

Soul Fire Stories: Rememberings and Imaginings



SOUL FIRE COLLECTIVE
April 2023

INTRODUCTION TO SOUL FIRE

**“Stories have the power to create social change
and inspire community.”**

Terry Tempest Williams (writer, educator, conservationist, and activist)

The Soul Fire Writing Retreat in April 2023 was held at Bore Place, Kent. Soul Fire Writing Retreats are spaces for changemakers and activists to get together and reflect, imagine, and co-create. They are co-designed and co-facilitated by Max Hope and Sophie Christophy.

For this retreat, we took inspiration from the spirit of clandestine movements of activists, artists, pirates, writers, and storytellers who collaborate and co-conspire to positively disrupt and disturb the status quo. We wanted to offer late nights, smoky rooms, hard drinking (or herbal tea), food on the run. We worked together in a lively and energising way to tell stories. Stories from our lives, and those which describe the world we want to live in. Stories which inspire. Stories which were real, imagined, funny, poignant, powerful. The stories unfolded, literally, as our weekend progressed.

We wanted to co-create something that we could publish at the end of the weekend, and this collection of stories – micro-tales from our lives, and visions for the future we want to create – is the result.

Grab a drink. Curl up by the fire. Lose yourself in a story.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Lesson

Hannah Rowan

When I was 8 years old, I was put into my school district's "Gifted and Talented Education" program. The start of 3rd grade was new kids, a new classroom, a new part of the school. I didn't realise that this was an ordeal beyond any other year so far. You go to your new class. There are kids. There is a teacher. The teacher teaches, the kids get taught.

Our new teacher, though. Mrs Tell. She taught much more than the expected reading, writing, and 'rithmetic.

On the first day of school, she had the whole class sit on the rug at the front of the classroom. "Welcome to the 2nd and 3rd grade GATE class. Most of you won't know each other—you've been selected from different classes and different schools. This may feel scary, but you will all make new friends. I'd like you to look around you. Look at someone you would like to be friends with. At recess, go up to that person and introduce yourself."

I looked around, bewildered by the sudden realisation that each of the "kids in my class" was A Kid. Each of them a whole person.

After a short eternity, Mrs Tell asked us to go to our seats for our first lesson. I looked at the maths worksheet in front of me. A friend... I forgot to look at one of these newly discovered whole people! I looked around the classroom. Mrs Tell was wandering from desk to desk, checking in with her new students. Six more desks until my turn. Each of them a whole person...

"Don't forget to write your answers down, Hannah," Mrs Tell snapped me out of my reverie. I looked at my blank worksheet and began putting answers down. A friend. What did that even mean? I didn't know and I'd forgotten to pick one. No one had ever taught me that I was supposed to make a friend out of the sea of kids in my classroom before.

Maths.

Friend?

Everyone else was writing answers down. They'd probably all picked their friend. How do you pick a friend? What is the difference between the kids in your class and a friend? Each of them a whole person.

I'd forgotten the maths again, my mind swept away by the new awareness of each whole person in my class. More sums.

I wonder now if Mrs Tell knew that she was teaching her class of Gifted and Talented kids a new concept that day. How many of us hadn't known about friends when we woke up that morning? How many of our heads were doing sums on paper, our minds, meanwhile, blown away by the realisation that each kid in the class was a whole person. A potential friend. Whatever that meant. I'm still figuring out what that means.

Then recess came.

A girl strode up to me and boldly said, "I'm Misty. I looked at you. Will you be my friend?"

CHAPTER TWO

I always cry when I go to the theatre

Emily Swaddle

In case you've never seen Matilda the Musical, it's a big budget Broadway musical with all the bells and whistles: a lively score, a dynamic set, big dance numbers, and a chorus cast of mostly children playing Matilda's schoolmates. Our seats were in the second row - almost *too* close to the action.

Tears came more than once as I took in the nearly 3 hour show but the eruption moment came midway through one of the precisely coordinated dance numbers. All the schoolkids on stage were singing us through the first verse, revving up to give it their all as the song built to its rousing crescendo, but before it was realised, they were stopped. It took a moment for all the actors and musicians to register the voice coming from a PA system in the wings telling them to, "Halt the show". The action fizzled into silence both quickly and gradually, like the eager flight of an open balloon, untied, let go. It turns out a mechanical element of the stage set had malfunctioned and a hatch, through which school desks had disappeared moments earlier, had not closed properly. The show had to be halted so that none of the actors would trip or hurt themselves on the open hatch. The stage emptied, the hatch was repaired, the whole thing took seconds. We hardly had time to react before the performers were back in place, awaiting the signal from the conductor to pick up the song exactly where they'd left off. The restart was not as smooth as the interruption had been. Some hold up offstage left the schoolkids waiting for a few beats longer than was comfortable. As steadfast professionals, they were in position and ready to go. As human beings, they were surely aware of the increasing awkwardness of the situation. The audience quickly clocked the one kid who was letting his genuine reaction shine through. The tiniest flicker of a smile in a fleeting instant, caught by 1500 people staring up at the stage. A ripple emerged. He giggled. Some other performers softened. We laughed. He straightened himself out. We breathed. The conductor was ready to begin, and just like that we were drawn back into the classroom of Matilda's world. I was sobbing.

I felt like I had seen into the lives of these performers, the hours poured into perfecting the material to know it so well that no interruption could break them. To do it so often that the gifts of the music, the words, the movement, the story simply flowed out of them, like an easy exhale. I saw children on that stage that had been there all along yet only briefly revealed themselves. I saw beyond the set, through the wings into the backstage where responsibility was slung over every shoulder, carried and shared. I even saw what had never been, not in this lifetime, I saw myself on that stage, in position, ready to begin again.

CHAPTER THREE

My first fantastic friend

Jo McAndrews

On the first ever day at big school Matthew Robins came up to me in the playground and said 'will you be my friend?'

That memory is usually eclipsed by the more haunting one of the tug of war earlier in the same day when my four year old self desperately clung to my mum's hand as she left me, while the teacher pulled me away from her. Of course the teacher won. I had fruit pastilles in my pocket as an inadequate bribe. I hope that wasn't Matthew Robins' motivation for his life saving offer of friendship. That has never occurred to me before so let's assume that he just thought I looked like a good playmate. He was right.

We became spies and adventurers, scientists and tricksters. We made secret dens in the shrub filled edges of our park, had sneaky routes that allowed us to spy on the grown ups whose boring to-ing and fro-ing was definitely a cover for sinister activity. We hid in his back garden, next to a tiny hole in the fence that was perfect for aiming a water pistol at passers by on the adjoining street. We made cakes with green and purple food colouring so that nobody else would want to eat them.

And there was one thing we did that was so outrageous that I never told anybody until I was well and truly grown up and had done enough therapy to understand that it was not as shameful as I had believed in my bones for all those years. I bet you are guessing what that thing was and I bet that you are wrong. We put a bogey under a microscope! It was Matthew Robins' new birthday microscope but I can't remember whose bogey. We got a proper scientific glass slide and the little bit of glass that you put on top of the specimen to hold it fast. And we put it under the lens and looked through the microscope and saw it massively magnified. I can't remember what it looked like but I do remember the thrill of breaking a taboo and knowing that we couldn't tell

anybody about it. A naughty secret that deepened again the bond of our collaboration against the world of decorum and oppression.

I can't remember exactly when Matthew Robins moved away but I hope that memory has stayed precious to him too.

CHAPTER FOUR

The diary of a social worker: The day I met you

Anon

I'm your new social worker. He's retiring today, so after today it's me. Just me. And I'm holding your story now. I want to do you justice....

We're somewhere outside of the city, winding our way through country roads. It's unusual for me to be sat in the back. I have more of a chance to look around, take in what's around. I'm new. So I sit back, observing and listening the relationship and conversation unfolding between the two people in the front. A casual, familiar and chatty tone ensues between them. And then he says, do you remember when you went to school down that lane and that teacher..... They both start laughing. And then it hits me. When he retires tomorrow it's gone. Those stories are gone. Lost. They're not in formal reports, they're not presented to the court, they're not reported to resource panels. They're the trueness of being in relationship with someone. Of being someone in someone else's life. And then retirement. You're gone. The stories are gone. The coldness of this strikes through me. I don't know any of this, I don't know these stories. I can't even learn all of them, it's not written down and there's not time to be told it all, record it, capture it. That means you can't read them all either. I can't offer these to you. I can't be the same person to you that he is.

So then I wonder how I can stop that happening for you again, how can I capture these stories for you, take these tales that we will share and put them somewhere. I'll write them for you. I'll write these stories and make sure you have them so whatever your age, wherever you are, you can know these stories about you, about your life. Because by then I'll be gone. I won't be able to share those stories with you but you'll have them. You'll have them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Picking nettles at the end of the weekend

Valentina Caivano

It was the end of a spring day, still too cold to be called spring. Pink, running nose, eyes inebriated by the sun, heads light and hearts warm. The weekend was about to end, and it had given us so much. We wanted to round it up picking the nettles, a thing that Em's mum used to do quite often in the wild Prussian fields where she spent her youth.

That Sunday, questions about deliberation and democracy, came about again. Not only because of our respective university curricula. The need to find a fix to another week of devastating news feeds, with its sequel of excruciating facts to follow on a Monday. Our moments of freedom and friendship were memories to grapple with on the days to follow, on our ways to work, at the edge of a desk chair, at the precipices of the train platforms, on the narrow strip of road where cyclists ride between two thin yellow lines, all across London.

Don't hurt your hands; please have one of these - Em passed me one of the two carrier bags we had, so that I could protect my hands from the stinging, nasty nettles.

While picking the nettles following the English way - grasp it quickly, be decisive -, the idea that people could co-exist in a state of affairs that made a slice of the population unhappy in the short-mid-term felt like an agony - how many of them would have entered a state of apathy? However, I remembered the words a clever activist once said at a writing retreat in Kent that apathy is nothing but the start of self-directedness. Dissent, disagreement, and antagonism were visions of rupture on the brink of happiness.

Em: You are an excellent picker, you know.

I had practised the art of picking several times, with all the spices and wild berries that mark the edges of footpaths and countryside roads.

There had been unsuccessful picking seasons, too, like the one in Kent the year before. All the uneaten things got smashed in my bike bag because of the unconventional packing, stained my favourite summer t-shirt, and ended at the bottom of a too-sugary crumble that went mouldy on a kitchen board back in London. *Why do we always do things that force us to be brave and do something difficult or unpleasant?* (Internal thinking)

The first bag of nettles was almost full, our smiles bright and wide.

We kept picking nettles at a good speed until the bag used as a glove got blown away by the wind.

We saw it gently touching the bottom of the valley, 1, 2, 3, a beautiful, fast and slow cadence. There was no way to get hold of that bag, it had gone too far, trapped at the bottom of an uncanny land made of curves, vectors, and nodal points. One can only hope that at the other end of the valley, a bunch of smiley walkers or cyclists will stop by and pick it up.

CHAPTER SIX

Barbecue Sauce

G.K.

This is a story about barbecue sauce and sunshine and time spent with family I no longer know.

I can't remember where we found the recipe. It was probably the Daily Mail - the best thing the Daily Mail ever gifted humanity for sure! A gift I can still taste if I close my eyes 25 years later.

Picture a Kilner jar, filled with an unctuous, orangey brown condiment. Onions and garlic softened and caramelised, paprika, worcestershire sauce and ketchup. "Ketchup?", I remember thinking. Is it cheating to use a sauce to make another sauce? The Daily Mail didn't seem to think so.

Maybe there were some more ingredients I don't remember, but I do remember the anticipation and excitement I had to contain while the jar sat in the fridge overnight. Marinading the marinade.

Then, the big reveal. Sunshine, swimming, splashing around with cousins before time to eat. Me proudly watching my family enjoy the delicious sauce made of sauces. My uncle George who once wanted to be a chef and reminded me of Jamie Oliver saying it was delicious. Me glowing with pride.

I'm okay without them, but it's nice for a sunny memory to break through the clouds. The family I no longer know.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Invincible Me

Janaina Magalhaes

Once more I was in the final of a judo competition. For many years that was a pattern that happily repeated, maybe a printed DNA that only I but not my brothers had inherited. I was that good that my brothers couldn't stand the idea and traded judo for football. I was invincible, I was more successful than my brothers. I was invincible. With my superpowers I could challenge gravity and make others fly: me, myself, my gi, and my belt. Which girl would want a better superpower than these two: being better than her brothers and making people fly?! I was invincible, and I was in the final of another competition. I must have been eleven or twelve, and on that very day I discovered that I had a third superpower. I was invincible. By a fractional exchange of looks between me and my mom, who until that period of time, held a seat in the front row of my invincibility, the 'get a grip and reverse the shit' power was activated. How would I ever know that I had that power if I was invincible? But not in that time, I was losing that final. When I got the score against me, there was no other place for my eyes to look than my mother's eyes. She shook her head, not in disapproval, but in despair. I froze in time, I lacked air. I do not remember the rest of the fight, but after the electricity of that look, few more seconds it took until mom's head shook no more, I threw a perfect score. I was invincible.



This is the first
(and maybe the last)
self portrait I've ever drew
of myself. Telling and
listening to stories is a
way to co-exist with
others and with the
many others who inhabit
ourselves.

Jay Bygones

CHAPTER EIGHT

A First Descent

Emily Young

My ten-year-old self's best friend is having a violin lesson in my family's dining room with our teacher Sue while I wait for mine in an otherwise empty house. Sue introduced me to Vivaldi's sweetly haunting concerto, Winter Largo. This song became a lifelong friend to me after I received a story-tape entitled 'Vivaldi's Ring of Mystery' from a family who hosted me in Toronto while I was meant to be singing on a choir tour around that same time – In fact I was mainly homesick, unable to perform, instead consolidating a close (but secret) relationship with anxiety.

In that story, a young violinist arrives at the Pietà orphanage in Venice, where Vivaldi was a teacher. The Venetian dark and narrow streets and canals and Island of the Dead become the backdrop to the unravelling of her story and the truth about who she really was.

I listened to it so often I knew the next phrase of music, the next lines of the story. I was captivated by the imagery my imagination created. I felt able to explore a dark place from the safety of my own mind, knowing the ending was familiar and comforting. I enjoyed the emotional security I found in this imaginary world, while unwelcome things in my real world began to open up like dark streets of an unfamiliar, foreboding place I didn't know my way around – or out of.

Still waiting for my lesson, the telephone rings. I diligently answer, providing the usual details offered on phone calls in the 90s – phone number and polite “who's speaking please?” Fortunately, I don't remember the precise dialogue that followed, except that the conversation began by the man asking me about myself and my family. The unwary, courteous “good girl”, taught to respect her elders offered up answers, until his questions began to get, weird. He stopped asking about me and began telling me about him, his body and what

he was currently doing, which was unfortunately utterly inappropriate for me to hear.

As soon as I hung up and interrupted my friend's violin lesson, I put on an ill-fitting layer of protective armour. I shook-off the experience on the outside, telling myself and the adults around me that I was fine, unaffected; yet I was left privately bewildered. I didn't know what to do with the information I had acquired, I didn't understand it or have words to explain my confusion or feeling of shame – so kept quiet.

A portal had opened between the previous safety of home and a dark place that children shouldn't have to get their head around. I've carried the ill-fitting armour around a long time, reinforcing it often when additional portals opened up. Through writing it and shedding tears for that trusting child, for all trusting children, I can remove some of that no-longer protective armour. I can see a way out of the labyrinth of dark streets that I got to know well after this first unsolicited descent.

CHAPTER NINE

A Constructed Memory

Helene Corneliussen Hersdal

A colleague once told me that we don't remember things between the age of zero and two, yet we sometimes construct them based on other stories or memories. Before that, I was convinced that I had an incredible ability to remember glimpses of my own life as a 1-year-old. I see myself clearly, sitting in a vintage pink, plastic bathtub, placed on a white-tiled floor. My naked butt planted on one end, knees slightly bended and touching the side-edges. Chilly air surrounding my arms, back and chest. Warm water hugging my legs and lower belly. The presence of my mum; the feeling of calmness.

"Mummy, can you join me in the bathtub," I asked.

She laughed. "There is absolutely no way I can fit into that!"

I don't recall what happened in between, but clearly imprinted in my mind is the image of my mum, buck-naked, sitting on the edge of the tub with her feet planted inside. I remember mixed emotions of confusion as to why she sat on the edge, but also the contentment of just having her there. If this actually happened, I can't be sure of, but I hope it isn't a constructed memory

CHAPTER TEN

The Monday Morning Food Shop

Sarah Allen

It's Monday morning and I step outside my house, pausing for a moment to breathe in the fresh air. A bumble bee darts in front of me, busily collecting nectar, nipping from dandelion to dandelion. It's strange to think that this used to be the start of the working week for most people. I recall all that rushing around, jumping into cars to sit in congested traffic and smile at the scene in front of me. This year it's my turn to grow lettuce and it's everywhere in my sunny front garden. It was paved over by previous owners but I have worked with the people in my street, over the past few years, to create raised beds covering most of the space, brimming with salad leaves mixed in with the wild flowers the bumble bee is enjoying. Of course, I can't eat all this myself, that's not the intention. I grab a box and a couple of bags and harvest rocket, baby spinach and cos. I then wander along the pavement to the community shop. I'm not sure why we call it that, a remnant from the capitalist era, it's really a community share. Different households grow different food then every week we meet and share the produce. It's an arrangement we've had for several years now and is replicated out in each street, village or apartment block across the country, providing, on average 50% of each households food. It's become quite a sociable occasion and a time to be amazed at what we've achieved, and there's also some bragging from those who might have grown the biggest cabbage or cauliflower; all good natured (I think!).

The food sharing is attended by most people as, like I said, this provides around half of our food. If someone happens to be busy, they'll provide a list and the produce is collected for them and left on their doorstep, same for anyone whose mobility makes this task difficult, though usually they're helped by a neighbour to get there. Electric scooters are at charging points, regularly spaced out so these are useful for people to move about the space. However, most elders only need someone to carry their shopping as all this fresh food and community has had such a positive impact on health and longevity.

As I walk along the pavement, I pass oak and hawthorn, rowan and beech all coming on well since they were planted in the 2020's. It took a while to take up the asphalt and create a healthy soil where cars used to dominate but it's made suburbia more like a woodland. Children are playing amongst the trees and I wave to them as I pass. Then within minutes I'm at our community food share. I must get some potatoes, we're almost out of them but otherwise I just pick from what's there, a box full is enough for my family of four and we'll devise meals with the contents.

It's 2033 and I live in Exmouth, Devon.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The diary of a social worker: Why her?

Anon

[illegible]

I can't do this. I can't do this. I can't I can't I can't. I don't want to do this any more. I ... just can't.

There's pain through every vein every nerve and bone. I can't get any of this out of my body. What is this. What's happening to me. It's everywhere. I'm completely consumed.

I need to come back down. I'm alone. I'm here. I'm in the car. There's sunshine out there but it's cold. The sky expands out in a vast blueness all around me. Cloaking the peaks and wrapping around their heather covered sides. There's dew sitting on top of the heather, the ferns, the emergent leaves. It's only the morning. There's still a whole day to go. I can feel breath trying to push through this pain, to reach those parts that need to breathe. I need to be free. I need to be free.

Why her? Why her? How could this happen? I couldn't stop this. I tried. I tried. They wouldn't let me stop this. They said there'd been too many this week so I couldn't take her away from all this. But why her?

I can. I must. I have to hold this. I have to hold this. I have to.

Drive on. Wind the roads, dodge the storm, tip the edge to the other side. Steadily down, wind through the town, over the motorways, into the city. Find her. Be there. Just be there.

CHAPTER TWELVE

We shall be known

(with thanks to Ma Muse)

Sophie Lovett

I close my eyes, taking a moment for myself as the voices around me rise up with the smoke into the night air.

It isn't late, but the cool of the September evening is all around us, and we huddle a little closer, bellies full and hearts replete. The harmony catches me, and my voice folds in.

"We shall be known by the company we keep"

My neighbour sits across the circle, her cropped white hair catching the light of the flames. She's still not well, but she's smiling.

"By the ones who circle round to tend these fires"

From the trees beyond, hushed voices can be heard: children colluding in play. My boys are connected to me by invisible threads which are woven now into a wider web. They are free, and they are held.

"We shall be known by the ones who sow and reap"

The harvest was plentiful this year, the soil grateful for the effort poured into it. Summer squash and corn and beans, salads piled high along the centre of the table as glasses clinked and new and old friends shared in the feast.

"The seeds of change alive from deep within the earth"

There had been enough left over to fill the larder to bursting, already heavy with surplus crops from the gardens nurtured tenderly across the town. Containers of cooked food were stacked in the fridge, sustenance for those who hadn't made it down this time.

“It is time now”

These monthly meals were always busy, and the power they generated went far beyond the walls of the old church. Shared words, hopes and dreams that would morph over the days and weeks that followed into new projects, seeds scattered wherever stories fell.

“It is time now that we thrive”

The impact had been greater than we could have hoped, though of course we’d dreamed it. Had imagined the softening in people’s bodies, the space that would open up in their minds. People were still afraid – how could we not be as the world outside continued its inevitable unravelling – but our fear no longer controlled us.

“It is time we lead ourselves into the well”

Stepping into that darkness had been a vital part of the journey. The past few years had been a cacophony of joy and heartbreak: of music and rage, of learning and despair. Once enough people had accepted that the shift was not going to happen on its own, that we needed to act – and we needed each other – that’s when things started to escalate.

“It is time now, and what a time to be alive”

The children had been the catalyst, the ones who had stopped us giving up. Having them there – them listening to us, us listening to them. They are circling closer now, moths to the flame as the light fades, their voices joining with our own.

“In this Great Turning we shall learn to lead in love”

A toddler teeters towards the fire, slipping silently between bodies lost in song.

“In this Great Turning we shall learn to lead in love.”

Hands reach out gently to guide her and she redirects her path.

Her future is safe, now.

She is safe.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Soul Fire Spell

Elspeth Murray

Birther of the Universe!
Every breath makes a clearing in
the heart for powerful possibility.

May we consent without objection to that purpose
which motivates us for the utmost good,
aligned at every level: vision to completion.

Bring on food and insight enough for today,
and ways to let go the hidden niggles of our slip-ups,
so we can release resentment for the errors of others.

Defend us from distractions, indecision and confusion,
And shake us free from patterns that keep us stuck.

For all right action is infused with connection,
as is pure passion and the joy of true presence,
in this gathering as in the next and the next.

All power to this being!
May it unfold in our lives
as the road goes ever on.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Prologue

Hannah Rowan

When did this all begin? At what point did we realise we'd actually had enough? And where did the energy come from that allowed us to start shifting away from everything we'd felt so trapped by? When did the disillusionment begin to crumble?

Was it something breaking in each of us, or did we break it together?

I look around me now, and nothing looks very different... The same buildings, the same trees, the same streets. People walking through town, errands being run, places to be. Dogs pulling on leads, excited for what's next. A pair of kids wandering off, but not too far, then returning to their parent, hoping they have finished talking with the person they bumped into.

"Do you remember the fire?" I hear one of the adults say.

"Like it was yesterday," comes the response.

The fire. Maybe that is when things changed. Why town looks the same on the surface, yet something feels different. The people still going about their day, but now with a lightness where once there was only weight. A weight that kept each step of our feet close to the ground. That pulled our shoulders down, tugged the features of each face into frowns that could be seen even when people smiled.

The weight is gone—maybe a hint of it in the wrinkles set in place before the fire.

Yes. It was the fire when our world began to break.

It had started small. A few people in the park, huddled around a fire of shared wood. Warmer there than in the homes they couldn't afford to heat. Talking. Saying they knew it could be different.

Someone put another piece of wood on the fire. "Let's tell a story," they said.

"Can I begin?" said a new voice, "I've brought more things to burn."

As the evening turned to night, more people came, and the fire grew.

Yes. I think that is when it all began to change. Each person bringing something new to add to the fire.

We burned so much more than wood that night.

The bonfire keeping us warm, but each of us fuelling the fires we'd all thought we'd lost within ourselves.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Peace Through Stories

Louise Woodford

I breathe deeply, I breathe easily, heart soft and wide open, as the flames from the fire embrace us with warmth, an inner smile of gentle knowing ignites my soul. Together, we breathe.

We connect, we love, we find peace through stories, stories, many stories. The young ones, like bear cubs explore and get curious, from a place of unreserved love and absolute acceptance. They grow, they transform, they find *their* inner peace, *their* equal place, among us, their people, a diverse bunch of people, understanding deeply the value and variation of the sacred human connection. Human connection. What else is there, really?

We breathe in order to breathe, we cook in order to cook, we walk in order to walk, we are born, we get ill, we recover, we die. Yet we suffer well, with support, and more support. For what else is there really, other than support?

We nurture Mother Earth like we nurture each other, we navigate conflicts with creativity and respect, we share our peace through stories, many, many stories, inherited from ancestors, to fortify the love, the peace the compassion that flows through our veins, with each generation, stronger and stronger, with each generation, through stories, more stories, the compassion will grow. For what is there really, other than stories?

We love one another for the sake of loving one another. We rejoice in our qualities, our growth, our kind human nature. Like open books we share with one another, we give to one another, for there is abundance, enough, we all have enough. Like Mother Earth we listen, without judgement or opinion, and in her likeness, we so beautifully transform our difficult happenings into wildflower meadows, forests, and streams.

The warmth of the fire sparks gratitude within me, cloaks comfort around me, the flames they penetrate my soul. Breathing deeply, together we sing, we hold space, we cry, we hug, we hold hands, we laugh and forgive in the knowledge that we are one. Like ocean waves we are separate, unique, distinguishable, yes. Yet we are *one* body of water, *one* consciousness, *one* love.

In humility, I surrender my being to this raw and precious moment, we sit close to the fire, the mesmerising fire. Same yet different, separate yet connected, in equanimity, in harmony, I breathe here with you.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Threads

Emily Young

C*huck us the red thread please Emily,* my friend Lois calls to me from the other side of the circle. I am sewing decorations for our equinox celebration tomorrow. This year is particularly exciting as it's the twentieth anniversary of our community hub we call H-Club (the H stands for 'hope').

Lois used to believe there wasn't going to be much for them to do once the suffering and damage from the last age was repaired and recompensed. In the time before the big shift, they had helped young people with addiction. They now obviously don't have those clients but do still occasionally see older people who hop over on the Renew-Tram from other communities near and far.

With this drop in requirement, Lois found more time to connect with their passion for growing and creating, which turned into the wonderfully fruitful production of organic flax seed, flour, oil, and the most beautiful and resilient fibres and linens. Along-side a small team (including past clients) they have found a new sense of purpose and peace growing, harvesting, milling, extracting, spinning, and dyeing.

Because of the collective agreements around farming scale, the little meadow outcrops where the flax grows next to the abundant loamy bogs are a visual spectacle. From the green shoots of spring, the powder blue flowers of summer, the golden seed of autumn to the mulchy decay of winter, when the roots re-enrich the soil for the following year – whatever the season, whenever I visit, I am engulfed with pleasure and wallow in the flax bog meadow's visceral medicine.

So here I am, older, softer, wiser, and more patterned; and here we are, a multi-dimensional group, gathered at our twenty-year-old hub – creating, and making together. Some of us sewing decorations, some mending or designing

and fashioning new clothing or other items made from Lois's linens and threads for our homes and collective spaces, some of us telling stories of old, some telling stories of new, some people here to listen, to learn – all of us here to be a part of this rich and nourishing woven patchwork of understanding, compassion, and love – connected by threads from deep within the earth itself.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Informal Review

Emily Swaddle

That movie we watched last night was a bit confronting, wasn't it? I mean, I didn't really rate the film overall. It may be considered a "classic" but it didn't do it for me. But it was confronting, beyond the empty storyline and rigid acting. There was a sadness to it, I guess. Those people, they didn't really have a clue. It was like watching baby birds see some food and just open their mouths at it because all they've ever known is their mother feeding them.

I can't really figure out why the story focused on what felt like arbitrary "struggles" when their basic socio-communal needs were being entirely disregarded. Not to mention their spiritual needs. I didn't see one ritual acknowledgement the whole movie. And the way they talked to each other, it was like code. Did they even really understand each other? I mean, obviously not otherwise the film would have turned out very differently. And of course they were all in cars and eating real meat and living in separate homes - real old timey vibes.

It just made me sad, I guess, to think that people actually used to live like that. I mean, I know it's a movie and it's probably dramatised. Like, I know it wasn't *actually* true life, it was in White People World. I've seen that before in old movies though, when it's set in a place with only skinny white people. Not sure why they did that, like as an artistic choice. Maybe to demarcate that we're stepping into a fantasy world now. "This is not a documentary" type thing. There was *some* truth to it though, I think. Hard to say really, hard to imagine.

The thing that stayed with me the most was the way the characters interacted with each other. I couldn't quite figure out how they were all related. They weren't asking consent for anything at all, not even touching, and there was so much cross talking and just full on interrupting. I thought maybe they were very close, that these agreements of interaction, strange as they seemed, had been settled in advance. But then if that was the case, they'd done a shit job of

it because boundaries were being ignored at every turn. I mean, the whole plot of the movie was essentially one character not knowing how to express their boundary, another character oversteps that boundary, and commotion ensues. (Like I said, not exactly on the edge of my seat.) So then, maybe they *didn't* know each other beforehand? It was all a bit confusing.

The soundtrack was nice though.

Two stars.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A world with care at the centre

Jo McAndrews

Anna woke to the muffled sound of rain on the soft, turfed roof of her hut. She could feel the roots drinking it in, thirsty, grateful. Her mind moved gently from her dreams into the day ahead. She was needed at the comfort garden. Her heart ached for the young man whose love had just died; a quick moving infection that had taken him despite the best efforts of all the healers from miles around.

She walked slowly to the common house, and let herself relax into the welcome and warmth from the others as she drank her morning tea and ate some of yesterday's rhubarb crumble. Her friend joined her, reminded her of their plan for a walk later, time to paddle their feet in the stream and talk over the day. She handed Anna a basket of fruit, flowers and balms, 'please give these to Ali. I am so sorry for his loss.'

In the big hall, groups of people were preparing for the funeral. Anna was relieved that she didn't need to do any of the organising or decorating, she was much more suited to the work of the elders holding circle. As she made her way to the garden, she could hear the shrieks and laughter of the young ones playing with the wild ponies at the edge of the village. For a moment it almost drowned out the usual birdsong soundtrack to her daily life. She shared a glance with the robin watching her pass. Maybe the birds didn't mind.

The rain had eased and the flowers and fruit trees throughout the village were glistening wet in the sun. As she passed through the carved gate, the damp wood smell and worn patterns under her fingers, reminded her of her old friend the woodcarver. She muttered the ancient words of blessing and remembrance and blew her a kiss into the air.

Ali was up and about and weeping quietly into the arms of his closest friends. He looked up in welcome as Anna waved and touched her heart in greeting.

Around the garden, other elders were making tea, food, and a bright life quilt for Ali's love. Some children were stitching pieces of fabric together and others played in the trees in the wild borders.

Anna settled down and listened to the grief song, smiling at the musicians who had taken turns over the past three days to accompany the heartbreak of the whole village. As she watched the circles of care moving around each other, she breathed, and felt her heart's familiar drum beat. Life, death, life. Home.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

And having a blue plastic bag blown by the wind

Valentina Caivano

E m: How about we go and get it? We have, after all, two more hours of daylight left.

It was great having Em as a friend because, before being a friend, they were: exemplary citizens, a caring person, and an environment-minded soul who would spend the last two hours of their weekends in the look for a blue plastic bag.

I imagined the blue plastic bag floating in the air, again crossing the valley. I saw the toxic particles entering the soil, a fluffy white lama chewing the remnants of the blue plastic bag happily.

I closed my eyes for a minute, sunbathed by a whole orange, sunny sphere setting down beyond the newly developed towers in front of the reservoir.

We had 2 hours of daylight, or 300 years to pick up the bag - until its photo-degradation. That feels like a long time, but I should factor in that, things beings as they are, my next 28 years should be spent in some form of occupation, in a London office more likely, so time is shrinking.

I started thinking about the implications of this in the only terms I could function lately: key performance indicators (KPIs). Project brief: to reduce the environmental impact of X - an unspecified number of blue plastic bags scattered across the valley edging the northeast London reservoir. Allocated time: 2 hours of daylight. Stakeholders and dependencies, constrains, accountability, comms, socialisation - what else were we missing?

Em: We need a simple, clear message of no more than 5 words to make this work.

V: We have 2hrs of daylight to save this valley (!?)

*Em: It could be shorter; how about:
Save the future NOW.*

That was too drastic, but there was no time to overthink it. We had barely 2hrs of daylight left to find those bags.

We wrote two notes, one for each bike, stuck it on the handlebar, and wheeled down the valley.

A Twitter hashtag went out secretly from my social media account: #changemakers #2hours left to save the planet #London #NorthEst. A photo went out with it; it had nothing to envy to our present selves - 28 years into our landfill activism journey, we look the same. Same shirts, sunglasses, rucksacks, vegan trainers and other essential items became a capsule collection of non-perishables.

At the time of writing, we are part of an enlarged family of 17 who left northeast London to pick and litter blue plastic bags on a late spring Sunday evening. We have readjusted our locations and now reside within a radius of 1.5 miles from each other. Surprisingly, that evening, we met more people picking litter at the other end of the valley. We could have trusted that the bag blown away by the wind when picking the nettles on a Sunday evening would have been picked up by someone at the other end of the valley. Yes, but no one trusted people back then. We didn't trust people, either. We had to reference, proof, and copy in all the time. We had to run miles to litter a bag passersby could have overseen. We had to make that change happen ourselves and ensure that some people would see us.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A Dreamed for Future as a Real Life Vision

Sophie Christophy

My granny lives up the garden. She has a place up at the end. It's her nest, but we get to visit her – we just knock before entering because it's her private space. We always knock when it's a nest to check it's ok to come in.

We live in a little house at the other end of the garden. In between, there's a vegetable patch. Asparagus, courgettes, peas, tomatoes, cucumbers, all growing in abundance. A butt catches water that we use to water everything.

We have spaces to be apart, and to be together. Each person has their own little nook, their nest, their den, and within there, they make it their own. It's an honour to be invited into a den. To be able to see something of the person, reflected on the space around them. Some dens are messy, some are neat. Some are vibrant, some are simple. Some are a mixture. Each den is unique, and they evolve over time, growing and changing as the inhabitant grows and changes too. Sometimes they go from simple to complex. It's ok to play, to change, to experiment and show different sides of ourselves, in our dens and anywhere else. Sometimes people invite other folk to stay over in their den, and that's an honour too.

Our neighbours are lovely. Many grow in their gardens too, but they grow different things so that we can all share and have something of everything. Our next-door neighbours garden is full of fruits – apricot trees, raspberry canes, gooseberries, apples, and some potatoes. They planted a greengage tree just for me because they knew it was my favourite. They have chickens, and a

cat. I love my neighbours. The growing folk plan together to work out what is a good idea to grow that year, what people like to eat and would like to have in the gardens. Other neighbours have other skills, some are builders, fixers, some are cuddlers and story tellers. We can always find someone or somewhere to help.

Inside our house is my mum, and lots of other people. We have our quiet private spaces, but in our shared spaces you will always find someone and something interesting going on. Sometimes these folk live near us, but sometimes they are visiting from far away and we are lucky to see them. Everyone helps out. My favourite is when people come from far away and bring new foods and recipes to try, new words to learn, stories and songs to sing. I've learnt a lot from the folk that come into our shared spaces, and the shared spaces I've visited too.

We have visiting seasons and resting seasons, in winter, we rest, so there aren't always lots of people around, sometimes it's just my family plus our closest people. In Summer it's busier with visitors, and we visit other folks too. It's like a network. In summer we are outside a lot of the time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The night the pirates came

Max Hope

She is walking down the street, her arms swinging by her side. No, hang on, that was the other world, the one when people were defined by gender, by pronouns assigned to them at birth.

Was this person - this lively child with mischief and magic in her eyes – was she a she? Did she look like a she? Did she feel like a she? What did it mean anyway, in this world, in the one that we had created?

It had become impossible to tell.

This gender stuff, the stuff that seemed so important in the other world, the one that we inhabited before that night. You know the night to which I refer. That one. The stuff of legends, of folk tales, of stories upon stories. The night when the pirates came, the night of rum and whisky, the night when dreams were spoken aloud and scrawled onto a long sheet of white paper. Spoken aloud, and written down, in a room with a powerful magical charge which meant that the world we imagined became our reality.

That night.

The world we live in now is one where gender is fluid. It has not gone. We are not gender free. Some boys are boys and some boys are girls and some boys are girl-boys or boy-girls. And girls are girls or boys or girl-boys or boy-girls. And some children are none of these and some are all of them. And some change from day to day and week to week. And the same for adults. The labels do not determine how someone looks, or what they can do, or how they can play, or anything else really. It's more of an inside thing.

In the world we live in now, tuning into our uniqueness and expressing ourselves in our wholeness, authentically and unapologetically – that is what guides us. That is what matters. There are no expectations assigned at birth, no

manipulation of the soul of a child, no steering down a pre-determined path. No. Now, the blessings we give to children at birth are that they will grow up to be themselves, to follow their own paths, to find their soul's purpose. The goal of parenting – which we more commonly describe as partnering or caring or loving – is to support the children, all children, to stay in alignment with their own soul.

And so, this child, the one who is walking down the street, with arms swinging by their side. This lively child, with mischief and magic in their eyes.

Where are they going? This child.

To a den, to a treehouse, to a shop? To a village meeting, to hang with a friend? To head into the woods for some solitude? To play football, to make doughnuts, to write?

Where are they going? This child. This boy-girl or girl-boy or girl or boy or none or all of these? This child.

It was impossible to tell.

Impossible, now, in this world, after that night when the pirates came.

Contributors

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EMILY SWADDLE: Emily is a podcaster, coach and facilitator based in Devon. She writes poems, songs and prose to help her soul understand the world and to help her imagination dream up a better one. In 2023, she is focusing on organising the [Oxford Storytelling Festival](#), hosting [The Carbon Removal Show](#), and learning as much as she can [about rest](#).

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