

Resiliency and Abundance: Finding Our Path to Wellness During COVID-19

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In the morning I open my window and smell the fresh air. The smell of rain from last night fills my nose. The scent reminds me to be grateful for the precious gift of the rivers, oceans and the waters that live inside of me. I can see the subtle new growth in the garden as the sunflowers smile back at me. I say a prayer of gratitude for all that is growing, ask abundance to multiple so, others may have the sustenance they need as well.

With each passing day as more people are impacted by COVID-19, this prayer is being amplified. COVID-19 has become a teacher for both wanted and unsolicited life lessons. COVID-19 has taken its toll on human beings across the globe. People of color and poor people are being impacted at alarming rates. Choices made by political leaders based in greed and corruption have furthered the damages to the point of a global economic collapse. Fracking and poisoning our earth's waters are happening every day. While healthcare workers and teachers fight to afford their lives, billionaires' profits increase.

In the U.S. alone millions of people have filed for unemployment, a safety net that is not available in most countries around the world and are on the verge of eviction. Businesses are closing at alarming rates, many people are on the brink of hunger if, they were not already there. This is the result when we do not value the sacredness of our land, water, children and elders.

The average income in the U.S. is \$52,000 a year. The valley I call home is only \$14,000. COVID-19 has dropped incomes significantly. Many people are out of work doing their best to make ends meet, as the cost of food sky rockets. The panic and hopelessness grows daily. There is a global perspective that the U.S. is wealthy. Not everyone here has that luxury. A large wealth gap exists. Those most vulnerable are people of color and people with already low incomes. There are many families that will go to bed hungry this evening. COVID-19 is widening the disparities. Our culture of individualism is coming to haunt us. Those who wear a mask and those who do not is practically split down party lines. More conservative individuals are making it more difficult to control COVID-19 numbers in their refusal to maintain their “rights”.

Consideration for elders and immune compromised people are at the mercy of this individualistic freedom seeking mentality. As of today, six million people in the U.S. have been infected with COVID-19. In my practice as a therapist parents tell they are down to their last bag of beans, “We don’t have enough to pay the rent.” “How will we survive without a job? one client asks”.

My teenage clients talk about their bleak futures and broken dreams as they enter the world of online schooling. The challenges for people continue to mount. I have a hard time keeping up with the number of referrals of people seeking help. My connection with clients are now through a computer screen on Zoom. Thoughts about my own stability creep inside my mind while I am in session. It takes more work these days to redirect my thoughts and to stay in the present. How does one stay calm in the midst of a pandemic and mounting tensions?

Eight years ago, I was invited to join a group of women to talk about the challenges of living rural in our area of northern New Mexico. One month prior, I had moved from a big city to the valley affectionately known as El Valle. The valley has about 2,500 people is one hour from any grocery store. Many people questioned my decision to move to such a rural area as a single parent with a one-year-old daughter.

Women gathered in the front room. Plates filled with delicious food each we all brought were on our laps and we began to share our stories. The women shared

their joys and struggles of living in the valley. They spoke about the isolation of not seeing friends while appreciating the beauty rural life in the high desert brings. Feelings of concern were shared about access to healthcare. The valley is located one hour from any store or hospital. Many of the women had health concerns and were unsure of what they might happen in an emergency. Several of the women had concerns about how to make a living with so few jobs in the surrounding area. The conversation lasted for hours, filled with laughter and tears. As the women brainstormed their ideas, they were placed on the wall on a paper. Dreams of communal farming, harvesting herbs for health and starting a thrift store was placed on paper and then into action. We began to call ourselves the El Valle Women's Collaborative.

Less than 30 days from meeting, the group began renting an old house bringing them unwanted wares from home to start a thrift store. The first day of organizing the thrift store was momentous. We saw what was possible when people come together for common humanity. Like the lesson mycelium teaches us, our reliance on one another began to grow and our networks became far reaching. With each passing week the thrift store continued to expand. More donations continued to come in locally and from the city one hour away. However, we were beginning to struggle with pricing the wares. Many women wanted to price the used items to make it accessible to the community. Others felt that if we priced the items higher, we would draw in more people from the city and the money could be used for other emerging projects. Everyone had good reasons for their pricing. There was just no consensus.

I began reflecting on how healers would make a living many years ago. Many people valued their healers in their community and brought items to support their families' needs.

There was no need to charge money because they were supported by the community. My friend and I began reading articles about sacred economics and gift economy. These seemingly new ideas were not new at all. They were in fact how many earth-based people around the globe have operated outside of the modern currency system. After all, our currency is only a couple of hundred years

old. After multiple discussions and challenges with pricing we decided as a group to try “pay what you want”.

In the beginning our neighbors were confused. “You mean I can take these clothes and pay anything I want?” “Yes, that is exactly what we are saying.” Some neighbors would come in and clear out a section of the store and pay a nominal fee. But that slowly started to change. Neighbors started to see it as a means to share with others. The donations items increased and people started to pay more to offset the cost of those who did not have the same financial resources. One woman who had very little resources came in and gave me her necklace. The necklace was a family heirloom. “I wanted you to have this. You gave me clothing and blankets when I could not afford them.” Her generous spirit deepened my understanding of what true abundance is. Abundance is not finite. It is an energy that comes from source ready for us to tap into.

I see those same lessons of abundance highlighted on my farm. Our farm called Bueno Para Todos is a project of the El Valle Women’s Collaborative. A few months after starting the thrift store a group of women including myself discussed the importance of growing food together. We began dreaming of creating a beautiful garden where we could feed our neighbors and ourselves alongside the thrift store. The dreams began to unfold and we soon had a community garden. The garden only lasted two growing seasons before we decided to close the thrift store. We attempted to negotiate a better price on the building and land but we were unable to do so. Just two years later we closed the store and had to look for another place to farm. One season we planted at a neighbor’s house. The travel to a less central location and growing tensions with other renters on the land made it less favorable than before.

At the time I was debating whether to return to the city. My contract as an adjunct professor ended. I had no money living in a small town, with a sick 13-year-old dog and struggling to hide my tears from my daughter. I did not want her to see me cry from being stressed out. I surrendered and began praying. “Creator if I am meant to be here in this valley provide me with a safe house for my daughter and give me land and give me water to work the land with.” “Help me to understand my purpose.” I had nothing left to give but my prayer. Three and a half months

later I received a call from some dear friends. “There a place on the other side of the valley we think you’d like.” How was I going to pay rent? I had no real income I just left teaching at the university. In all honesty I went to see the property out of a false sense of obligation. As I got out of my car I could hear the sound of the birds chirping. The first step on the land and I knew I was home. The property was 10 acres with a brand-new home and water rights. A perfect place for a community farm. Was this really happening? This was my prayer manifested. Within two week my friends negotiated minimal rent and my daughter and I were in our new home with plenty of space to plant.

Today Bueno Para Todos (Good for all) is a shared partnership with neighbors. It has become a mutual aid for COVID-19 as many people lose their jobs and employment becomes scarce. Each one of us takes turns watering and weeding. On the weekends we mask up and practice social distancing to do farm projects together to build camaraderie and grow food together. Native indigenous practices, sometimes called permaculture, have been used to build up healthy soil and increase production. We plant with intention.

All of our planting practices begin with an offering of traditional medicines of our people such as blue corn and tobacco. Our relationship to the plants is important. We treat them with respect as living beings by using pronouns or their names to address them. As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “In some native languages the term for plants are those who take care of us.” This type of synergistic mutualism is all over the natural world. A strong case for the anti-thesis of free market capitalism.

Before COVID-19 I was driving 12-16 hours a week to go to my office in the city, sometimes weeks would go by without going outside. Today seeing clients online has been a welcomed blessing. These days after my prayers and morning meditation, I walk outside to the farm. It is my place of grounding before seeing clients online. Sometimes my daughter, Yolotzin will join me in the morning if she’s not too tired. I treasure these moments when she joins me. Looking around I see the explosion of colors. The bees and ladybugs are hard at work, pollinating and

caring for their plant friends. Sometimes I am in awe thinking about how each of these full-size plants grew from tiny seeds. These plants are now my friends offering nutrition and a full spectrum of medicine. All they ask of me is to water them and pick them. On one hand the relationship with them is simple, I water and pick and they grow. Over the years I have learned that I can deepen this relationship by connecting with the plants. This can be done through offerings of blue corn, tobacco or a song. They like when I spend time with them watching them grow.

The garden will always give if I am intentional with the relationship. When I commune with her the abundance is even greater.

Bueno Para Todos has become a symbol of hope. Students from the United World College, an international high school have partnered with us over the last three years to build a large hoop house, craft raised beds, and start an edible food forest. The hands and minds of these young people have laid the foundation for the farm's success. Students join us monthly for a weekend to work on the farm and learn about healing the mind, body and spirit. We get the honor of engaging with them for two years. It is difficult to see them off when they graduate. The students become family. The mending of my heart comes when they call or message to say they are interning or taking a job to support mother earth. I feel like a proud mama whose child returned home for a visit. Just last week one of our students from Germany launched a fundraiser to support refugees and the environment. Another student from Greece told me she is helping to protect bats as pollinators. Meanwhile one of our other students is taking a gap year to work on a farm inspired by the work she did with BPT. My daughter is gaining a perspective of the world with the students without having to step foot off the land. These precious students have been a blessing, a welcome blessing.

Along with the offerings of tobacco and blue corn that go into the earth when planting, so do these stories. When someone comes to gather vegetables, they are taking in the goodness at a cellular level. Students from the United World College come from all over the globe. I can recall a day when we had over 60 people at the farm raising the hoop house. That day we had six continents represented, 13 countries, 11 languages, and 7 religions present. A friend leaned over and said, "Do

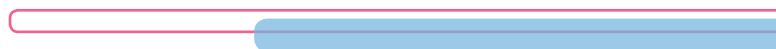
you know how amazing this is? Jews, Muslims and Christians are here on Passover working together.” I have always held high hopes for humanity. In that moment I knew that a new world was possible. The earth is our common ground and here we were caring for her together.

In trying to stay present and looking toward the future I remind myself to remember the past. The high desert lands that I stand upon were once home to the Pecos Native American Tribe. The Pecos people were one of the largest Tewa Pueblos (villages) at one time. Tewa territory, which consists of multiple pueblos, covers a large part of the state of New Mexico. Three years ago, in a fit of frustration and feeling my body overheat, I sat down in my chair and asked why am I even here. “I am from the city.” “I am not a typical farmer.” “Why creator do you have me here?” I was suddenly prompted to look at my computer. I was being guided to look at different webpages and found the history of the territory. During the Spanish conquest most of the Pueblo people were killed. The remaining 17 Pecos natives fled to be with their kin in Jemez Pueblo. I had recently learned at a family reunion that we were Jemez Pueblo people. My great grandparent had even been in the boarding schools. I heard a voice, “You have come full circle.” I understood in that moment I was exactly where I needed to be. My work was to honor those who have passed by paying respects to the land.

Learning to regenerate land has been a steep learning curve for me. The pretty pictures they show in magazines or a Google search takes a lot of work. Very rarely are we given a real perspective of what it takes to regenerate the land. On the same note we are rarely shown the gifts mother earth gives to us. These gifts are not quantified the way we might count a tomato or an apple. No. These gems come in the form when my daughter gets excited after trying a homegrown strawberry for the first time. She looks at it with such joy and realizes the taste is different from store bought strawberries. When I can make herbal tea for a friend who is feeling anxious, or when you start to learn the healing properties of herbs, and where you once saw weeds, now you see food and medicine, the moment when you can hear your plant allies speak to you, you realize you are not alone in this world. In fact, you are surrounded by immense support and beauty.

The lessons plants teach us are the laws of the natural world. We are interconnected and we are blessed when we have the courage to be in the right relationship with the living world around us. Like most healthy relationship, land regeneration takes time.

Learning to honor the ancestors' land we are upon, listening to the plants and water speak and learning how to defend the sacred is a process. Each layer of wounding we shed opens up space for these lessons to be learned. COVID-19 has given us the opportunity to be in right relationship with one another and all other living beings on this planet. If we take these lessons forward in this uncharted territory of civil unrest and COVID we may have a chance to recalibrate the heart of mother earth and open up a pathway for the next seven generations to come. Everyday will be a test of our strength and our courage moving forward.



LEARNING NARRATIVES