

## Bringing Nature into Social Work Settings: Mother Earth's Presence

By Carolina Gana

I am a social worker who provides counselling to women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, adult sexual assault and intimate partner abuse. In an urban location in the downtown core of Toronto, Ontario, I provide both individual and group counselling to women impacted by trauma in a community-based setting. Various modalities and theoretical frameworks that include feminism and anti-oppressive methods inform my counselling practice. I am often asked how such theoretical frameworks are integrated into my job. There are many interpretations of feminism and anti-oppressive practices that include broadening individual experiences into the larger social system. A clear example would be connecting women's experiences of violence and abuse to the larger system of patriarchy, colonialism and systemic oppressions, such as racism, sexism,

classism, heterosexism, xenophobia and pathology.

Often I hear women share that they are blamed for the abuse and violence that they have experienced. Where are these messages of fault, shame and blame coming from? How can I support women by deeply reflecting on the imposition of dominant values? Together we engage in a process of deciphering between values that have been harmful and values that they wish to now incorporate that can provide healing, growth and nourishment. The approach that I take in the counselling role is to provide a space for reflection, process and personal transformation.

I utilize nature as a means to connect individuals and communities with the concepts of reflection, process and



transformation. I believe that bringing nature into the therapeutic environment is a form of feminism and anti-oppressive practice. Aspects of nature, such as mother earth, can be used as symbols of feminine energy and have been honoured by many communities globally as vessels for healing. Whether it is participating in sweat lodges to offer our sufferings to mother earth or creating herbal remedies for the ailments of bodily pains, nature is utilized to endure in a process of healing, transformation and self-discovery.

For many years, I have been interested in developing a relationship with nature to guide my professional practice. When I witness the changing of the seasons, I come to an understanding of transformation. For example, a tree goes through many changes, from vividly coloured leaves in the fall, barren branches in the winter and sprouting buds in the spring, to fruitful flowers in the summer. Nonetheless, a tree remains a tree throughout this process. How can the example of a tree be part of a therapeutic healing process?

I will share a few narratives of various social work settings where I have incorporated nature into practice as a means to provide reflection, process and personal transformation while connecting the personal journey to a larger social commonality. I honour the teachings that I have been offered by many indigenous healers, academic scholars and the individuals to whom I provide service.

### **Nature and Her Presence in an Urban Setting**

Access to nature and the outdoors can be limiting in an urban setting. I believe that nature can be included in both indoor and outdoor settings. Like a chair in an office for sitting, plants have a purpose in an office as well. On a valuable and basic level, plants provide oxygen; a vase with water and flowers can humidify a room. My ongoing quest when working in an urban setting is to make nature accessible to marginalized women. For this reason alone, I continuously

convey that an experience with nature is a universal right. However, many women with whom I work with have limited access to the vastness of nature, such as attending outdoor education programs, spending weeks in the great outdoors or travelling outside of the urban setting. Access to various programs are, at times, limited due to barriers such as single mothers' need for childcare, linguistic hurdles, women living in shelters and poverty, to name a few. Disenfranchised communities, in my opinion, have many more barriers to accessing larger bodies of nature. My role as a social worker is to be like a bridge, linking individuals to a setting that includes nature and addressing nature as a means for healing.

### **Nature and Her Presence in Practice**

I have plants, seashells, stones, lava, rocks, soil and water in my office. At times I bring flowers and offer them to the women as transitional objects. Transitional objects, like a flower, can support women to bring the counselling environment (support, trust, compassion, etc.) into their everyday environment (home). The presence of nature in my office is done with intention; nature's presence is used to support women in the process of grounding emotions and feelings as she describes voices, and explores and discerns her experiences of violence and abuse.

Representing generations of knowledge, stones and rocks are symbols of wisdom. When I invite a woman to hold a stone, I ask her to notice feelings she holds inside her. Holding and engaging with a stone can provide her with the opportunity to externalize her feelings, to acknowledge that feelings exist and that she can begin to explore the depths of her feelings. While holding a stone, we may discern a variety of questions. When did she begin to have these feelings? Where are they held in her body? What values lie beneath the feeling? What does the feeling need? Holding a stone offers her an opportunity to position her feelings outside of her mind and into an earth-bonding space of support.

### **Nature as a Vehicle for Healing, Transformation and Self-Discovery: Cultivating Healthy Relations with Emotions**

I worked on a medical team as a mental health specialist for children and youth with life-threatening illnesses in an outdoor recreational program in south-central California. Much of what was expressed to me by children and youth was their relationship to death and the need to share what death means to them. Conversations of death and dying were an essential aspect of healing. Some youngsters felt enormous guilt for putting their parents and family through much pain; others expressed not feeling heard or understood in relation to their ongoing thoughts of death and the afterlife.

On one occasion, I invited a group of twelve-year-old boys to help sow seeds for an on-site herbal garden. We piled manure, compost and soil, taking our time to thoroughly mix each important component to nourish beds for sowing seeds. One boy commented, "Carolina, we need a whole lot of sheep manure to enrich this soil." Another boy responded, "Ya, like us, we go through a whole lot of s\*\*t to get through our pain." I could not let this moment of total discernment pass by and asked the boys to pause for a moment and notice what was needed in their own personal lives to enrich their experiences. One boy responded with, "For my father to listen to me." Another boy responded that he would like his mom not to worry and be stressed. All boys stated that they wanted to be loved and not viewed only as a disease. I heard all boys share the need to feel safe to express their emotions. Each boy shared his fears, hopes and uncertainties; how life was precious to them and how death was important to speak about.

Preparing the earth to sow seeds gave space to recognize the need to share, discuss and feel emotions. Being with earth provided playfulness and yet profound reflections. I feel confident in stating that much of what was emotionally expressed in the herbal garden by each child occurred because of

earth's presence to contain and embrace feelings.

### **Nature as a Vital Tool for Self-Care, Compassion and Love**

Living and working in an urban setting requires great creativity when striving to engage with nature. I am often asked what small town or forest outside of the city I go to when I mention having spent the weekend with nature. I take long walks through Toronto's local parks, such as High Park, Scarborough Bluffs and the butterfly conservation area. In the summer time, I often ride my bicycle to the lakeshore, take the plunge and swim in Lake Ontario. There is a wonderful UV-filtered and contained swimming area near Islington and Lakeshore that I truly adore. When I was in Havana, Cuba, I observed many Cuban families swimming in the ocean near the downtown Malecon (water wall). I thought to myself, this is the most accessible way to connect with local bodies of water. I noticed children and adults alike laughing, swimming and even fishing off the Malecon. I am a lover of water and have noticed that it is essential for me to spend time around and within bodies of water to support a process of unwinding and replenishing from the professional work that I do. Nature can maintain our sense of belonging. I believe that we can engage with nature from wherever we are, whether it be inhaling the air with intention and allowing air to bring in freshness, supporting urban organic gardens and taking the time to plant seeds or admiring the sun, moon and stars from all corners of the city.

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*Carolina Gana was born in Santiago, Chile, and raised in Toronto, Canada. She has a Masters of Social Work and provides trauma counselling in both English and Spanish to women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, adult sexual assault and intimate partner abuse. Carolina is a global feminist, social justice advocate, nature-lover and devoted traveller. Carolina's professional endeavours have led her to work with communities in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Mexico, Iceland, California, Louisiana, British Columbia and Peru.*