

Relational Neuroscience & Art: A Love Story by Mary Kay Neumann

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“There is so much other work that love has to do in the world....I hang out with a lot of climate activists, and there’s this profound love they have for the natural world, for the future, for justice, and that really shapes their lives and gives them tremendous meaning. And it benefits all of us that they have this, and that this motivates them because they’re acting on behalf of all of us. And we should call that love.”
-Rebecca Solnit (2020)

“When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace”
-Jimmy Hendrix

“A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.”
-Albert Einstein

I want to tell you a love story. It spans 20 years. A woman exploring tidepools was approached by a 24-legged sunflower sea star who came out of the sea grass, touching her shoe and exploring her pant leg. The woman fell in love with that beautiful creature, and it changed her life forever .

The woman is me, an artist, psychotherapist, and student of Relational Neuroscience and Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB). In my role as an artist, my work addresses climate change and climate injustice.

In 2010, I began my artistic collaboration with Helen Klebesadel, a wonderful human and extremely talented artist. We met a few years prior as teacher and student when I took a watercolor workshop with her. We quickly became friends and art colleagues. Our deepening connection led us to collaborate on an art project of our vibrantly colored, large scale watercolor paintings. These works would speak to the heart of our planet’s climate crises.

We had the opportunity to see many excellent climate change exhibitions that brought the devastating reality of what was happening to the earth to the public eye. Unfortunately, the responses to these exhibits often resulted in depressing people so much they looked AWAY from the images. I understand that the pain of what they saw activated fear and their nervous system reacted by going into a fight or flight response.

Helen and I knew we needed to explore a different way forward. We wanted to create beauty to make it possible for our audience to look TOWARDS the art even in the midst of the pain. We hoped that their ability to stay with the truth about our climate crises might inspire people to take action.

"Screaming in Color-Corals in Crises Series, "Collaborative Painting by Helen Klebesadel and Mary Kay Neumann, Watercolor on Paper

During our times painting together in one of our studios I would often relay to Helen what I was learning about Relational Neuroscience and IPNB. I described Steven Porges' Polyvagal Theory (2011) that our need to connect with others "is a biological imperative." and our human need for our embodied brains to experience warm, welcoming relationships in order to feel safe in the world. Dr. Porges also tells us that when we no longer feel safe, we will adaptively fight or flee or dissociate. No wonder it is so challenging for people to stay with awareness of the existential threat to our earthly home. The Polyvagal Theory made us curious: could beauty provide enough safety for people to see the pain and not look away?

We discussed Iain McGilchrist's (2009) ideas about our left hemisphere dominant society, leaving people cut off their feelings, viewing nature as disconnected from who we are. In this left shifted world view, without the balance of the right hemisphere that sees the wholeness and interconnectedness of things, the planet and human beings are experienced as objects to exploit. In this limited view, resources of the earth only exist to harvest for the good of a few, not caring about the bigger picture or who or what is harmed. How might our art help people move away from this left dominance?

At these early stages of our collaboration, I illustrated Daniel Siegel's (2008) "River of Integration" for Helen in my studio. Using this visual reference we were able to see how being mindful and present can balance the right/left hemisphere, creating a greater capacity to experience compassion and empathy. We both sensed these ideas held seeds of wisdom about how to approach our work. As I deepened my understanding of IPNB principles by teaching them to Helen, she became a student, listened, took notes and asked lots of questions. We pondered how to make these ideas come alive in our efforts to help shift how people were relating to the global devastation unfolding before us.

Parker Palmer (2014) wrote beautifully of "the invisible powers of the heart...it is always backstage directing the action...in everything that is human." We adopted this core belief, encouraging our viewers to attend to the tender places in their hearts as the most trustworthy way to engage in something as overwhelming as the global degradation of nature.

Helen and I continued to think of how to present our work with INPB in mind. If feeling a connection to love and care can lead to feeling safe (and if safety supports feelings of connection), it might be possible for a viewer to stay regulated and calm enough to look at the distressing consequences of our climate crisis without turning away. If we cannot have a felt sense of safety, we cannot connect to one another. This led to our belief that connection was the necessary environment our audience needed to deeply engage with our work. Knowing that feeling grief was an inevitable part of facing climate change, we wanted to be up front and name the sorrow, normalizing the grieving process. We trusted that harnessing our love of nature could be a source of power and an agent of change.

Through these many rich conversations between us, our approach to bringing the horrible consequences of climate change became clear. Through art and words, we would ask our audience to focus on their own lived experience of something in nature that they loved

and cared for. Is the object of their love in danger? What were they moved to do about it? With our mission statement in place, five years ago, we prepared to mount our first exhibition called "The Flowers Are Burning: An Art Exhibit and Climate Justice Project."

As in many love stories, heartbreak lurks. A year before our first exhibition opened, I was thunderstruck to discover that my beautiful sunflower sea stars had been dying in the millions. A virus had attacked the sea star population on the West Coast of North America, killing 95% of all the sea stars in the largest massive die off in recorded marine history. Sea Star Wasting Disease was causing the stars to literally melt and die a gruesome death. I felt as if a beloved family member was dying.

The Last Waltz-Melting Sea Star Series" by Mary Kay Neumann, Watercolor on paper

I had walked along for 20 years of my life, savoring that beautiful moment of contact with my sea star, never realizing that I was being called. Now, I felt that ocean creature tugging at me to do something, to wake up, to make their lives (and now, their deaths) matter. Reflecting on this experience, I sense this is what Daniel Siegel (2015) refers to as "Mwe" (me + we = Mwe). Mwe was devastated. Painting helped me deal with the anguish of facing the death of the sea stars, and I began to create my "Melting Sea Star Series," illustrating the heartbreaking process as they disintegrate in the grip of disease. The terrible loss of an animal that was so precious to me made our exhibition feel even more urgent.

During this time, Helen and I discovered the benefits of painting collaboratively. It is quite unique for most artists to actually co-paint into the same painting, but we found that by exchanging watercolor paintings and taking turns working on a piece, we would create images that individually neither one of us would have been able to do alone. Again, IPNB came to mind, as I reflected on some of the teachings of my dear friend and mentor Bonnie Badenoch . She asserts that healing can only happen in connection with one another; we do not "self-regulate" but rather we "co-regulate" (Badenoch 2017). I was struck by a parallel: what we do as therapists is to cultivate healing relationships with our clients, co-regulating each other while engaged in distressing material. Similarly, what Helen and I were creating between ourselves as we painted images that expressed our sorrow for the natural world, was co-regulation for each other as we collaborated. We hoped our artwork could help co-regulate our audience.

As we moved more deeply into the process, we began to understand that collaboration itself was a key ingredient. Everything related to grappling with climate change and climate justice relied on collaborating and working with other people. I wondered if Stephen Porges phrase - "connection is a biological imperative" - could also refer to collaboration being a biological imperative?

Bonnie Badenoch (2011) writes and teaches about the power of "disconfirming experiences" as an avenue of healing. It seemed to me that the approach Helen and I had adopted for our exhibition mirrored a similar kind of healing process. In trauma work, this involves activating the disturbing memories, feelings, body sensations - the threads of experience that occurred during the distressing time when trauma became embedded - while being accompanied by a caring other. This offers our nervous system an opportunity to bring into consciousness the experiences of the subcortically held trauma memories that we cannot tolerate on our own so that they can now begin to be digested and integrated as we are accompanied. By sharing our nervous system with the people who come to us for healing, the space becomes large enough and secure enough to be with the long-held pain and fear. This healing experience can result in our system no

longer needing to avoid awareness of the distressing material. It bears repeating that the most important ingredient in this process is the accompaniment of a “caring other.”

Similarly, with our exhibit, we intentionally invite people into our beautiful paintings as a way to settle and bring a sense of peace and calm, bringing the nervous system into ventral vagal state. As the viewer is presented with the disturbing facts that might evoke grief or loss while they are in a state of calm, the comfort of the beautiful images might be the “accompaniment of a caring other” (Badenoch, 2017). In this way, we may feel strong enough to face what feels unbearable, in order to hold our appreciation for what’s left and to take action towards preserving and protecting what we can of what remains on our amazing planet Earth.

Through the lens Iain McGilchrist offers us, we can say the intention of our paintings will perhaps encourage people back to the spaciousness of their right hemispheres where they might hold both grief and hope. The left hemisphere, when it loses connection with the right, must pull away from unwelcome emotions and try to exert control, often by looking away, forgetting. It seems this is the crisis at the heart of denial about climate science. “The Flowers are Burning” asks us all to hold the whole picture, hopefully providing an avenue for our right hemisphere to lead the way. If we can settle into safety, we may be able to be with the pain and not push it away. We humans must rebalance our ways of viewing our fragile home on earth, relating to nature in a “whole brained,” embodied way as we navigate climate change together, hearts open and hands joined.

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“The Flowers are Burning” exhibition of our watercolor paintings traveled to several venues between 2015-2019. We planned a new exhibition to honor Earth Day’s 50th anniversary, scheduled for April 2020. Our new exhibition, “Oceans A Rising” focuses on the Ocean, to peek beneath the waves to see how climate change was affecting marine life and speak the stories that were being lived out underwater. The challenge to ourselves was to create a new body of work that was primarily collaboratively painted works. These take quite a bit more time to create, exchanging them back and forth between our studios. We felt the importance of co-painting these works offered great power and meaning by embodying our shared value that we must work together with each other in the face of climate change. Collaboration was always speaking to us as essential in our message.

When the novel coronavirus was just a glimmer in the news, I was deeply immersed in a newly released book by marine scientist Drew Harvell (2019) about the death of the sea stars due to the outbreak of ocean diseases. While still reading the book, COVID-19 swiftly became a global pandemic. It left me literally shaking in my boots at the parallel between the disease that has killed off my favorite ocean animal, that Harvell calls “the mighty sunflower sea star”, and the one now killing humans. I saw yet another parallel to IPNB - everything is connected. What happens to our oceans, is happening to us.

I Can’t Stand Losing You-Melting Sea Star Series,” by Mary Kay Neumann, Watercolor on Paper

Helen and I felt it necessary to make this connection visible. When the pandemic forced us to cancel our exhibition, we sought another way to get our message into the world. Since our audience could not come to us, we decided to create a digital version to bring our exhibit to them. The parallels between life above and below the seas were so urgent, we could not wait until the pandemic was over to send out our clarion call.

“The Flowers are Burning...Oceans A Rising: An Art and Climate Justice Exhibition” A Collaborative Project by Mary Kay Neumann and Helen R. Klebesadel is our offering to the public on behalf of the Ocean, the Earth (and my beloved sea stars).

Our subtitle “...Oceans A Rising” refers not only to waters rising but that the Ocean itself is engaged in “A Rising”...a protest against human caused climate change. It also parallels the current rising up against institutional racism that contributes to the unequal impact of climate change on different communities. Black, Indigenous, People of Color and poor populations across the globe are bearing the brunt of the climate degradation and an “arising” against this injustice is sweeping the globe, shoulder to shoulder with COVID-19.

As I ponder the novel coronavirus pandemic and the outbreak of ocean diseases that happened so close together, it almost seemed that the ocean had mirror neurons activating our own. After all, Marco Iacoboni (2011) says, “We live within each other.” Author Michael McCarthy (2016) believes “There is an ancient bond with the natural world surviving deep within us, which makes it not a luxury, not an optional extra, but a part of our essence...the natural home for our psyches where we can find not only joy, but peace. And to destroy it is to destroy a fundamental part of ourselves. Should we lose it, we would be less whole...less than we have evolved to be...we would find true peace impossible.” It is as if nature is actually a part of us, not something separate, but actually an aspect of being human. If this is true, we are the Ocean and the Ocean is us. Providing warm nourishing care for each other and our beautiful earth and her creatures has never been more urgent. As McCarthy writes, “For nature, as human society takes its wrecking ball to the planet, it has never needed more defending.”

As we move towards a new normal as COVID-19 is passing, it is crucial to highlight the interconnections between everything and everyone. As our post-pandemic society grapples with making positive changes and addressing institutional racism and injustice, flaws in our public health networks and economies, we also must pay attention to how any action or change we institute will affect the natural world. Climate change and climate injustice must be at the center of everything we do, every policy and plan we make from now on if we are to continue to have an earth that sustains life.

Helen and I have created a website to accompany our exhibit: www.theflowersareburning.com. It provides education, resources, art/science collaboration, activism....and HOPE for being present to the increasing threat we all face. Our mission is to encourage people to focus on what they love and care about that is threatened by climate change, inspiring them to think about actions they can take if they are moved to do so. We ask: reach into your heart, experience the emotions that climate change elicits. Is there something you love in harm's way? What are you moved to do in response? Every one of us has the power to become a climate activist and to harness the power of our love.

This is my love story. What is yours?

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