

We get to be

Well

Written by:
Njoki Mbũrũ
[LinkedIn](#)



“Presence comes up in our work when we remember that we are all related ... And part of practicing presence is being with what is not good in the world, but also, making time to heal, pray, and tend to ourselves so that there is hope for our future generations.”

Jesse Cardinal
Executive Director of Keepers of the Water

lemons and raw tomatoes

My cūcū (grandma) and mother tell me a story of when I was 3 or 4 years of age. I was learning, for the first time, how to host guests in our home – with cūcū as my teacher.

One beautiful day, they tell me, a guest came over for the occasional tea and chat. And after our time together, as the guest prepared to leave, I realised that we had not yet offered them a parting gift. So with my tiny legs and feet, I scuttled into our kitchen, and grabbed whatever I thought edible (and which my height permitted me to reach). This specific time, my cūcū and mother tell me, I gifted our guest a lemon. The next time, a very raw, green tomato.



Somehow, we had the most gracious guests, because, as I am told, they always received my 'edible' gifts with joy and gladness. They commended my cūcū for teaching me how to share our harvest. In fact, on the occasion that I write about above, the guest ate the lemon before my very eyes – simply to show their gratitude for my generosity. I am sure my cūcū had a more edible basket of goods available for them outside the main door, but in this moment, all I knew was that I had done what I had observed cūcū doing multiple times. And that is, to make sure each guest left our household with something good in their belly, heart, and hands.



You are Welcome here

Between October 18 to 20, 2022, in the midst of the Zoom-verse, a community of kin – far and wide – gathered around a large kitchen table to participate in the 'Fall Feast'. I was invited as a guest alongside several others from the East, South, West, and North. Greetings and songs of welcome began long before we were at the virtual entrance. In the distance, we could hear music, laughter, the sound of a kettle hissing, and we could also smell warm baked goods. For three, beautiful days, we gathered around a very large kitchen table to listen, share, create art, and feast in the company of good folks, delighting in being hosted by an amazing team at [The Circle on Philanthropy](#) (The Circle). We rested in care, and in each other's company.

At The Circle, Fall is a season dedicated to listening deeply, to gathering and sharing the abundance of collective harvest, and to telling stories about seasons past and yet to come. Specifically, this Fall Feast was an opportunity to learn about exciting Circle offerings and hear from Circle members, as well as leaders in the philanthropic sector, about how they are decolonizing grant-making, fundraising, operations, and governance.

Over three days of feasting, The Circle curated a container for all members that was guided and informed by four key principles, known as the 'Four Fold practice'. In introducing these principles, Kris Archie, Chief Executive Officer of The Circle, shared that the Four Fold is an embodied practice that asks folks to: tend to one's ability to be present, to participate, to host others, and to co-create. For this virtual gathering, the Four Fold practice revealed itself in the way we introduced ourselves to one another, in how we grounded ourselves through music at the start of each session, in conversations across multiple break-out rooms and chats, painting, colouring, and in our daily morning practice of breath & body work.

For those who participated in the Fall Feast, we recognized that, this was not only an opportunity for connection and shared learning, but also a time to pay respect to the many relations that enabled us to gather in the first place. In contemplating on respect, Kelly Foxcroft Poirier (Co-Founder, White Raven Consulting), reminded us all of the invitation for this current time of ecological distress, sharing, “It has been a 100 days of no rain. There is so much grief by our land, our people, and our language. So, the invitation right now is to take intentional pause and to pay our respect – where respect means to stop, observe, appreciate, and act accordingly.”

FOLD 1 *presence*

This first fold saw participants gathering around the virtual kitchen table to engage in an array of rich conversations. On some days, we reflected on the non-linearity of time, and on others, we discussed what it might look/feel like when organizations prioritize accommodating everyone’s different needs, so that individuals and teams are supported to be fully present.

At a personal level, when speaking about her career journey, Janine Manning (Manager, Annual Giving & Donor Relations, Anishnawbe Health Foundation), shared that she felt most supported to be present when a workplace offered flexibility, child-care support, and comprehensive, culturally-appropriate benefits.

Within the larger ecosystem of philanthropy, the exploration of presence was around how Indigenous and racialized leaders navigate complexity and uncertainty to mobilize change and enable meaningful participation and engagement. A key theme that came up was around how urgency was often an underpinning characteristic of many funder-grantee relationships. Challenging these rushed timelines and the sense of urgency that is oftentimes embedded within philanthropy, Yamikani Msosa (Network Engagement Manager for the Ontario Nonprofit Network), brought forward the Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu, which can be translated to, “I am because you are”. Yamikani invited us to consider how Ubuntu can facilitate a different way of doing philanthropy – where wellbeing is centered and prioritized, and where our goals and relationships are built on the principle of creating enabling conditions for care.





With that, as we sat around the kitchen table, we activated our first fold of presence. Presence as a tool for self-care and community care. Presence as necessity for rest. And presence as a catalyst for doing good work. In the words of Jess Bolduc (Executive Director of the 4Rs Youth Movement), “presence is having the fluidity to move through the complexity of our lives to bring ease and comfort.”



FOLD 2 *participation*

Building up on the reflections about time and presence, Vi Nguyen (Director of Grants and Programs, Law Foundation of BC) facilitated an abundant conversation between Bina M Patel (CEO and Founder, Saathi Impact Consulting) and Meseret Taye (Grants Manager, Law Foundation of BC), where the guiding question was on how settlers and racialized immigrants can show up in a good way to support the work of Indigenous people and communities.

To explore the principles of participation, Vi asked of Bina and Meseret, “Knowing what you know now, what advice would you have given yourself earlier in showing up to support the work of Indigenous communities?”

Drawing from years of experience and learning, some key principles that Bina and Meseret shared with us are: to acknowledge that relationship-building takes time and dedicated intention; to practice constant self-inquiry so that our work is in service of the right mission; to remember who should be centered in our work; and, to understand that systems are not simply just the way they are; they were designed to be that way.

Inherent within participation, therefore, is accountability. That is, to be in this work alongside Indigenous partners requires folks to hold themselves and one another accountable. By doing this, we can ensure that practices and processes of participation center Indigenous innovation and leadership, and do not replicate patterns of harm, characteristics of white supremacy culture, and colonization.

FOLD 3 *hosting others*

Another kettle of tea hisses on the stove. A big tray of cookies and warm slices of bread emerges out of the metaphorical oven, and folks are invited to play with the spread of fruit jams on the kitchen table. And as everyone indulges in the sweet delicacies before them, the hosts return to the kitchen to quickly heat up a fresh batch of cookies and bread. As Kelly Poirier said, “to be a good host, you want to ensure you are always ready to share your gifts and that you have real lots of them.”

So I poured another cup of tea, leaned back on my cushioned seat, and opened my head and heart to a circle of Indigenous women sharing stories in what was called the “Aunties Gathering”. Earlier in 2022, The Circle on Philanthropy, International Funders for Indigenous Peoples, and Arctic Funders Collaborative hosted the inaugural gathering of Indigenous women working within and beside philanthropy.

As I listened to the Aunties sharing about their experiences at the Aunties Gathering, what came through for me was the abundance of what is possible when we prioritize nourishment, connection, and sharing of stories. I learned that the practice of hosting is an invitation to become clear on what your responsibilities are as a host, to prepare one’s space in a way that upholds the safety and comfort of guests, and also, to be honest about one’s capacity to host.

These learnings, while easily applicable to welcoming guests in our homes, can also apply in the work of philanthropy. For example, hosting others well might mean considering models of philanthropy that prioritize safety and wellness, directing funding to specific community asks rather than assumed needs, asking for permission when entering a community’s territory, and becoming aware of when a partnership has run its course and what it may look like to end the partnership in a good way.





FOLD 4 *co-creation*

While our time together around the virtual kitchen table was soon coming to an end, the principle of co-creation reminded us that we could carry our relationships into the next phase of our journey. As Heather O'Watch (former Research Coordinator at The Circle) shared, co-creation provides us with an opportunity of “activating kinship”.

It was now time to act with deliberate intention to create something new, to shift something already existing, or to stop something that is no longer aligned with our mission. And as much as co-creation ignites a spirit of moving forward together with synchronicity like a grand starling murmuration, what is important to remember is that, co-creation also calls for accountability, trust, and shared power.

Speaking about their journey in co-creating the Foundation for Black Communities (FFBC), co-founders Djaka Blais-Amare and Rebecca Darwent emphasized the value of centering trust, extending grace to one another, and being in the practice of making room for generative conflict. During their time tending to what was once a seed of an idea, to what is now a national foundation investing in change-making initiatives that advance the wellbeing and agency of Black folks all over Canada, Djaka and Rebecca recall the strain that the work sometimes had on the founding members. Having to facilitate difficult conversations, experiencing racism, and creating an organization in the midst of a global pandemic required the team to lean on each other's strengths, to become comfortable with asking for help, to engage with the discomfort of being in disagreement, and to have the willingness to learn from their mistakes.

To create together, we are invited to make our kitchen tables conducive to accommodate our guests. In particular, as Kelly Poirier noted, this means, “being in the practice of welcoming those who have often been farthest from the table”. This is the work of equity, justice, decolonizing wealth, and ethically stewarding resources.

until then be well

IT IS IMPORTANT IN OUR FEASTING THAT WE START WELL AND END WELL.

Let me return to speaking about my cūcū (grandma). In my home, whenever we meet up as a larger, extended family, we begin and end each gathering with words of gratitude, honour, and blessing for each person in the room, as well as for those that could not make it to the room that day. Cūcū, our matriarch, prays for everyone's safety as they travel back to their respective houses. And each time, when I return to my mother's home or fly to Vancouver, I call cūcū and tell her that I made it back safely, that I found my house in peace, and that my belly, heart, and hands are still full with all the good gifts she shared with me.

Similarly, in the Fall Feast, we closed with a round of gratitude. We thanked each person that had popped by the kitchen table at one time or another. We, metaphorically, helped clear the plates and cups, sweep bread crumbs off the floor, and put the seats and cushions back in place. We recognized that this Feast was only as good as it was because, each one of us had said "yes" to being present, participating, hosting and being hosted, and creating together.

It excites me to know that there will be more opportunities to meet and feast together. Until then, may you know that you are welcome here, may you travel safely back to your land and kin, and may you and those you love be well.

