Fluidity
When Boundaries Do Not Define Us
I had to focus not on what I could see, but on how the sound bouncing off me in relation to structures and environments locates me in a constantly shifting relationship to you, whoever you are by now.

Lessons From Marine Mammals
by Mikki Morrissette

In a lovely collection of essays, “Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons From Marine Mammals,” Alexis Pauline Gumbs literally goes deep, drawing wisdom from animals that use echolocation, travel in schools, and — as is the mysterious habit of spinner dolphins — leap into the air to rotate multiple times before returning to the water.

Gumbs writes about underwater mammals who see through clouded waters and across distances with their voices. She notes that these species — our ancestral foremothers — collaborate with other species for safety and health. “Out here on the open ocean, mothering is an emergent strategy."

In contrast, the human species seems to have become much less fluid since emerging from the ocean, trapped inside nets we cast ourselves. “Legally and narratively,” Gumbs writes, “our society encourages small, isolated family units and an anti-social state reluctant to care. So, care becomes the unsustainable work, the massive unpaid labor that breaks backs, hearts, and the visionary will of multitudes on a regular basis.”

She asks us to consider how we can organize ourselves intentionally to combat the isolation of capitalism and to listen across species, across extinction, across harm. “Marine mammals [have] much to teach us about the vulnerability, collaboration, and adaptation we need in order to be with change at this time.”

Adaptation & Collaboration

For this month’s issue, we gathered together the voices of those who fluidly engage with the world:

- Sister Irene O’Neill created a way for nuns in different countries to support each other’s communities.
- Marie LePage explains her practice of ethical, non-monogamous relationships.
- Maija Hecht discovers how citizen scientists can build relationships with water both before and after disaster strikes.
- Lissa Maki reports on volunteer drivers in rural Minnesota who provide both physical and emotional lifelines for elders.
- The people of Avivo Village created a setting that balances borders and open spaces to offer stability and respect to formerly unhoused folks.
The arts-and-crafts tote overflowed with cylinders of petrified Play-Doh, crispy-bristle paint brushes, and Elmer’s glue bottles with clogged applicator tips. Underneath it sat a stack of spiral notebooks with homework from previous years: simple fractions, facts about fossils and chlorophyll, vocabulary words neatly written on blue lines. Star Wars characters were sporadically doodled in the margins.

None of its contents had been touched in years. Yet the very second I tipped it upside down into the garbage dumpster — unwittingly blasting a flume of silver glitter into the garage ceiling — I felt deep, aching sadness and enormous regret.

When did fuzzy pipe-cleaners become nostalgia-worthy? How did bags of nubby crayons and crumbled watercolor paints become worthy of my emotions? I am not even on Pinterest!

Of course, it was about something else entirely. My son has advanced to the next phase of his life.

He relegated his Curious George book collection to the basement to make space for Peg Kehret and Rick Riordan hardcovers; he prefers a frappuccino to a hot chocolate; he listens to Ozzy Osbourne, Johnny Cash, the Beatles; he uses the verb “hang out” instead of “play” with his friends; he requests gift cards for his birthday, not Nerf guns and Legos; he routinely passes on puppet shows at the library in favor of watching YouTube. On his iPhone. With the Tesla screensaver. Sigh.

My baby, a four-and-a-half pound preemie, has grown up overnight! But evidence strongly suggests he is still my baby. When does that classification end? He is terrified of lightning storms, bumblebees, the dark. He cannot fall asleep at night without his Lovey lamb, once white as snow and now a dingy gray.

Am I feeling insecure in that role as my child’s dependence on me lessens, fearful of what might happen when it disappears altogether?
When I was pregnant, complete strangers winked at me as they passed. “Enjoy! They grow up fast,” they said. And how right they were. When your eyes are too close to a wheel in motion, you do not see how hurriedly it is spinning; it appears as if it is not moving at all.

More than any other storybook, I cherished “Love You Forever” by Robert Munsch. I remember sitting in a rocking chair cuddling with him — his chubby, uncoordinated palms batted at my cheeks as I read the famous line, “forever and ever my baby you’ll be.”

Even though there is no disputing that “he grew and he grew and he grew,” I still recognize a little boy inside of him. At the beach, I watch as he lowers his muscular, lean torso and steadies his forearm onto his knee. The split second the lifeguard’s whistle blows, he sprints across the sand and is nearly always the first kid back into the water. And when we take our dog for a walk, he often grabs my hand.

Just as the moon has phases, the same is true of a child. In the beginning he is full — bold, open, confident, unabashed. As he matures he slips into the crescent, quarter, and gibbous phases and only reveals the slivers of himself he feels inclined to share. Then it seems life goes dark in the form of the new moon. It is still there, of course, but you cannot see it at all.

My own mom frequently said she knew I was growing up when I stopped holding her hand and realized I had become a woman when I reached for her again.

I dread the day when my son lets go of me — in more ways than one — because that means I will have to do the same. Never will I be ready.

But phases change, they always do. In my glitter-free house, I will wait for the next.

Jillian Van Hefty (she/her) is a writer from Waconia, where she lives with her husband, two sons, and emotional support Keurig. She is a 2022 grand prize winner of the A Hotel Room of One’s Own: The Erma Bombeck | Anna Lefler Humorist-in-Residence Program.
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One in four Minnesotans will be 65 or older by 2030. In many rural areas, the concentration of older adults will be even higher — they will comprise 35 percent or more of the population.

The state is not prepared for this unprecedented aging of the population and the strain it will put on the health care system, particularly in non-urban areas.

An ongoing trend of closures and consolidations of rural clinics has already made accessing health care more challenging for residents of Greater Minnesota. They have to travel farther to receive care. Additionally, an existing shortage of workers in long-term care facilities was exacerbated by the pandemic and has led to some older adults being turned away.

In this environment, services that enable older adults to live independently cannot be overstated. Often elders can meet the majority of their own needs if they receive a little help. Because older adults may not have a vehicle or be able to drive, transportation is one of the most critical links to health care and social services. In rural areas without ample public transport, this is an especially salient issue.

Katie Boller Gosewisch, executive director of the Living at Home Network, says “having access to transportation is a huge determining factor in whether or not people can stay safely in their homes.”

The Network has 32 nonprofit, community-based programs throughout the state that offer a variety of resources to help older adults maintain independent living. Of these programs, 95 percent have a volunteer driver program.

Volunteers use their own vehicles and donate their time to help ensure people can access health care and social services throughout Minnesota, including trips to the grocery store and rides to social events.

Drivers and riders also develop relationships, which helps older adults combat isolation, according to Boller Gosewisch. “Volunteer drivers find out it is more than just a ride … They become involved with people they are caring for.”
She points to an example from Foley’s CARE program where driver Joyce Rife and rider Jean Tiedt have developed a friendship. “I have learned so much about the community that I did not know before just by talking to these people who have been here for years,” Rife says in a video on Volunteer Driver Coalition’s website.

According to the Volunteer Driver Coalition, volunteer drivers in Minnesota provided more than 165,000 rides to older adults (and other non-drivers) in 2018, covering 9.5 million miles.

A 2017 analysis of six volunteer driver programs commissioned by the Minnesota Council for Transportation Access demonstrated that volunteer drivers provide an incredibly cost-effective transportation alternative. Depending on the length of a trip and the other transportation options available, these unpaid helpers saved counties anywhere from $18 to $185 per round-trip ride.

“They are already giving a lot.”

According to research by the Center for Rural Policy and Development, just as the need for transportation for older adults has been rising, it has become more difficult for programs to recruit and retain volunteer drivers.

Last year, the Volunteer Driver Coalition successfully lobbied the Minnesota Legislature to create a statute to define volunteer drivers, distinguishing them from for-hire services — such as taxis and rideshare companies — so that they will not be charged more for auto insurance. In addition, a state income tax subtraction was created for volunteer driver mileage reimbursement.

Mileage reimbursement is an ongoing issue that the coalition would like to see remedied at the federal level. The current charitable reimbursement rate is 14 cents per mile; it has not increased since 1986. Many volunteer driver programs reimburse volunteers at the business rate of 58 cents per mile, recognizing that the current rate does not cover the costs of gas, plus wear and tear on a volunteer’s vehicle.

Reimbursement is reported to the IRS through a 1099, but only 14 cents per mile rate is actually tax deductible — the rest is counted as income. Because most volunteer drivers are retired, the additional income can trigger a reduction in their Social Security payments.

Dawn Simonson, president and CEO of Trellis, notes that some volunteers are very active, giving multiple rides, sometimes weekly or more, to take people to recurring treatments. These round-trip rides could easily be 200 or more miles, as in the case for people who live in Grand Marais and receive treatment in Duluth.

Simonson and her colleagues in the Volunteer Driver Coalition are working to ensure that financial penalties are eliminated for volunteers. As she says, “They are already donating their time and the use of their vehicle. They are already giving a lot.”

The coalition’s next focus is to raise the federal charitable mileage reimbursement to the same level as the business rate. People can contact the group’s co-chairs for more information or to learn how to become a volunteer driver in their community.

volunteerdrivermn.org/get-involved

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Minnesota-based nonprofit Avivo collected insights from people with experience being unhoused. In December 2020, they opened Avivo Village — an indoor community that houses 100 residents in private dwellings in a “tiny house” village, built partly in response to the pandemic’s impact on growing numbers of unhoused.

“We talked with people about what it would take to feel comfortable,” said Emily Bastian, vice president of Avivo’s Ending Homelessness division. “As a result, we have seen people choosing to come indoors that have not done so in years.”

Avivo offers workforce training, chemical and mental health services, and housing support services for nearly 15,000 people each year. The organization has long offered street outreach, transitional recovery housing, transitional housing for young adults, and permanent supportive housing.

Since opening, the team has helped 57 people move into permanent housing. “It is a perfect example of how individuals know what they need. The rest of us have the power and the privilege to help get barriers out of the way,” explains Bastian.

Minnesota Women’s Press asked Bastian to explain how Avivo Village offers security and encourages growth.
How did Avivo Village reconcile the concerns around security, safety, and trauma that people have experienced — as well as give them stable walls?

The first thing that we do is ensure a radical welcome. When folks move in, they are welcomed unconditionally with a laundry basket filled with new items. We do not just flip or turn a room. We get it staged. We are putting a different level of care into getting it ready.

The intake is very trauma-informed. We ask minimal questions in the first 24 to 48 hours. Once people have had a chance to sleep and feel that radical welcome, there is a little more trust that starts to build.

We do have security, but they do not wear a uniform. They sit at the front desk and act like a door person, welcoming people by name. If there is an incident, staff are trained to respond. Security keeps an eye on the cameras and the doors, and an eye on the staff who are handling the situation, but are not the ones who intervene.

We are very cautious about calling 911. There have been times that we have needed police to respond because the paramedics will not come in without the police clearing the area, saying it is safe. We have let [the police] know that they should not come in without an escort, and we let people know they are coming in beforehand.

Can you describe the physical space?

We start at the front door, which is secure. Guests cannot come in. When people walk into the lobby area, it is a wall of windows. There is a lot of natural light. It is a very open space. Then they get past the next set of doors. They get buzzed in, and it opens for them — so it is not like being buzzed into a prison. That space is open and not cluttered. Walking into an open space feels healthier than walking into a space where you feel closed in. The ceilings are high. Lights are installed so it is not that horrible fluorescent migraine-inducing overhead. We change the lighting as the day goes on, kind of as the sun would rise and set. We always have a puzzle that the community is putting together in the large open space. We have artwork that people are creating.

We have a lot of folks who identify as Indigenous at Avivo Village. We have partnered with White Earth Nation to choose paint colors in relationship to the medicine wheel — the elements. A rust color for fire, yellow for the stars, green for earth, blue for water. We have [interior] signs that are in both Ojibwe and English, and indoor “streets” are named after animals and Indigenous medicines.

Being grounded when experiencing anxiety is important. We have a space that we refer to as the Zen Den, which can be used for individual meditation or yoga or reiki — or simply a space where someone who is experiencing intense emotions can sit in stillness and not have neighbors around. Having 99 neighbors can be a sensory overload.

We have a chalkboard wall so they can draw. Our hope is that folks can use their skills to self-regulate in a way that allows them to be safe. We all need to learn ways to decompress. Often folks who have experienced a lot of trauma have less healthy ways to decompress.

Sometimes individual therapy and medication are not appropriate. What else do you offer at Avivo for healing?

People in crisis, living with trauma, are in the “now” moment. Therapy is often reflecting back or looking forward, and we really need to help people in the moment.

Humans are relationship-based. Giving someone the opportunity to feel or see or talk through an experience can be so much stronger than sitting in a 50-minute therapy session.

We hope that individuals have new experiences at Avivo to feel what it is like to be safe and find people who care and to bounce ideas off — the things many people have been able to do with friends and family. For some, friends and family cannot show up with care and compassion because they are struggling or have been traumatized themselves. It really is a kind of corrective experience that we want residents to have.
T

eleven years ago, I suffered so many losses in a

eyear that I lost my ability to cope.

The grandmother who helped to raise me
died in December. My mother died in February. My
brother was killed in a car accident in April. My other
brother overdosed in September. My aunt died a year
after my grandmother. And my 15-year-old son was
sent to prison for 10 years the following month.

I could not get over one loss before there was
another one. I did not know how to deal with this, so
I self-medicated. It took a hold of me and I watched
everything in my life disappear, one by one.

First I lost my job. I had become a heroin addict. I
was stealing money from my job, then trying to make
up the $100 to $200 I took regularly to replace that
money before it was noticed. It was quite a hustle I was
doing, moving money around. It caught up to me, and
I was fired.

Then I lost my Section 8 housing. I could not keep
up my insurance payments and lost my car.

I started isolating myself, because I was ashamed.
I stopped going to family events. I chose new friends
who were doing the same drug. I would couch-hop
with them for a month or two, then move to another
friend’s place.

Eventually my sister got a home and I moved there,
helping take care of her five daughters. I had to hide
my drug use, but was not able to stop altogether. That
went on for quite some time.

A friend told me about Avivo Village. Last March, after
waiting less than three weeks, I was able to move in.

I did not like living in shelters, where you have one
big room to share and lockers that are regularly broken
into. At Avivo Village, I have my own tiny home. I was
relieved I could finally breathe again. I know my stuff
will be safe here, with no one going through it. It is
a nice new facility, very comfortable, and they do not
rush to get you out.

They want you to get on your feet
before you step out the door.

I would already be in my own place, but I have to
take care of some legal issues caused by having a felony
warrant on my record. People at Avivo Village are
helping me connect with my probation officer so that I
can qualify to get my own place.

I did relapse recently, and they offer me sobriety
support for that. They helped me get into detox.

There are mental health and recovery treatments,
and classes throughout the day: writing, resume
building, job searching.

It is about striving — being able to be comfortable as
we do things on our own to get back on our feet. We
are adults here.

I have been able to concentrate on myself. When you
are out on the street, you feel very scattered — parts of
yourself here and there. I am able to get myself together
here, and it is nice. I look forward to getting back to
work. I have not been a regular person for a while.

* Last name withheld by request
When Enbridge released between 6,000 and 9,000 gallons of drilling fluid within wetlands bordering the Mississippi River on June 25, the lack of clear and timely communication between the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) and the local community confirmed what many Indigenous people and Line 3 protestors already knew — that depending on one another, rather than the governing agency, was their best hope to access information about their community’s water in the event of crisis.

Keshia DeFreece Lawrence, a Ramapough Lenape Munsee environmental political scientist based in Connecticut, lived in Line 3 resistance camps in Minnesota for two weeks last summer and again in November.

Prompted by the June spill, DeFreece Lawrence founded Sovereign Science: a network of Indigenous people and allies who perform water quality tests across Turtle Island (North America) to create a set of “baselines,” including soil and air quality and plant nutrient levels.

“The lack of prior informed consent for activity on our lands means that in terms of monitoring, we only know ecocide now,” she says.

Sovereign Science is working toward a less disaster-focused monitoring approach by encouraging collection from spiritually or personally significant sites as well as sites of ecocide. Ultimately, DeFreece Lawrence “seeks to build a sovereign community of people who view themselves as a part of the spectrum of the natural world.”

People from diverse backgrounds and many locations are invited to join Sovereign Science. Participants need access to a cell phone to record coordinates and clean containers to collect water. After signing up with a location in mind, DeFreece Lawrence coordinates with individuals to determine a collection method and assist participants through the collection steps. Water samples are processed by DeFreece Lawrence and her colleague, a doctoral candidate studying water quality in the Great Lakes at Guelph University in Ontario. Once sufficient data is collected for a territory or otherwise-determined geographic area, DeFreece Lawrence and her team create publicly available reports illustrating aquatic health.

DeFreece Lawrence hopes to gain funding to disseminate full test kits for easier data collection. “It is very simple equipment and testing,” she says, noting that these experiments can be run with young students. “It is just a matter of access.”

Until the project receives funding, DeFreece Lawrence is traveling to testing locations herself. “If there is a location that I can get to within a two- to four-day period, I am doing it,” she said while traveling through Six Nations of the Grand River territory in Ontario.

The long-term goal is to create a map of water qualities across Turtle Island, including collectors’ ancestral and
DeFreece Lawrence, who holds a master’s in international law and is currently working on her tribal law degree, hopes to see “Indigenous communities, tribal lawyers, and others use this data in creating a legal precedent against corporations exploiting natural resources and violating national and international Indigenous human rights.”

In a future that promises immense climate change, DeFreece Lawrence emphasizes the importance of transparency in scientific research and the need for environmental literacy redefined through Indigenous knowledge.

Delayed Accountability

According to the Sierra Club, “the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (PUC) allowed Enbridge to select, train, and pay for the ‘Independent Environmental Monitors’ working on behalf of the MPCA and DNR to monitor Line 3 construction.” Nearly half of these monitors — 12 of 25 — were past Enbridge employees who, the Sierra Club writes, “failed to alert state authorities” when construction drilled deeper than approved and burst through an artesian aquifer cap, releasing more than 24 million gallons of water in January 2021. The Department of Natural Resources was not alerted of the breach until the following June.

Not only did the PUC fail to ensure responsible environmental safety management, DeFreece Lawrence and one of her associates — Dr. Christy Dolph, a research scientist in the University of Minnesota’s Department of Ecology, Evolution and Behavior — say the MPCA failed to supply timely and detailed safety reports to the public despite multiple requests from Indigenous leaders for clear information. “The agencies continue to share almost no information with us about their process for investigation or accountability,” says Dolph.

One month after the June 25 release, 32 senators and representatives addressed a letter to the MPCA, citing concern that spills during the “severe drought and excessive heat” might hinder the ability of water bodies to “effectively dilute harmful chemicals and excessive sediment” used in the drilling process. They demanded the MPCA release data on the spills.

A list of 28 drilling fluid releases during Line 3 construction between June 6 and August 5, ranging in amount from 10 to 9,000 gallons, was published by the MPCA on August 9. A comprehensive report of damage to each ecosystem — including a plan of enforcement action against Enbridge in response to violation of the MPCA’s 401 Water Quality Certification — has yet to be released as of February 2022.

In response to a request to comment on the report’s timeline, the MPCA stated: “Once our investigation is complete, the MPCA will publicly release its comprehensive findings, corrective actions required or taken and monetary penalties. Foremost, the MPCA believes any polluter needs to be held accountable, and the release of drilling mud into a waterway is a violation of the 401 certification.”

Who Decides What Is Toxic?

In the meantime, state officials are asking water protectors for their footage of the spills to fill information gaps “they rely on Enbridge to supply,” says photographer and videographer Ron Turney.

“We sounded the alarm that night of July 20. I posted the footage [of frac-outs] and the next day MPCA tweeted that ‘A lot of misinformation is being shared on social about potential frac-outs,’” says Turney. “Now they are asking us for our data and footage, after they tried to discredit and criminalize us.”

The MPCA now lists four drilling fluid releases taking place on July 20, two of which occurred within wetlands. “The MPCA has met several times with citizen activists and organizations to better understand their data and evidence,” the agency said in a statement to Minnesota Women’s Press.

The fundamental disagreement between Enbridge, the MPCA, and water protectors about what constitutes toxicity is what makes water protectors doubtful that action will be taken in the event of a more dangerous spill.

Enbridge lists the horizontal directional drilling fluid ingredients released into waterways as “nontoxic.” Manufacturer safety data sheets for Power Pac-L and sodium bentonite — both used in this drilling method — note that these products...
should be prevented “from entering sewers, waterways, or low areas.” Bentonite is a fine sediment that can clog gills and suffocate aquatic life such as mussels, fish, and insects if released in large quantities. In drought conditions, when ecosystems have reduced capacity to flush out pollutants, spillage may smother flora and harm fauna, regardless of whether or not spillage contains chemicals listed as “toxic.”

An Ancient Reaction

Thus, DeFreece Lawrence’s Sovereign Science initiative does not rely on information from agencies, but returns “autonomy to the First Peoples and first stewards of the environment.”

Their first report, “Enbridge Ecocide: Minnesota Line 3,” tells a story of floodplain movement, water chemistry, and possible solutions for a healthier ecosystem. Together with Dolph and analyst Laura Triplet, DeFreece Lawrence has compiled a baseline image of what the soil and water look like at and upstream of an area where three frac-outs have been identified near the Mississippi headwaters. Her analysis of the area affected by the spill finds deadly levels of iron, aspects of drill mud, and other unknown toxins present in water. To counteract toxins, the scientists suggest repairing the river’s soil base using compost and manure, which have regulatory effects and high levels of nitrogen.

“Sovereign Science represents an intentional way to think about science work as a project that is rooted in a different cultural paradigm of protection, care, longevity, survival, and justice,” says Dolph. “[It] provides people with the knowledge they need to do caring, protecting work.”

“Indigenous people and our knowledge are not something of the past. We are present,” says DeFreece Lawrence. “These resistance camps and frontlines are not happening by coincidence; they are reactions of defense to things immediately happening in the area [and] an ancient reaction that we feel through intergenerational trauma and ecological grief.”

To join Sovereign Science’s work and conduct testing: tinyurl.com/MWPSovereignScience
Growing up in Roseville in a family of 10, there was always a whirlwind of activity. I was among the older kids. My parents guided us to pay attention to the needs of the younger ones: listen to them, include them, adapt games to accommodate them, because they counted too. Another family value was to be kind and friendly with family and neighbors. These always felt like simple things.

Later, as a student at the University of Minnesota, I met a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet in the theater department. She led a class called Teaching Teachers How to Teach Drama. I realized that what she was really teaching was how to coach children to love themselves unconditionally. After the class ended, knowing that I understood her approach, she invited me to join her in her consulting work.

Through that instructor, I met many other sisters, all paying attention to the needs of others, caring about the disenfranchised, discussing root causes of poverty, adapting to address needs. It was exciting to see everything that a community of caring, concerned individuals could accomplish. In my mid-twenties, I asked to join them.

An insight I had early on was that sisters do not just move in and fix things. They first listen to the needs expressed by people who are disenfranchised and then together work on solutions.

Eventually, I began to imagine what could happen if the 650,000 sisters across the world had resources to address root causes of poverty. Sisters are already in place, living and working in areas of greatest need.

There have always been two obstacles to that vision, however. Sisters have not been easily connected to each other, nor have they had ready access to resources needed for their work.

In 2015, I gathered a merry band of sisters, including one sister’s talented cousins in the tech and communications industries. We tested a hypothesis about whether donors might be excited to support the work of global sisters. The answer was a clear yes. We launched Sisters Rising Worldwide (SRW) in 2017. In 2019, our innovative technology platform called the PeaceRoom was launched.

The PeaceRoom allows sisters to...
privately communicate their needs and share best practices with each other. Sisters Rising Worldwide has a public website that enables people to make a contribution of time or talent. To date we have raised over $1 million and been able to fund 30 programs in 13 countries.

Examples of Sisters Rising

Sisters in Visakhapatnam, India, educate and prepare young women for jobs. However, the cost for regular transportation was not affordable. Women walked to their internships, making them vulnerable to traffickers. With SRW funds, a small bus was purchased, and today the women are safely transported to their internships.

In Philadelphia, Dawn’s Place offers a safe and caring residential setting for survivors of human trafficking. It is a pioneering program that provides a safe space for survivors to develop a recovery plan, heal, and successfully return to society. SRW funding enabled them to hire a social worker who helps women transition to independent living.

Three Sisters manage the Catholic Health Training Institute (CHTI) in Wau, South Sudan, which trains nurses and midwives. In 2010, when CHTI opened, there were only 83 registered nurses and 19 registered midwives in the country. Since 2013, CHTI has graduated 154 nurses and 71 midwives. More than 50 percent of the student body is female — in a country in which many girls do not go to school beyond the fourth grade. With SRW funds, CHTI can now accept more women into its three-year program, which offers a good education and is key to preventing human trafficking and early marriage.

In 2021, the first shipment of computers arrived at a sisters’ school in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The school is located in a village near the borders of Burundi and Rwanda. In 1994, the village was destroyed by genocide. To reconstruct elements of society, sisters use those computers to work with young women to prepare for future careers.

Sister Helen in Mindanao, Philippines, convinced farmers that people are paying the price from years of pesticide use and the solution is organic farming. After five years of helping them rehabilitate their land, fishing, and forest resources, those practices are working. Sister Helen received funding from SRW to begin building an ecology center that will allow farmers from farther away to come to week-long workshops for hands-on learning.

Boundaries are not needed if we want to solve problems. Details: srw.org
Focus on Equity

Changemakers Alliance (CALL) — the new Minnesota Women’s Press circle for conversation, story, and action — hosted two discussions in February. Advocates explained what they are looking for in the 2022 legislative session for housing, mental health, family health, and agriculture. Featured guests were from Homes for All MN, Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing (MICAH), National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Greater Twin Cities United Way, and Land Stewardship Project.

One theme that emerged from both conversations is that some Minnesotans do not want low-income and supportive housing in their neighborhood — the “not in my backyard” or NIMBY reaction. Speakers suggested that uninformed fear and exclusionary instincts can prompt these concerns.

One possible initiative that could develop from these conversations is to explore NIMBY objections, past and present, and provide members with knowledge to support statewide housing projects. This would include housing for youth in transition, disabled communities, those coping with mental illness, and people recovering from addiction.

MICAH executive director Sue Watlov Phillips noted that the Minnesota legislature is currently debating a $7.7 billion state budget surplus. She says we have been undersupporting too many Minnesotans for too long.

“As long as we have people who don’t have their basic needs met, we don’t have a surplus,” Watlov Phillips says.

NAMI executive director Sue Abderholden says: “The mental health system is not broken. If you look at the system, it was never built.”

As CALL members identify statewide issues that engage their interest, multimedia storytelling teams will develop focused on solutions. Upcoming conversations are focused on Healing Trauma and require registration:

- **Addressing Stigma & Addiction** — March 9 and/or 12 tinyurl.com/CALLaddiction
- **Healing From Sex Trafficking** — March 23 tinyurl.com/CALLTrafficking

Learn more: lwvsp.org
compassionandchoices.org

womenspress.com/call-equity
KaYing Yang Joins Biden’s Advisory Commission

“The state of Minnesota is a very important state for Asian American representation,” KaYing Yang told Sahan Journal after being tapped to serve on the national Advisory Commission on Asian Americans she helped launch in the 1990s. Yang, formerly the Director of Programs & Partnerships for the Coalition of Asian American Leaders, was featured in two Minnesota Women’s Press stories in 2021: “Reducing the Risk of Deportation” (March) and “Building a Better Twin Cities” (June).

SCOTUS Greenlights Gerrymandering in Alabama

An op-ed in the Boston Globe titled “Supreme Court shows its true colors by greenlighting Alabama’s racial gerrymandering” parses how the high court could side (5–4) with Alabama’s secretary of state in Merrill v. Milligan. “Kavanaugh’s even more bizarre claim of election proximity supposedly justified keeping Alabama’s distorted congressional election map in place. It was a map that packed so many Black voters into one congressional district that it looks like a Rorschach test for racists.”

Contaminated Drinking Water in Bemidji

Bemidji’s mayor Rita Albrecht published a piece in the Minnesota Reformer cautioning “every city and township in Minnesota” to understand the implications of living with PFAS — commonly known as “forever chemicals.” High levels of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) were found in Bemidji’s drinking water, which puts residents at increased risk of some cancers, thyroid disease, and infertility. Albrecht urged the state legislature to fund PFAS research, among other preventative measures. In February, the city of Woodbury was also forced to shut down municipal wells because of PFAS contamination.
I never expected to become a publisher, certainly not in my mid-forties, although I knew when I was growing up that my life would revolve around books. My earliest memories are of immersing myself in the world of a book, a world I fell into readily, often preferring it to my daily reality. My dad was my constant reading ally; he not only brought me books but spent time with me on evenings and weekends talking about our favorites.

As I grew up, it seemed natural to write my own stories. Writing gave me the opportunity to create worlds of my own. In high school and college, I edited the literary magazine, reading and critiquing submissions, a process that helped me improve my own writing. Throughout college, I found part-time editing jobs to help pay for tuition. I began teaching in graduate school and continued to teach afterward, courses in literature, writing for children, and writing poetry. I continued to write, sending out my poetry and fiction in hopes of publication.

In the late 1970s, I became a part of the growing literary community in Minneapolis, a community fostered in large part by the Loft Literary Center, then only a few years old. At the Loft I met Randy Scholes, a visual artist and Loft board member. We talked about the fact that literary journals included little visual art and that it would be exciting to see a more equal mix of art and writing. After a year of planning such a publication, in the winter of 1980 we founded the literary-visual nonprofit journal Milkweed Chronicle to explore a different theme in each issue, with graphics and writing commenting on or complementing one another. Sweat equity and grant support allowed us to scrape by and survive to become the book publisher Milkweed Editions in 1987.

Publishing allowed me to showcase new and emerging writers whose work I admired, writers whose distinctive ideas deserved an audience. Publishing gave me the time to work with authors to shape their work, and the opportunity to launch books that I believed would remain relevant for years to come.

What I did not recognize at first — and came to value more than anything else — was that I could choose to publish in areas important to society. A paramount issue that needed to be addressed was sexual violence against women. My colleagues Pamela Fletcher, Martha Roth, and I created a book of essays demonstrating that every facet of American culture engenders sexual violence against women. The essayists in “Transforming a Rape Culture” (1993) examine education, sports, religion, pornography, the commodification of women, and the language surrounding sexuality. The book’s final sections depict strategies for change, examples of activism, and visions for the future of a sexual-violence-free culture.

I felt the need to increase public awareness about the growing challenges to the natural world. In my last years at Milkweed, all of our nonfiction was concentrated on the threat climate change poses.

Today I take heart in the fact that anyone with a computer can take a stand on crucial issues.

When I retired from Milkweed in 2003, I intended to take...
time off before concentrating on my own writing. In my case, “time off” meant being able to have time to spend with a dog. To my surprise, I learned from the various humane association blogs that children often harm dogs and cats because no one has taught them that all animals need care and affection. I looked for picture books that showed children responsible, loving treatment of animals, but found instead a multitude of books in which animals are little more than cartoons. In 2006, I founded the Gryphon Press to provide a “voice for the voiceless,” with a mission to publish children’s picture books that encourage empathy for every animal’s life.

I am still publishing. My love of books continues to inspire.

Recommended Reading

“Changing the Bully Who Rules the World: Reading and Thinking About Ethics,” by Carol Bly includes selections from Alice Walker and Joyce Carol Oates, among others. It sheds light on how to confront oppressors and how to nurture ethical human beings.

Pattiann Rogers uses rich, sensual language in “Eating Bread and Honey.” These poems celebrate our connection to the natural world — a hymn to our ability to feel through both emotional and physical senses.

“Cracking India” by Bapsi Sidhwa is a vividly imagined look at one of the most painful events in the history of the subcontinent. Told through the eyes of an eight-year-old, it is a story of ordinary people unable to cope with horrific events that changed their lives forever.

“World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments” is poet Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s debut work of nonfiction about the natural world. As a child, Nezhukumatathil called many places home, but no matter where she was transplanted, she turned to our world’s fierce and funny creatures for guidance.

Diane Wilson’s “The Seed Keeper” is a haunting novel spanning several generations as it follows a Dakota family’s struggle to preserve their way of life and their sacrifices to protect what matters most.
I was a full-time evangelical Christian missionary in Mexico, preaching about Jesus to families who lived in Mexico City. Now I am a spiritual atheist and life coach for people who practice ethical non-monogamy.

Did I plan this? Nope. In ten years, I doubt I will be able to say I planned wherever I am then either. Life is fluid.

In My Youth

In the 1990s, I was coming of age. When I entered my teens, the internet also came of age, and I discovered pornography and masturbation. I attended a church in Roseville, where I was told in a youth group that every person we had premarital sex with was like a piece of paper being glued to another piece of paper and then ripped apart. We would lose parts of ourselves to the other person that we would never get back.

When I was a freshman at an evangelical high school, the dissonance I felt about looking at porn and lusting after classmates compelled me to confess, to my peers in a Christian religion class, that I had sinned, had masturbated, and had lusted. It was humiliating, but I thought it was the only way to get back to being “pure” for god.

I felt so much guilt and shame while going through this typical development stage. I was naturally a seeker. My culture, my faith, and my generation felt very limited.

Already insecure from undiagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), I realize now how harmful it was to be taught to be submissive, deferential, and codependent. I also did not learn how to have intimate relationships, because my faith taught me that god would provide the right person. Instead of starting conversations, I would sit quietly and pray that god would send someone to me so that we could talk. I did not develop the ability to connect, to be vulnerable, and to assert myself with others.

Not feeling secure enough for college, I moved to Mexico to be a Christian missionary. My goal was to convert Catholic Mexicans to evangelical Christianity. Eventually, however, a secret crush I had there started to date someone. I immediately lost interest in the missions, wondered if god had ever meant for me to go to Mexico — and whether god even existed at all.

Rushing Into Relationships

After I returned to Minnesota, I started dating someone, had partnered sex for the first time, and got married to him — all within one year. Retrospectively, I believe I chose that
path to rebel. I was still Christian, but that was fading. Five years later, my partner and I divorced. Six months after that, I started dating someone who basically moved in on the second date and eventually became my second husband. I still had not dealt with the trauma of internalized “not good enough” narratives from my childhood. I continued believing that my sexuality was a commodity that could be used up. The relationship was benevolently codependent.

Eventually, I began to have panic attacks and sobbing fits when my husband would initiate sex. I pursued help with a sexual health doctor and therapist. In 2016, I concluded that I needed to essentially go back in time and date like I had never allowed myself to before. My husband agreed to open up our marriage and be ethically non-monogamous.

In 2017, I went on dozens of first dates, only one involving a kiss — since I was still terrified of relationships. At first, I dated one person at a time. Being in intimate relationships with different people who have their own unique experiences allowed me to become skilled in asserting myself, enjoying sex, managing conflict, and negotiating the needs and desires of multiple people.

**Ethical Non-Monogamy**

In 2019, I began working as a life coach for people who practice ethical non-monogamy and for those who suffer from religious trauma. I started a podcast, “Marie, Myself, & I” — where I talk about the intersections of insecurity, religious fanaticism, and the need to gain approval — using radical vulnerability as a way to navigate.

Eventually I came to relate to the philosophy of relationship anarchy — basically deferring to the nature of fluidity in all things. It allows me to show up in a relationship needing nothing, expecting nothing, and being delighted when I can connect securely with another person. It allows me to let go of clinging to the idea that a relationship needs to have longevity. It allows me to learn about my limited views. It allows me to continue to evolve as a person and not feel like I need to hold back who I am becoming in order to protect a relationship. It puts the control of my life solidly into my hands. It allows me to be honest about what I am interested in sharing with a variety of people, instead of feeling compelled to find everything in one core relationship.

Ethical non-monogamy is not about having more or kinkier sex, which is often the stereotype associated with it. For me, it is about profoundly seeing and valuing all kinds of people without attachment to a particular connection or outcome. It allows me, after a stunted childhood and adolescence, to exist in the fluid state that I believe is natural.

Details: marielepage.com
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I was diagnosed with selective mutism when I was two. It is a rare anxiety order that causes a freeze response in a person’s brain. Many kids are unable to speak outside of their home.

When I was almost seven, my parents and siblings brought me to a special camp in Miami called Brave Bunch that helped me overcome my selective mutism. I did so well that, when I was nine, I was asked to be a speaker at the National Selective Mutism convention in Las Vegas.

When I was six, I started a kindness project called This Life Rocks. At the time, my dad was recovering from his first cancer, and I was struggling with selective mutism.

Because we could not travel that summer, I started painting rocks and hiding them for people to find — an idea that came from my mom. At first, I thought it was a nice way to share my art and words with people, without talking. Now I simply like knowing that people are finding a nice surprise. They are almost always found by strangers. I have gotten some nice messages from people who found them.

A nonprofit group called The Spread Sunshine Gang heard about me and asked me to host a rock painting party. I realized then how much I liked doing kind deeds to help others.

submitted by Nika Hirsch
others, and started doing more benefits — lollipop sales for the Blue Lollipop Project, Bundle Up Minnesota, designing T-shirts for the Conquer Cancer Foundation. I started to talk about my experiences on podcasts about selective mutism and mental health.

The Spread Sunshine Gang inspired me to host a Gratitude Tree in my town. I partnered with the library in my community and named the tree Rocky. (Last summer he got his arms trimmed, so I had to find another tree and named him Rocco). There is a sign near the tree, and I provide tags and Sharpie markers. People hang tags about what they are grateful for. It is super colorful by the end of the summer.

In the winter, the gratitude tree becomes a giving tree — I put handmade winter items on it for people who might need extra warmth. Knitters in the community help.

Another project that has gotten pretty big started when I asked my mom what Black Friday is. She told me about people who shop like crazy and fight over things like a Tickle Me Elmo doll. I thought it would be cool to have people do nice things for each other that day instead. I asked, “What if people could do 100 kind things that day?”

So, we decided to try. The first time, in 2017, we had about 12 people who helped out. We did things like bring toys to the Children’s Hospital, play music at the Veteran’s Home, hide rocks, hold doors open for people, and write letters to teachers. We got to 100 good deeds by about 11pm that first time.

My Dad

My dad twice overcame sarcoma, a group of cancers in the bones, fat, and muscle. Then he was diagnosed with glioblastoma, which is an aggressive type of cancer in the brain.

He was going through his second sarcoma treatment when I was eight. I asked my parents why it came back. They explained that there are not good treatments for sarcoma because research is underfunded. I decided to host a bake sale, and raised $500.

I wanted to raise more money. I partnered with Skateville, a roller rink in Burnsville, and some of my Instagram friends. People donated prizes, skated, and entered a raffle.

My dad could not skate because the sarcoma was in his leg, but he had fun at the party. We raised about $1,500.

My dad died on September 27, 2021. Before he lost his battle with cancer, he told me to “keep making life rock.” So, two months later, on Black Friday, my Instagram followers and I did 1,000 kind deeds in 24 hours!

I know it is important to take care of myself, too. I love visiting animals at the Humane Society, especially dogs. They are so full of love and always seem to know what you need.

I have two dogs. Scrappy is 97 in human years, and he is a dog model. He has been in photos for companies because he is cute and listens well. Piper is 11 in human years — just like me. She is cute too, but still has to work on her manners. Scrappy is helping her out.
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Through May 15 — Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art

Artists working in the U.S. have long visualized the supernatural, mysterious, and inexplicable to depict their experiences and national events. This exhibition spans the early 1800s through the present and features 150 works by internationally recognized artists such as Howardena Pindell, Alma Thomas, and Dorothea Tanning. It also highlights those whose work has never before been included in museum exhibitions of American art, including 19th- and 20th-century “spirit artists” who conjured inspiration during séances. $20. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis.

March 12 — Chastity Brown

With this new series presented by Sue McLean & Associates and the Women’s Club of Minneapolis, fans have the opportunity to hear the stories behind an artist’s creative journey. Chastity Brown is a Minnesota-via-Tennessee songwriter and blues musician whose music is populated by marginalized characters. During the performance, fans can submit questions, many of which Brown will answer from the stage. $35–$75. 7:30pm. The Women’s Club of Minneapolis.

March 12 — Marisa Monte

Superstar vocalist-composer Marisa Monte’s adventurous take on Brazilian popular music has earned her four Latin Grammys. She is widely considered to be one of the country’s top singers. Monte performs at the State Theatre to celebrate her twelfth album, “Portas” (Doors). $45 – $108. 8pm. State Theatre, Minneapolis.

March 18 — Women Walking

Participants will feel winter slide away during this Vernal Equinox gathering. Walkers gather indoors for welcome and centering exercises, then move into the woods and prairies that make up Belwin Conservancy’s acreage on the banks of the St. Croix river. Light refreshments will be provided around a fire. Open to women ages 16 and older. $20 (RSVP and prepay required). 6pm–9pm. Belwin Conservancy, Afton.

March 19 — Time in Our Voices

Adult choral group MPLS (imPulse) partners with the youth of ComMUSICation to perform Moira Smiley’s “Time in Our Voices.” The piece explores “how our voices change over time to carry different perspectives on life, time, and the role we play in the world,” according to the composer. $20–$40. 12:30pm. Wellstone Center, Saint Paul.
Twenty years ago, I was a burned-out, stressed-out nonprofit leader and social justice activist. I had spent 30 years in the fight against U.S. imperialism, racial injustice, economic inequality, and patriarchy in every corner of my life as a woman. I worked nonstop on issues, campaigns, and organizing that I hoped would create a better world, but personally, I was a mess. I often operated out of anger, frustration, and harsh judgments of myself and others.

At a certain point I realized my commitment to a life of social change had become unsustainable and unhealthy. If I did not want to lose my passion for change — a casualty of my drive and intensity — I had to find another path.

The change for me was gradual. It began with retreats, first for a day and later for several days. I began to intentionally nurture myself, to stop to rest more often, and to recognize that “I was not responsible for fixing everything wrong in the world.”

I found my way to a healthier lifestyle, poetry, meditation, stronger relationships with family and friends, and eventually to the practice of Buddhism.

Now, 20 years later, I can say that my commitment to a life of social change had become unsustainable and unhealthy. If I did not want to lose my passion for change — a casualty of my drive and intensity — I had to find another path.

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Now, 20 years later, I can say that I am still a grassroots organizer and advocate for social change, but I no longer believe all the world’s injustice is my responsibility to mend.

What a relief it has been to realize that my purpose is not only to do what I can to change the world, but also to rest with ease into “life as it is.” I seek connection more often than division, quiet more often than rage, and inner strength rather than a forceful exterior.

Now that I am in my early seventies, I like where I have ended up. I could not have gotten to where I am without a strong foundation in Buddhism. This is a practice that identifies our acute perception of separation as one of the main barriers to greater happiness.

The antidote to the sense of a separated self was expressed beautifully by the poet Jane Hirshfield in a recent On Being podcast. She speaks of “inseparable kinship” — the notion that we are not alone, but fully in relationship with everything else.

We are not separate, whether we realize it or not. We live in inescapable kinship with all living things, the natural world, and even the cosmos.

Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, who died in January, calls this “inter-being.” In other words, though my body is my distinct container, and my skin is a barrier to the outer world, I do not exist except in relation to all that is alive and constantly changing around me. This insight helps me to appreciate the gift of life and to develop greater reverence for the natural world we share.

The second helpful insight from Buddhism for me is the notion of impermanence, which suggests the fluidity of time. Everything is constantly changing, including ourselves. Our atoms, molecules, and cells are constantly growing, mutating, changing, and dying. That which leaves me is born again in the air, the water, the plants, the earth, and in other human beings. It is a comfort to realize that our thoughts, perceptions, and behavior are impermanent — because if things feel permanent, they can destroy us.

With practice, we can learn to sit quietly with our emotions, become curious about them, gain insight, and even watch them change. If I am depressed personally — or in despair about my country, the pandemic, or the overwhelming suffering in the world — I have the ability to calm myself, focus my breath, and recenter my energy so that I can act skillfully in the world. This is not passive acceptance of things as they are but living in awareness of the process of change.

It is hard to have our eyes wide open to human suffering, climate catastrophe, racial injustice, devastating inequality, and our own painful experiences of living. To change what is, we have to first lean into life “just as it is” — gather our resources, recognize that we are not alone, and then do what we can to make a difference.

Change is constant. What that change will be depends in part on us.

Pam Costain (she/her) is retired from AchieveMpls and spends time with her grandchildren.
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My painting references a photo of myself (left) and one I took of a little girl I know (right), who was separated from her parents and has had little say in her situation. She was a partial inspiration for my "Rights of the Child" series of paintings, reflecting on how different societies exercise mixed messages around the value of life and youth.

This piece emerged from an argument I had with someone who felt that unborn children deserve rights but the children detained at the U.S.-Mexico border did not. I wondered about the cognitive dissonance we all exercise in making decisions on behalf of children.

I wanted to depict images of two little girls from two different times and encapsulate a sense of the enormity of the worlds we emerged into. At the right, viewers might see either a cage or a common playground feature; I wanted everything in the image to be construed as both playful and foreboding, because that is the essence of childhood. Children's rights are not one-size-fits-all in a world where so much trauma and separation, and also healing and cycle-breaking, take place.
A new film from Dakota/Diné Director Leya Hale explores the urgent epidemic of murdered and missing Indigenous women in the U.S. Follow three Native women - an artist, an activist and a politician - in their journeys to bring awareness to the crisis and hope to their communities.

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