

Perspective

Cultivating Pearls of Wisdom: Creating Protected Niche Spaces for Inner Transformations amidst the Metacrisis

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Abstract: The impetus for this paper emerges from the growing interest in leveraging inner transformations to support a global shift in ways of seeing and being. We caution that without sufficient individual and systemic maturity, inner transformations will be unable to hold the whole story and that attempts to drive paradigmatic shifts in ill-prepared systems will lead to insidious harms. As such, interventions for inner change will not have sufficient protected niche space to move beyond the boundaries of best practices towards wise practices. Drawing on Indigenous trans-systemics, we offer the metaphor of pearls as an invitation to recontextualize how inner transformations are conceived and approached in the metacrisis. To further develop this notion, we share a story of Wendigo and Moloch as a precautionary tale for the blind pursuit of inner and outer development. Weaving together metaphor, story, and scientific inquiry, we bring together Anishinaabe and Western knowledge systems for the purposes of healing and transformation. We hope that this paper will create space for wise practices—gifts from Creator to help sustain both Self and the World—to emerge, establish, and flourish. We invite readers on an exploration into the whole system of systems that are endemic to Anishinaabe cosmology, and a journey of reimagining new stories for collective flourishing amidst the metacrisis.



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1. Introduction and Invitation

Dear reader, this is an unusual paper for it is not a paper at all. At least, it is not a paper in the classic sense. We, the authors, wish to share with you a journey that emerged when an Anishinaabe Storyteller (DGM) invited two white colleagues of European descent (KJC and DM) to a discussion about the metacrisis. Stories were shared, systems were mapped, and a pearl was formed. What follows is not a prescriptive path to solutions for global issues, nor a scientific report. Instead, what we offer is a *pearl* we nurtured in a protected niche space of respect, friendship, and trust. Pearls are not the solution to the metacrisis and will likely not have the answers you seek. However, we hope that better understanding their role within an ecology of reciprocity might shine wisdom on different ways of thinking and being that could be insightful in these turbulent times. We have invited story, metaphor, and Indigenous knowledge into an arena that places greater value on *logos* over *mythos*. This is not to undermine the value or positive contributions of knowledge systems such as Western science, but rather to create space for trans-systemic and trans-perspectival ways of knowing. Reader, we hope that the stories we share, and the reflections we offer, seed new pearls and inspire new stories to emerge in us all.

Stories are a universal human phenomenon [1]. For thousands of years, we have used stories to carry information across space and time [2]. Stories shape our values, beliefs, and worldviews and by extension our cultures, economies, and nations [3]. Not only do stories

contain knowledge but they are also vital for cultivating wisdom. When heeded, collective wisdom helps us detect, prevent, mitigate, and adapt to emerging crises [4]. Humanity is now entwined in a planetary crisis that threatens much of the human and more-than-human world [5–7]. Disentangling ourselves from this wide, sticky, and dangerous web, while often enticing, is impossible. Consequently, understanding and responding to what has been described as a “metacrisis” in a way that reduces suffering and nurtures conditions for long-term viability is a collective existential quest. A hero’s journey will not suffice—there are no heroes in a metacrisis. More knowledge will not suffice—there is no shortage of knowledge about the metacrisis. What is needed are wise psycho-social transformations [8] in which stories have an important role to play.

As an initial point of orientation, the first part of our exploration investigates how Indigenous trans-systemics and Stories offer holistic, healing, and complexity-rich sense-making processes and gifts to understanding the metacrisis. Second, through an Indigenous trans-systemic inquiry, we examine best and wise practices for inner transformation in response to entwined social and ecological crises. Through Story, we give form to the energies of Wendigo and Moloch who battle over precious pearls of wisdom, reflecting competing narrow interests that undermine conditions for collective wellbeing. Thirdly, we explore how irritants can be transformed into pearls in protected niche spaces. Here, we survey the boundaries of mono-cultured ways of thinking and being, and shine light on the potential of inner work and inner transformation for nurturing a gift ecology of mutual learning. Fourth, we demonstrate how a cultural transformation towards “right relationship” will require both individual and systemic maturity. Lastly, we reflect on our journey of making sense of the metacrisis through Indigenous trans-systemics and Story.

From a very young age, I was told Stories of Creator, Trickster, and a magic reality. Until I was a young adult, I believed this was how every child was taught. These Stories were placed inside your very being. It was there that, as an Anishinaabe, the Stories would ruminate. I would contemplate and spend the rest of my life sense-making this wisdom. As I grew up, I would talk with Elders, Aunties & Uncles. They would direct me and help me understand my path and what it was to be an Anishinaabe—a Good Human. These Stories are magic. They are shared and expanded throughout one’s life. The meaning of the Story is circumstantial. Once implanted, the same Story can rise up into your consciousness time and again under very different happenings in one’s life. The Stories set me on a path that has had me travel to all ends of Turtle Island; gathering more Stories from more nations to illuminate, irritate, and substantiate the life I have been gifted. . .

-DGM

From a very young age, I was told stories about creatures, their ecosystems, and an objective reality. Until I was a young adult, I believed this was how every child was taught. These stories were recorded in books and held in libraries. It was there, that as a scientist, these stories would coalesce. I would contemplate and spend the rest of my life sensemaking this knowledge. As I grew up, I would talk with fellow scientists and researchers. They would direct me and help me understand my path and what it was to be a scientist—a good researcher. These stories are Truths. They are shared and replicated, universal and provable. The purpose of the story is one of utility. Once established, the same stories are revisited and improved, enhanced and scaled, under various controlled conditions. The stories set me on a path that has had me travel extensively; gathering more stories and more data to add insight and knowledge to the collection of scientific knowledge that shape my world and the life I have been given. . .

-KJC

We are in a time of crisis. In fact, we are in a time of multiple, interacting, and mutually reinforcing crises—a *polycrisis*—that arise from and perpetuate issues such as ecological collapse, rivalrous geopolitical rifts, and existential technologies [6,9,10]. This interconnected crisis web has emerged from a breakdown in individual and collective capacities to perceive, engage, reflect, relate, and understand phenomena [11,12]. Collectively, these drivers are described as the *metacrisis*—an “underlying crisis driving a multitude of crises” [13]. At the core of the many cascading existential risks that threaten modern global civilization is a falling out of relationship with ourselves, each other, and the more-than-human world [14–16]. As such, we suggest that it is not more knowledge

that is required to respond to these challenges, but more wisdom. Wisdom that centralizes multi- and trans-perspectival ways of seeing, being, and relating [17–19].

Indigenous trans-systemics represent a complexity-informed and trans-perspectival approach to sensemaking. Instead of investigating reductionist perspectives, Indigenous trans-systemics illuminates the relational perspectives shared between dynamic living systems [20–23]. The prefix *trans-* refers to the connections across, through, and between systems. (While we recognize that the term “system” can be problematic for perpetuating Eurocentric ways of knowing [24], it provides a useful point of orientation for this discussion). Indigenous trans-systemics is a way of understanding that explores the “intersections of distinct knowledge systems” and the liminal space that emerges through the “interweaving and intraweaving [of] an entanglement of knowledge systems, languages, concepts, and feelings” ([20], p. vii). Consequently, trans-systemic thinking opens “the door for deeper dialogues between different modes of thinking, or different knowledge systems, rather than enclosing the content of other knowledge systems into one’s own” ([25], p. 50). When applied to the metacrisis, Indigenous trans-systemics is a useful sensemaking process for mapping the intangible web of meta social and ecological crises *and* the relational connections between them.

The trans-perspectival nature of Indigenous trans-systemics makes it suitable for navigating and sensemaking within a pluriverse of perspectives without defaulting to reductionism [26]. Such flexibility is vital when exploring partisan issues or the liminal space between what is often framed as oppositional ways of knowing (e.g., scientific reductionism versus holistic knowledge systems) [24,27,28]. A simple thought experiment to clarify the distinction between conventional scientific approaches and Indigenous trans-systemics is to first imagine a researcher *extracting* a specimen from its environment to analyze it in a laboratory under controlled conditions. Now, imagine the same researcher *embedding* themselves within the systems in which the specimen lives and exploring the relational dynamics that sustain this life and the life the specimen in turn sustains. Indigenous trans-systemics is an example of the latter. In this context, understanding is gleaned only when one comes into a relationship with all systems and can make sense through multiple perspectives simultaneously.

Indigenous trans-systemics in many ways mirrors the metacrisis, as it holds awareness of the deep entanglement of nested systems (social, ecological, economic, etc.) within systems. Moreover, it gestures towards the complex underlying drivers of crisis that can be understood as being out of relationship. It is important to clarify that complexity in this context is not limited to complexified phenomena, but rather the centralization of collective wellbeing in all considerations [29]. As such, applications of trans-systemia are less exercises in problem diagnosis and treatment than they are invitations to explore different perspectives, stories, and epistemes in order to enrich trans-contextual understandings [26,30].

As agents in the world, all systems affect our individual and collective stories, just as we in turn affect those stories. Humans have been described as *Homo fictus*—“the great ape with the storytelling mind” ([1], p. xiv). For thousands of years, story and myth (*mythos*) were widely accepted as sources of wisdom [31]. Among their many qualities, stories are both pervasive and powerful. They are pervasive in the sense that they exist (albeit in diverse forms) across time, space, and culture [32]. They are also powerful in the sense that stories give rise to empires, modern states, political movements, religions, and legal systems [3]. With the rise in Western rationalism (*logos*), mythic symbolism was cast aside by rationality, story with reason, and religion with philosophy [33]. This more recent devaluation of *mythos* is a stark contrast to how humans have traditionally made sense of the world and their place within it [34–36]. Among the many perils of this fragmented worldview is a loss of context, complexity, imagination, systemic understanding, and relationship, all of which are foundational to the metacrisis [24,37].

Helping us to make sense of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), stories occupy an important niche in our sensemaking ecology [38–40]. In many Indigenous

cultures, stories play an integral role in the transfer of knowledge and wisdom [41]. The process of sharing through oral traditions and orature (oral literature) preserves language, customs, traditions, and norms, in a manner that maintains the contextual richness and complexity unique to each culture [42]. To clarify, we refer to “Story” or “Stories” as living gifts as described in the Anishinaabe and various Indigenous traditions. In contrast we use the term “story” to describe narrative, tales, cultural myths, and memetics that are not always viewed as sacred cultural artefacts. The term “stories” is used to describe a combination of both Story and story. In Anishinaabe tradition, Story helps an individual make sense of their Gift (life) in relation with the community (both human and non-human). Instead of providing prescriptive solutions to challenges, stories offer wisdom that help people orient, assess, make sense of, and navigate life’s challenges. By inviting individuals into relationship with the human and more-than-human world, Stories create a protected niche space for inner work and inner transformation. We describe *inner work* as an initiatory practice that reveals new ways of *seeing* that honor *all my relations* [15]. In a similar yet slightly different way, we define *inner transformation* as a profound shift in ways of *being* and *doing* that are in service to a respectful, reciprocal, and relational coexistence—or what is often described and understood in the West as sustainability.

2. Trans-Systemic Inquiry into Best Practices and Wise Practices for Inner Transformation

Through an Indigenous trans-systemics lens, no “system” is autopoietic (self-creating and self-bounding) [26,43]. Instead, what is perceived as a system in the West (e.g., law, politics, and ecology) is seen as an unbound constellation of indivisible and inseparable relationships. This holistic ontology and epistemology greatly contrast with the dominant scientific materialist understanding of the world. Central to this holistic meta-systemic approach is an appreciation for the transcontextual richness that emerges from each Nations’ place-based knowledge and customs. This wisdom is generally passed intergenerationally through stories and ceremonies which contain a Nations’ origins, values, cultural identity, history, language, and understanding of trespass [42,44].

In the Anishinaabe tradition, all phenomena are understood as interrelated and interconnected through Story [26]. Stories are seen as living gifts to be shared and sustained through community. Often, Stories are first heard through dreams and then aloud when a baby is cradled in their mother’s arms. In this protected embrace, infants are nourished not only through breastmilk but also by the Stories themselves. The melodic tales guide the infants through the dream realm where they are safely nestled amongst their cultural spirits (*Manitou*). The stories remain with the infants as they grow, maturing in their subconscious, like a pearl. Once a child has reached adulthood, they are initiated into their journey of becoming a “good human” [15,45]. Once initiated, the individual will continually draw on Stories as they make their way through life. As Johnston (1987) reminds us, “it is not enough to listen to or read or to understand the truths contained in stories; according to the elders the truths must be lived out and become part of the being of a person. The search for truth and wisdom ought to lead to fulfilment of man and woman” (p. 7).

In many Indigenous cultures, Stories are not just “tales” to passively consume. Rather, they are entities with substance, rights, and responsibilities. To reduce a Story to a “thing” or a “tool” is akin to reducing a living being into a heap of isolated parts. No matter how the pieces are reassembled, they will not reflect the wisdom of the whole that is greater than the sum of individual parts [46]. A similar process is mirrored in an ecological context, where a combination of partitioned elements fails to create a gestalt of a living being [47].

Being in relationship with Story is a process of inner work whereby individuals are prepared and guided towards a respectful relationship with all life. Story-ing is therefore a reciprocal gifting process shared between the teller (giver), audience (receiver), and the Story itself. Some Western scholars have attempted to make sense of traditional gifting economies by arguing that gift sharing is but a means to strengthen social cohesion [48]. While in part true, this Eurocentric mindset overlooks the fact that Stories themselves are living gifts imbued with immense wisdom to which the teller and audience *both* have

an obligation to take time to tell, listen, absorb, and explore that which is below the surface of consciousness. Storywork and orature must therefore be approached from a place of “respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy” ([44], p. 132). It is important to note that Indigenous storytelling processes are not prescriptive or intended to tell someone what to do but rather to offer an invitation to different ways of seeing oneself in a relational context. They are intended to be imaginative, thought-provoking, and “irritating” in the sense that they disrupt unconscious behavior [49]. Indigenous Stories are also constantly transforming across contexts. This transcontextual quality of Stories is what entwines the storyteller, characters, cultures, places, and listeners into relationship. Amidst the metacrisis, Stories also play an integral role in healing some of the many harms incurred by dominant worldviews that perpetuate ecocide, culturicide, ethnocide, and epistemicide [41].

3. Moloch and Wendigo Battle for Pearls

Don G. McIntyre/AhnAhnsisi (co-author) is a Storyteller from Timiskaming First Nations in northern Québec, Canada. Below, he shares his Story of Wendigo and Moloch in the Meta-Lodge battling for pearls. In Anishinaabe traditions, Wendigo is perceived as a hideous monster with a heart of ice and voracious appetite for human flesh [50]. Wendigo is depicted as physically large yet emaciated, and always starving regardless of how much they consume [50,51]. The character Moloch represents a similar precautionary character in mainstream metacrisis discussions, particularly warning against the perils of unbridled progress [52,53]. In Biblical contexts, Moloch (or Molech) worship included sacrificing children (generally one’s own children) to fire [54]. Both Wendigo and Moloch symbolize unbalanced systems that are driven by selfishness, namely an insatiable appetite for power and consumption. In both stories, the insatiable appetites of these monsters leads to the destruction of the community and future generations through the cannibalization of the world or what is often described as the tragedy of the commons [50,54–56]. In this Story, the Meta-Lodge represents the looking glass of the Meta-Crisis. Here we see that Wendigo is driven to consume by an insufferable *inner* craving whereas Moloch is tortured by an *outer* craving for infinite growth.

Wendigo, Moloch, and the Meta-Lodge by Don G. McIntyre/AhnAhnsisi.

Wendigo was hunched over, cautiously entering into the vast, dimly lit space. It was massive. It should have echoed but even those were muffled, trapped by the mass assemblage of stuff that filled the universe of Moloch. The space appears to continue indefinitely, engulfing even the subdued light in the distant corners of the chamber. Wendigo was ravenous, as always, left searching through the dank, crowded corners for something, anything to satisfy their hunger. The space is crammed with piles of things. Mountains of blankets, Tupperware containers, socks, arts, cash, teas, toys, tins, jewellery, and clothes. Heaps of gifts given but never reciprocated. Crawling over stacks of firewood, over-dried but never used, they stumbled upon reserves of food kept well-beyond any acceptable date. The nutrients having long-since evaporated in their time-full stagnation, yet Wendigo devours the empty morsels anyway, intent on filling the void. The exercise is futile. It doesn’t work. They are still woefully wanting. And... they are sickened. The foetid scraps attempt to escape back up Wendigo’s throat, but through sheer force of will, they manage to return the rancid masticated remains back down their gullet to the gaping hole of their stomach. They move on through the humid, overbearing room and discover an ornate feasting bowl full of pearls.

Wendigo covetously looks at the pearls, they smell them avariciously, they lick one tentatively. Wendigo eats one anyway, then another. A handful. And finally, Wendigo picks up the feasting bowl and unceremoniously devours them all searching for a means to end their hunger. The pretty pearls have no taste. The pearls had no smell. The pearls have no nutrition. They do not fill the gap, the need. Wendigo’s stomach rejects these offerings as it did their last meal and Wendigo is not so fast to stop the bile. A few of the pearls drop with the sourness toward the grimy foul ground. Wendigo reaches out a hand attempting to pull the pearls and vitriol back into its protracted orifice. They miss. The few pearls bounce off the floor echoing in the chamber creating sounds far beyond their small size. Wendigo, still starving, goes searching in the cracks and crevices for the tiny potential of the fugitive pearls.

The sounds reverberate and grow reaching the bloated ears of Moloch. Moloch twists their swollen body and lumbers towards the disturbing sound that continues to repeat and rebound throughout their quarters. The dimness of the rooms expands as Moloch enters. It is as if they are consuming the tiny illumination itself. Picking up and forcing the escaped pearls back down their gullet, Wendigo simultaneously turns towards the changing light, yearning for something more to dispel the hunger. They are met with a swollen mass. Moloch. Moloch watches as Wendigo re-swallows the remnants of the feasting bowl. Wendigo lets out an unsatisfied whimper. The pearls have not lessened the pangs of emptiness inside their stomach. Moloch responds with unrestrained blubber.

“NOOoooo! No! No. No. No.no.no.no. My pearls. My pearls. My pearls.”

Their pearls! Their prized pearls are gone. Fear for the loss of their priceful pearls forces Moloch’s girth to move much faster than would be considered possible. Before Wendigo can react, Moloch snatches up an oyster shell in one hand, hoists Wendigo up with the other and begins forcing the pathetic creature, wailing and writhing, into the confines of the shell. First a taloned toe (that was easily itself the size of the shell) was rammed inside. Then a foot, a leg, and another. The waist, torso, and chest are next to be jammed into the tiny oyster shell. Flailing arms and long nails scrape against the sides of the shell as each part of Wendigo cedes to the will of Moloch.

Wendigo screams and howls, snarling and biting as their antlered head strains at the edge of the tiny entrance. At the very last second, Wendigo falls silent then whispers words imperceptible to Moloch. Moloch needs to know the nature of the communication and lifts Wendigo’s dangling head closer. Wendigo is silent once again. Moloch shakes the antlers and the head and shell follow along. “What did you say!”

“Feed me and you will have your pearls once again,” repeats Wendigo.

“What?”

“Feed me.”

“Why would I?”

“You can have your pearls once again, but first, you must feed my gap.”

Moloch shakes the head suspended atop the shell shouting “Stupid, Stupid beast! Ignorant savage creature!”

Wendigo whispers once more, “You can have the pearls again, but first you must feed me.” Moloch pulls the head closer to hear the words and Wendigo stretches open their mouth, swallowing Moloch whole. Moloch tumbles deep into the recesses of Wendigo’s gullet where they are finally reunited with their precious pearls.

-DGM

Stories of these terrifying creatures offer precautionary tales against the pursuit of narrow goals to the detriment of communal wellbeing [57]. In Anishinaabe tradition, unless the Wendigo spirit is intercepted and transformed by wise practices, it will cannibalize and torment those it has infected to the point of self-termination. As we will demonstrate in the next section with the pearl metaphor, wisdom is cultivated in spaces where coordinated efforts are oriented towards long-term, and collective, flourishing [58].

4. Best and Wise Practices for Inner Transformation

Calls for new stories are becoming more common in the West in response to the metacrisis [59,60]. Coupled with this curiosity is a growing hunger for traditional transformative practices such as Indigenous wisdom, plant medicines, mindfulness, and yoga [61,62]. We use the word hunger to bring awareness to the ways in which these practices are rapidly being extracted, appropriated, and consumed [62,63]. A recent proliferation of scientific inquiry corroborating many of the long-known benefits of these and many other traditional practices is legitimizing religious, spiritual, and Indigenous knowledge-based interventions and inner transformation [64–66].

Inner transformation is a novel umbrella term used to describe shifts in values, worldviews, and mindsets [67–69]. This process is often associated with interventions derived from wisdom traditions that are being increasingly used in Western secular contexts for personal development and in some cases, to help align individuals with goals that serve collective social and ecological interests [70,71]. Increasingly, inner transformations are lauded as leverage points for paradigmatic shifts towards more relational ways of seeing and being [72–74]. There is now growing enthusiasm to shift towards more sustainable and equitable ways of thinking and doing; however, re-thinking paradigms, including their evaluation, appraisal, and re-design, remains paradoxically limited by the very paradigmatic systems being examined.

The notion of paradigm originates from the Greek word *paradeigma*, meaning “to exhibit side by side” [75], ([76], p. 148). Through the lens of Indigenous trans-systemics, one can interpret a

paradigm as “something we have one eye on while we look at something else” ([77], p. 185). This is particularly important in a time of planetary crisis when any attempt to solve, fix, cure, or treat one systemic challenge risks worsening another [9,56,78]. As interest in inner transformations grows, it is increasingly important that they are held accountable to the collective so that they are not caught in Moloch or Wendigo’s grasp and become motivated by greed, consumption, and power. One of the most poignant differences between traditional and post-traditional approaches to inner transformation and change lies between the distinction of *best* and *wise* practices.

Best and Wise Practices

Through an Indigenous trans-systemic lens, a “best practice” may be understood as a specific method, technique, or process proven to effectively achieve a specific outcome under a specific circumstance. It is a concept based on lessons learned where successful results are used as a benchmark that can be widely scaled or standardized. There are many benefits of having best practices, as this allows for consistency, replicability, and standardization processes. While this is vital in specific contexts, such as manufacturing, when applied to inner transformation there is a risk of imposing a meta-frame or meta-intervention that reinforces problematic worldviews such as Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism [79,80].

The growing interest in inner transformation has rapidly expanded the trillion-dollar wellness and conscious capitalism industry [62,63,81]. This burgeoning market for inner development operates by encouraging individuals to constantly improve themselves by augmenting how they think, feel, and act, as prescribed by *best practices* [61]. Approaches to inner change in these secularized and commodified contexts broadly cover a range of interventions including mindfulness [82], plant medicines or psychedelics [83–85], and yoga [86]. As previously noted, many of these approaches have been taken from spiritual and religious traditions and decontextualized for popular consumption [87–89]. Legitimacy for best practices to “fix, treat, or heal” symptoms of systemic issues is legitimized in the West by science [90,91].

The rapid proliferation of interventions for inner transformation in the secular domain is catalyzed by the explosion of wellness programs intended to increase organizational value by increasing worker wellbeing [92–94]. While there have been many reported benefits of wellness programs for reducing stress and increased productivity [95,96], some interventions have actually worsened conditions such as burnout [97–99]. More insidious harms associated with inner transformations that only consider *best practices* have been associated with reinforcing inequities, reducing prosocial reparation, strengthening hegemony, and causing various forms of traumatization as seen in mindfulness practices [100–103].

Other issues with interventions for inner development are linked to cultural and ecological exploitation as seen in the growing Western interest in psychedelic compounds [104,105]. Contrary to traditional Indigenous settings, plant medicines are promoted in the West as a gateway for individual healing and self-actualization [106]. The growing demand for psychedelically induced transformative experiences is driving the unsustainable harvesting of plant medicines with damaging consequences for social and ecological systems [107,108]. Outside of the traditional cultural container, there is little support to make sense of the effects of the psychedelic intervention [109]. As Evans (2023b) explains: “Ordinary people who have ecstatic experiences have very few places to go for information about them. This means they will turn to secular psychiatrists, who may pathologize their experience, or to religious or spiritual influences, who often have self-serving or conspiratorial agendas. Ecstatic experiences can be healthy and healing, but they can also be dangerous both for individuals and their societies. We urgently need a more mature cultural understanding of ecstatic experiences, to support individuals and the health of the body politic.”

Through the lens of Indigenous trans-systemics, it becomes clear that decontextualized interventions for inner development: (i) are not value neutral, (ii) do not endeavor universal positive effects, and (iii) are not always aligned with collective wellbeing. As we have demonstrated, best practices are often focused on supporting individual healing and self-transcendence as opposed to nurturing conditions for collective and long-term viability. We wish to clarify that interventions such as post-Buddhist mindfulness or psychedelics are not without benefit for certain individuals in specific contexts, for there is now sufficient “scientific evidence” to support that they do [110,111]. Instead, we argue that the benefits of “*best practices*” for the metacrisis are limited when compared to “*wise practices*”. Moreover, without a more transsystemic understanding of the different interventions in this space, including their motivations, incentivization, design, and delivery, the pursuit of wellbeing can paradoxically lead to ill-being [112,113]. For these reasons, we suggest a shift towards wise practices rooted in reciprocity and respect for “all my relations” [114,115].

A checklist for “wise practices” would be convenient, especially when addressing the metacrisis. However, we are being intentionally vague with our description of wise practices to avoid creating a framework that would feed Wendigo and Moloch energies. As Yunkaporta (2019) reminds us, “The war between good and evil is in reality an imposition of stupidity and simplicity over wisdom and complexity” ([2], p. 3). Many others have issued similar cautions when trying to distil rich wisdom into something quantifiable, consumable, and manipulatable. For example, Lao Tzu famously proclaimed “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao” [116]. Similar logic holds within the context of inner transformation. While there is evidently a need for individual and systemic changes to grapple with the intertwined challenges of the metacrisis, there is no cohesive blueprint for what scalable wise action would entail beyond a dominant paradigm constrained by hegemony, competition, individualism, and human-exceptionalism. In a time of increasing VUCA, attempts to decontextualize, sanitize, and homogenize various Indigenous, spiritual, religious, and other rich traditions into a solutionist and franchisable best practice would not only be *unwise* but likely result in the creation of a truly “hideous progeny” ([117], p. 5).

Wise practices encourage an “ethical relationality” that centralizes kinship, love, and respect in all relationships [118,119]. Some generative distinctions between best and wise practices have been made by Mussett et al. (2023) who explain that “wise practices represent resilience and adaptation; they are meant to exemplify not on a dynamic learning process, but also a congruence of lived experiences” (p. S13). Additionally, they offer that wise practices differ from best practices in their appreciation for culture, nuance, context, holistic framing, and valuation beyond conventional models of development and success [120]. Where best practices might be used to scale treatment for a specific affliction, wise practices explore the systemic causes of suffering. Specifically, wise practices sense as to what has fallen out of relationship. An example of best practices might be the prescription of mindfulness-based interventions for stress reduction, whereas wise practices would explore how the cumulative effects of unsustainable modern systems create and exacerbate stressful conditions. Wise practices are informed by transcontextuality—an ecology of relationships coursing through all living systems [47,121,122].

5. Pearl Cultivation and Inner-Outer Transformations

Bivalves, including clams, mussels, and oysters live in both fresh and salt water. These aquatic organisms have a hard outer shell and an inner layer of mother of pearl that covers their sensitive organs. Because of their sensitivity to environmental conditions, mollusks are often used as an indicator species to detect ecosystem threats [123–126]. When exposed to threats, either through natural biofiltration processes or artificial implantation, mollusks respond by secreting nacre to encapsulate and calcify the irritant. Sometimes the host is killed by the irritant, while other times, it manages to survive through adaptation. In rare instances, the host manages to transform the irritant into a biomineralized gem commonly known as a pearl [127]. The change process through which a threat is transformed into a precious jewel is a suitable metaphor for understanding the emerging field of inner transformation amidst the metacrisis. In this context, we examine best and wise practices for natural versus farmed pearls and elucidate some of the complexities and limitations of many conventional Western approaches for systemic change. Additionally, we offer some reflections for reimagining an ecology of protective niche spaces for transformation.

5.1. Monoculture Farmed Pearls versus Polyculture Wild Pearls

Many “best practice” interventions for inner development and transformation in the West are advocated and taught by wealthy, well-educated, and white practitioners [100,128–130]. Since these interventions are designed to help people cope with irritants in their life including stress, anxiety, and meaninglessness, they rarely address the systemic factors that create these adverse conditions [112,131,132]. Consequently, without confronting and interrupting the underlying drivers of these deeper issues, for example colonialism, these interventions risk reproducing the very problematic mindsets, worldviews, and values that are at the core of the metacrisis [133–135].

The dynamics of system transformations is often understood within the context of the panarchy cycle [136–138]. This model (Figure 1) demonstrates how dynamics on smaller scales can link and influence a system of interest (revolt) and how larger, generally slower moving systems, can constrain a system of interest (remember) [137]. If a change agent introduces an intervention for inner development but fails to consider the broader dynamics of the system they are trying to change, including the scales below (e.g., organizational or individual mindsets) and the scales above (e.g., broader socio-political-economic influences such as neoliberal forms of capitalism), they risk strengthening the very systemic conditions they originally sought to transform.

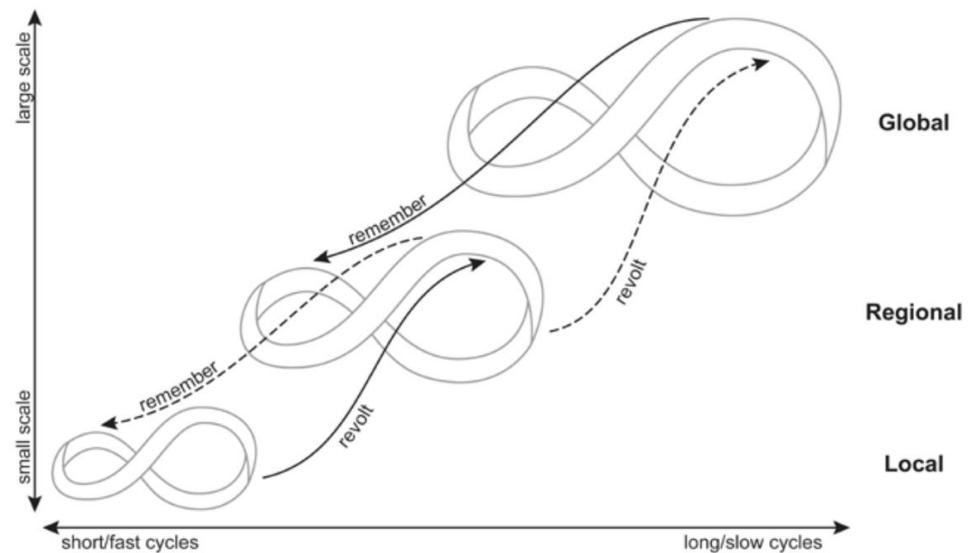


Figure 1. Panarchy of interconnected adaptive cycles (Reproduced with permission from [137], p. 158. Copyright © 2002 Island Press).

To apply this to the context of pearl formation, if one considers the pearl as an emergent property of a system responding to an irritant and thinks about transforming that system without considering the “remember” dynamic, there is a risk of exploiting the process of pearl formation. The remembrance dynamic can thus result in systemic distortions associated with a forced insertion of irritants into the oyster, an occurrence that is, in fact, far from an “innovation”. This artificial irritant impregnation can be reinforced by “revolt” dynamics associated with the way individuals unconsciously perceive the potential “innovation” and the process of pearl formation. Consequently, the process of artificially seeding an oyster for the purposes of economic gain inadvertently reinforces the unsustainable dynamics of the broader system in which it is embedded. In such conditions, interventions for “innovation” strengthen undesirable system dynamics through increased forced irritations instead of desirable transformations. To decouple this path dependency, individuals must learn to look across scales and systems [25,139].

A notable similarity between the pearl and inner transformation industries is that they flourish because of their capacity to *both* implant *and* extract irritants. The trillion-dollar *wellness* industry for example is paradoxically reliant on people being *unwell* [140]. The market for inner development and interventions for personal transformation reflects a “farmed approach” to consumptive *well-being* that is indicative of modernity’s promise of infinite growth on a finite planet [141,142]. Interventions such as market-based “healing” or artificial pearl formation are not incentivized to heal but rather create a constant cycle of irritants or stressors for which they can offer a consumable solution. This superficial, artificial, and constant irritant–response model does little to enable the building of longer-term or cumulative resilience, and, in fact, can distract from broader, systemic issues such as the poly/metacrisis [6,13].

5.2. Wild Pearl Cultivation and the Diversification of Inner Transformations

In natural environments, bivalves occupy a niche within a gift economy [143]. In their niche, these soft-bodied creatures filter water and as a result, sometimes ingest irritants that they cannot expel. When an irritant threatens the bivalve, it is encased in nacre, which protects the creature’s sensitive organs. As previously described, sometimes the creature can adapt to the irritant and other times it cannot and perishes. On rare occasions, the oyster, for example, can transform the threat into a pearl. The process of pearl formation in the context of personal transformation and healing can serve collective interests *if* it is supported by *wise practices*.

By metabolizing the toxic “gunk” that other aquatic creatures cannot, mollusks “heal” their environment, which, from a psychoanalytical perspective, is akin to lifting a systemic shadow [144]. Therefore, an individual’s capacity to transform irritants into pearls to heal both themselves and others gestures towards what we describe as “*inner maturity*”. Contrastingly, “*systemic maturity*” speaks to the ability to embrace and map the richly complex landscape of possibilities around us from many different perspectives to enrich our understanding of the systems that we are intricately part

of [145–147]. By building these twin capacities, individuals are better prepared to identify and interrupt unconscious ways of thinking and being that contribute to the metacrisis.

6. Inner Maturity and Systemic Maturity

Protective niche spaces can play a critical role in preparing systems for transformation by providing safe conditions to: (i) recognize the intrusion of the irritant; (ii) reflexively interrupt unconscious patterns of suppressing or numbing against the irritant; (iii) transform the irritant from threat to jewel; and (iv) step back and step out to look inside *and* outside of the shell [137,138,148]. Together, these capacities are vital for recognizing system dynamics and patterns (e.g., adaptive cycle), seeing across scales (e.g., panarchy), and responding in non-reactive manners to existential risk.

As social and ecological systems deteriorate, there are increasing incentives to retreat into the comfort of one's metaphorical shell. In this carefully curated space, there is safety, certainty, and a sense of belonging. Taken out of a relational system, however, these shells can become toxic containers for all kinds of dangerous-isms including solipsism, nihilism, tribalism, racism, sexism, anthropomorphism, etc. There is therefore a tension to be held with how shells become protective spaces for inner transformations, while being in relationship to the broader ecosystem [148]. In response, we suggest that both inner and systemic maturity are simultaneously needed to respond to irritations and the metacrisis more broadly so that these challenges can be addressed with agency instead of unconscious reactivity [149–151].

Applying the pearl metaphor to systemic changes reveals that maturity is linked to the ability to experience "irritation" or systemic stress without being overwhelmed ([149–151]). Increasing these kinds of psycho-social navigational skills in VUCA environments would in turn lead to a more careful investigation into the transcontextual nature of systemic irritants. Additionally, these capacities would nurture greater agency for discerning how pearl creation might serve the larger ecosystem as an "innovation" or whether it would be responding to a neoliberal irritant designed to reproduce systems of unsustainability (e.g., pearl farming). We anticipate that the development of inner and systemic maturity would lead to greater resilience, reflexivity, and complexity-informed approaches to sensemaking [40,152].

7. Conclusions

Dear reader, you have reached the end of our paper. We are grateful for your presence and hope that you have found many elements of this piece irritating in a pearl-creation sense. We have explored the role of Story as one approach to developing agency in the metacrisis. Not only do Stories promote wise practices, but also healing and connection. In these contentious times, where fragmentation, separation, and *logos* prevail, there is both a need and yearning for *mythos* to support individual and collective transformations. Individual and broader systemic changes are urgently required to respond to the metacrisis. However, as Indigenous trans-systemics reveal, these transformations should not be approached as a *best practice* for inner development but rather a journey of coming into relationship with the human and more-than-human world. Inner work is one way in which both individual and systemic maturity might be nurtured in these times of global crisis. As we have demonstrated, it is through these internal processes that the oyster is able to transform an existential threat into a pearl and promote systemic healing through an ecology of relationships.

In many instances, modalities for inner change in the West have become highly profitable and secularized solutions to the ills of modernity. Sanitized from rites, rituals, and deep inner work, inner development interventions promote personal wellness via *best practices*. Through an Indigenous trans-systemic lens, we suggest that without *wisdom*, these interventions for inner change risk strengthening unsustainable systems by perpetuating various forms of exploitation, oppression, and human exceptionalism. Moreover, we suggest that without profound recontextualization, interventions that have been franchised for *well-ness* will paradoxically perpetuate *ill-ness*. While it would undoubtedly be convenient, there are no universal checklists for *wise practices*. This is a cause for celebration, for it means there is still time to disincentivize attempts to create one.

As the Story of Wendigo and Moloch reminds us, pearls of wisdom should not be mindlessly consumed, hoarded, or exploited for narrow gains, but rather ought to be treated with respect and reciprocity. By nurturing protective niche spaces, Stories create conditions in which individual and systemic maturity might be nurtured. As an initial step for developing inner maturity, we hope that the pearl metaphor encourages readers to reflect on their capacity to make conscious the mental models, worldviews, and framings they have acquired in their life (shell), so that they can interrupt reactive protective coping mechanisms they use (*nacre*) when facing challenges (irritant). The same reflections can and ought to be applied to larger systems such as geopolitics to identify

(i) the boundaries of dominant mental models, worldviews, and value systems, (ii) how these systems react to irritants, (iii) how different viewpoints might illuminate more generative understandings and responses, (iv) how multiple perspectives might be held simultaneously, and (v) how existential irritants can be transformed in service to collective flourishing.

Through the lens of Indigenous trans-systemics, we can hold multiple perspectives at once. We can also weave them together into a relational system that informs new insights and wisdom. When this approach to systems thinking is combined with processes of inner work and Storying, irritating threats can be transformed into gems. Wisely responding to the metacrisis necessitates both individual and systemic maturity to continually look inwards in order to look outwards, as well as the capacity to perceive through a global ecology of perspectives. The cultivation of these abilities is dependent on a healthy network of protective niche spaces situated within a relational gift economy.

The Story of Moloch and Wendigo that we shared is only the beginning of their tale. We hope that this telling invites readers into the dreamworld with us. Not to think about how we can solve the metacrisis, but to dream with it...for it is here in the dreamworld, far beyond the reductionist territories of knowledge, where wisdom and new Stories emerge. We wish you well, dear reader, and hope to see you in the Meta-Lodge. . .

One version of the Seven Sacred Teachings tells of a gathering which included the First Beings and Creator. Creator gathered them together to thank them as they prepared to give their essence to the world to create future generations. To each, Creator gave a Teaching for the world. As they sat together, Creator reached into their Medicine Bag and pulled out a gift for each, in turn. To Loon, Creator gave Wisdom. To Bear, Creator gave Bravery or Courage. To Wolf, Creator gave Humility. To the Horned-Ones, Creator gave Respect. To the Turtle, Creator gave Truth. To the Eagle, Creator gave Love. As Creator finished handing out the gifts to the First Beings, along came Humans. They asked Creator, is there a gift for me? Creator had not planned for Human but did not want to disappoint them. Reaching back into the bottom of their Medicine Bag, they found the Dream. They handed it to Human who asked, how does it work? Creator said, with the Dream you can create anything as long as you use the other gifts given to the First Beings.

Dreaming is the human equivalent of the sand-to-pearl story. It is through the Dreamtime that we can move beyond all of life's irritations through Story. It is our gift from Creator but we must remember that in our dreams, we must ensure that we act with humility, bravery, honesty, wisdom, truth, respect, and love. Then all that we dream and build, all of our pearls, will be made beautiful as we strive toward being a Good Human. We must dare to dream big, recognizing that inner transformation supports outer transformation and vice versa. [DGM]

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