived in this moment. Perhaps I may have done something differently, but in that moment, I chose to act using whatever spontaneous wisdom I could access. I chose how I wanted to direct our attention, and that was to focus on how this structure connected Ana and Jared, noticing that Ana **liked** the building that Jared made.

As a narrative inquirer, I am aware that this moment is nested in the midst of stories that began long before, and what strikes me as important here is the story of these two children in relationship up until this moment. Ana had, throughout the year, been a focus of Jared's anger, and they were sensitive to one another—Ana with fear that could easily shift to indignation, and

Jared in anger (which may also be grounded in fear, though not always triggered by Ana herself).

"Jared!" I gently called out to him elsewhere in the room, "Did you forget to put a stop sign on your building? Look …" I continued, as Jared came barreling across the room "Ana really likes your building!" Ana stiffened and I was aware that she would likely be feeling fear at his both speedy and determined approach.

As I retell this story, I am conscious of how I am attending now to the role of our bodies in that moment. Embodiment, that connection between the mind and the body in an experience, is a big part of my inquiry into this experience. I remember Ana's body stiffening. She stiffened in reaction to seeing Jared's body in motion—fast and determined and ready for anger. And I turn again to Prentis Hemphill as they describe in a podcast interview (Young, 2021) the body in moments of conflict and the work we can do to support ourselves in these moments, "Normalize that it's hard," they offered:

> Your body doesn't always know the difference between "this person is coming at me," and "this person is having an ideological difference than me, values different than me." Because it feels like it's attached to our survival. Sometimes it very much is. And our bodies are responding. Whether or not we pay attention to that … your body's going to respond in some way that is meant to save your life. We can try to bypass that, but even the most centered, grounded person is going to be reactive. It's not about not being reactive, it's about returning to a wider capacity more quickly. (para. 20)

I reflect on Hemphill's words, and it strikes me that in this moment at the light table, the little boy was, in fact "coming at" the girl, but I focused on my role in bringing both children into a place of wider capacity, to a place of response.

So what was important to me in that moment? What were my emotions? What was my agenda with those children, what Ergas (2017, p. 3) would refer to as my "inner curriculum?"

How might inquiring into that inner curriculum, inquiring into what was perhaps important to me in that moment, inform my practice as a teacher? How might it give me insight into practising in alignment with who I imagine we might become?

I am conscious that I was holding various needs of various people as I navigated this moment. My attention was initially on the children's relationship to one another through this block structure, an opportunity to frame Ana's interest in Jared's structure as a way of drawing them toward one another. As I attended to this longer-term need for connection, I notice now that I didn't lose sight of Ana's need to both **be** and also **feel** safe. I am interested by the wisdom of my body in that moment. I watched as Jared speed-walked over to us at the light table in the corner of the room and I now wonder if this is the survival-oriented reaction to which Hemphill (Young, 2021) refers—the initial **reaction** that needs spaciousness if we are to act **responsively** instead. Remembering back, in these brief moments in which he was barreling our way, I strategically positioned my near six-foot-self low on my haunches, leaning my elbow on the light table to casually fill the gap and physically barricade Ana away from Jared's initial reaction. I used my body to create physical space, which I realize now also offered the time and emotional space for Jared to return to that "wider capacity." There appears a real link here between how we moved through physical space and the relational possibilities that opened.

Eyes wide, "I didn't know it was yours!" Ana blurted, ready to yell her innocence if she deemed it necessary.

"I guess we forgot the stop sign," I said again to Jared, then repeating, "Ana really likes it! Look, she's already putting it back." In that moment, I have drawn his attention to a series of considerations—we forgot to use a stop sign, Ana has an emotional response to his work, Ana is reading messages conveyed by his body and is demonstrating to him that she has heard his request (even if he only made the request with body language). Jared has stopped in his habitual

tracks, and in the pause made by my physical position and by slowing us down to direct his attention to a different series of considerations, he has moved past his initial reaction and has capacity to choose a more intentional *response*. Perhaps his reaction was driven by a fear based on his initial interpretation of her behaviour—that she might destroy his structure, or not value it as he would like. And perhaps that fear was addressed through the strategic spacious pause, through being given the time and (literal) space and the guided support from me to make new and intentional considerations, to respond instead of react.

Jared gave Ana a matter-of-fact talking to, wagging a finger to convince her that he worked hard on it (no one was suggesting otherwise), and then walked away to find a little "stop sign tent" to place on his structure, now safely stowed again on the shelf. Then he went back to playing elsewhere in the room. And I wonder now how the spaciousness that I inserted into the conflict, the new considerations to which I drew his attention, might inform **Jared's** spontaneous wisdom when he feels his threat response triggered in similar situations again. How can I continue to be awake to supporting him in his moments of reaction, offering him ever greater awareness of his capacity to spaciously attend to diverse considerations, to encounter the unexpected with openness and generosity?

I remember now that the moment didn't end when Jared walked away. I chatted with Ana afterwards, debriefing the exchange. I drew her attention to how Jared heard us. "Yah," Ana responded, "Jared **always** mad with his body." Aha! Here emerged a narrative of Jared which Ana had been holding. She was noticing both Jared's anger, and how his anger manifested in his whole body as he sped our way (what embodied awareness!).

"I've noticed too, that Jared sometimes gets angry when he's worried, and look! He didn't this time!" It takes considerable effort to help her see that Jared has **not** behaved in a way that reinforces her preconceived narrative. It seems she was perhaps adjusting her understanding

of him—that he might have multiple ways to relate to her in any given moment, that his identity, his capacity, might be more complex than how she had storied him. While his initial reaction was familiar, the spaciousness offered through my physical and emotional support perhaps invited him down a less familiar, less reactionary path, and he responded with finger-wagging understanding instead.

I am conscious of my role in assuring Ana's sense of safety while slowing this moment down to work with Jared. Perhaps in holding one another this way, Ana and Jared and I were nurturing a space where all can belong, where we can fully show up. Hannah Arendt (1968) writes of "spaces of appearance," and their relationship to freedom. She offers that freedom is experienced when "action has created its own worldly space where it can come out of hiding, as it were, and make its appearance" (p. 169). She writes of freedom and of spaces of appearance more in the context of politics at large, but it strikes me here that by slowing ourselves down to see one another and be seen, to make space to move past our reactions, and find instead our responses, we are making spaces where we can show up, where freedom can be experienced. And I come back to bell hooks and her offering that living a love ethic is that all might live free. In contributing to this space of appearance, perhaps these children are living into love as they experience their freedom. Perhaps relationships are renewed.

Jared perhaps became more aware of the capacity within himself to cultivate and access strategies of honouring their relationship with one another, aware of his capacity to **respond**. Who was I in that growth, and how might it continue to inform my own attention as I work with others and encounter alienating behaviours that so often come with reactions? How might I grow my awareness of opportunities to make space for **response** when **reaction** is bubbling? How might my embodied knowings be honoured and harnessed, contributing to spaces of appearance? How might we live our freedom as we enable others to do the same? How might we live in the service of love?

CHAPTER 3: HONOURING FEELINGS, ORIENTING TO NEEDS

Embodying Feelings: Namaste

I am kneeling on the carpet, having brought my eyes to the level of the 5-year-olds with whom I share my mornings at school. We have just finished some sun salutation singing and moving together and we are now in a large circle facing one another, singing our song of Namaste (Willey, 2017). They are standing while I kneel at their level. Most years, this time in our morning routine takes on a sacred quality, being (somewhat?) still and slowing down to see and honour one another, to be present to one another. Each child, a teacher of my heart. Each child deeply wrapped into the stories of who I know myself to be as a teacher.

In reflecting on this meditative practice, I think of a child who was a particular teacher to me. I made a point each day of making sure there was space near me for that child. Her often fast-moving body now in a quiet calm, her eyes glued to mine with ease. This part strikes me. The easy eye contact. I can picture those eyes in other moments too—eyes often framed by furrowed brow, squinting threat, or teary sadness. But not here on the carpet as we stand in a circle and hold eye contact, soft voices singing about the light in each of us being seen and honoured. We each lay our own hands, one on top of the other as we gesture to our hearts, then extend those same hands to others in a gesture of seeing and honouring each of them, of deepening awareness of our interconnection.

"The desire for interpersonal union is our most powerful, fundamental passion that keeps the human race together, in the clan, the family, and in society," (p. 95) writes Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu in his book *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness: Transforming Self and Society with Compassion* (2018). He later describes that "in heartful communities, we create empathy and respect by seeing others clearly" (p. 102). What does it mean to see one another clearly, or at least to endeavour to do so? What does it mean to **want** to be seen clearly by another, to centre

our relationality? For this child, whose eye shapes in all their diverse emotions I remember so well, seemed to be ready for me to see her there on the carpet, however clearly it might be possible to do so. This child seemed ready to see me as well, and I, ready to be seen by her. Our experiences together were sprinkled with her physical outbursts and full-body anger or sadness. In these moments in the circle though, we could somehow still slow down and endeavour to see one another. And I wonder now whether I am glossing over the times in the circle that were hard to make eye contact, selectively remembering as "consistent" the moments that were easy, because they felt so powerful. There were plenty of hard moments with this child, when other children might have felt unsafe. How did those difficult moments affect our experiences in the circle on those days, singing this song? Was I ready and willing to be seen? Was I able to see clearly after such moments? I do wonder.

In the years that followed, our connection continued even if only in the hallways of the school, and those moments on the carpet seem formative, even as the difficult moments together held wisdom too.

Amidst the embodied comfort of retelling and reliving connection with this child, I am pulled to remember another moment, where connection with this child was threatened by fear and relations were strained.

Feelings As a Window into Needs: Scooching Over

"SHE'S GOING TO HIT ME!" In our Kindergarten class, a little boy now stands in front of me with fear in his eyes (or is it indignation?). Gesturing across the room to the snack table, he explains that all he was trying to do was find a spot. It is clear that he is expecting I will deduce what my role might be in his distress as he tries to meet his need to be safe again. He is trusting that his visible and audible distress will motivate me as his teacher to help. He and I walk to the busy snack table together, a handful of other children sitting on the floor around it,

their snack bags open in front of them. The girl, meanwhile, has wedged herself into the corner by the wall, her back turned to the group. By this time in the school year we had already done a lot of work together identifying feelings and the ways in which they can manifest in our bodies.

I crouch low beside her, “I’m looking at you curled in the corner and I’m wondering—are you worried?”

“YES!” she quickly swings around to face us, “If I move over for HIM, there will be no room for ME!”

By this time in my career, finding reconnection and renewing relationships was already important to me in my pedagogy. Making space for all voices was how I usually began supporting children when emotions ran high.

I realize that more habitual teacher reactions to a report of attempted hitting might have me approach the snack table to put her in place—like making a public statement that hitting is wrong, scolding her or simply enforcing an apology. At this point in my learning journey, I would not have gone there, but while (re)connection was already central to what I was doing with children, this moment did contribute to personal longing to deepen my understanding of the larger dynamics that we were part of as we moved into this difficult moment together.

I reflect now that the little boy, encountering threat, did **not** choose to engage with the other child on his own. He chose instead to come to me, his teacher, to be involved. This choice to involve me felt different than the day out on the playground in those early months of teaching Kindergarten when I felt like some anonymous enforcer. This moment was with children I knew. Late in a school year, his choice to involve me seemed more informed as to what I might offer their relationship. I had modelled it across months already. I doubt the boy expected me to scold his classmate. He wanted space to eat without fear of harm. I had a role in that as his teacher.

Maxine Greene (1997), in her essay “Teaching as Possibility: A Light in Dark Times,”

points to the potential role of teacher to open new spaces. Greene references the "capacity of human beings to reach beyond themselves to what they believe should be, might be in some space they bring into being among and between themselves" (pp. 1–2). Greene points here to what might be. She warns us that "if teachers cannot enable [students] to resist the humdrum […], they will be in danger of miseducative behaviour, ending in cul-de-sacs rather than openings" (p. 3). If I slow down with these words, there is so much here to ground me as I inquire into this story. It seems to me that part of the "humdrum" might include patterns of relationship denial, that perhaps openings might be our capacity to see ourselves expansively related to … everything and everyone. What strikes me now is the implication of relationality within any openings; that we are individuals among others and that as teachers, we have a role in that interplay. Greene calls me to hold in my focus my role as teacher as I go about the work I believe to be important—that of relationality, that of serving love.

And Greene's words of "what might be" and the space "among and between us" comes together for me here with Marshall Rosenberg's framework of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and a needs orientation (2003). While I didn't have access to the NVC framework at the time, I can see how the principles that Rosenberg uses in his framework aligned with the considerations I was holding, and it serves now to reflect on what was perhaps going on as I supported these children. I see now how turning our attention to our feelings and needs was allowing us to hold at centre our relationality in this moment of adversity, no matter how much we might be tempted to fall back into habits of relationship denial like blame or judgement.

As their teacher, their caregiver and adult—what did it mean for me to approach the girl, who had tried to harm another child, who seemed to be doing everything in her power to remove herself from that space by curling into her own body and facing away from the group—what did it mean for me—for **us**—to make space for her to articulate her own feelings and needs within

this moment? Upon my invitation, she turned around and made her voice heard. She reappeared to us in this space that had opened between us. In this space, we were ready to explore our intersecting needs.

A Nonviolent Communication Approach to Needs

As part of his NVC framework, Rosenberg (2003) describes human needs as common to all. Threads to help understand these common needs are ones of connection, physical well-being, honesty, play, peace, autonomy and meaning (Center for Nonviolent Communication, 2005). The word "need" requires inquiry, as the NVC framework has a very specific use of the word "need." Phrases I might hear such as "I need a hug" or "I need a sandwich" suggest to me that something is currently lacking in a particular moment—that someone perhaps has an unmet need for connection, or an unmet need for physical well-being (food). Within a framework of NVC, a hug or a sandwich are **not** understood as needs. They are understood as strategies to meet a need, or more specifically an unmet need. A hug can be one strategy to meet a need for perhaps connection, and a sandwich can be one strategy to meet a need for food—physical well-being. While these needs are understood here to be common to all and ever-present, whether these needs are being met is **not** universal nor constant. Language of "I need love" or "I need some connection," suggests that the need comes and goes, but in the NVC framework, we understand the need as always there. What changes is whether or not the need is being met. NVC frames needs as the underlying motivation behind all actions. When a need is unmet, we use a strategy—such as a hug or a sandwich—to meet it.

Reflecting on the need for connection, a lonely person and another with an active social network **both** have a common need for connection. One of them perhaps is experiencing that need as being unmet more than the other. In this framework, neither is more "needy" than the other, as they have the same inventory of needs. The difference is in whether or not this need for

connection is left unmet for each of them, and whether one of them might benefit from support or attention to access strategies to meet the need. Access to a choice of strategies to meet needs can also be unevenly distributed—something to be further explored in the next chapter.

This needs orientation serves relationship renewal in how it frames the intersectionality of our strategies. The strategies we use to meet our needs, or the strategies to which we even have access, intersect with others who are doing the same thing: trying to meet their needs. While NVC's primary focus is on common **human** needs, understanding the larger relational web within which we all endeavour to meet our needs can also open possibility. How might we consider the ways our strategies intersect with more-than-humans as well—the land and animals of land, sky, and water? With this lens of the intersectionality of strategies to meet each of our needs, I am reminded of Jinpa's compassion stance (2015), hooks' love ethic (2001), and Donald's relationship renewal (2022). They all share a common thread of interconnectedness.

Scooching Over: Making Space for Our Intersecting Needs

Perhaps we can see that by making space for the girl to articulate her own feelings and needs, we are perhaps also supporting the little boy in meeting his needs in the long term because we see how they are intertwined. They each have had, based on their lives up until this moment, perhaps different access to strategies to meet their needs, different considerations when choosing which strategy to use. In making space for both children involved, the little boy could broaden his strategies to now consider how they might impact others.

"If I move over for HIM, there will be no room for ME!"

The little boy had not shared with me what had transpired before she had tried to hit him. In this description of her need to belong, the girl had offered me understanding as to what he must have been hoping for—that she move over. The little boy had perhaps not been able to perceive how this request had landed for the girl.

The boy seized the opportunity of new-found clarity of the need underlying the girl's anger and possibility opened, born of his new consideration of her needs.

"Well …" he said, with eyebrows and shoulders raised in anticipation. "Well! We can just … scooch over!" The group at the table, perhaps not directly involved in the interaction, now acknowledged their part in the strategy opening up between the two children, and they all scooched over a bit, making both concrete and public the sense of belonging that we were trying to extend to all in this community in the making. The whole community was invited alongside. With this simple act of scooching over, perhaps we glimpsed for a moment Greene's warning to resist moving into "cul-de-sacs" and we instead lived into new relational possibilities.

Attending to What I'm Attending

I wonder further at what made it possible for this resolution, this reconnection, to happen. What made it possible for the girl to open up and share her vulnerability in that moment? What made it possible for the other children at the table to support the effort? What made it so seemingly effortless for the boy to consider the little girl's need as he continued to hold his own needs in focus—that he modified his strategy to meet his need for space by making explicit that they can scooch over to make space for them **both**? What made this modification possible—this finding and naming of strategies that held their intersecting needs—their relatedness—at centre?

Who was I in the relational possibility that opened in that moment, and who might we become as we continue to centre relationality in Kindergarten, in our school system? I notice now how I slowed us down to make space for the girl's experience even as she almost caused harm to another. This touches on the importance of presence, and I realize how much presence is an essential part of orienting ourselves toward feelings and needs. I notice that I was using some of the principles of NVC, even if I didn't have the words to articulate them at the time—rather than labelling the girl's behaviour as "mean" or "bad," I came alongside both children by making

observations, naming the position of the girl's body, and then guessing at her feelings, making space for her to reframe my guess if she needed to. So to some extent, the way I came alongside perhaps (re)framed the moment in a way that drew our awareness to **both** of their experiences and needs. I was guiding their attention to one another and to their intersecting needs. I think here of Oren Ergas' (2017) work around the role of attention in curriculum and pedagogy, that "the foundation of any 'educational' practice is the orientation of attention," and that "orienting attention means selecting content by which to define our reality for the moment" (p. 31). What relational possibilities open up when we **attend to what we are attending**? I might have been inclined to attend only to the boy's safety as I came alongside them. As I hold relationality at centre—as I consider our intersecting needs—my attention can perhaps stay with all who are involved in the experience. I can hold in my awareness that both children are trying to meet their needs and that the other children around the table are also related to the moment. In this moment at the snack table, who were we becoming as I drew everyone's attention to the little girl's needs as well? How did the consideration of her needs alongside everyone else's inform the new strategy that formed?

I am remembering now the sudden change in the girl as she swivelled around to face us. What allowed her to share her fear, her certainty even, of being pushed out? She had just made threatening gestures at another classmate with a bunch of her peers there to see them. Some of her peers may have reacted. With this in mind, what brought about her shift in position? Was her willingness to open up perhaps because she felt safe to do so, that she trusted her voice would be valued? Would she have shared her worries with us earlier in the school year when we were still a new community together? Would she have shared without me present, without me there to perhaps protect her from the peers who she had feared might push her out? Her worry that she didn't belong had driven her to try to hit another child. She hadn't initially offered explanation,

and now she was offering us insight into her underlying need for belonging, insight into the motivation behind the strategy. We were then able to respond to her need, rather than her strategy of hitting.

I remember how that strategy at the snack table opened into yet more possibility. As everyone sat there at a table at which there was always room for more, "scooching" grew in its relational potential. As the days and weeks passed, it became a bit of a mantra that the two of them then taught to the rest of the class for when someone wasn't feeling heard or seen "Let's … scooch … over!"

It seems to me that by intentionally opening my attention to the different intersecting needs at the table, we were able to scooch over and make the space to hear one another's feelings and underlying needs. We were able to consider that just as each of us accesses our own strategies to meet our needs, others are doing the same thing. How might I continue to expand my capacity to attend to what I'm attending to, holding relationships as central—particularly when harm is done and feelings are hard? How might I cultivate opportunities for children to do the same?

Responding to Underlying Needs: "Silly Pants" at the Slide

"Hey Sara!" A little boy is sitting atop the big metal slide in the schoolyard, delighted grin spread across his face as I perch at the bottom in the melting snow, playfully blocking the slide's exit. With a big smile, he joyfully calls down "Get out of the way, you idiot!"

The other children are busy playing elsewhere on the structure, some on the big saucer swings together, others weaving in and around obstacles in a game of chase. Jesse and I are alone at the slide, and we are one another's playmates for the moment. Jesse is rarely drawn to play with his peers, and likewise, his peers are generally not at ease playing with him. Anger often fuels his reactions to unexpected moments in play, and he doesn't often integrate others' ideas, so an adult is often the one with whom he plays. As his adult care giver and teacher, I am hoping

to support him in developing skills that might help him to relate more actively with his peers, and so I am consistently looking for ways to build moments of connection with peers. As an adult surrogate playmate, I am also looking to emulate how a peer might insert their own play ideas, ideas that Jesse can't control and might not expect. I am trying to give him opportunities to practice responding to how a peer might throw him a curveball during play. I want him to know that such a curveball doesn't have to be threatening, and can instead be fun and even valuable. And so, I stand at the bottom of the slide, wagging my hands to signal the lightness of my actions as I play around with blocking his path. His giggle from the top of the slide tells me that, at least in this moment—the two of us together, blocking his exit at the bottom of the slide is not being received as a threat. Very likely, he trusts that I won't do something that might result in him getting hurt, or that he will be able to proceed at some point soon. His giggle tells me that he understands my action to be one of play.

"Get out of the way, you idiot!" Knowing Jesse, these words are likely his strategy to connect with me. Despite the dissonant vocabulary, my attention is more so pulled to his body language—his smile, the lilt in his voice—all of which come together to communicate joy and invitation. I sense both his attempt to connect, and my own discomfort at the language he is using, language that minimizes my identity, even if uttered jokingly. Conscious that I am also trying to stand in as a peer playmate, I'm quite sure that his language might not bring him that hoped for connection when playing with his actual peers, so I offer my support to broaden these connection strategies and draw his attention to the role that language plays in our relationships. I suggest an alternative term of endearment, "How about you call me Silly Pants instead?"

He giggles again, "Poopy Pants!"

"No, " I gently persist, "I feel a bit sad when you call me that"—offering him insight into how his choice of language hurts me, even if unintended. "You can call me Silly Pants though." I

smile. It's settled. He whips down the slide as I dramatically jump out of the way. Collision averted. Connection confirmed.

Looking back now, I remember my own feeling of satisfaction that with persistence and care in attending to both his needs and mine, I had come alongside him as he perhaps uncovered more nuanced skills of connection—that initial attempts to meet this need might not go according to plan, but that it doesn't necessitate a sense of failure; that strategies to meet a need are adaptable; that strong relationships involve negotiation or shared decision-making; that relationships involve consent. It seems that in this brief, joyful, buoyant moment, all this has transpired.

Distinguishing Between Strategies and Needs

Oren Jay Sofer in a podcast on Mindful Communication explains the importance of the distinction that separates strategies from their underlying needs within the NVC framework. He breaks down how everything we **do** can be understood as our strategies that are motivated by underlying needs. He offers that if we can better distinguish between the strategies and the needs that motivate them, it opens up more choice, particularly in moments of conflict. He explains that it is at the strategy level where conflict tends to happen, where our strategies might not match, but that if we "shift down a level … to the deeper concerns … then it opens up the playing field. Maybe there are other strategies that we can find that might work for both of us." (Zimmer, 2019, 35:50)

With my little friend on the slide, here was a connection **strategy** that involved calling me an "idiot." The strategy might have perhaps conflicted with my need to feel safe and valued, but I was conscious that the underlying **need** for perhaps connection that motivated the playful use of the term did **not** conflict with my need to be safe or valued. We just needed to find a different strategy that worked for us both, a strategy he could use to find connection that didn't interrupt my ability to meet my need for safety or being valued.

While NVC is an orientation that centres needs and can be understood as a lens by which to view experience, it is also a concrete tool that serves relationship renewal and offers a formal framework by which to slow down and make the space for needs-oriented responses rather than reactions to the strategies that might be misfiring. Sofer outlines Rosenberg's framework: first we make an **observation**, we explore the **feelings** manifesting in our bodies, we identify the **needs** underlying the embodied experience or feeling and then we make a **request** (Zimmer, 2019, 40:50). While the process may appear overly prescribed, it leaves a great deal of openness and is really a tool to direct our attention. It creates space to move beyond reaction and to choose a response that aligns with the meeting of needs. In the case of the moment at the slide,

- I observed a quickness in my chest at being called "idiot." I also noticed a big smile on Jesse's face that helped me guess at the need he was trying to meet—that of connection.
- I shared with him that I felt sadness at being labelled in this way by him, my playmate.
- I recognized a need in myself (and guessed at the potential need of other children that might be in my place at other future play moments) to be safe and valued, and held it in relation to his own underlying need for connection.
- I made a request that he not call me "idiot," but rather something else that perhaps held the intended spirit of playfulness but without the minimizing element. I suggested a strategy that I hoped might work for both our needs, and after a few tries, we settled on "Silly Pants," a strategy that worked for us both.

One might suggest that the request I made seems more like a requirement or demand, and I want to remember that as a teacher, I am both meeting my own needs, and focusing on helping the child meet his own needs as well. I am considering the potential relationships that he might build with peers in our learning community as well. In my seemingly persistent request, one that

might have led to some further banter of other options if "silly pants" really didn't work for him, I am letting him know that for him to meet his own needs for connection *here, with me, at this moment,* calling me "idiot" isn't a strategy that is going to work. I break it down into those three categories because it seems to me that different strategies and their success at meeting needs is very dependent on these three dimensions of experience: place, sociality and time, upon which narrative inquiry as a methodology is grounded (Clandinin, 2013, pp. 12–13; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Jesse may meet his need for connection with some**one** else, some**where** else in his life at **other times** when he uses the word "idiot" playfully in this way. Perhaps what was important for me in that moment was that I supported him in developing **transferable** skills to meet his needs with others in other moments. My needs are wrapped up with his as we engage with one another. I was drawing his attention to my needs as they intersected with his strategies to meet his own, drawing his awareness to our interconnection. This needs-based orientation offered an anchor to turn our attention away from surface behaviours (strategies) and toward connection (the need).

I do wonder whether I might also inquire into whether a word like "idiot" might serve authentic connection in any setting, really. In a larger social context, are put-downs a strategy that ever really bridge people together, no matter how much folks are laughing? Does the use of playful insults perpetuate power imbalances that do not serve equitable or reciprocal relationships? Do put-downs leave space for others to fully show up? I think of how some words, historically used to belittle or insult, have been reclaimed in communities. Who gets to decide which words belittle? A word like "idiot" may have felt personally insulting as it minimizes my intelligence, but I'm also conscious that historically, the word "idiot" was at one time a clinical term for those with intellectual disabilities. So in this way, by using a word like "idiot" we might also consider the relationships we are holding with those with such disabilities today. When

holding relationality in awareness, the complex web of relations expands beyond the two of us as he uses this insult playfully, and I might hold these considerations as well as I allow this story to inform my future practice.

Considering What Might Have Been

In thinking about who I was in this moment, I wonder now at what might have transpired had I **reacted** along the lines of what might be a more habitual teacher-student path, rather than intentionally **responded** to him calling me "idiot." Perhaps in the reacting, I would have held my attention exclusively on my own needs and the hurtful word choice in the strategy he was using. I might have labelled the behaviour "bad" and ended the joyful moment. I might have even sent him away to perhaps the office, isolating him from the play space and the social community.

In the **responding**, it seems to me that I am exercising my capacity to expand my attention **beyond** my own needs. My attention goes beyond his use of the word "idiot," hearing his words as embedded in the context of his bigger story, hearing the invitation to connect through playful friendship. Perhaps in my choice to attend to his underlying need, I am serving our relationship. I am serving love. In the responding, it's not that I am ignoring the hurtful language and its impact on me, but rather I am considering it within a larger story and accessing choices to respond in alignment with what I believe is important: the cultivation of relationships—our current relationship and also his potential future relationships at school and elsewhere.

Prentis Hemphill's thoughts on making space for responses resonate again here, their offering that "it's not about not being reactive. It's about returning to a wider capacity more quickly" (Young, 2021, para. 20). I cannot expect myself to be able to avoid that initial reaction in every circumstance, but by being present to both my experience—perhaps the twinge in my belly as I receive the label "idiot," and also being present to what I value or what is important to

me in that moment—the larger web of present and future relationships, I can create the spaciousness to access **choice** in responding in alignment with these values.

It becomes so clear to me here, the ways in which cultivating presence is an essential component of a needs-orientation. How can I attend to underlying needs if I am not present to them? How can I attend to the ways in which Jesse's need to connect intersected with my need to feel safe and valued unless I am present to both those realities as I choose my response? A needs orientation is served by practising presence, and Prentis Hemphill offers that attending to our body's wisdom is a powerful tool to equip us to access that capacity more readily. I was in tune with my own body's discomfort, as I was in tune with Jesse's intention based on his body language. Responding with a needs orientation also requires that we are attending to what is important to us, and within a needs framework, relationality truly is at centre. It seems that when we orient ourselves to one another's needs and the ways in which they intersect—perhaps in these moments, we are renewing relationships, living a love ethic, and maintaining a stance of compassion.

Attending to Power When Teaching to Needs

I think back to the joy of that moment at the slide, and even as I celebrate the connection we found after a bit of careful work, my attention also turns now to the power dynamics involved in our two positions within the shared moment. While I didn't wield my teacher power by banishing him to the office for calling me names, I acknowledge that I was still holding much power in the moment. Even within a needs orientation that holds both our needs in focus, what meaning surfaces as I consider the systems of power within which this moment was situated? I wonder again, who gets to decide which strategies are misfires? Misaligned with what? Who needs to do the adjusting in order for us to each be able to find strategies that allow us to meet our needs? Whose comfort is considered? How does it affect my actions to hold awareness that I

carry a great deal of power (and responsibility) as the adult and teacher?

With this in mind, I attend to power as I remember the strategy Jesse used of playfully uttering "get out of the way, you idiot!" If his words didn't align with his body language as I interpreted them, I'm conscious that I was inviting him to adjust his strategies. I didn't just go along with it and focus solely on the messages I could read in his body. I suppose I could have, so why didn't I? When do I choose to invite the child to adjust their behaviour to meet their needs (and mine), and when do I adjust my own responses instead? Perhaps I might trust that in that moment, I was considering his future self playing with others, so I chose to insert a pause in our play in order to cultivate strategies that will more likely transfer to other relationships. I chose to help him practise strategies that don't minimize his playmate. Perhaps I might trust in my capacity in that moment to choose where my attention would rest.

I am conscious now that were I to consistently try to adjust children's behaviour to allow myself as teacher more comfort, we perhaps begin to wade into waters of compliance-based teaching practices, where I would perhaps be "correcting their behaviour for their own good." Perhaps it might simply inform my practice that I hold this power dynamic alongside the many other considerations I carry during my mornings in Kindergarten, holding this uncertainty with care and possibility.

If I am considering "future relationships" as I encourage him to use other strategies, which relationships am I imagining as I hope that he broadens his strategy choices? Might there be peers who would not consider being called an "idiot" to be an impediment to their play? Might there be children who would laugh and carry on? Here, I recognize that I do have values motivating my actions. They motivate me to create communities wherein children practise strategies that are loving and peaceful; strategies that make space for others to bring their full selves each day, not strategies that minimize others, no matter how much those words might roll off some.

I think too about the other children with whom this little boy might grow to engage, a goal I know I held at that time, even as he primarily played with adults. How might I **also** consider supporting these **other** children in engaging with him, connecting with him, even with his perhaps unexpected behaviours that might not seem to invite connection? How might I understand that in community we **all** have work to do to adjust our strategies to support our various intersecting needs, even when we encounter behaviours that are not as familiar or welcome, that even harm us in small ways? Just like with the boy who "scooched over" for the girl who tried to hit him, it's not that harmful acts be "tolerated," but rather that all of us have a place in our community. What work can be done with everyone in a community to cultivate a culture where all can belong and feel safe, even after harm has been done? How might I hold relationships at centre, so that if a child calls another child a name or hits, neither of them is left alienated? What are the skills and supports children need that will allow them to stay with it and work it out in these moments instead of walking away? Who might I be in developing those skills and offering that support? Who might we become?

Cultivating Skills of Perseverance and Perspective

I picture the child from one year who cried and stomped when she didn't get the puppet she had wanted to play with—at the time, she wasn't perhaps ready to even recognize the other children as agents in their own play stories who were sharing excitement and space and materials; or another child who seemingly mindlessly would flick the backs of children's heads as he passed by; or another who regularly told others that she didn't want to play with them. And my attention turns to those other children in the learning community who may have engaged with the sad or mad peer. I can see their initial reactions, especially in those early months of school—of turning away, of getting angry, of labelling the other child as "rude or "mean," or of "telling the teacher." I realize now how much work I do to support these other children in

endeavouring to see and value the child with whom it was perhaps more difficult to connect, to help them see that this child is using their available strategies to meet a need and that we need to stay patient to help them access and practise new strategies that work better for us all. Some of that work is in helping those other children articulate how the strategy doesn't work for them, and some of that work is simply in practising patience and openness and stamina to stick with the relationship.

Centring relationality, it seems to me, means that relationship isn't a choice, so the work is in shaping what **kind** of relationships we cultivate. The work is in reinforcing that there's always room for healing and reconciliation as we work to get all of our needs met, to get our voices heard when harm happens. The little girl at the snack table lashed out at the boy, and yet we all still made important space for her voice and her needs to be known. We all had work to do there, not just the girl who lashed out. Even with a strategy that scared the little boy, they both still had a need to belong, and as a community, we chose to support both of them in meeting it. They found connection as they acknowledged each other's needs. The rest of the children at the table held space for that work and supported it by moving over too—for the boy **and** for the girl.

The Distraction of Labels: High School Bully

Kalum is standing in the hallway amidst the hustle and bustle of children putting away their outerwear at the start of the morning. It's yet another year in Kindergarten. Kalum's arms are crossed, and he speaks somewhat vaguely in my direction. "Oh, I see," he says, nodding slightly, "Luke is going to be my bully in high school." There have been a number of days in a row when children have solicited my support when Luke has said "bad words." It has been confusing for me and I haven't felt traction in the support I've offered, unable to better understand what is motivating the name calling and the sometimes hitting. I have spoken to Luke's family about it on a few occasions, hoping to hear from them whether they are seeing

similar behaviours at home and what strategies they might be using to support him, simultaneously assuring them that while he is the eldest of three children, he is young and still learning what it means to be in a community made up of a diverse bunch of people with a diverse collection of stories.

It strikes me now that as we share a moment here in the hallway, each of us have had very different stories that have led us to this moment. I don't know what their mornings were like before they arrived at school (and I don't know what mine was that day either), and I also didn't know these children as babies or preschoolers. We have all arrived at this moment having had different journeys, and there is value in how the act of **considering** these diverse journeys, without actually **knowing** them, may inform my future practice and reflections. Who did I know these children to be, and who did I want to be as I came alongside?

I reflect on Kalum, arms crossed, and wonder at his introduction of a narrative of a "high school bully" and the inevitability of Luke becoming his. I consider what I know of Kalum's experiences. He arrived from out of province midyear, not having yet attended school. He is excited to play with others and his eyes light up at a shared story idea in play. He is an only child. His parents have commented on his regular struggles with sleep. I am sensitive to my position of power as I reflect on these pieces of his story that I have observed, and that these observables are filtered through the limitations of my own perception, both at that moment and in this moment while I reflect. I want to stay awake and not fall prey to fitting these observables into a socially constructed binary framework of "good/bad," "hard/easy," or to over-simplify my understanding of his motivations or the plurality of his identity. Rather, by considering these pieces of his story, I make space for them to inform my wonderings as I inquire into meaning emerging from this story as I came alongside them. What need might Kalum have been attending to by labelling another child as his future bully? I notice here that he doesn't consider a label of

"bully" as a possibility for the present moment, but rather just "high school." What meaning might be held in this distinction? I also notice that he didn't directly enlist my help, but rather spoke to no one in particular, but within my earshot and with his body angled a bit in my direction. Who, I wonder, was he hoping I might be to them?

So who am I as I come alongside Kalum? Who was I hoping we might become as I came alongside him? The label of "bully" is one I have long avoided. Through a needs-orientation, I understand labels to obscure underlying needs, alienating the children from one another by cultivating a binary of "victim/perpetrator" (Rosenberg, 2003, p. 16). Labels can direct attention away from the needs that motivate the behaviour, ready to be uncovered. I also understand a label to be somewhat static, and I wonder whether in Kalum's labelling of Luke, he was resigned in some way. If one is labelled "bully," then the work is done for Kalum. The work was in determining where the fault lay.

My work as I come alongside these two children is to discern the needs and the feelings driving Kalum's strategy of labelling Luke in this way. In the word "bully," I hear Kalum feeling sad, perhaps needing safety, perhaps worried that he is helpless to affect change in the relationship he currently holds with Luke. I wonder whether perhaps by directing his comment vaguely in my direction, he is demonstrating hope that there might be an alternative and that I might offer it.

Looking at Kalum standing there while Luke continues to get his outerwear put away, I ready myself to talk things through—to identify and communicate our feelings and needs, to uncover the ways in which we are interconnected, to find ways to see and hear one another and recognize our common humanity, to find our way back to renewed relationship, back to love. As it turns out, very little is needed in order to get there. Through a few guided questions, Luke makes clear that, in fact, he wants to play with Kalum. Kalum responds that it's what he wants

too. With a casual shrug, they acknowledge one another and scurry inside to look at books together before the morning meeting happens.

Kalum's declaration that Luke was set to be his bully sounded like he had resigned himself and labelled his classmate. Holding relationship at centre, I did very little reframing in order to reinterpret Kalum's declarative label instead as a request for clarity from Luke. Luke offered that clarity by assuring Kalum that his seemingly aggressive swat was meant as a playful gesture. The power of any "bad words" uttered was dissipated, and they established connection with ease. It seems they had arrived at a new place of trust in their relationship, even if perhaps fragile. Each had needs—perhaps needs of connection, of clarity and trust. Perhaps they sensed their interrelatedness by opening to see one another's needs; to see each other in their common humanity.

Being Present to Our Intersecting Needs: Always Almost Crying

A journal entry after practising yoga and singing Namaste (Willey, 2017) one morning:

> *11:05AM—It's been a very Monday kind of Monday. Ramped up by the fresh dump of snow we got over night after a full month of near-summer weather. There have been a lot of support needs. Volume was very high during play time, and I felt like I could have used another two adults to support, play, and engage with the children. We held to our routine of transitioning from play time to gym time by doing group yoga. "Dance for the Sun" was somewhat fragmented in energy for me as I had to leave to track down a child missing in action in the halls. By the time I came back for "Namaste," some children were now at the whiteboard drawing, others chatting, and about half the children were in our circle, trying to sing the song. I didn't notice any intentional opposition. Simply a scattered focus. I pressed pause on the music to help us collect ourselves and get back into shared focus. We brought our toes to the circle and placed*

our hands in front of our hearts "The light in me sees the light in you ... I honour you as you honour me. Namaste." I invited children then to point to their feet, bringing their awareness to the next job for the body before they mindlessly run for the door—to walk to their snack bags to put them away before heading to gym. On the way to the gym, a child waved his fisted hand from the back of group, using our sign for "toilet" before ducking into the washroom. I dropped the rest off at the gym, and on the way back to the empty classroom, I noticed my body exhale, I noticed the adrenaline dissipating from my body.

The child was just now coming out of the washroom as I passed. "You know Sara," he said to me in transit, "Namaste always almost *makes me cry."*

"Yah," I responded, "That song really reaches the heart, doesn't it?"

"Yah, just almost." And he's gone. And I'm renewed.

What is it to see one another? To hear one another? What is it to centre our relationality, to recognize that our needs intersect, as do our strategies to meet them? What is it to move away from relationship denial and toward renewal, toward love? What is it about this song, what is it about mindfully **seeing** one another that brings us into vulnerability and near tears (if only almost)? Murphy-Shigematsu (2018) points to the power of heartful communities to "begin crossing borders with mindfulness, leading to a greater willingness to be vulnerable and authentic" (p. 108). Perhaps the sense of separateness of ourselves as individuals dissipates when we mindfully sing this song and make eye contact. Perhaps our interconnectedness becomes clearer and vulnerability is made possible by the safety of being seen, of seeing others, of sharing space where we can all bring forward our full selves. Perhaps in making eye contact, we are making heart contact. We belong, we are related, and we sense it. Perhaps in the sensing, we know we are a heartful community, grounded in love.

In a conversation between Sharon Salzberg and Sebene Selassie, they discussed the

foundational importance of a **sense** of belonging, and that in its absence, there is a shakiness. What is it to endeavour to cultivate a kindergarten community where all can **sense** their belonging? Belonging, in this sense, **is** the centring of relationality. Selassie spoke in that same conversation about how we belong whether we're aware of it or not (Salzberg, 2020). Perhaps this is the renewed relationship which Dwayne Donald references.

We, with all our feelings and our common needs, are interconnected, related, whether we're aware or not. So how does building an expansive awareness of these common and intersecting needs, of our common humanity, of our belonging, of our relatedness—how does an awareness of all this inform our choices and our actions? How does such an awareness serve our relationships, our relations? How might we consider that just as we endeavour to meet our needs with every act we take, others—including more-than-humans—are doing precisely the same thing? In this way, perhaps practising presence and this needs-orientation that is Nonviolent Communication work in tandem to contribute to relationship renewal. Perhaps it is love.

CHAPTER 4: AWAKE TO EQUITY AND NEW POSSIBILITIES IN SCHOOL

Moving Toward the Discomfort

In this moment, I am sitting in my kitchen watching snowflakes fall slowly in the sun. No matter that it is late March and really my daydream is perhaps more to see the grass pushing through the expanse of white on the ground. The falling snow is beautiful. Sparkly. It has slowed me down as I sit and think. When I initially began preparing to write my thesis months ago, readying myself to inquire into stories from Kindergarten, my first step was to read through the stories I had already woven into papers for courses in this Master's program, reminding myself what meaning I had already uncovered. I was finding common threads, deepening my understanding of what was important to me and what these stories were inviting me to notice. There is one paper that I haven't been able to motivate myself to read. It is the one I wrote about centring connection and compassion not one month after Covid first shuttered the doors of schools around the world and our Kindergarten community "went remote" almost exactly three years ago. Even now as I write about it, my chest is heaving slightly and my eyes are watering. And so my gaze is immediately drawn to the window again to give space to these emotions as they move through my body. Images from that adrenaline-fueled time arrive in my mind …

… of standing on families' stoops as I wrap my arms around my own body to emulate the hug I am offering a child at a distance;

… of running up and down our city sidewalk at home, camera in hand, drawing chalk hearts and singing wildly "Love hearts!!! Oooooo—Hearts everywhere …!" as I make a video inviting children to do the same on their own city sidewalks to connect with their neighbours;

… of stabbing at the icy sewer in our back lane to drain the growing puddles, earbuds securely in place while I talk through technology logistics with a Kindergarten colleague from another school—strategizing how we might authentically stay connected with our learning

communities despite this sudden and unfamiliar physical distance.

Yup, I'm crying now. Remembering. Retelling. Reliving these stories. There is a wisdom in this weeping, and perhaps it is time to go there. Perhaps as I reflect on this profoundly difficult time for our whole community generally and our learning community specifically, I might hold these wonderings alongside …. What did Covid, its closures, its restrictions, and all the necessary safety adaptations make visible about the school system? Who are we as a system; as a community? Who am I within it? Who might we become as we reflect on this system and all the diverse relations that comprise it, human and more? Who might we become as we centre those relations within this system? What possibilities emerge? What wisdom is there in this weeping?

As I garner my courage and read through my reflections on connection in those early days of remote school, I am somewhat surprised by how clearly the threads I currently articulate as important to me were, even then, so vibrantly at centre. My main priority was contributing to connection: teacher with families, families with other families, teachers with teachers, and also connections within households and with the wider neighbourhood. I even articulated the embodied experience which I hoped to invite from families: that of an "exhale rather than a tummy clench." I wanted to support families, rather than burden them, invite engagement rather than add to the already growing pressures within the household. It was so clear to me then that I needed to consider that children's relationships to school—that families' relationships to school—were embedded within all kinds of other relationships that took families' headspace and time. I wanted to be sensitive to those other relationships as well. Perhaps these considerations that were so visible and important as we all entered this Covid disruption are no different than the considerations that might benefit us as a system generally. What is the web of relations into which school relations are woven? How might this wondering inform our practice? How might it inform the routines and habits of school?

It strikes me as I sit quietly and let flashes of that time come back to me, that my memories are all socially engaged, despite—perhaps even **because** of?—the distance. These are flashes of connection. I am reminded again of bell hooks: "When we choose to love, we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other" (2001, p. 93) . In these flashes that evoke such emotion, perhaps what I am feeling is love—love as we moved against separation—love in the perseverance of relationship.

Standing on a family stoop, I wanted nothing more than to hug those children close, to have the physical pressure of their arms around me and mine around them, so we improvised. And of course, smiles followed. The connection was felt. We were moving **toward** one another, even at our six-foot distance.

Running around drawing hearts on the city sidewalk, I felt connected to my neighbours (whom I very much know and love), and I used joy and humor and zany spontaneous singing in the hopes of inspiring children to get out there and leave their marks of connection with their neighbours too. I felt that while I might not be able to share love in proximity to these families, perhaps I might plant seeds of love-finding with what **was** proximal to them.

And in the lane, poking at the iced-up sewer drain, what strikes me is that as we as teachers struggled and made the most of every single moment to figure out how to meet this new challenge, it never entered my mind that I would have to figure it out alone. We may have each been teaching from our separate homes, and yet—we were still together. The humanness, the interconnectedness, of this new version of school was, as a colleague expressed it in the mess of it all, non-negotiable. We were, as ever, still in relationship.

In May of 2020, a month after I wrote that reflective paper on connection, Kimiko Shibata spoke with Matt Galloway (2020) on CBC's The Current as both a parent and teacher

living in those early days of remote schooling. She referenced the ways in which different points of privilege were affecting how each of us was navigating those times. In her own life, she was conscious of her fluency in the English language as a point of privilege in her children's journey of remote school. She reflected on others who might not hold the same points of privilege that she held:

> Our newcomer, refugee families, we've got families who are living with addiction and mental health issues. We have so many vulnerable and at risk marginalized families in our communities. Some don't have the Internet bandwidth to participate or the technology. We have kids who don't know where the next meal is coming from. We have so many families that are going through really tough times that are just—the stress load on them is incredible. So they're in that sort of trauma brain right now. And as a society right now, we are all going through this really this collective traumatic experience right now and everyone's feeling very real feelings of helplessness, loss and grief. And, you know … we're not in the same boat, but we're all in the same storm. (para. 32)[5]

"We are not in the same boat, but we're in the same storm." It seems to me that I was trying to offer Kindergarten engagements that might help these different boats to stay close, perhaps even to help stabilize one another on those stormy waters.

It strikes me as I read Shibata's reflections, that many of those diverse challenges for families, some of which offer more or less ease of relationship with school, that these challenges were there before Covid sent us all home and made them more visible. They continue now, even as we try to get back into "normal" routines again. These diverse parts of our realities and identities affect our relationships and experiences of school whether we were "doing school" at

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[5] The paragraph marker is approximate given the transcript formatting.

home or inside the classroom. In my own reflections on how to "do school" remotely, I wondered how to cultivate a schooling experience that had a sense of moving **toward** one another rather than **apart**. I hoped to provide as much ease as possible for families. Logistically, I wanted families to be able to find our read alouds with ease, for children to engage with our "morning meeting" videos with ease, to tap into familiar joy-filled routines with ease, even to simply access our resources and schedule with ease using SeeSaw, a learning platform I had already used for years to offer easy communication and updates between home and school.

I spent a great deal of time and energy thinking through how to make my messaging inviting and efficient and clear so that families wouldn't have to work hard to keep their children and themselves connected to what I hoped was an authentic and valued community in their lives—in whatever way worked for them. For those who valued the physical aspect of relationship and the **place** of school, we created a postal system of sorts. Children decorated mailboxes out of cracker boxes at home that we then affixed to massive panels of cardboard so we could send messages to one another by visiting the front steps of the school where we placed the panels a couple of times per week. When restrictions eased a bit, we had small groups gather to have Kindergarten story time, settled on massive family-sized stumps that we rolled to be 6 feet apart from one another in the playground. We found togetherness, even in the distance.

I consider now that not all families participated in my invitations in the same way or with the same frequency—or at least not in a way that was made visible to me. Some of us appeared to be moving **toward** each other more so than others, finding connection within this community, despite our physical distance. And I wonder now, were those other families who weren't as visibly engaged in our invitations meeting their need for connection elsewhere? Did some of these families perhaps not consider school as a place to pursue connection and belonging and so chose to do so elsewhere? And then were some families not finding much connection at all in

this time? Was their need for connection left unmet and were they experiencing isolation? Who were we, what was school, in these different families' lives? Who are we now, and who might we be if we centre connection, if we centre relationality? Who might we be as a system if we shape our decisions and routines in ways that hold at centre these diverse points of privilege and unevenly distributed barriers to strong relationship with school? What did we learn from that time? What might still be learned if we bring our attention there, to finding connection even with all our different experiences and intergenerational stories of school?

As I consider these wonderings, I turn to Beth Berila's TEDx Talk and what she offers—that while connection is perhaps most effortlessly made with those with whom we find similarities, that **difference** provides new important possibilities as a bridge to connection. She warns that the cost of connection made exclusively through a "sameness" orientation results in an erasure of how difference presents in society. She offers that differences are especially important when considering identity markers that serve as key operative categories in society. These are markers that can affect how we experience the world—our access to resources or safety, how laws and policies land on us, and others' perceptions of us. She lists markers like race, sexual identity, national identity, dis/ability, religion, immigrant status, culture, and class. None of these markers are to be understood as prescriptive of experience, but rather that they affect how each of us uniquely experience moments, even those shared with others (Berila, 2019, 3:10). Berila (2019) says further that "There are intractable power dynamics around these identities that grant privileges to some and saddle others with oppression. Unless we account for those lived differences, genuine connection between them is impossible" (3:30), and that "We can't all just be human when some of us are regularly dehumanized in society" (8:02). What does it mean for us to find connection within difference? Berila (2019) urges that "If we really want to be connected with one another then we will have to let go of this desire for sameness at

the expense of difference" (15:22). What are the ways in which our system perpetuates an assumption of sameness at the expense of difference? How might I expand my openness to and awareness of the ways in which children and their families are positioned in relation to me, how we are different from one another? How might I stay awake to the ways in which these differences might affect privilege within the school system, might give more or less space for different voices, stories, and ideas? How might I hold openness to the ways in which our diverse identity markers might affect how each of us experience our shared moments together? How might we find connection **through** these different identities?

I go back to the writings of Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu (2018). His writing points to the foundational importance of connection to our existence as humans, and offers fundamental questions that frame connection: "What am I part of? Where do I belong? Where is my community? Who are my people?" (p. 96). What would it take as a school community and system for all families to consider "school" as a part of their responses to these questions?

Murphy-Shigematsu reflects too on growing up in the United States with an expanding awareness of his various identities—identities of Japanese, Irish, American, mixed. What strikes me are his words around coming to a place of seeing himself as more than just his Japanese identity, to a place of recognizing all of them (p. 96). He reflects that "Over the years I learned to live in many worlds, despite the persistent attempts of others to confine me to the standards of their dichotomous world that told them I must be either this or that. I became more whole, more connected, more the person I was born to be" (p. 97). I wonder at the routines, habits and structures of schooling that might obscure children's abilities to perceive and cultivate the pluralism that is their identity, that falsely dichotomize the world into this **or** that. Are there subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which we invite children (and families and even staff) to **choose** which parts of their identities they bring forward during their time in their school community,

leaving other parts hidden? Are there ways we hinder them from growing into who they were "born to be?"

From The Other Side of the Fence

In one of my early years of teaching Kindergarten, we ended each morning playing outside. One mom, in picking up her daughter, rarely entered the schoolyard to chat or spend time together while the children played, instead calling to her from the other side of the eight-foot fence. The child would heed her mother's call, running from the structure to grab her bag and head home as she waved goodbye to me in passing. One day at the end of March, I caught up with them as they walked away. I wanted to offer a brochure for an after-school program available to Indigenous families. I wasn't sure in their case.

"Yup!" she replied. "We're all card carrying!" I hadn't known of her daughter's Indigenous heritage. I casually asked about whether there was anything from their cultural experience that she might want to bring to the classroom, and she happily agreed to teach the children to make bannock.

When the day arrived a week or so later, the mom also brought her auntie along, and the two of them spent the morning moving the children through the different steps to make their own bread, eating it warm together when it was all baked. At the very end of the morning, we headed outside like usual, children running ahead and into the playground. The mom went with us, passing through the gates of the playground and heading to the picnic table where she sat criss-cross on top and initiated a casual conversation with me about camping. I remember the feeling I had in that moment. The joy in small talk, of finding connection and chatting casually about something as simple as camping. I don't remember details of the days and months that followed, and I can't speak to the mother's experience or why she chose to enter the schoolyard that day, but I do remember that she more regularly joined us in the school grounds at pick up, and there

were smiles and a general openness to chat in those times.

Is this what Berila was referencing when suggesting that we need to allow difference to serve as a bridge to connection? Did a new trusted space open in our relationship only once her Indigenous identity, an identity different than mine, was known? Is this what enabled us to more authentically move toward one another? And if she hadn't trusted that there was space for her and her daughter's Indigenous identity at the school until then, I wonder at all the other dynamics involved in dropping her child off there each day. Again, I cannot speak to this mother's stories and experiences, but her willingness to join the group after teaching us to make bannock holds meaning for me as I wonder who I am in families' lives, as I serve as a representative of the larger school system. What does it mean for us to engage in school routines and learning experiences that make space for children and families to **show up** in all their diverse identities? What does it mean for "school" to be included in families' responses to Murphy-Shigematsu's questions of "What am I part of? Where do I belong? Where is my community? Who are my people?"

As I sit with this story alongside Murphy-Shigimatsu's questions, it strikes me that just as important as wanting "school" to be part of families' responses, what does it take for "students" and "families" and even "colleagues" to be centred in school staff responses to those very same questions? What does it take for us to consider our own movement **toward** families, **toward** one another, **toward** our students? What does it take for us to cultivate a culture of trust where not only do we hope that families wish to move toward us, but that we hope to move toward them?

I think about the mother on the picnic table and the relational invitation that she extended by asking me about camping. I received it with ease and remember chatting for a while after that. She had made space for me to see our interconnectedness, just as **I** had earlier hoped **she** could. What does it mean for **me** to move toward families, without it being threatening or filled with imposition and expectation, but rather based on reciprocity and mutual interest? Perhaps we

cannot understand this movement "toward" as one-directional. Perhaps we move toward **one another**, not one way **or** the other. Perhaps.

The mother's offering of "camping" as a gesture of connection brings my thoughts to the writings of Thupten Jinpa (2015) and his reflections on the role of perceived similarity in expressing compassion. He cites a "conviction in the key Buddhist insight that compassion depends on the identification with the object of our concern" (p. 157). Jinpa is reflecting on the ways in which our perceptions affect our inclination to help others. He cites a study from Piercarlo Valdesolo and David DeSteno (2011) in which pairs of participants listened to music on headphones and were invited to tap along. Some pairs listened to music in sync and therefore tapped in sync with one another, while other pairs' music and therefore tapping was not in sync with each other. The pairs who tapped in sync were dramatically more inclined to help one another and for longer periods of time (as cited in Jinpa, 2015, pp. 156–157.). In the name of compassion, Jinpa is encouraging readers to practise perceiving similarity in others. At first read, this may initially appear to be a plea to ignore all differences. It may initially seem to be an idea that runs counter to Berila's idea that connection cannot be made without making space for difference. It strikes me now, the power of bringing these two ideas together, that perhaps when there was space for the mother to express her card-carrying Indigenous identity—her different position within the colonial institution of school, that strategies to find similarity could surface. In a system like school, where historical and contemporary power dynamics affect how we function—power dynamics like the intergenerational trauma of Indian Residential Schools, dynamics of language, dynamics of work schedule or income or education—the ability to perceive our similarities and live in relational reciprocity might best be founded on an openness to these differences. Might it be that once we can trust that our differences are seen and honoured, those similarity-perceivable small-talk topics of camping or the weather might

emerge? Might those small-talk topics then even bridge to building something new together? How might our relationships within the school system take form as we make space for difference and then perceive our similarities? What new world might be imagined together? Who might we become as we centre a relationality that opens to both differences and similarities?

Relationship Denial

I am reminded of Dwayne Donald's sharing of a nêhiyaw (Cree) teaching of wâhkôhtowin, and how it "teaches human beings to understand themselves as fully enmeshed in networks of relationships that support and enable their life and living" (Donald, 2021, pp. 58–59; Donald, 2022, para. 9). Fully enmeshed. This carries an image for me of threads. Perhaps loosely woven. Perhaps tangled. In any case connected. Individual and united. Enmeshed in relationship.

Dwayne Donald's other framework of relations, that of colonial relationship denial, comes to mind here as I reflect on connection in a system filled with diverse and plural identities:

> When newcomers arrived, the story of ancient kinship relationality was gradually replaced by the emerging story of a Canadian nation and nationality. ... This narrative taught that the needs of human beings, in the form of the growth and development of the Canadian nation and nationality, must always supersede the needs of all other forms of life. (2021, pp. 55–56).

He goes on that "Educational jurisdictions across Canada have slowly come to realize that the stories that have been told in Canadian schools have left out critical considerations, including the memories, experiences and foundational knowledges of Indigenous peoples" (2021, p. 56). What does it mean for us as a school system to be leaving out critical considerations? How might we continue to identify them, name them? As we continue to (re)establish school routines now when Covid restrictions have lifted, how might we integrate those considerations? Who needs to do the considering? How might these considerations affect change?

Donald brings a pedagogy of walking as a way to come back to awareness of these relationships again, referencing the walks he leads in Edmonton, Alberta. “By walking and listening, people begin to perceive the life around themselves differently. They feel enmeshed in relationships. This change in perception is not the result of anything special I do as their guide, rather, it arises from their willingness to be put in the flow of the traditional wisdom insight of the wâhkôhtowin imagination. They walk themselves into kinship relationality” (2021, p. 61). His words echo Jinpa’s reference to perceiving similarity, making space for the power of **perception**—Donald’s words that “people begin to perceive the life around themselves differently. They feel enmeshed in relationships” (2021, p. 61).

Considering Another of My Identities: A Parent

I think about the power of both being **aware** of our perceptions and also of being awake to **how** our perceptions are shaped. I think of my position as a parent of two children in the public school system, and experiences when I have bumped up against patterns of “relationship denial” made visible in the school system. These were moments where I perceived an invitation to sense our separateness from one another. I received a schoolboard-wide invitation to do a Parent/Guardian Survey. In the invitation I remember being happy to see a long list of languages that could be requested in order to access the survey with greater ease. Perhaps in that list, I sensed the strength in and honouring of the diversity that existed within our divisional community. Beginning the survey though, I very quickly noticed in myself a deep discomfort that bubbled into anger. The opening questions themselves troubled me. The survey opened by asking me to categorize myself in terms of my income and level of education using a drop-down menu. I was uncomfortable with the questions, and I was also uncomfortable with how I was articulating my discomfort at the time. My first inclination was to consider the harm being done to those who fit within the “lowest” categories of these options—least education or least

household income. I sensed my "separateness" from those who would fit in other categories than me, and I felt uncomfortable with this separateness. I felt anger that some of us might have the satisfaction of clicking the "most" money or education, while others of us click the "least." As Berila's TedTalk outlines (2019), we do need to acknowledge our differences. Perhaps there is important relational nuance in how these differences are named, and by whom.

After resourcing my initial emotional reaction—by phoning some educational mentors and talking it through with other parents, I remember that the way I chose to address the underlying concern with the survey itself was to get in touch with whoever in this school division held some influence with the survey. It is a different division than the one in which I work. I remember the email I sent requesting to discuss the survey with the applicable divisional director, and the rich phone conversation with her that followed. I remember her letting me know that these kinds of income and education questions were standard statistical questions and weren't intended to rank people; that these surveys support budgetary decision-making and that such questions are part of that bigger picture. I am reminded of Donald's language of relationship denial, and wonder whether "budgets" and "big picture" are a manifestation of that—that we can justify practices that alienate us from one another in the name of numbers. I wonder—if we held at centre the relationships with and between those who fill out these surveys—would we begin the survey with questions that separate and rank? Equity considerations are important when making budget considerations, but census data is available for such decisions. Is asking families to declare these details directly to the school system serving school's relationship with families, serving relationships amongst families?

Beginnings Matter

It seems to me that those beginning invitations to communicate—like those beginning questions in the survey where we hope families will then share about their experiences with

school—these beginnings matter. How we invite one another to shape our relationships matters. I wonder what values are conveyed when we begin a survey by requesting that all participants state their income and education. I wonder who feels valued, and who—perhaps undervalued? Are there questions that might better align with honouring families and their plurality of identities? It strikes me that surveys themselves may not even reach all the folks whose voices have less space within schools. If we centre relationality, what might be other ways to connect with families, other ways to surface what is important to them? What does it mean to inquire into our habits and practices at a systems level and whether they align with what it is we say we are trying to do? Might we endeavour to "do" school aligning with relationships of love?

Beginnings matter. Families matter. I wonder beyond surveys to other "beginnings" that we might consider if we, as a school system, want to actively value students—to value families. All families. I think of those beginning days of each school year. In the school division in which I work, all Kindergarten-grade 8 classroom teachers begin the year each autumn—the entire first two days—with half-hour meetings with each family in our classroom community. There is great possibility in this kind of beginning, it seems to me, and while each teacher can use this time according to what serves their relationships with families, it seems to me this is a systemic choice to value the role of families in children's school experiences. As a teacher, I choose to use that time to get to know the child alongside their familiar family, to hear about their home languages and their play interests and the feelings they have about beginning their first year of school. I hope that in that time, families see that I will love their child, value their stories and experiences, and that I will value their whole family as we learn in community together.

Who are we in families' lives, and who are they in ours? Who might we become as a system as we centre relationality in our beginnings … but also throughout children's and families' schooling experiences?

Centring Relationship Through and with the Land: Iskigamizige-Giizis

I think now about how we begin each day in Kindergarten. I come back to Donald's offering of wâhkôhtowin, being a good relative to our kin, and how he explains that in the nêhiyaw worldview "kin" goes beyond humans (Donald, 2021; Donald, 2022). This view of relationality in which land and more-than-humans are kin, both resonates for me and awakens me to expand my perception of what is possible. Through these years of Covid restrictions and now even as they have lifted, we have spent much more of our learning time outside, beginning each day together by directly experiencing the seasons as they move through their annual cycle—through play, through inquiry, and in storytelling. What has emerged, in part from our focus on presence and noticing and wondering, is a deeper relationship with the land and these changing seasons. Alongside these experiences is a growing resonance with one of the ancestral languages of this territory, Anishinaabemowin (also referred to as Ojibwe or Saulteaux).

In Kindergarten this year, we grew to really voice our noticings and wonderings about snow as it changed within the winter season, sticky or fluffy and then into the awkward messy bits of March, when the snow might melt a bit in the warmth of the sun and then the surface refreezes in the nightly cold. The students would come to me some March mornings, clutching snow bricks destined for our little fort, remarking on the shiny icy surface on only one side of the chunk of snow, and we would notice that the other sides were still opaque and crystally. Then we learned that we were in the month of Onaabani-giizis—"the hard crust on the snow moon," as referred to in some Anishinaabemowin dialects (Vukelich, 2023a). I felt such connection to this land in that moment of Anishinaabemowin learning—that just as we were noticing and deepening our relationship with the icy surface of our snow chunks, so too have generations of peoples who have been learning on and from this land. What power to notice how this cultural knowledge is held in the very words with which we might organize the passing of time through

the seasons—this “hard crust on the snow moon.”

So we began to learn more of the 13 moons that take us through a journey around the sun, and found that one of the names for the next moon in Anishinaabemowin was that of Iskigamizige-giizis—“sap boiling moon” (Vukelich, 2023b). After a bit of asking around, we were gifted a connection to a man from a nearby First Nation who came to share his knowledge of maple trees and harvesting sap in a way that honours the trees as kin. In preparing for his visit, we watched a sap harvesting video made by another Anishinaabe sap harvester, noticing that in a spirit of gratitude he first offered asema (“tobacco”) to the trees (Minnesota Historical Society, 2020). So before our visit, we also prepared with a pouch of tobacco for both our new teacher and also the mitigoog (“trees”), tobacco that was grown on land here in our school division.

What sits with me today was the relationship that took shape with a school neighbour in the days before we were set to tap. We had noticed that we didn’t have many Manitoba Maples on our schoolgrounds, likely because these trees have been viewed by many as weeds, so would not have been planted by divisional staff with intention. We did notice though, that a nearby yard had a good handful of them and we had met these neighbours a few times in our moments outside. So a few days before our scheduled teaching on tapping, the Kinders and I knocked on the door and while our request was unexpected, our neighbours happily agreed that we could harvest the sap of the trees on their yard.

The morning arrived and before school began, my new tree teacher and I walked around the area, checking the trees to discern which would work for harvesting. As we were walking around, the neighbour was just pulling her car into the lane and she stopped when I waved. She got out of the car and explained how glad she was that she saw us, as she had been troubled because she hadn’t made sure earlier that we were going to offer tobacco to the trees before the sap was harvested. I assured her of our intention to do just that, adding that the tobacco was even

grown here locally at the school division's land-based learning centre. She was visibly relieved and was excited that they would collect some of the sap themselves on the weekend.

And there it was. My own growth made visible to me. I felt a wave of gratitude that I had been able to reach into my pocket and show her the tobacco that I had carried with me into the yard, already prepared to integrate this new bit of personal and professional learning into our Kindergarten practice, to honour this protocol of reciprocity in our relationship with the land.

While I have long been interested in and cultivated my own professional growth with engaging children with nature as part of our learning day, it has only been recently that I have begun to find ways to more directly learn about, honour, and integrate Indigenous ways of engaging the land and with our school grounds. There is so much possibility to live into, and I see this work as contributing to work of reconciliation, but I feel frequent discomfort as I try to understand how to do that—how to listen, how to try, how to discern when to lead and when to follow. I remember an invitation that Niigaan Sinclair directed at Canadians (settlers) in his Sherman Lecture on reconciliation and the future of education (2021). He framed reconciliation as being about "understanding relationships with each other" (1:14:45). After clarifying that the work of self-determination and conversations about sovereignty are not "revolutionary things," but that they are about Indigenous national identity and rights, he offered that really "All of that's me saying actually 'I love you.' … Or that 'We're in this together,' and that 'Let's live in a just and wonderful place in which we all have meaning and we all carry lives together" (1:15:31). And in encouraging those of us who are trying, he offered this advice—"Listening twice as much before you speak is probably the good method here" (1:16:36). Here again I hear him pointing to the common threads of love and relationality and justice, and freedom for all to live meaningfully. All of this, it seems to me, is "I love you."

In this moment in the lane, when our neighbour asked if we were going to honour

Indigenous protocol before harvesting from the land, perhaps this was my neighbour offering her love. Perhaps in the offering of her concern, I was able to better understand my role in reconciliation—I had done some listening. I was able to affirm that I was familiar with the protocol, and could affirm that we would be making visible to the children this important way of living in relationship with the land. Is my ability to share and honour my neighbour's agenda perhaps a personal demonstration of the ways in which a school system can grow … can love? We are, after all, a living system—made up of humans—humans enmeshed in a web of relations, all with our different experiences and agendas. I think of Maxine Greene's (1997) ideas of "teaching as possibility," and I touch for a moment on the expansiveness of this idea. Possibility opens into more new possibility, which opens into yet more. That is, provided we both perceive it, and also allow our attention to rest there enough to engage with it.

It strikes me now that while I was ready to respond to the neighbour's concern that we make an offering to the trees, I hadn't actually expected such a concern to be expressed. I don't know our neighbour well, save for these few times when we've visited at the start of a morning in the school yard. I do wonder now whether such an exchange would have happened two-, three-, five-years ago. Much has happened in our world in recent years, and I want to inquire into what may have contributed to this exchange in the lane. I wonder—would I have even been working to tap trees with the children before Covid prompted us to spend such a committed amount of time outside? If so, I also wonder whether a neighbour would have voiced such a concern, even if they felt it.

I am conscious here that not only has Covid opened new possibility to reflect on how we "do school." Other major events have also shaken the foundations of these systems—both the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis, United States, in 2020, which sparked global protests and broader support of the Black Lives Matter movement, and also the

release of findings of a land survey of former Kamloops Indian Residential School in BC, which identified the remains of 215 children. This survey was followed by many more surveys at former residential schools across Canada, reinforcing the knowledge long held within Indigenous communities. Just days after those first survey findings were released, Orange Shirt Day, honoured annually by a growing number of schools on September 30 since 2013, became recognized as National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a statutory holiday federally, though not provincially here in Manitoba. This day, which honours the experience of Phyllis Webstad having her new special shirt taken away on her first day at Indian Residential School, "recognizes the tragic legacy of residential schools, the missing children, the families left behind and the survivors of these institutions" (Government of Canada, 2023). These last years have opened more space for dialogue and awareness within Canadian society, affecting larger conversations about Canadian identity and even how Canada Day is marked, given the growing awareness among settler Canadians of the lasting impact of residential schools.

Holding these considerations in mind, I wonder about that short exchange in the lane, where concern for honouring our trees was both voiced by an Indigenous neighbour and shared by this settler teacher, Indigenous knowledge keeper standing alongside. I wonder at the pathways to systemic reconciliation, to reciprocity and the healing and renewal of historical relationships. Perhaps possibility emerges from these stories … the spontaneous moments in lanes when we share concern for our mitigoog kin (tree kin), the unexpected declarations outside tall fences of being "card carrying!" that lead to moments of understanding across differences. How might our systems make ever more space for these moments? For acknowledging and centering relationships? For healing and renewing relationships? And I am reminded that systems are not separate from the personal and social, that systems both shape and are shaped by the personal and social, by the relationships that pulse within.

Belonging in School

As I reflect with gratitude on the readiness of our neighbour to express her concern that we honour Indigenous protocol by offering tobacco to the trees, I think further back and wonder why I didn't know that the mom on the other side of the fence was Indigenous. How might I have known? Just as our neighbour made her concerns known about honouring the trees, might this mom have made her Indigenous identity known were her child to be in Kindergarten now, after more dialogue has opened these last few years? Are we more open now to share a diversity of our identities with one another? I wonder at the diverse identities I have yet to notice and honour from my position as a teacher. Beth Berila (2015), in her book *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy* writes that our own mindful learning "helps us see that who we are shapes what we know, but it also helps us expand the lens of what we can see" (p. 21). Who am I as an individual, and who am I as part of the institution of school? Who are we becoming? How might I (we) mindfully make expansive the lens of what we can see? What systemic barriers are in place that might make identity information like Indigenous status obscured or even purposefully withheld? What might support a growing readiness for concerns to be voiced—that we honour our tree relatives with tobacco, that we not rank and separate ourselves by income or education, that we make space for diverse expressions? What will it mean for all members of our school community to trust that what is important to them will be considered, will have space at school? Honouring the lasting trauma of Canada's residential school system is an important step to building trust. Who else might need focused attention in order to rebuild trust to share stories and values?

What limits my ability to see? What might be needed in the school system for a sense of belonging to be accessible to all, for all to be seen in their plurality, in their fullness? I think of the word "welcoming," and wonder whether perhaps it is not enough to be welcoming as a school, as the expression of welcome is one directional and extended to outsiders—that is until

those outsiders consider that they belong to this community.

What exactly defines "community"? Is it more than simply a collection of people? This bannock-baking mom was, by many indicators, already part of our school community. Her daughter's name appeared each day on my attendance roster. Her phone number and other details were in our database. She came to the school each day at pick up.

It seems to me that something powerful happened as we visited at the picnic table that day—that perhaps until that day, we were behaving in Dwayne Donald's pattern of "relationship denial." It's not that I was **not** in relationship with this mother, but more so that we perhaps weren't living into this relationship. I think of the stories that we hold and how these stories shape not only who we are but also the relationships into which we are enmeshed. This mother had lived, by my understanding, many stories of bannock-baking, stories involving her family baking together, it seemed. Whatever her stories of bannock-baking, they were being told long before she wove them in with her daughter's classroom stories. These bannock-baking stories are also part of her daughter's story, and now part of her daughter's story of school. What does it mean for our school system to make space for the full expression of children's ever-expanding identities, weaving home identities with school identities? What does it mean for our school system to weave family stories, skills, and identities in with its own? How might I consider this diversity of stories when curating play invitations or selecting books for story time? What does it mean for everyone in the relational web of our school community to acknowledge our patterns of relationship denial and to sense our common belonging, to contribute to our relational renewal?

Considering Intersectionality of Needs within the School System, Considering Equity

A relational lens reinforces how systems are not separate from the personal or the social. "Without that active awareness of the systemic backdrop of our individual existence, we regularly re-create and reinforce systems like colonialism and capitalism and their onslaught on

life and people," writes Miki Kashtan in a blog post about the opportunity that a needs-orientation provides for our sense of interconnectedness (2019, para. 16). In a follow-up blog post, Kashtan adds that "More is needed in order to get us to see what is made hidden, to make the connections that are deliberately obscured and to care beyond the individualization of life that characterizes our current ways" (2020, para. 11). There is so much resonance again with what Dwayne Donald brings through his writings of wâhkôhtowin and relationality—that people might "perceive the life around themselves differently. They feel enmeshed in relationships" (2021, p. 61). Kashtan offers a needs-orientation as a tool to serve relationality, and I go back to that little girl years ago at the snack table who attempted to hit the little boy as a strategy to secure her threatened need for belonging. A more common habitual teacher response might have drawn me to blame and shame in order to "deal" with her behaviour and I wonder what larger patterns I might have contributed to had I done so.

I picture the girl, processing the big emotions that prompted her to then turn her body away from the group after she tried to hit the boy and he jumped up to get me. I think now of how, even amidst so much important difference, we all have these common needs—to be seen, to be heard, to belong, to love, and yet here—she was turning her body away. Cutting herself off. She was, it seems, withdrawing from her very need to be seen and heard, choosing to let these needs go unmet. It strikes me now that perhaps she was, in that moment, attending to a different need by her strategy of turning away. It seemed to me in one moment—a threat to her belonging prompted a strategy of hitting, but after the strategy misfired—a different need then emerged as more important, trumping her other needs and prompting her to withdraw. In the face of a more pressing need—perhaps that of safety—it seems to me that her unmet needs to belong or to be seen and heard receded from her awareness, leaving these needs unmet as she focused on feeling safe again, coiled up in fear.

And I now remember the intersectionality of needs that Kimiko Shibata (Galloway, 2020) referenced in her reflections on the diverse challenges that Covid presented to families in different boats in the same metaphorical storm. With or without Covid, families and individual children, even staff, arrive at school with different collections of needs that are unmet each day, or arrive at school with a more readily triggered sense of threat to these needs.

How might the system be shaped in a way that considers this little girl and her web of intersecting unmet or easily threatened needs? How might the system consider these needs, and also the girl's awareness of and relationship to them? How might a system consider that for some children—for this little girl—her relationship with her needs is affected by all kinds of difficult, even traumatic stories from before she even entered the school system? How do we consider community-members' intersecting needs within a school system, and the disparities of access to strategies to meet them? Both those children at the snack table belonged there, but it seemed they could not equally trust that this need would be met for them there in that social setting. Their perception of their opportunities to meet their various other needs was perhaps different. How do we as school staff support children in meeting an array of intersecting unmet needs? How do we support children in discerning **which** unmet needs they might attend to **when**? How do we decide which unmet needs **we** will support and when? How do we cultivate a school community where our relationality is centred and sensed, where we endeavour to meet our needs with an understanding that others are doing precisely the same thing? How do we cultivate a culture of compassion even when a harmful strategy is used, or attempted?

The complexity—of all of us within the school system meeting our needs—becomes so apparent as I reflect on how we are each in a constant state of making micro-decisions about which needs we will attend to, and which strategies we will access to meet them. The little girl at the snack table might have felt her need for belonging to be threatened, and I recognize I too

might experience moments of threat to my sense of connection or belonging, but the strategies **I** might access in those moments would be different than the ones from which **she** could choose. I have, based on both my particular collection of life stories and also my much longer time of living, developed different and more strategies to meet this need. I have my particular set of strategies that I have developed across my lifetime and I access them with varying degrees of success to navigate the systems that make up our society. How does the diversity of life experiences affect the strategies that are readily available to us as we endeavour to meet our needs—life experiences affected by our intersecting identities of gender, culture, dis/ability, socioeconomic status—all in relation to the larger systems that govern our society and how power is distributed (Berila, 2019)? What can we do as educators and within the school system to cultivate in our students and ourselves a collection of strategies to meet our needs that considers others, that considers ourselves, that centres love and all our relations, that holds us in our interconnection in all the diverse expressions we hold? How do we help ourselves access those strategies when we need them?

I wonder again at the role of being actively **aware** of this interconnectedness. How can we cultivate the awareness that builds heartful communities, that builds relation-oriented systems, systems founded on love? How might we expand our lenses of perception to see one another in all our fullness, to sit on picnic tables and stand in lanes and hear one another's stories, to know ourselves as enmeshed in all the relations that sustain us, to see ourselves in relationship with the world around us? How might this school system, our school system, serve love?

CHAPTER 5: IN PAUSING, NOTICING, AND WONDERING: LOVING—IN RELATION

The snow is long gone now. My daydream of green poking up from the ground is now a reality. I am still sitting in my sunlit kitchen to write and inquire and reflect, but now the windows are wide open and despite being tethered to my laptop, I feel so connected to the outside world as the chittering of squirrels and the call of returning geese cause me to pause and be thankful. I am so present in this moment, aware of the web of relations (including the seasonal cycle) into which I am enmeshed. It is from this relational place that I allow wonderings to surface…. What message is that squirrel chirping, and to whom? Why do the birdsongs swell and then die down? Where might the people in that passing car be going and what might be on their minds and in their hearts? I am conscious here that the wonderings aren't asking for answers, but rather that the wonderings themselves hold value. They inform a growing sense of our interconnection—that we are sharing this land, this sunshine—that we are sharing this sound space. And the swell in my chest as I look out the window at the expanse of green buds on blue sky—this swell, I know to be love.

In Kindergarten right now, we are learning that we can know ourselves to now be in the Zaagibagaa-giizis—the budding moon. James Vukelich (2023c) teaches that he believes that the Anishinaabemowin word zaag—"to emerge"—relates to the words "love"—zaagi-iwe or zaagi-idiwin: "our grandfather teaching, that sacred law of—to love one another." He offers that just as the perfume of blossoming flowers is for everyone, "a thief or a teacher," that the love that emerges from deep within us is "for the benefit of all of our relatives." I sit here now and am so struck with gratitude for this growing awareness of the network of relations into which I—we—are enmeshed. I am grateful that I am growing to understand what it means for my relatives to include the land and the more-than-humans. I'm grateful at how this growing understanding might contribute to the relationship renewal that Dwayne Donald calls for in schools (2022).

I think again to bell hooks' (2001) thoughts of love as an ethic—one that "presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well" (p. 87), that "we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet" (p. 88). Hope grows inside me as I centre the **living** of a love ethic. There is so much action in her understanding of love. Love goes beyond the limitations of a noun and becomes an ongoing endeavour. There is the seeing, there is the connecting, and there is the expanding scope—of "everyone else on the planet." I weave this living love with Niigaan Sinclair's words of reconciliation as a justice oriented "I love you" (2021), and to Dwayne Donald's words of wâhkôhtowin, of kinship and relationality, that "teaches human beings to understand themselves as fully enmeshed in networks of relationships that support and enable their life and living" (Donald, 2021, pp. 58–59; Donald, 2022, para. 9). What does it mean for us to understand ourselves as enmeshed in relationship? How does it inform our school practice to centre learning and experience around this enmeshed network of relations, where all have "the right to be free, to live fully and well" (hooks, 2001, p. 87)? How might I, as a teacher, contribute to a learning and schooling experience grounded by an expansive and relational understanding of love—that all be free, that we all might have space to fully show up and live well as our lives intersect with one another? How might learning be shaped by such a focus, shaped by relational love?

How might we be in tune with our tummy clenches, present to the wisdom in the weeping? What does it mean for us to scooch over so that all might sense their belonging and trust the network of relations into which they are enmeshed? How might we shape systems of schooling where the plurality of our identities—"card carrying" or otherwise—are known and valued and nurtured with care? How might we "do school" if expansive love for all our relations is at centre? Who might we become?

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