

Child Well-Being and the New Science of Resilience

Practices to Heal Trauma and Nurture Hope

On The Verge

NWCF 2025

Opening Comments

Ben Danielson 1/23/25

I'm very honored to join you all and participate, again, in NW Children's Foundation's annual gathering.

I understand we have hundreds of folks, from far-flung places, joining us today.

It makes me feel your energy flowing across many time zones, across latitudes and longitudes, arcing over a curvature.

I want to acknowledge how ironically hard and timely it is to gather today.

It's important, right now, that we are affirming something by coming together, that we are projecting unity, warmth across demographics and identities, and a continued commitment, no matter what, to express and practice our belief in humanity.

We reaffirm our promise – through imperfect but persistently learning endeavors – to manifest the beloved communities we know are possible; and that our youth, especially, deserve.

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Let's just stipulate from the start, we're all going through a lot, and we're committed to granting each other grace today.

I know I need all the grace, and love, you're willing to share.

I've been finding it a bit harder to put coherent thoughts together these days.

I know I'm not the only one who's been going through it.

Some of it on the very personal, very vulnerable level.

Some of it on the larger level; things happening, or about to happen, around us.

This is some kind of time we're in.

For many it was a hard year and then, something else altogether is on the horizon

We're all in it.

I'm not at my best today, but I'm gonna do my best today, but I might stumble a bit.

I hope some images and your own inner view will help these words transport you.

I'm gonna subject you to some nerdy stuff, and some poetry, I hope you find something useful in this roaming entanglement.

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I'm wondering how you are; I hope you are taking good care of yourselves.

I'm thinking about you, the good things you do, the things you struggle with.

I'm wondering how you are, in this time on the verge.

It feels like we're on the verge, doesn't it?

It feels like we're about to enter a period, when the battle, the good fight - whatever that might mean - will look more like being forever on defense with no space for offense.

The climate we are entering, almost disparages, squelches, the possibility of bold advancements.

Cautioning us, instead, to focus on preventing the further erosion of hard-won progress.

Preventing further erosion; after already having lost significant ground.

Having already lost ground on a woman's bodily autonomy.

Having already lost ground on the work to promote diversity, on the work to advance equity.

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I'm wondering how you are.

It seems we've been sitting on the verge.

I feel like some of the people I know have been choosing to tap out a bit for a while.

Suspended their connection, for a bit, to the roiling nature of emerging reality.

Have taken up a position slightly outside the spewing news cycles for a little while.

Some folks I know have taken to watching from some balcony, if just for a while.

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I get it.

Things around us can feel like they're spiraling, well out of our control.

It can feel like the one aliquot of control we can exert, for a minute anyway, is to check out.

To choose to spend a little time unconnected to news.

Because we all see what's coming.

Selections have been made, and consequences will start to flow.

We know what we've been dealing with - personally, societally - and we know what's coming, what's heading our way.

As forces march up our streets to erase and dehumanize immigration, to undermine the underpinnings of decency, to deepen wealth gaps, diminish dignity, move basic human rights further into the distance,

lay further waste to our environment.

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It feels like we're on the verge,

As a political tsunami approaches.

I'm wondering how you are;

knowing that soon you will need to stir from the perch.

How will you find your kinetic energy again,

how will you reignite your momentum and respond to the impending reality?

How will you respond?

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As eyes begin to acknowledge the conscious impulse to open lids on the world.

As stirrings begin to penetrate our inner quiet, begin to whisper in our not yet alert ears.

As pre-contemplation begins to rouse nerve endings, begins to prepare for the first twitches of muscle fibers.

As our circulation ramps up, in anticipation of movement, what are we readying ourselves for?

How will we respond, what do we feel capable of?

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As our eyes gain focus, and we start to see, predictions morphing into realities, the things approaching mutating into the things that are here...

on this ominous verge, as the good fight reveals itself anew, how will we respond?

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In the time-out, there was a certain kind of repose.

There was a way to say, 'I'm not doing anything more right now.'

A way to reject external input, set the tools down, and say, 'I'll pick that up again, but not right now'.

There was a way of being, a way to become disembodied.

In those moments just-past, on that verge, for some people I know it evoked an out of body experience, conjured an anachronistic pause.

Achieving a sort of active inaction.

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And it was justifiable; it was a pause with merit.

Because we all have some inkling, some certainty, that the impending time, marching toward us, will take a toll on us.

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So some folks stopped time, for a moment or two, just like it was for Schrodinger's cat.

Maybe you know of this thought experiment: Schrodinger's Cat.

Fair warning, this is a nerd alert.

And this is a hypothetical; no actual cats were harmed in running this experiment.

Schrodinger's cat is a thought experiment, that lends insight into the quite counterintuitive nature, of quantum mechanics.

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The thought experiment goes something like this:

Hypothetically, a cat is placed in a box and the lid is closed.

And inside the box, with the cat, is a device that can release a radioactive substance.

Now, the theory says: as long as we don't lift the lid, and open the box, we don't know if the radioactivity has been activated, and killed the cat or not.

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We don't know if the cat is dead or alive, as long as we don't check.

This is the quirk of quantum superposition:

In quantum mechanics things can exist in multiple states at the same time.

Like the cat, while it's in the unopened box, both alive and dead.

As long as we don't examine it, a quantum particle can exist in different states.

As long as we don't look in the box, the cat is both alive and not alive.

This paradox, based on not doing something, can be a powerful lens through which to understand our universe, and of exponentially amplifying computing power.

Quantum computing.

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There is a power - ironically - I guess it's a resting power, in the suspended state of not quite acknowledging.

Besides being a nerd-out opportunity regarding quantum physics, maybe Schrodinger's cat also describes that moment folks were in.

On the verge of something, and choosing not to look.

By some version of intentional inaction.

They've been Schrodinger, the box remained closed, for a little while.

And that's been okay.

I imagine it's been therapeutic.

To have indulged in disbelief – about the future our country has beckoned in – just a little longer.

To have resided in unbelief – of what will be asked of us in the coming time – for just a little while longer.

To take a beat, have a pause, hold a diastole, freeze the metronome and the clocktower.

To not have opened the box, for just a little while.

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Maybe it's been part of their rest, these past few months.

The pause will allow them to be more present in the coming present moments.

More present with those they love.

More attuned to their own needs and cares.

More connected to our source of loving, knowing, showing up, this past little while.

Maybe it's been part of folks taking the time they have needed, to know themselves, to usher in some healing.

Maybe it's been a reminder, a reverie.

A reminder of how much good there is in this world.

Of what it looks like to treat other human beings humanely.

Before we are subsumed by trying to fend off a coming time of inhumanity.

Maybe it's been part of readying themselves.

Maybe the pause has been just what the healer prescribed.

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Maybe this pause has afforded the opportunity to weatherize, seal up, and insulate against the erosive forces we are destined to face.

I gotta say, I'm good with that.

I understand why it made sense to take a beat, not open that box.

I'm fine with a little nerdy dabbling in quantum superposition.

I'm okay with lingering, a while, where many things are possible.

I'm fine with folks who have chosen to be Schrodinger, for a little while.

Our pauses are probably as important as our actions.

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Pauses are as important as actions when it comes to achieving an impact.

Being intentional in the way we rest or pause is as much a critical strategy, as is the intention with which we map out our activities.

A pause is as meaningful as the active state that precedes or follows the pause.

Rest is not a luxury or an afterthought, or a deferrable asset.

Rest is essential, elemental, foundational, righteous.

The timing of rest is essential to the value of rest.

Rest, as the first four letters of restoration, is not separate from the time we spend achieving the things we care most about; rest is essential to those achievements.

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There are plenty of undermining narratives in this society.
 Narratives that present themselves as virtues.
 That pose as approaches to being most productive.
 That front as the values that we are supposed to aspire to.
 Or humble-brag about.

There are many undermining narratives in this society;
 Some of them seek to negate or deny our right to rest.
 Narratives that iconize overwork.
 That celebrate the so-called busiest of people.
 Regardless of whether they're actually getting things done or not.

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Even in our more multigenerational work spaces, where some are less susceptible to the overwork trope, I still wonder if their rest is actually restful, is restorative.
 Our own personal narratives about work might vary.
 Yet, I'm not sure how many, regardless of personal narrative, have truly cultivated restorative rest.

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Especially in the fields you all have chosen.
 Or - for many of you - the fields that have chosen you.
 I haven't met most of you, but I venture to say you are among the folks who practice a rarified level of dedication.
 You cherish a connection to your avocation that is much more relationship-based, than it is transaction-based.
 You practice a relationship-centering approach to your work.
 Your work is based on relationships, deepened by relationships, dependent upon relationships.
 I see y'all, game recognizes game.

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Your work asks so much of your hearts, plumbs the depths of your spirits.
 Asks you to lay bare your tenderest vulnerabilities
 Compels you to tilt your most arduous efforts, toward causes, goals, outcomes, whose best results may or may not often manifest, but for which the journey is its own value.
 Work that simultaneously fuels your hope and inflames your disappointment.

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You each have better words, better descriptions of what it means to do what you do.
 I admit I'm not doing justice to it.
 You know, beyond any simple description, what you give to your avocation; what it gives to – and takes from – you.
 This is not a simple conversation, not a binary prospect.
 Your commitment to your cause, your dedication to your efforts...
 They say a lot about who you are as people.
 Good people, good folk.
 And – I gotta say this – others can take advantage of your deep connection to your work.
 Others can start to expect you to sacrifice more, be compensated less, to forego even your rest.
 Knowing you'll tolerate many things in order to answer your calling.

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This is a difficult bind.

The good you feel you can do,
may sit in bright contrast to other agendas.

A triad of dynamics can hold sway in your work:

- Heart work for you that goes beyond transaction.
- Combined with high stakes, great consequences for those you serve and for you.
- Further combined with systematic priorities that are counter to yours.

Add to this tryptic an environment of trauma that surrounds the work.

Add to that a network of institutions that reek of ingrained racism and other oppressions.

Now we have a pentad that suffuses the workspaces you ply.

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Which is why I bristle, when words like, 'burn out', or 'exhaustion' are used.

Those words place the activity solely within the bodies of those doing the work.

Those words subtly place the locus of control, the onus, on those experiencing it.

Now, I'm kinda old, and it reminds me – way too much – of the way public health used to talk about many health impacting things, things, we now call social determinants, but back then were referred to as personal choices.

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I'm not okay with terms like 'burn out' or 'exhaustion'.

They don't capture the depth of contextual factors, the external things.

It's not sufficient, in my view, to name what's happening inside our bodies, without naming the context.

Because, without context, you could think someone was exhausted, purely based on the number of hours they worked,

You might think it has something to do with a lack of basic stamina.

Some lack of fortitude.

When that's just not the case.

The context is important.

The context is everything.

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So 'burn out' isn't sufficient; 'exhaustion' just won't do.

We need to be accurate, and that requires other words.

To be honest, I'm not totally sure I have apt language to replace those words.

I'll throw a couple out there, if you have ideas, post them.

Maybe instead of, 'burn out', we should call it something like, 'anguish'.

Instead of saying, 'exhausted', we should talk about being, 'beleaguered',

To me, something like, 'anguished', speaks to the moral violations, many of you are exposed to, made party to.

Things that are erosive of your integrity and your conscience.

To me, something like, 'beleaguered', speaks to being beset by an unrelenting, external assault, on your sense of fairness, dignity, sustainability.

A constant attempt to dim your guiding light.

An unrelenting assault on your why.

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When we find more accurate descriptors, it points to more accurate remedies.

When those external factors are properly placed in the context of our fatigue, then, not only do we name the rest that we deserve, rest that is deserved; not requested, hoped for, pleaded for, or grudgingly given.

Rest that is deserved.

Not only that, when those external factors are placed in context, then we see that, in addition to rest, we deserve to see the external factors change.

We deserve to expect that those institutions and systems that are functioning exactly as designed, need to be reimagined, redesigned, reinitiated, redeveloped and realized.

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Rest without redesign is likely to continue to erode hope.

Redesign is its own hard work, and it's too often put on our backs.

For anyone doing it, redesigning our institutions and our systems without also affording restorative rest, is just another way to keep us oppressed.

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Rest is a foundational right, is an inherent part of healthy cycles.

Is the right partner to the best of our efforts in our work.

Rest is not idle.

Just like sleep is not passive.

Just like our brains do not become comatose when we sleep.

Our brains, during sleep, are hotbeds of activity.

Tending to under-processed issues, expressing things unexpressed in our wakefulness.

Exploring ideas and constructs beyond the bounds of daily realities.

Offering dreams full of curiosities and puzzles to contemplate.

Dreams that untether but are still wonderfully entangled with our wakeful doings.

Dreams that allow us to imagine, then render true, the future we seek.

Langston Hughs wrote a poem about dreaming a world

He wrote:

*'I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day'.*

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You have to imagine it, dream it up, before you can make it happen.

The power of dreaming, of imagination, to help us name where we want to go.

It's an amazing thing.

If it hasn't yet been seen by us, then it must be imagination, dreams, that help us define where we want to go.

Not just what we want to get away from, not just what we want to stop seeing.

Whether that's injustice, being unhoused, incarceration; any of our ills.

Not just the things we want to stop seeing or get away from.

But what we want to start seeing; where we want to go towards.

Defining where we want to go, that takes imagination.

It takes the willingness to dream of something different than we see, on the daily.

Our dreams allow us to conceptualize a better world.

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Our minds are practicing restorative alchemy when we sleep.

Just like rest itself is more than idleness.

There are ways to rest, to cultivate our ability to rest, in ways that best beckon restoration.

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And then we rise.

After rest, restorative rest, we rise.

We rise.

We rise because our restoration has enabled it.

We rise because people are counting on us, and we're counting on others.

We rise because we never really lose sight of the promise of liberation.

We rise in joy, and in our power.

We rise because the times call for it.

We rise because there is nothing else we can imagine doing.

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Oversharing alert:

I recently endured a tribulation called a trial.

I was calling for an accountability for the racism, imposed on me, colleagues and especially the families from our communities, that an institution tried to deny, ignore, rebuff, and distract away for two decades.

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Each session of a trial is initiated by the refrain, 'all rise'

When the judge or the jury enters or leaves the courtroom.

Toward the end of the two-month trial, every time I heard, 'all rise'

I thought about Maya Angelou's poem.

It helped to get through the ugliest of moments and kinda kept me grounded.

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'you may write me down in history

With you bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?

Why are you beset with gloom?

'cause I walk like I've got oil wells

Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?

*Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
 Weakened by my soulful cries?
 Does my haughtiness offend you?
 Don't you take it awful hard
 'cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
 Diggin' in my own backyard.
 You may shoot me with your words,
 You may cut me with your eyes,
 You may kill me with your hatefulness,
 But still, like air, I'll rise.
 Does my sexiness upset you?
 Does it come as a surprise?
 That I dance like I've got diamonds
 At the meeting of my thighs?
 Out of the huts of history's shame
 I rise
 Up from a past that's rooted in pain
 I rise
 I'm a Black ocean, leaping and wide,
 Welling and swelling I bear the tide.
 Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
 I rise
 Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
 I rise
 Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave
 I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
 I rise
 I rise
 I rise*

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Just as much as rest is our right, so is our act of rising.
 Rest as has been said, is an act of political activism.
 And rest comes in indivisible partnership with our act of rising.
 Rising to meet that next day.
 Rising to say that, in oppressing us you have also been preparing us to rise.
 Rising to say we see what's coming, what these next years will bring, and we are resolute in our
 resistance.
 Rising to show we may have been bent but aren't broken.
 Rising to express our dignity by dint of our posture.
 Raising our voices, when we should, when we must.
 Raising our fists to express our anguish and our strength.
 Rise we should, rise we will; rise we must.

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There will be temptations, in the coming times

To compromise things dear to us because we think it might lead to progress.
 Or at least prevent regression.
 In a time that feels scarce, that feels uncondusive to progress.
 It can feel tempting, to make gouging compromises.
 We might cloak it in convenient phraseology.
 To make compromises more palatable.
 I heard one the other day.
 They called it, 'pragmatic progressivism.'
 Be careful when you heare something is done in the name of 'pragmatic progressivism'.
 We will be tempted, to defer our larger goals.
 To be wooed into the compromises that feel less confrontational.
 Seem more comfortable.
 We will be tempted, in the coming times, to defer our dreams.
 To think that we are only allowed to be on defense, and forego the right to fight for change.

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I hope there are ways for us to remember,
 that our values, personal and organizational, are not for sale, or for trade.
 Our values are not rheostatic, turned to dim sometimes to avoid discomfort.
 Our values, are poles held high to bear our banners in good times – especially.
 And are the rods that steady our gait and keep us upright, in hard times, especially.
 I hope there are ways for us to remember, in the coming times,
 That only defending against the erosion of progress, can lead us to defending a status quo.
 One that is already unjust, already causing great harm.
 Which is why we must rise; rise to this moment, especially in this coming moment.
 Which is why we deserve rest, the rest that serves our restoration.
 That enables us to rise, in whatever way is meaningful to us.
 In whatever way feeds our integrity.
 Honors our ancestors and sows the seeds of our best futures.

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So, this is what I'm trying to say:
 If, recently, you've spent some time on the balcony,
 choosing to sit it out for a minute, just for a hot minute, I think that makes a lot of sense.
 I think that's okay, I think you deserve that.
 And anything else you needed.
 And, now, it's time to get off the balcony and rejoin the fray.
 It's time to rise.
 If we are to face what's coming in this country, then we must rest, our rest must be restorative,
 we need to dream, we need to rise.
 We need, even during the waning tide of liberty that we are entering, especially during this
 waning tide of liberty we are entering, to live our values, to adaptively navigate the currents, and
 keep moving forward.
 We must continue to rise, rise and call for the kind of transformation we know we need.
 The transformation first visualized in our imaginations.

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This can feel like a lot, yet these are parts of cycles, parts of the rhythms that guide our journey.
A journey that has always been there, has always been shared.

We've always been co-destined.

Destinies are linked, across great distances, across the greatest philosophical divides.

Our destinies are linked, I'm not talking about some intangible, cosmic link, I mean we are linked in the most direct, knowable, human-to-human kind of way.

Human-to-human, like your strenuous, yet life-affirming work.

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The activist and writer Nikki Giovanni had this whole thing down.

Nikki passed on December 9, 2024.

And I kind of like to think she was one of those folks, who wanted to slide across the finish line of life with just a figurative nickel in her pocket, clothes tattered and dirt-streaked face screaming, 'what a ride!'

She appreciated the journey, every bit of it.

And she knew that life is measured in lives touched, not things accumulated.

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She wrote:

*'The tasks I can no longer complete are balanced by the love of the tasks gone past
I offer no apology, only this plea*

When I am frayed and stained and drizzled at the end

Please someone cut a square and put me in a quilt

That I may keep some child warm

And some old person with no one else to talk to

Will hear my whispers.'