



## The Fact of Kinship: Considering the Fundamental Reality of Connectedness

Early in my childhood, my maternal grandmother—Grandma Dot, short for daughter and pronounced “daught” in my great grandfather’s big, joyful Scots-Muscogee baritone—taught me many things that shaped who I am. Like the people who raised her, she found opportunities for instruction in daily events, stories of our relations, and the natural world—especially, rocks, minerals, fossils, plants, and birds—imparting important life lessons.

Throughout my life, of the many teachings that I’ve carried with me, one stands out like a memory tucked away in my pocket. For some 50-odd years or more this particular insight has often paralleled my lived experience, repeatedly revealing more and more layers of wisdom and meaning. Usually, just when I need it most. Paraphrased, the abiding lesson is this:

*People are like geodes; you never know just how beautiful they really are or what they are made of until something breaks them open.*

More than once in my life, I have found this analogy true not only in myself, but also in others. To be honest, more often than not, the breaking-open experiences I have had were uncomfortable at best. Many times, the moments that laid me bare before myself were painful—and often, those periods taught me the most about myself, my experiences, their lingering effects, and the world I inhabit.

To my mind, not only people, but communities, whole societies, even counties, and eras too, are like geodes: we never really know what went into creating them, their formation, what they are made of, and what beauty or ugliness lies at their core until something cracks them open on the anvil of change. These days, it feels to me as if the whole world—even at times, my own heart—has been broken open. Often, daily. And so, I keep turning Grandma’s teaching over and over, searching it anew for insights, practical lessons, and honestly, for a measure of hope.

There is, I think, a lot to learn from geodes.

Geodes are formed by the gradual seepage (precipitation) of mineral rich groundwater into hollow cavities in rock formations. After the water has evaporated, these deposits remain and crystalize along the walls of the cavities. In some cases, the water too remains trapped in the pocket. I have one like this in my personal, ever growing, collection.

Although no two geodes are the same, they are all formed through the same processes of geological precipitation into rock cavities hollowed by pockets of air, gases, or obstructions in the rock formation. Geodes found in the same area contain the same elemental materials, even as the particular presentation of their matter varies from rounded rock to rock.

On a more heady theoretical level, like everything else in our known world, geodes are made from differentiated arrangements of the very same stardust that forms everything else. Including us. In a sense—like deer, hawks, turtles, even trees, all manner of animate and inanimate beings, and one another—geodes, too, are our earthly relations.

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2025 - LIAM HOOPER, MDIV

Like these outwardly unremarkable rocks, we too are formed by the continual comingling of raw materials we inherit, our particular bio-psycho-spiritual embodiments and dispositions, and all our experiences, including the precipitating elements that seep into us from our surroundings—tangible and intangible alike. Analogically, there are ways in which ideas, information, events, narratives, persuasions, and other influences seep into us, becoming mineralized deposits, and likewise, seep into human communities and cultures, affecting and shaping the societies we build.

What I mean to say—to kindle a collective remembering—is that *the kinship of everything to everything is a reality*, not a romanticized, sentimental idea. Or, so I was raised to believe. And, when I make myself open to the possibility, my experience teaches me this is so. More empirically, over and over again I discover it is true that we exist, by nature, within webs of kinship by studying findings from generations of earth science, teaching us what our ancestors knew and imparted to us in stories, songs, poetry, myths, and legends: *everything is connected*. And we, in turn, are connected to everything.

The earth and all its elements, creatures, natural phenomena, and other beings are our relations. And we are theirs—and more importantly, one another's. Psychologist, researcher, and author Darcia Narvaez has developed a robust theory of kinship, including practices that nurture a sense of self and connectedness through socio-relational enculturation practices she calls "nestedness."

For Narvaez, the fact of kinship, of relatedness, is both the foundation of all things and the only true antidote to social divisiveness, conflicts, and harm. In a book she co-authored with Four Arrows (Donald Trent Jacobs), she observes that "communal grounding" (nestedness within community) provides individual persons with "freedom to grow in body, mind, and spirit" in ways that promote creation of thriving communities. She goes on to say:

"With nestedness throughout life, they develop and maintain the self-control and flexible responsive cooperation that are fundamental for a democratic society" ("Noninterference," *Restoring the Kinship Worldview*, p 245).

Philosophically and practically, Narvaez is interested in discovering, and rediscovering, life-ways that teach us how to live well together for our own sakes and for the sake of the planet. For Narvaez—as well as for other Indigenous peoples and other keepers of earth-based lifeways—all that exists in kinship with all that is, was, and ever will be. Everything exists in relationship with everything.

Like Narvaez and others, Anishinaabe and Ukrainian writer and activist Patty Krawec also teaches the fundamental reality of human kinship with one another, the whole of nature, and the cosmos. In her book, *Becoming Kin: An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future*, Krawec notes it is clear that we are all related. The question she posits and seeks to answer is "what does it mean to be *good* relatives—to not only recognize our kinship but to be *good* kin?"

This question seems to matter concretely, rather than abstractly, as divisions deepen here in our own country and our human kin are divided against one another all over the world. There is an ever-widening fissure in our collective remembering that we are all kindred. Gaping cracks cleave our knowledge, separating us from the reality that *we are not above nature*, superior to the earth that sustains us or to all its creatures, including one another; at the material, elemental level, we are in fact deeply bound to the natural world. And to each other.

And yet in significant, painful, and too often, in deeply harmful ways, we are disconnected from each other and from our environment. And our planet suffers from unfettered drives to domination and

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exploitation, destructiveness, and short-sighted neglect. It could be said that entire groups of human beings also suffer the same afflictions and fates. *What we do to the natural world we belong to, we do to one another.* Metaphorically, the whole world is a geode. And self-serving opportunism, egocentric elitism, greed, domination, and subordination are heavy hammers.

It is also true that we humans have been divided before, time and time again. Occasionally, we have even learned from destructive schisms of the past. More often it seems, repetition of divisive patterns guides the way. Presently, here and around the world, a great forgetting has come.

Even as I ponder Grandma's teaching, almost daily of late, I am reminded of a pertinent lesson in the ancient story of Cain and Abel—a story brimming with insights into the human capacity for division and harm. Much is revealed, I think, by understanding the story on multiple levels, reading it as spiritually focused literature rather than literal history, and encountering it as an allegory (one level in Jewish practices of reading biblical texts through layers of interpretation).

In addition to serving as a reminder that all humans are kindred, born into a diversely expressed common species, allegorically the tale also reminds us that, by nature, we are equally capable of good and not-so-good (or bad) inclinations. Moreover, failing to recognize harmful impulses, understand, temper, and learn from them leads kindred to rise up against kindred. Embedded in the story is the question of what makes us, as humans, prone to rising up against our kin—collectively, group against group, nation against nation, as well as individual against individual.

As a friend in Torah study observed, "reading Cain and Abel calls me to search myself, to understand why *I do* the wrong that *I do* against my brother; my sister; my kin. *What inclines me to do* the wrong I do when I do wrong, when I know better?"

Psychologist and neuroscientist, Keith Payne has tackled this underlying question in his book, *Good Reasonable People: The Psychology Behind America's Dangerous Divide*. That is, Payne is interested in why we are so divided on things that matter to us. In search of an answer, Payne surveys, interprets, and distills insights from decades of psychological research and neuroscience, including studies he and his colleagues have done. The causes of our deep divides, he notes, originate not so much in *what* we think or believe and *what* we value, but rather in *how* we think and *how* we attach value and meaning to our beliefs.

Even amid all the complexities and nuances, the cleft that divides us and disconnects us from our inherent kinship can be understood, Payne posits, as the result of two primary phenomena: the *psychological immune system* and its functional interaction with what Payne has dubbed the *psychological bottom line*. The psychological immune system is the set of thought processes our minds employ—usually, subconsciously—to protect our well-being by defending us from psychological threats. (Some of us old-school students of psychology are used to thinking of this as the psychological system of defense mechanisms.) Payne notes:

"Like the biological immune system, the psychological immune system is constantly humming away in the background whether we notice it or not, ready to pounce on the first sign of a threat" (p 29).

Payne uses the phrase *psychological bottom line* to cover two essential psychological principles that occur somewhat naturally in the mental processes of nearly every human being. These essential

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psychological principles consist of “nonnegotiable assumptions that we make about ourselves and the world” (p 41). There are two core beliefs that, together, constitute the psychological bottom line:

- 1 - *I am a good and reasonable person.*
- 2 - *My groups are comprised of good and reasonable people.*

When the psychological immune system is activated to protect us from threats to our sense of self and our stabilizing assumptions about the world and the groups we recognize as “our people,” it does so “by finding a way to make everything else add up to the psychological bottom line” (p 41).

People who are adept at influencing, if not manipulating, the psychological bottom line actually use language consistent with the core assumptions in the bottom line. For example, Hitler convinced hordes of German people that they were not merely good, but a great people belonging to a lineage of greatness, who had been woefully wronged and, thus, were justified in rising up against their neighbors. As well, the divisive rhetoric here at home is rife with the phrases “good people” and “very good people.” Of course, the unspoken implication is that any people who are not like the “good” people are, in fact, *bad* people. Although it may seem obvious, it is nonetheless true that the good-bad binary is an effective method for creating social divisions.

This good-bad binary, coupled with the need to belong, to believe we are good people and that we belong to groups of good people, is precisely the inclination that simultaneously binds us to some people and alienates us from others. Lulled by our psychological immune systems into false and fracturing beliefs—often stoked by a host of external influences—we humans are all *equally capable* of forgetting we are, every single one of us, stardust in human form. *We are all kindred*. Forgetting who we are makes it possible to convince ourselves that we do not exist in webs upon webs of relational interconnection and interdependence and that some people are most surely not our kin, not “*our people*”—or worse, that they are even our enemies.

In such a state, we are all equally capable of remembering how to hate. Strengthened by our in-groups—*our people*—any of us can fail to intervene with ourselves and temper our alienating impulses. Like Cain, we can become people compelled to rise up against our brothers, sisters, and other siblings. Doubtless, developing solutions to this sad cleaving of our connected roots requires willingness, imagination, and courage. Thankfully, there are many among us who are thinking, dreaming, and vision-casting ways to mend our tattered relational tapestry just as actively and earnestly as others who are exploiting our divisions for their own ends.

Alongside Narvaez and Krawec, I not only believe that we are all part of the same human family, I believe we can—if we choose to—figure out together how to heal ourselves and our society. We are all relatives. Relatives don’t always get along, it is true. But it is also true that we are capable of remembering and relearning how to sit together. We can remember how to love one another.

Krawec proposes that unforgetting is possible and offers practices for remembering we are kindred. Narvaez teaches about *nestedness* and offers practices for rearing and grounding our children in nestedness, in community. Payne offers us insights into why we humans fall so easily into deep, destructive divides, offering pathways to healing by understanding how we become divided.

I think, maybe, there is hope of repair in such searching for wisdom-ways and visions. And, like my grandmother, I am inclined to think that healing, reimagining, and creating a better future will require some breaking open. Perhaps, like us humans, a circle of curious, courageous relational conversation is also like a living geode.

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It seems possible that the circle we form can be a commune of gathered kindred, joined together, willing to crack ourselves and our searching hearts open—laying bare all the brokenness, beauty, bravery, dreams, visions, and wisdoms we all carry. The collective crystals of communal care, courage, and imagination, shimmering and shining in the light of our willingness to risk, discover, and grow together.

If so, it seems to me the thing to do is to keep putting chairs into a circle, inviting others to join, and sitting down together, willing to open up and begin. And so, I am now going to go out and pull up some chairs. I will be here, in the circle, should you choose to join me.

### References & Resources

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