Passing the Hemlocks: The Power of Sharing Truths

By Jacquie Pruder St. Antoine

The whole drive to Pittsburgh it rained. The autumn reds and oranges cascading down the rolling Pennsylvania hills, watercolors behind the water-covered glass. It was my first visit to the state and that Monet-esque image will remain with me years from now, I am sure. Not only was this my first visit to Pennsylvania, but also my first time attending the American Educational Studies Association (AESA) conference, where I was scheduled to present a paper bridging disability and anthropocentrism. My work, specifically, focuses on Madness, or what some might refer to as psychiatric disability. Though I'm only in my second year of doctoral coursework, this work, I hope, will ultimately be a part of my dissertation and is something I hold dear. This is not just because, as with most academics, my work is integral to my personhood, but because I identify as a Mad person. Mad, not at you, but as a reclaiming of my psychiatric labels.

Speaking about my Madness – the way I see it functioning to Other me and the way it has been used as a historical weapon against other Mad folks, my people – is something I have done at other venues. I have stood in front of rooms and described my own experiences. I have talked about the times I have questioned reality and counted (and counted, and counted…). I have described the deep despair I feel when facing the ecological crises that bombard our world, the disregard I have felt when I speak about these violences. The exclusions of those Mad and disabled people who have come before me and existed alongside me, the forced treatments and sterilizations in institutions and hospitals, the segregation from communities and schools, - these are all stories I have told, histories I have described, pieces of the picture I have displayed. The entanglements of these histories, my own life, and the greater-than-human world are constant conversations in my work. However, I have been very fortunate because, prior to my journey to AESA, I have always known, going into my presentations, that there was at least one other Mad person in the audience. Needless to say, when speaking about something so

raw and personal, it eases my (copious) anxieties to know there is one of my people in the room.

In travelling to AESA, I was not sure how I would be received. The conference itself was not disability focused. For me, being around disabled folks feels like home. In preparing, I felt a deep discomfort, wondering if what I would say would be well-received or contested. Several times during my journey south, I looked longing at the hills and considered disappearing into the forest to hike among the Sugar Maples, the Northern Red Oaks, and the Eastern Hemlocks. If being with other Mad and disabled people is my home, being among the trees and animals of the wood is my church. In doing this work, however, speaking truths in new spaces and among new bodyminds is essential. So I did not disappear into the hills. Instead I spoke, my art displayed alongside me, of my life and the stories of those who came before me. I spoke for the ecological community members who, too often, are disregarded and seen as inhuman and unworthy of regard. My hands shook.

What I was met with was not Othering, as I had worried.

I was met with, "Me too."

To be heard is humbling. To have someone else share their truth brings me to tears. Following my presentations at other venues I have been privileged to hear stories and truths that often lead me to wonder what I have done to experience such openness from strangers. In this venue, I was met with equal acceptance and more shared truths. Baring my pain has led others to say, "Me too." Speaking these painful truths certainly is not easy. It is uncomfortable and harrowing, but it feels important. It is important because I think maybe we could all say, "Me too." and it is coming to this that we can begin to address the hierarchized thinking that prevents our communities from being healthy, just, inclusive, and democratic.