

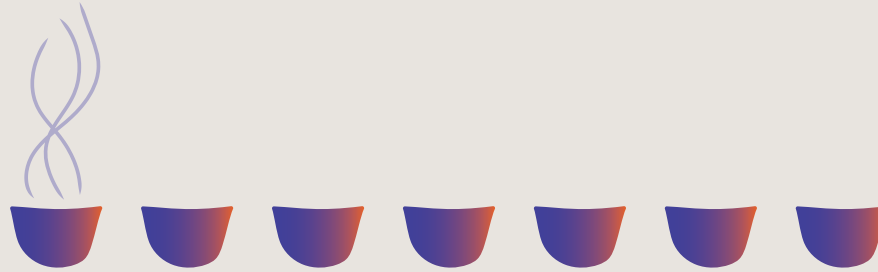


MELANIE GOODCHILD

# Duck Shit Tea, Yarning & The Magical Space In Between Things

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I'm riding up the Skylon Tower elevator to the observation deck at the place of the thundering waters (Niagara Falls, Ontario as it's currently known). The elevator man looks at my brother-in-law Tyson and exclaims, "nice jacket bro, you look like a rock star!" to which me and my man Sly respond in unison, "he is a rock star!" This reply probably sent shivers up and down the back of Tyson who is not too impressed by all the guru fuckery going on in our world right now. But in my world of systems thinking and complexity science he is a rock star, because he wrote a phenomenal book called Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World, wherein he shares with us the brilliant thought-paths of his Aboriginal ancestors, examining global systems from an Indigenous Knowledge perspective. The elevator man, however, may still be perplexed, trying to figure out what Band he's with. If he was a rock star, I'd like to think he was with Mongolian folk metal band The Hu. Except it would be an Apelech clan metal band from the far north Queensland, Australia and he would have carved his own instrument. Back at the base of the tower, we purchase the overpriced souvenir photo taken of our family, arms flailing in the air, looking like we are going over the Falls in a barrel.

It's late September 2022 and we have all just experienced the COVID worldwide pandemic which seems to be shifting into a new phase, but it's not over.

*AnishinaabeKwe inda* (I am an Ojibwe woman) and I am on a writing retreat in Niagara Falls. The place of the thundering waters is part of the songline (narrative on the land) of the Great Migration of the

Ojibwe peoples and of my own life's journey. My family and I lived in this area for the past ten years until we moved back home recently to Baawaating (the place of the rapids) in what is currently known as Sault Ste Marie, Ontario. My mom is from Ketegauneebee First Nation (Garden River) and she wanted to enjoy her elderhood at home, in the land of our ancestors. Garden River reserve is near Sault Ste Marie. I am currently a Systems Changer in Residence with a global philanthropy and my residency includes two writing retreats. Although I'm quite grateful, a retreat to write something, anything, is the antithesis of a good time for me. I still have a doctoral dissertation to finish on top of it all.

When Tyson wrote to say that he and his family were coming to Manitou Aki — the lands of the Anishinaabe, currently known as North America — the timing coincided with my writing retreat. The only way I could swing it was to rent an Airbnb, go site-seeing by day and write by night. So, this first retreat is an experiment. What happens when we drink bowls of tea, yarn, and spend a week with my weapon-wielding rock star brother-in-law and his family in a shared Airbnb in the Falls? To make the experiment even more interesting Tyson's woman Megan very recently busted up her leg at an indoor trampoline park when her body went east and her leg went west, so Megs and Ty are traveling from the southern hemisphere to the northern hemisphere with two special needs children, a teenager, and Megs hobbling about with crutches. Sly and I — us-two — arrive at the Airbnb and I am greeted with a stunning bouquet of flowers sent by the global philanthropy wishing me well on my first writing retreat. It's thoughtful and much appreciated.

Tyson's woman Megs and my man Sly (aka my cabana boy, aka my life partner) are siblings, they are sister and brother through totemic kinship. They are both eagle clan. Megs is of Barada and Gabalbara heritage of Northeast Queensland, Australia and Sly is of Algonquin and French heritage from the Mattawa area of Ontario, Canada. Sly also has a Chinese name and is a certified tea specialist along with being a second level Qigong instructor. If not for Meg's busted leg, we might be doing Qigong daily this week. In the not-too-distant past we would have carved an eagle clan stick and put it outside the front door of our Airbnb to welcome our relatives to Turtle Island (North America). Around 20 years ago or so I had tea with a 92-year-old Nokomis in Roseau River First Nation in Manitoba and she told me that's what she missed the most in modern times, that nobody visited anymore. She said she used to put her clan symbol outside her place and that way every one of her clan relations would know they had a place to sleep and a bowl of soup to eat. But in that soup economy there was no charge for her Airbnb. Tyson could carve us all our clan sticks because he is an artist and carves tools and weapons. *Mooz indodem*, I am moose clan. That's why I wear moccasins with beaded moose on them in ceremony. So, let's add a moose stick to that eagle stick. The totem sticks would have been a cordial sight to see outside our ancestors' *wiigiwaaman* (lodges).

Pot of soup on the stove, tea in the traditional Chinese side handle teapot, Eagle/Moose clan sticks on the front porch and the Yunkaporta mob arrives at our front door. Tyson has wrapped up a visit to Cornell University, a visit prompted by an invitation from Professor Jolene Rickard to speak as part of the American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program speaker series. Several days later Tyson and Megs would accidentally leave a mug from Cornell at our rental place and I'm not entirely sure I will mail it back to them in Australia. In planning this visit Tyson asked via email, will the rental place be a problem for our special needs babies who are grabby/climby/shouty, or do you think we'll manage ok together? We will manage just fine, I reply, us-two found the perfect rental with bunk beds, family friendly furniture and comfy kitchen area for eating and drinking together. Tyson adds that Megsy wants to meet her eagle bro Sly. We stay on the lower level while Tyson, Megs and kiddies are upstairs.



Us-two selfie (Melanie & Tyson)

This is the first time we've met in person. We met in spirit many times, yarning with bowls of tea on zoom. Interesting thing about kinship through clan, dreams and visions is that you often end up being quite similar, so much so that people notice how you are alike, even though you are not related by 'blood.' You are related by spirit. During our first dinner together, Megs is talking about Willie Nelson to which Sly replies, "hey did you hear Willie Nelson is in the hospital. He was hit by a car." "Oh no!" says Megs. "Yeah, he was playing on the road again," to which Megs and Sly laugh out loud. Bad dad joke and they both loved it. Sly heard that one from our *Niigii* (brother) Keith Boissoneau who is a lodge keeper back home in Garden River. Tyson and I – us-two – remark at how they are so alike while us-two each sip our PC Blue Menu Lime Sparking Water. He and I finished a 12 pack together this week. We also both detest complicated food and drink orders, just order what's on the menu and don't rhyme off your list of alternates, and we both leave cupboard doors open. So, brother-in-law and sister-in-law resemble each other too. My brother Julian Norris and I are in essence cosmological twins, he's a rather brilliant British complexity nerd mountain man, who I dreamt into my family as my big brother in 2015. I don't do well in the mountains, I enjoy glamping more than roughing it in grizzly bear country, but we think alike. He sent me a text a couple of years ago and asked if I had ever read a book called *Sand Talk* by Tyson Yunkaporta. If you-all haven't read it yet I advise you to listen to the audiobook for the full Tyson effect as he is the narrator. After I read it cover to cover, at times chuckling out loud in a 'I can't believe he said that' way, I invited Tyson to have a yarn about the book over seven bowls of tea. We got tea drunk together and thus began our long-distance yarning. Yarns are like conversations but take a traditional form Aboriginal people in Australia have always used to create and transmit knowledge.

Tyson and I – us-two – have recorded podcast yarns together and during this writing retreat I am reading the manuscript of his next book. I was quite honoured when he included me in the mob to whom he sent the draft a few weeks ago. In the wee morning hours of this retreat, while Ty snores on the sofa upstairs, I am downstairs reading his book. Kind of meta. I'm not entirely sure how/why Tyson brought me into his mob, maybe he sees me as someone who has my shit together?

On our first evening together Sly prepared dinner, even our wee nephew who eats only four things, devoured it and then we had our first bowls of tea together. The choice for tonight is a tea called The Qi of Tea, Ancient Rattan Tea Tree Raw Puer, 2021 Limited Edition. The leaves are from trees over 150-200 years old. This puer is packaged in a compressed cake or puck of tea, wrapped in paper with an elegant Chinese illustration of a tea house on a mountain. Nothing but the best for our relations! We are beginning our week together in right relations. The autistic toddler in nappies is taught our names, Uncle Sly and Auntie Melanie. He says "nana" to me which we determine is either him calling me his nana or that he wants a banana. Qi in the tea context is not the flavour you can taste, but the feeling you get from the tea. This tea has got big time qi because of the way Sly prepared it and because of the yarning we do together as a family. In *Anishinaabemowin* (Ojibwe language, the original way we speak) tea is *Minikwe Niibish*, the leaf we drink. The word for tea in Ojibwe is *niibish*, which also means leaf. Traditionally, explains Linda LeGarde Grover in her lovely book [Onigamiising: Seasons of an Ojibwe Year](#), the Ojibwe made tea from the leaves, berries, barks and roots of the plants, grasses, and trees that the Creator provided for our use during the time we spend on Earth. Some teas are medicinal and only those who brew it know the contents. Our brother Keith shares tea with us from a woman from Sagamok First Nation, who brings him medicine, to help people sleep or detoxify. Other Ojibwemowin dialects say *Aniibiish*, a leaf or tea. *Aniibiishike* – he/she makes tea and *Aniibiishkaa* – there are many leaves. Anishinaabeg did not have what is usually referred to as tea today, from the *camelia sinensis* plant, that tea arrived on ships along with the baby turtle islanders (as my Lakota friend Tiokasin Ghosthorse refers to non-Indigenous people now residing on Turtle Island). But once tea arrived, we quickly appropriated it to have pots of tea by the campfire. We Anishinaabeg are ardent tea drinkers. Yarning is often done over cups of tea says my brother-in-law.







Puer Tea Puck (photo by author)

As we sip our puer tea and yarn, Tyson asks about making appropriate introductions of he and his family to the sentient landscape here. We suggest they make tobacco ties and offer them to the thundering waters. We will do that tomorrow. Tonight, as we yarn there is an exchange of gifts. Sly gifts Megs a wooden box with beading on top that he made for her. The beading is colourful and beautiful. Megs offers Sly and me something incredible she is making for us; she has all the materials and will finish it before they leave for the next part of their trip. Tyson offers me gifts he made. The first is a woman's fighting stick (a miniature one). It is a multi-tool, a spear, a club, to throw, dig, fight, dream. It is made of Gidgirr wood (very hard acacia) from copper-rich ground in West New South Wales. Engraved on it is a turtle symbol from Oldman Juma Fejo from the Larrakia People (which is seen in the *Sand Talk* book). The second gift is whalebone (blue whale) burnishing tool, that was used to polish all the carvings made for the *Sand Talk* book. So, all that story and lore is in there. It is roughly carved in eel-shape, a migratory animal that moves between fresh and salt, land, and water. Transformations. There is white owl story in that bone he says, brought up from drowned lands by a beaching whale. For each chapter in *Sand Talk* Tyson carved the logic sequences and ideas arising from his yarns into traditional objects before he translated them to into print and his table of contents was visual, on the back of a turtle. This is his method called *umpan*, his people's word for cutting, carving, and making. I am so deeply honoured by these gifts from my brother-in-law. Tyson gave Sly a gift too, a bullroarer, but that is men's business and not my place to speak about. Sly gifted Tyson a flute made by Dave Maracle (Mohawk) and I gifted Tyson one of my favorite items, a red willow circle with four tobacco ties in red, yellow, black and white. Too many layers of teachings in that one item to share here but it hurt my heart a little to gift it away because it has been with me for a long time, and that's how I knew it was a part of me and time to give away. Red willow is a translator between our world and the spirit world, it is how we make our ancestor plates of birchbark for funeral ceremonies. The four colours represent the four directions of our medicine circle teachings.



So, there are more than the humans gathered here in Niagara Falls at this comfy Airbnb. There are also our non-human helpers and the thundering waters herself, joining us for bowls of tea. There is whale medicine, turtle medicine, eagle medicine, eel medicine, and wolf medicine. The toddler in nappies is carrying a toy killer whale that he picked up when his mom and dad stopped at Michaels, a craft store, for some supplies. Sly notices right away and asks if that is the whale from my *o-dah-bah-ji-gahn* (sacred bundle). I tell him nope that's not it, that my whale is at home in a different bag, but it's the same miniature toy Orca. I have two spirit names given to me and witnessed by the killer whales. A female Orca from the north and a male Orca from the West who each witnessed my star names. To Anishinaabeg stars are sacred and personify the spirits of ancient ancestors. Megs and Tyson say their little boy insisted on bringing two killer whales with him, picked up at the store. I show them the ink on my right forearm, two orcas with planets and stars put there by a biker tattooist. My sister Eleanor Skead, like me, once dreamt of killer whales. She consulted an Elder who told her the water spirits travel through all the waterways, so the spirits of whales and dolphins are in our fresh waters and that we must feast them. So, we do, we feed their spirits. That is how I am connected to the killer whales, so familiar to the ocean Peoples. The toddler points to my tattoo and exclaims, "koo-whale, koo-whale."

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On our first full day together, we take our visitors south of the Falls to Dufferin Islands, ten acres of secluded green space, so they can walk on country. Winding paths and wooden foot bridges connect small, tranquil islands. Shortly after we arrived my nephew walked across a bridge, stopped, and tossed his killer whale into the waters below. Free Willy. If you-all ever visits Dufferin Islands in Niagara Falls, don't be surprised if you see a tiny killer whale in the pond. And for gawdsakes don't go to a certain marine park nearby that captured and tortured a killer whale called Kiska, separated her from her pod, and has kept her there in horrible conditions for decades. Put some *asemaa* (tobacco) down for her instead. In an email from Tyson after they returned home to Australia, he told me my nephew threw his other 'koo-whale' into the



Tyson and kids walking at Dufferin Islands (photo by author)

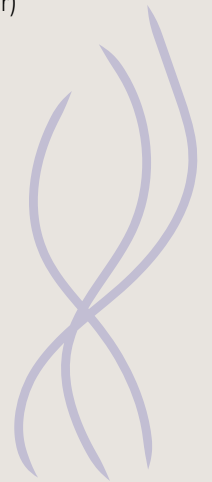
river in Chicago. Free Willy part two. We then visit Clifton Hill, with its tourist attractions, theme restaurants and hotels, and the kiddies delight in seeing the big dinosaurs at the miniature golf attraction and riding the Niagara SkyWheel. Us-two wave back at our nieces and nephew as they go round and round. It's been a fantastic day; we head back to basecamp and drink some tea, Gu Shu Single Tree Sheng Pu'er from Nannuo Mountain in Yunnan Province in China.

On our second full day together we visit the Skylon Tower, ride the Whirlpool Aero Car, and visit the Butterfly Conservatory. I point out to Sly, who regularly asks me to put his keys/wallet/sunglasses in my purse during family outings, that Tyson has a murse (man purse) and Sly says, "ya but he's on another level of cool than me, he's a rock star." He also points out that Tyson still manages to lose track of the car keys. Tyson and I have a yarn about writing. I tell him I find it an excruciating process. I cannot seem to get the thoughts in my head and heart to translate to written text. He offers me a life-changing piece of advice. Keep in mind Tyson is a freak of nature who can both read and write like Mr. Data on *Star Trek the Next Generation*, very, very quickly. He says, when he sits in a cabin in the bush and hammers away on a keyboard the secret is, "I just don't give a shit about the process, no respect for it, for writing, it's not our way. Our cultures are oral cultures." He makes weapons and tools and that's his communication. Writing in English will always be foreign so just write whatever comes to mind he says. This helps me tremendously because I tend to write for the worst critic in the room and ignore everyone else (like those who might enjoy the *dibaajimowin*, story).

The next day is a big day, we prepare for our *dagwaagin* (the fall season) feast together. Our relations are visiting from the southern hemisphere, so they are heading into spring but here we are getting ready for fall and winter. They accept our invitation to have our fall feast together. Sly is the chef in our mob and he makes steak that Tyson picked up at a local grocery store, *manoomin* (wild rice) we brought from Treaty 3 territory, *mandamin* (corn), and berries (strawberries and blueberries). Manoomin is the good seed, a gift of sustenance from the Creator, it is spiritual in origin, and it is precious, says Linda LeGarde Grover. I offer a pumpkin pie with whipped cream. We include candies too for the *manidoog* (spirits) with a sweet tooth. Sly and Tyson eat some of the steak raw, to

feast the wolf, because the wolf eats raw meat. That's men's business and they might tell you more if you ask them. The ceremonies, like our seasonal feasts in spring, summer, fall and winter, retain our connection to our earth mother, to our ancestors, and to our spiritual way of life. In this ceremony we nourish our helpers, the spirit items in our sacred bundles, and the non-human kin that travel with us, the turtles, whales, eels, wolves and eagles. They need to be fed just like us humans, to be nourished. I tell my family that the berries can be added to the wild rice and tossed together with a little bit of the maple syrup. Our teenage niece has a taste for sweets and loves this alchemy. These foods are our traditional foods, gifted to the Anishinaabeg by the Creator. The sugar maple tree gave us, its little brothers and sisters, the Anishinaabeg, this food gift. In the early spring when the days are warm and the nights are still cold, a brilliant, sweet syrup flows from its bark. We drink maple water in our lodges in the spring, it's good medicine. And many Anishinaabeg families today have sugar camps. I ask our niece to help me prepare the spirit plate that will be put out on the land with *asemaa*, our offering to the spirits. I invite our kin to put any of their sacred items on a blanket and we smudge ourselves and the items. Smudging with our medicines helps to purify us and our helpers. Sly offers a song with his humdrum, the ancestor song. There is really no part of the Anishinaabeg way of life that does not involve song, food, and our sacred medicines. It is such a profound honour to have our family from so far away join us for our feast. I introduce the family to a *mikinaak zhiishiigwan* (turtle shaker) telling them the story of its activation and use. The rattle is red on the left for the heart and white on the right for the mind. In a *madoodiswan* (sweatlodge) ceremony I was told this rattle would be my helper, it's a healing rattle said the *manidoog* (spirits). It's a rattle that reminds me and others of the connection between heart and mind.

After we finish eating all the yummy food, my man Sly and I and Tyson head outside to the backyard of the Airbnb for our *opwaagan* (Sacred Pipe) ceremony. For the purposes of this story, I will share that both Sly and I are pipe carriers. This is not something, out of humility and deep respect, that we share outside of our family





rituals but it's important to include here for you-all to understand the context of what happens next. These spiritual processes and protocols enable the Anishinaabeg to live in harmony with all our relations and to communicate with the ancestors and share spiritual knowledge. We prepare for ceremonies by cleansing, fasting, and praying. I was given my pipe from a medicine man after I fasted. The pipe is a turtle pipe, a woman's healing pipe, and it has helped me since I was 19 years old, so over 30 years. During that time, I have been learning about what it means to be a pipe carrier. Us-two lift our pipes, and we invite Tyson to smoke with us-two. As we offer gentle instructions on how to handle the sacred items Tyson takes to it right away, understanding both the physics and power of lighting *asemaa*. The smoke carries our prayers to the Creator, the great spirit. I am not a *mashkikiiwikwe* (medicine woman) and I never will be, that's not my gift or role. I am not an Elder either, I am simply an Ojibwe-kwe with a sacred bundle that helps me navigate through life's journey. That bundle now includes a woman's fighting stick with turtle story in it and a whale bone with eel story. Us-two enjoy the cool autumn nighttime air, tell stories that spread over a breadth of topics, and head back inside to put the kiddies to bed.

The next day is the last full day that our family will be together in the land of the thundering waters. We decide to enjoy lunch together at the Table Rock House Restaurant, that is perched on the brink of the Canadian Horseshoe Falls. The hostess seats us at a table with an astonishing view, the thundering waters rushing right below us. It's spectacular and I'm so happy we were gifted a fabulous table as close as it gets to the waters. Our server is a very patient and understanding woman, a grandmother, not phased at all by our non-verbal, autistic toddler prone to screeching at a moment's notice and a little diva five-year old who insists on making lemonade for everyone with our glasses of water and the sliced lemons. At one point she is elbow deep creating a tsunami in a glass, squeezing a piece of lemon, making a significant puddle on the table while my nephew shrieks in his highchair. We peruse the menu with its local food procurement, a certified 'taste of Ontario.' It always mystifies me that establishment like this, with tens of thousands of visitors yearly, doesn't also educate people about the traditional foods of the First Peoples. It shouldn't be too hard, partner with Indigenous chefs and create an

educational menu that honours a history tens of thousands of years old. Missed opportunities abound, to be honest, or calculated omissions in the ongoing erasure of the First Peoples from the sentient landscape at tourist destinations like the Falls. I noticed the same phenomenon when I first met my brother Otto Scharmer of the Presencing Institute when he and I and Kely Bird walked together at Walden Pond near Boston, MA. There was a plaque commemorating the life and home of the area's most famous resident, Henry David Thoreau, but no mention of the Massachusetts people who lived there for generations and generations before.

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Our last evening together Sly and Tyson debate whether they will go to BATL Axe Throwing, "not your typical tourist attraction" to throw some axes. They end up discussing martial arts and how once you are on the ground the fight is over. My brother Julian perhaps would have enjoyed this bromance convo as he is a black belt in Taijutsu, a martial art emerging from the Japanese ninja tradition. I had the honour of visiting with his teacher Kan'nushi Jay at Usagi Jinja (Shinto temple) in Calgary one year when I was visiting my brother in Banff, AB. Julian has written about integrating Taijutsu into leadership and complexity education. While axe throwing is appealing, we decide to have tea instead. Tonight's selection is Snow Duck Shit Oolong tea from the Phoenix Mountains in Guangdong Province of China<sup>1</sup>. Our tea sessions together honour sourcing teas that help us connect with qi. These are loose leaf teas that Sly serves out of the side handle clay teapot we brought with us to the Falls. Megs admits she felt a bit embarrassed to bring teabags of Earl Grey and Lady Grey tea to drink. I tell her no worries; I too enjoy bags of Earl Grey de la Crème tea even though Sly teases that I am drinking swill. Tyson admits he too was a bit embarrassed to take us to Starbucks at the Skylon Tower. I say, no worries, I regularly enjoy a Venti Matcha Tea Latté, made with almond milk and no sweetener please. So, my Starbucks order is the complicated order that drives both me and

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1 See more about this category of tea, which doesn't really smell or taste like duck waste, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/megykarydes/2015/09/30/duck-shit-tea-haute-tea/?sh=6a344bf461b1>



Tyson a bit nutty. Tyson looks through the vast selection of teas that Sly has brought with him and says, "I would have liked to try the Ma Tou Yan Rou Gui (Horse Meat) oolong tea, just for that name." Sly brought a special tea for the delightful teenager that has been spending her time with us old folks and her young siblings. It's a tea he thought she might enjoy, a blooming tea, otherwise known as flowering tea. It is a bundle of dried tea leaves wrapped around one or more dried flowers. Sly prepares it in a glass Gaiwan so we can all watch its beautiful floral petals unfurl in the hot water. While not a true tea, because it's made from herbs or dehydrated flowers, it is still magical.

Sly retells us a story about a tea farmer. His house burned down in his village, all his personal belongings and tea farm equipment were lost, his pots, his special reserve tea, grand crus teas (exquisite teas) were lost. According to the legend of the village, when your house burns down, you are deemed to be bad luck so you can't live in that village any longer. So, the farmer had to move to another village. An American Chinese tea specialist created a GoFundMe page and raised \$25,000 USD for the farmer to buy himself a house, replace his belongings and purchase new tea farming equipment. His old farm is 8 kms away which he now travels on foot or by mule each day. He just started producing his first harvest again in the spring of 2022. He's a multi generation tea master and farmer. Sly says the tea we get to experience is enhanced by the stories of the farmers and tea masters who prepare it.

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Megs is almost finished the gift she is making for us. It is a miniature Chinese tea shop. I love miniatures! It is a crafting kit and Megs has been meticulously building the tea shop each evening after the kids are asleep. It should be finished by the time they leave for the airport at 4am the next morning. We get up early to see them off. Megs presents us with the stunning model tea shop, it's fantastic, it has an LED light kit and shelves featuring tiny packages of Chinese tea and tea ware. Before entering the store there is a table with a tea set waiting for guests. Such a special gift. Megs, like me, is on the

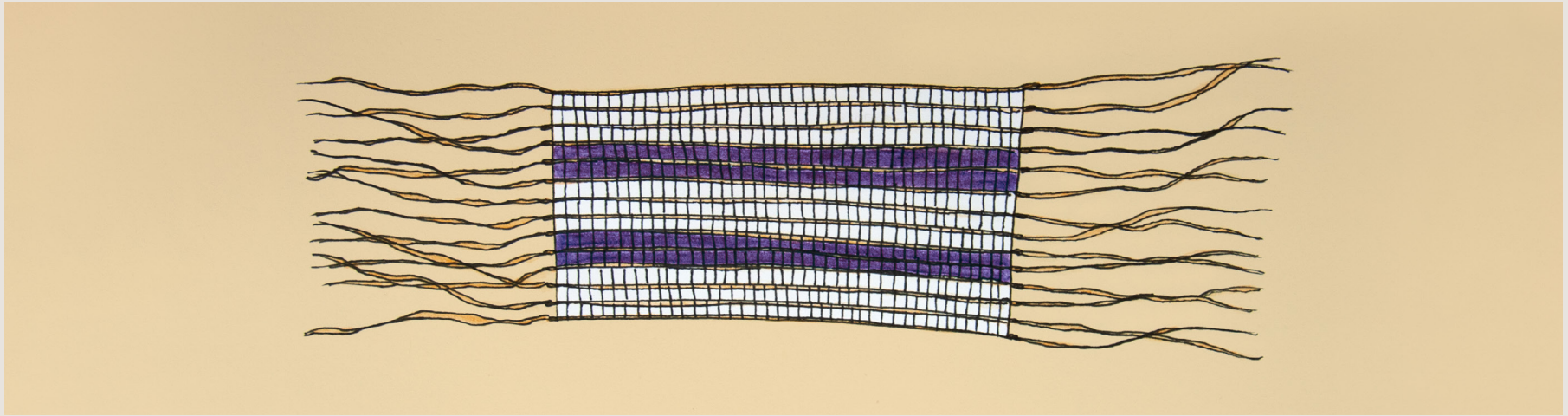
arduous journey of trying to finish her PhD. The Yunkaporta gang load up their rental van and head to the Buffalo Niagara International Airport. Tyson will be spending a few days at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana meeting with scholars at the Ansari Institute. The Institute has awarded the Nasr Book Prize to Tyson, an author who "explores global problems using Indigenous perspectives." Yunkaporta's book, says the press release, "has earned widespread acclaim, raises important questions and brings Indigenous ways of knowing to the critical examination of global systems. In so doing, it enriches the public conversation." In our language there is no word for goodbye.

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I have one day left in my sponsored writing retreat and so I must begin writing.



Miniature Chinese Tea Shop (photo by author)



### Wampum belt

In the early morning Sly and I move upstairs at the Airbnb. We do a sweep of the place for things accidentally left behind, we find our nephew's sippy cup and a coffee mug from Cornell. I adore the mug and the sippy cup just makes us miss that sweet little nephew of ours even more. The house is so quiet now. I set up my laptop, Sly brews some tea, and I start to process my first writing retreat experiment. I can't imagine the pressure on authors like Tyson to follow up a successful first book with another one. I've read that Pulitzer Prize winners are advised not to write sequels, but many do anyway. Tyson emails me the concluding chapter to his latest book and the only constructive feedback I have to offer is that I'm pretty sure lightsaber is one word, not two. I am on a sponsored writing retreat and feel some pressure of my own to produce an essay or article worth reading, never mind a book. My first published writing is quite recent. In 2021 I wrote an academic paper called "Relational Systems Thinking: That's How Change is Going to Come from Our Earth Mother" (Goodchild, 2021). The paper was double-blind peer reviewed and published in the inaugural issue of the Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change (JASC) sponsored by the Presencing Institute. To date it has had almost over 24,000 views. I published a sequel, follow-up article

earlier this year (Goodchild, 2022). Not sure if that one has had any downloads at all. The topic of those papers in a nutshell is that systems thinking is most useful when it is performed as an experience of relationality, irreducible wholeness as kinship, and community.

Using a central metaphor of the Mohawk two-row wampum belt, my Uncle, Dr Dan Longboat, Roronhiakewen (He Clears the Sky), a Turtle Clan member of the Mohawk Nation and citizen of the Rotinonshón:ni (Haudenosaunee – People of the Longhouse), talks about the space in between the Mohawk birch bark canoe and the Dutch merchant sailing ship sharing the river of life together, the sacred space in between. The wampum belt treaty was about separation of different Peoples and their cultures, equal and differentiated. This sacred space in between is what Makwa Ogimaa (Jerry Fontaine) might call *naa-wi aki* (middle ground)<sup>2</sup>. There are two boats sharing the river of life, two lodges on Manitou Aki

2 See DI-BAYN-DI-ZI-WIN To Own Ourselves book by Jerry Fontaine & Don McCaskill: [https://www.dundurn.com/books\\_/t22117/a9781459748996-di-bayn-di-zi-win-to-own-ourselves-](https://www.dundurn.com/books_/t22117/a9781459748996-di-bayn-di-zi-win-to-own-ourselves-)



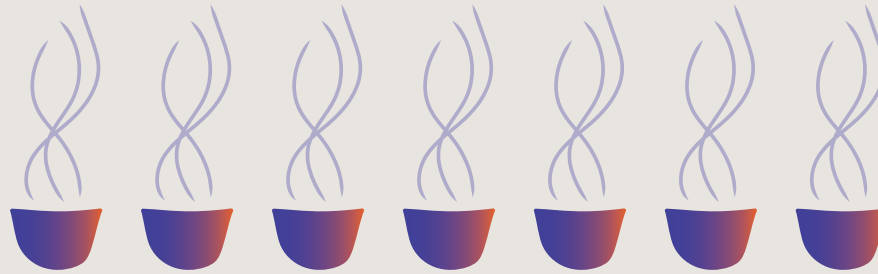
(North America) and we meet in a third space, a sacred space, the middle ground. Relational systems thinking is an invitation to be in that middle space/place, to be open minded and accepting of emergence, of what emerges when we transcend binary thinking. Middle ground, says Makwa Ogimaa, is both a physical and spiritual place; it represents a separation between cultures and nations. How do we access this middle ground and why do we even want to? We access this middle ground so that we can practice an ethic of right relations when our cultures and worldviews come into contact with each other, which is to engage in the practice of *biin-di-go-daa-di-win* (to enter one another's lodge), says Makwa Ogimaa.

For me, being a pitiful human who often forgets about the spiritual origins of my humanity, I need reminders, tangible helpers that assist me, that help me to cross a threshold into *naa-wi aki*. During this writing retreat Tyson gifted me two powerful helpers for my *o-dah-bah-ji-gahn* (Sacred/Medicine Bundle). The woman's fighting stick has turtle story and medicine in it and the burnishing tool, the whale bone carved into the shape of an eel, carries the story and the medicine of the in between space. Remember the eel is a migratory animal that moves between fresh and salt water, land, and water. Tyson says Brother Deen speaks from his understanding of freshwater-saltwater Dreaming and that *liminal space in between things* is where all the *magic happens*. In my second paper (Goodchild, 2022) I reference this also, from one of Tyson's earlier academic papers, the interface where two bodies of water come together, the interaction of opposite systems such as fresh and salt water, as a "magical source of creation" (Yunupingu et al., 1993 p. 71<sup>3</sup>). The fighting stick is appropriate. One of my spirit names is *Waabishki Ogichidaakwenz-anang* which translates closely to white (from the north) warrior-woman-young-star (because that is the name that I am known by in the spirit world, this is how a killer whale from the north knows me). *Ogichidaa* or *o-gi-chi-dah* is often translated

3 In Yunkaporta, T., McGinty, S. Reclaiming aboriginal knowledge at the cultural interface. *Aust. Educ. Res.* 36, 55–72 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03216899>



View of the thundering waters from the Skylon Tower (photo by author)



as warrior, but it means a “strong heart protector,” says Makwa Ogimaa. We protect our *i-nah-di-zi-win* (Our way of being and way of life). So, maybe that’s what I needed, a woman’s fighting stick to fulfill the obligations of that name, to protect our way of life.

If you are going to practice *biin-di-go-win* (to enter one another’s lodge) here are some takeaways from this *di-bah-ji-mo-win* (story) of my writing retreat. Put your clan stick at the front door of your lodge so your visitors (often weary travelers) know who you are and that you have a warm pot of soup on to nourish them; prepare an offering, a thoughtful and heartfelt gift for the weary travelers who visit your lodge (something that hurts your heart just a little when you part with it); yarn while you drink seven bowls of *minikwe niibish* (tea) together; stay on the middle ground, don’t retreat back into the suffocating realms of binary and hierarchical thinking; be mindful of the current season (spring, summer, fall, winter) in the hemisphere of the lodge you are

visiting; and, don’t forget to feed the whales, wolves, turtles, eels, and eagles who are providing the stories and medicines for your *o-dah-bah-ji-gahn*. In writing this piece I am trying to be a good ancestor, offering future generations a snapshot into this moment in time in my life’s journey as an Ojibwe-kwe. It is part of a larger project that Cherokee writer [Daniel Heath Justice](#) describes as articulating Indigenous *presence* in the world.

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