

"Nora Samaran writes with a unique combination of compassion and intelligence on the most pressing topic of our time. I'm convinced that if every person read her words, the world would be a much better place."

—**Liz Plank**, journalist and executive producer of *Divided States of Women*

"*Turn This World Inside Out* is doing something unique and visionary."

—**Wayde Compton**, author of *After Canaan* and *The Outer Harbour*

"*Turn This World Inside Out* is a must-have for educators, parents, counselors, and all members of the community who are working to transform structural harm."

—**Agustina Vidal** and **Maryse Mitchell-Brody**, *The Icarus Project*

As Nora Samaran writes, "violence is nurturance turned backward." In its place, she proposes "nurturance culture" as the opposite of rape culture, suggesting that models of care and accountability—different from "callouts" rooted in the politics of guilt—can move toward dismantling systems of dominance and oppression.

When communities identify and interrupt systemic violence, prioritize the needs of those harmed, and hold a circle of belonging that humanizes everyone, they create a foundation that can begin to resist and repair the harms inflicted by patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. Emerging from insights in gender studies, race theory, and psychology, and influenced by contemporary social movements, *Turn This World Inside Out* engages today's crucial questions, helping move us beyond seemingly intractable barriers to collective change.

Includes the essays "The Opposite of Rape Culture Is Nurturance Culture," "On Gaslighting," and "Own, Apologize, Repair," as well as conversations with Serena Bhandar, Ruby Smith Díaz, Aravinda Ananda, Natalie Knight, and Alix Johnson.

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Turn This World Inside Out

The Emergence of
Nurturance
Culture

NORA SAMARAN

TURN THIS WORLD INSIDE OUT

Thank you to the wide, only partly seen web of people whose economic contributions and moral and practical support have buoyed the project. To everyone who has helped, too many to count by name, you have my gratitude.

Thank you to the readers, without whom this book would not have been possible.

May we call forth one another; may we all nurture one another's best gifts.

All errors and oversights remain the responsibility of the author.

Introduction: Nurturance Culture Means Holding the Circle

At Windsor House, a free school in Coast Salish territories (also known as Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada), every child has an internal map of how harm is handled by their school community.¹ In this school, the only public democratic school in North America and one of the longest-running brick-and-mortar free schools in the world, any student who experiences harm can "write up" the other person who they feel harmed them. When someone is written up, they are required to go to what the school calls justice council, which is a circle of their peers who then help repair the harm.

Going to that circle is not an option. It is a requirement for anyone who wants to be a member of the school community. This is especially notable because it is one of the only concrete requirements at a public, accessible, democratic school that has almost no coercion or compelling of any other kind. In the free school system,

¹ Free schooling, or unschooling, is a way of organizing learning that is noncoercive. In free schools there are typically no set curricula; the students decide what they want to learn, and the adults act as resources.

deeply invested in beliefs about autonomy and keeping kids whole, if a student wants to skateboard or paint all day, that is what they do.

In a community so steeped in an ethic of consent and self-determination, with so few kinds of ordinary, everyday compelling in place compared to regular schools, I was curious how this requirement worked. What is the relationship, I wondered, between the commitment to individual autonomy that is such a dearly held value of the school, and this justice council that can compel students to repair harm?

At the beach one day, while watching kids pull up seaweed and pile it into stacks, I asked my close friend's twelve-year-old son, who goes to the school, "What happens if a kid who gets written up doesn't come to council?" He barely skipped a beat before he answered, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, "If someone doesn't go to council, council goes to them."

A day later, I asked my friend's nine-year-old daughter, who had not heard my earlier conversation, that same question. She too is a student in the school.

I got the same answer. She barely paused in her playing, glanced up, and said, "council goes to them," as though this was the obvious answer to a silly adult question, and then immediately resumed her game.

What their answers say to me is that these kids experience justice council as self-evident and ordinary: when you hurt someone, you get called to council and you have to go. You are expected to make it right. This concrete, practical structure, and the kids' regular use of it for handling harms large and small has, it seems to me, hardwired an ethical framework for a functioning, everyday

model of interdependence into their assumptions about how the world "just is," how reality works, and how human beings "obviously" get along.

Attachment theory teaches us that true autonomy relies on feeling securely connected to other human beings.² Current developments in the field of attachment science have recognized that bonded pairs, such as couples, or parents and children, build bonds that physiologically shape their nervous systems. Contrary to many Western conceptions of the self as disconnected and atomized, operating in isolation using nothing but grit and determination, it turns out that close-knit connections to others are in large part how we grow into our own, fully expressed, autonomous selves.

It seemed to me, thinking in attachment terms, that there is a relationship between this requirement to heal relationships and the children's sense of freedom to be themselves.

The students who go through justice council are not necessarily best friends and may not be freely choosing one another. They exist in relationship nonetheless. They decide how close they want to be, but an underlying sense of a shared humanity exists in a bigger container that can hold everyone in the school community, that can expect certain basic relational capacities from them—don't bully, don't gossip, don't exclude peers when in group activities, don't harm or violate one another—regardless of

2 Thomas Lewis, Fari Amiri, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001); John Gottman, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000); Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008); Amir Levine, *Attached* (New York: Tarcher Perigee, 2012); Stan Tatkin, *Wired for Love* (Oakland: New Harbinger, 2012).

whether they are close, regardless of whether they even like one another.

At justice council, students are not punished. Punishment can disconnect people from empathy and lead them to focus on whether they got caught, or on shame, rather than on the feelings and needs of the people they have harmed. Instead, a circle of their peers listens as each of the people involved gets a turn to share what happened. Then the circle expects whoever caused the harm to mend it in a way that helps meet the needs of the person who was harmed. This, again, is not optional, but required.³

As my friend's daughter patiently explained to me, her feet planted as she stopped swinging for a moment to help me understand, "The goal of justice council is to stop that same harm from happening again, and help them both feel good and stronger together again, so they're not hurt by what happened."

Kids at Windsor House use justice council often and easily, because they know they will be cared about, protected, and heard. They also know that the kid they write up will be helped and taught, not punished. These students reweave the fabric of their community as a routine

³ Notably, consequences and boundaries whose purpose is to create safety for those harmed are not inherently punishments. A student at Windsor House who has caused harm may, for example, lose access to a given space in the school where those they have harmed spend time, until they can prove that they can be in that area without harming others. On a related note, as Mariame Kaba observes, "a person in a position of power losing their position of power is not a punishment, it is a consequence of bad action / behavior. If I were to ensure that you could never again make a living to support yourself and your family, that would be punishment. If I were to take your liberty, that's punishment. If I were to kill you, that's punishment. A powerful person losing [their] powerful position because [they] abused that power is not a punishment." ("Education for Abolition." Allied Media Conference, Detroit, June 17, 2018).

part of daily life in this school, just as they are expected to take good care of their books or coats.

Imagine how this container for handling harm transforms the culture in which it is rooted. Imagine the kind of safety to be oneself that this container can create. Taking this further, and thinking about it in relation to our current political moment: imagine how this unbreakable feeling of belonging can provide those who experience it the security to stand up against harm when they are bystanders to it, or targets of it, knowing that their community has a way to grapple with it well. Imagine how it would feel to have no fear of social repercussions when standing up to violence, because a structure is in place that means their fundamental humanity and worth will be legitimated and taken seriously.

What would it be like to live in a culture where we all could be socially embraced in this way, where we could speak up about harm, could say no to it, without fear, because we know without question that no one in our community will dehumanize another? What would it be like to know without a doubt that the culture in which we live will *require* the one who causes harm to empathize with those harmed, grow, and become able to do appropriate repair, while humanizing that person too? What would it feel like to trust the fabric of our human community so fully that we could take the risk to belong in this way, belong as our whole selves?

While the attachment literature typically discusses secure emotional connection in the context of families or close intimates, this book proposes that the insights of attachment theory may help us recognize larger kinds of belonging—social, ecological—as well. It has become

increasingly clear to me that the idea that we are “wired to connect”⁴ is helpful for understanding not only our families but also our broader human communities, as well as the deeply interwoven ecological systems within which we exist and without which we do not, in Judith Butler’s terms, “persist in existing.”⁵

If the insights of attachment theory are correct, it is quite likely that we do not have a choice in this matter. I see that as a good thing. We do not have a choice about whether or not we need air to live, and yet we trust that our next breath will continue to enter and exit our lungs while also not viewing this kind of trust as coercive; it is simply a condition of our existing. It is a foundation upon which our every independent action depends. Our physiological belonging in human and nonhuman communities, it seems to me, is something like breathing in the invisible substance that sustains our life. When we can recognize that fact, we can turn our attention to the quality of the webs that contain and sustain us, and grow

4 Stan Tatkin, *Wired for Love*.

5 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004). Or, as Jeannette Armstrong writes: “The physical self, which is body as one part of the whole self, is dependent entirely on everything that sustains it and keeps it alive in an interface with the parts of us that continue outside the skin. We survive within our skin inside the rest of our vast selves. We survive by how our body interacts with everything around us continuously. Only in part are we aware in our intellect, through our senses, of that interaction. Okanagan teach that the body is the Earth itself. They say that our flesh, blood, and bones are Earthbody; in all cycles in which the Earth moves, so does our body. We are everything that surrounds us, including the vast forces we only glimpse. If we cannot maintain and stay in balance with the outer self, then we cannot continue as an individual life-form, and we dissipate back into the larger self.” (“Keepers of the Earth,” *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, eds. Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, Allen D. Kanner [New York: Sierra Club Books, 1995], 316–324.)

their health and well-being, which is the same thing as growing our own.

In “just knowing” that when someone does not go to justice council, justice council “goes to them,” my young friends are learning that handling harm in a good way—one that recognizes the existence of the connected circle of human beings, and acts with that consciousness in mind—is essential for these kids to feel able to be themselves, to speak up about harm that occurs on their watch, to stick up for one another: in short, to become ethical, empathetic, trustworthy people.

This kind of secure connection, I believe, is related to, yet a distinct experience from, the more chosen forms of intimacy such as friendships, partnerships, or families. My friend’s daughter is learning—by doing—how to protect and strengthen the relational responsibilities that exist even with those she has not chosen as close friends. The school is creating a social fabric that fills in the space between “the close intimate whom I have chosen and care about” and “the complete stranger whom I have no obligations toward whatsoever.” The reason that this structure works is because it recognizes that each person is already inherently part of a larger unbreakable web of connectedness, and gives every member of the community the knowledge of how to mend that web on which human independence so fundamentally depends, and the obligation to engage in that mending when called to do so.

In a healthy human ecosystem, most interactions between human beings exist in this in-between area, in which we have relational responsibilities to one another regardless of our emotional closeness. In a functioning

human community, we do not get to choose the baker, the butcher, the crossing guard, the person who sews the clothing or handles the sewage system that carries wastes away and the plumbing that carries clean water into our bodies, or the person who grows the food that keeps us alive, and they do not choose us. Yet in a healthy human ecosystem, we would know one another and understand how to live our relational responsibilities to one another. When we begin with this awareness of our already-existing interconnectedness, we can look at harm in an entirely inverted way, in which we are connected from the start. Harm, whether in the form of violation or neglect, is then understood as a harm to the integrity of those bonds, or as a failure to meet relational responsibilities, not only as a violation of a presumed disconnectedness.

Our bodies are not distinct and separate from the systems that sustain us but instead are dynamic, with air, nutrients, water, pathogens, sunlight, sweat, and wastes all continually moving into and out of us. Our nervous systems are not closed systems but rather are interwoven with those of other beings, as certainly as valence electrons connect atoms. This continual interwoven quality is physiologically necessary for all life. Our boundaries, understood in this way, are utterly necessary, but they are more like cellular demarcations in a larger liquid of life than they are like walls between cut-off individuals who can act without profound effects on one another. To bring this back to the example of the free school, the autonomy that these kids experience depends, it seems to me, on the container of the justice council, which, I would suggest, sits at the heart of any such community. Indeed, one might even argue that a community without such a

structure is not a community at all, but a series of fractures just waiting to happen.

Under the stepped-up version of neoliberal capitalism that has been in ascendancy these last three or four decades, and a settler-colonial culture that has sought to dehumanize Indigenous Peoples in order to take control of land, these lived relationships are often erased from cultural awareness. Human dependency is converted into a market exchange that keeps us circulating the things we need to live while disguising or denying relational responsibility, turning us into "lone individuals" supposedly without need for others beyond a partner or atomized family.

At the same time, complex matrices of violence and oppression structure the cultures into which we are born, dehumanizing many people in the process. Social movements that challenge and refuse these forms of systemic violence also develop critical analyses, ways of understanding the systems of violence that shape the dominant culture.⁶ The expertise that has developed processes like the justice circle is most often generated by Black, Indigenous, and other POC feminist organizing and theorizing.⁷

6 Thank you to Harjap Grewal and Harsha Wallia for this insight.

7 For more on transformative justice and prison abolition, see: Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Lianne Betasamosake Simpson, "Indict the System: Indigenous and Black Resistance," *Briarpatch*, November 24, 2014, <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/blog/view/indict-the-system>; Charlene Carruthers, *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2017); Mariame Kaba, "Transformative Justice," *TransformHarm.org*, March 1, 2019, <https://transformharm.org/transformative-justice/>; Mia Mingus, "Transformative Justice: A Brief Description," Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, January 9, 2019, <https://leavingevidence>

To disrupt systemic harm requires growing the capacity to listen to analysis that allows us to comprehend such seemingly disparate structures as police violence against Black people, anti-immigration laws and border regimes, a colonial system that seeks to dispossess Indigenous Peoples, gendered violence, or ecological destruction. These systems of harm are all deeply interwoven, and we can learn from and listen to directly affected people who know the most about these systems of harm, who are producing theory and analysis as they organize.

Many of us feel these systems in operation around us, yet until these and other systemic harms are history, so to speak, we too are caught in their web. So we have to work together to see beyond our current social conditioning and ways of treating each other. This change is not about being "good people" in an individualistic sense. It is about strengthening our understanding of our position within these massive systems of power and oppression that structure social existence, so that we can better recognize systemic harm occurring, even though it is typically masked. We need to work to become better able to recognize it and then become able to say no to it.

For that to be possible, we have to push ourselves, collectively, to expand capacities for care and empathy, to learn how to listen to human beings who walk in the world with the physiological and neurological impacts of hidden forms of systemic violence. This will and must

.wordpress.com/2019/01/09/transformativ-justice-a-brief-description/; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *Color of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Kai Cheng Thom, "#NotYet: Why I Won't Publicly Name Abusers" *GUTS Magazine*, November 30, 2017, <http://gutsmagazine.ca/notyet/>. See also the work of Sandra Kim, Rachel Zellars, Project NIA, Philly Stands Up, and Critical Resistance.

happen in an uneven and differentiated way. As adrienne maree brown proposes, "Where we are born into privilege, we are charged with dismantling any myth of supremacy. Where we were born into struggle, we are charged with claiming our dignity, joy, and liberation."⁸

We need to think with complexity and nuance, and grow our ability to come to one another with open hearts and spirits about the ways in which we benefit and are complicit in harms not of our own choosing. If we become collectively willing to grow until we recognize even the most hidden kinds of ongoing systemic harms, and become able to support one another even as we challenge each other and struggle together, we will have found one part of the path to a healthy community that can handle these kinds of harms, both internal and external, without continual fracturing.

The opportunity to write *Turn This World Inside Out* arose out of an essay that I composed at a time when I wanted to make sense of several bewildering forms of harm that I had observed in my life and in the lives of people around me. To my surprise, this essay, "The Opposite of Rape Culture Is Nurturance Culture," went viral and then grew into the book you hold in your hands. However, I didn't write that essay because I felt certain, or wanted to explain, but rather for the opposite reason: I wrote because I was confused and trying to figure some things out. As it turned out, many other people were trying to figure out some of the same things. I would like to offer this book in that same spirit.

⁸ adrienne maree brown, "Report: Recommendations for us right now from a future," *Sublevel*, n.d., <http://sublevelmag.com/report-recommendations-for-us-right-now-from-a-future>.

We will each come to nurturance in our own ways. As brown proposes, where we walk in the world with unearned privileges it is our role to unlearn and “dismantle myths” of entitlement, to reconnect with empathic capacities dulled by acculturation into dominance, and to become accountable. Several of the chapters in this book grapple with challenging acculturation into domination in masculinity and whiteness, as these are inflected within capitalism. Where we walk in the world as targets of systemic violence, we are tasked, as brown writes, “with claiming ... dignity, joy, and liberation”; three of the chapters in this book speak of modes of this kind of claiming.

In keeping with the impulse to do this thinking in a relational way, with others who speak from their own social positions, especially when it comes to lived experience that I do not share, this book interweaves essays on nurturance culture with dialogue pieces that delve into some of the ways these questions are taking shape for people around me. The initial dialogue, with “John Snow,” is a creative composite piece formed out of conversations with several masculine-identified people who have shared personal inner transformation they have moved through as they read “The Opposite of Rape Culture Is Nurturance Culture.” While they chose to remain anonymous, my hope is that for masculine-identified readers who are coming to the idea of nurturance culture for the first time, being able to read how others engage with it may help build the sense that they are not alone in striving to reclaim lost parts of the self, deepening self-awareness, and becoming better able to take care of and nurture others. This piece is paired with a dialogue, with Serena Bhandar, that pushes the analysis further,

articulating the ways in which any understanding of masculinity, or of gender, will be most effective when it positions transness at the center of the analysis.

The next dialogue piece, with Ruby Smith Díaz, delves into what thriving physically and culturally can mean for Black people in a white supremacist culture. This is followed by a dialogue with Aravinda Ananda that examines how cultivating wholeness and shame resilience can begin to help undo white people’s conditioning into white supremacy, while grappling with some of the risks and drawbacks to that practice. In this way, the idea that “violence is nurturance turned backward” can perhaps act as a challenge both within masculinity and whiteness. These are followed by a discussion with Natalie Knight about how colonization acts through gendered violence to dispossess Indigenous people of connection to land and culture, and explores ways of reconnecting across these ruptures. The book closes with a discussion with Alix Johnson about transformative justice skills, thinking through the constructive tensions that arise in putting a culture of meaningful care and accountability into practice in our daily lives. These dialogues hold together, expand upon, and connect three nurturance culture essays: “The Opposite of Rape Culture Is Nurturance Culture,” “On Gaslighting,” and “Own, Apologize, Repair: Coming Back to Integrity,” which all appear in full here.

While it is tempting when writing a book to present oneself as an expert who has the answers, what is more genuine and I hope will resonate more with readers is sharing the ways in which, like many of us, I am attempting to make sense of an era that anyone with a heart can recognize as marked by immense upheaval, including

fascistic shifts and tremendous cultural transformation. Nurturance culture is not a five-step plan that can tell us how to solve the world's problems. The emergence of nurturance culture is just that: an emergence.⁹ This book is intended as a living, breathing engagement with readers and community, asking questions together, and struggling together as we find one small answer at a time. I invite readers to think of nurturance culture as a prompt, one that can help us ask questions of one another, challenge systemic harm, and strengthen the bonds needed so that we can resist together.

So rather than offering a big answer, I want to share some big questions that organize and bind this book.

What would it look like to belong in the world as our whole selves? What kinds of culture, knowledge, and community structures would we be able to create if we could nurture one another without our armor on, if we could draw out and develop the gifts in one another, if we could care for one another in concrete, meaningful ways, and could protect one another from systemic harms and forms of structural violence, even as we're struggling to dismantle them? What do we already have waiting within us that can guide us in that direction?

The free school, Windsor House, is but one of many places in which these skills and values are already in practice in everyday life. Like many beads of water that expand until they meet, what would it take to make this culture of repair, exemplified by a handful of children in one small corner of the world, into the obvious response to harm in all of our everyday lives?

⁹ adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico: AK Press, 2017).

Hopefully we too will eventually "just know," intuitively, that any rip or fray in the social fabric is a threat to the well-being of the whole and so will turn toward the hurt, toward threadbare connections between human beings, and mend them, just as we would mend a tear in a perfectly useful coat before the whole coat needs to be discarded.

Let's turn this world inside out.