

**Alive and Whole in a World of Hurt**  
*the below and beyond of well-being*

~ ~ ~

*dreams and weeds  
when cut and trimmed  
just drop seeds  
that rise again*

~ ~ ~

Over the past years working in longer-term relationships through trust-based approaches to philanthropy, a key learning agenda for the Peacebuilding team at Humanity United emerged around what we might call a pressing “harm” dilemma:

*In the face daily crises, how do leaders and communities persevere and stay vibrant, agile, and creative across decades and lifetimes?*

At essence, we wanted to better understand, uplift, and invest in what frontline partners require to stay innovatively engaged and healthy while they forge platforms with long-term clarity of purpose.

We participated in conferences and research initiatives. We engaged in and supported what commonly is referred to as *well-being* approaches. In fact, within our peacebuilding portfolio we created a learning and grantmaking pod dedicated to healing and well-being. Yet we continuously felt that well-being did not adequately represent the nature of the challenge, our duty of care, nor the exemplar lived experience of long-term proximate peacebuilders.

Listening more carefully into strategies of response to the harm dilemma, three distinct but not incompatible dimensions consistently emerged. Each attended to a significant aspect of the challenge to stay *alive and whole* in a world of hurt.

The daily grind unfolding over years, decades, and lifetimes highlights the need for personal renewal, restoration, and care to balance and persevere through the long journey. This voice emphasizes a focus on *resilience*, the ability to bounce back and stay agile and clear on ultimate purpose.

The constant crisis-flow of renewed forms of harm in everyday life layered on systemic generational suffering calls for rising up, speaking out, and crafting creative transformative response. This voice focuses on the need for *resistance* and a systems change orientation – the need to constantly push back against and face down the patterns of harm.

Most proximate peacebuilders and frontline social change activists understand and imagine their health as a collective journey, a community-based response to social healing. These voices appeal to felt mutual presence, the embodiment of alonsideness and having each other's backs. In a word, *accompaniment* as practice and strategy.

Bounce back. Push back. Have our backs.

These dynamics flow below and beyond a more superficial understanding of well-being, which in the popular imagination tends to pull more narrowly toward practices of personal renewal. While these voices initially appeared to be in tension, we found that when held together, the whole was much greater than the sum of its parts. Together, they illuminate scale at depth, balanced and accountable relational dignity, and the integration needed to continuously engage harmful systems that produce permanently emergent crises.

### *Dynamics of Permanent Generativeness*

As a way to frame the integrative approach, we turn to a teacher that hides in plain sight, often growing in the most unlikely of places — the crack of a sidewalk, a crumbling edifice, a neglected patch of land: the humble dandelion.



How does the dandelion remain healthy and perniciously prolific?

The dandelion stays true to its purpose through three *dynamics of permanent generativeness*. It has deep and extensive roots. It casts its seeds wide. And, it has the capacity to locate small bits of protective soil in which to root and grow.

If applied to positive social change, each of these dynamics correspond to an integral practice that fosters perseverance, growth, and health.

### **Dynamic 1: Bounce Back**

Drawn from the study of nature, the term resilience originally described how a plant bounces back to life and purpose after being trampled. To follow the poet Walt Whitman, leaves of grass have marvels upon marvels within their living example.

For our dandelion, a source of resilience is found in its deep and wide roots. Dandelion roots reach far into the soil, providing access to sources of water that enable survival despite environmental stressors, such as drought. Alongside this depth, the roots spread up to twice as wide to increase access to nutrients that support the dandelion to grow strong and robust. These deep and wide roots make dandelions difficult to uproot and facilitate their regrowth when cut.

Exemplar social change activists and leaders who have navigated lifetimes of engagement embody these capacities to root deeply in their context while they adapt and shift to evolving challenges. Far beyond survivors they are artists. They recognize systemic harms in both the old patterns and their new guises. They navigate fluidly between their inner world and the outer challenges, conscious of when these patterns of harm penetrate the spirit and psyche and when carried wounds replicate rather than transform these very patterns. They feel the harm in both its systemic and relational expressions. They can see it in themselves and others, but they refuse its demand to surrender purpose.

From these examples, we can understand resilience less as a thing and more as a verb. The origin in Latin (*resilire*) literally meant to leap back, to unleash responsive energy.

*Resile (v): the ceaseless deepening of the taproots that seek the source, the wells that renew the spirit such that clarity of purpose shines on; the unleashing of the human spirit to bounce back to purpose.*

### **Dynamic 2: Push Back**

We often associate resistance in activism and social movements as the impulse and energy needed to rise up, speak out, and face down repeated harms.

Communities that must repeatedly muster the strength for continuous response to urgent survival needs are too often met

from the outside with only admiration for their resilience. Many communities resist such praise and call out facile notions of self-care that are more akin to apathy. What is needed is not acclaim, but enduring change.

The dandelion teaches the art of resistance as continuous creativity to send off seeds and spawn new growth that help replicate purpose and new possibilities. Caught on the currents of a passing breeze, dandelions release their feathered seeds, which can float up to a kilometer before coming to rest. The seed's capacity to fly so far is enabled by the porosity of its plumed umbrella that creates a pocket of air that buoys the seed in its flight.

In the human context, resistance is best understood as the creative act – the agency that emerges and flourishes in continuous artistry – rising from, responding to, and pushing back against affronts to dignity and repeated injustice. This creativity is never well served by privileged escapism from accountability and responsibility. Rather it embodies courage to affirm dignity, spaciousness in the imagination of new possibilities, and tenacity in the pursuit of ending harm and nurturing social healing.

*Resist (v): to push back against injustice and patterned harm; to face down dehumanization in all its forms; to continuously cast new seeds of hope and healing; to remember and embody wholeness back into collective health.*

### **Dynamic 3: Have Our Backs**

Accompaniment appears as felt presence with and for each other and for others. This aloneness creates a collective container that holds and fosters courage and persistence, what we might call personal and social stick-to-it-iveness in the face of systemic numbing and stuckness.

The dandelion finds life in the soil of accompaniment, expressed in the conditions and qualities of the ecosystem in which it seeds and grows. Dandelion seeds settle and take root in places that may appear inhospitable. Yet in the presence of even the smallest patches of moss or protective soil, seeds find the nourishment to grow. This capacity of dandelions to find life in cracks and crevices teaches us as much about the plant's tenacity as the quality of the conditions required for it to rise in its purpose.

We are guided to attend to the cracks, to come to see what may appear broken as rich with potential for life, to remember that brokenness co-exists with and is constitutive of our wholeness. We are invited to reflect and inquire into what it means to embody the qualities of the moss and soil – these small patches of hospitality

that nurture and create the conditions for new life to be expressed. In all instances, accompaniment is mutual, never a one-way street, in the sense of connection and having each other's backs.

In our human community, accompaniment has many forms. It offers leadership as learning to come alongside others in ways that encourages them to rise to their greatest potential and purpose. At times, it requires stepping forward to create the safety and opening such that people with deep wisdom who have far too often been invisibilized can bring their light and purpose forward. Accompaniment understands encouragement-as-action – the support that fosters agency and elevates the lived experience of people and communities.

*Accompany (v): to be alongside the journey together such that we encourage and nourish both personal and collective fullness.*

### ***Towards Wholeness and Integrity***

Each of these dynamics constitutes a fundamental quality and practice that enables engagement in peacebuilding and social change in ways that attend to health as wholeness for individuals, communities, and the planet. Wholeness, in turn, asks us to center the relational – the spaces across and in between – for any one of our three dynamics in isolation remains incomplete.

Resilience without resistance can too easily fall prey to escapism.

Resistance without resilience is a recipe for burnout.

Resilience and resistance without accompaniment become numbingly narrow and exclusionary.

Accompaniment without resilience and resistance falls toward externalized privileged help, often with patterns of superiority disembodied from mutuality.

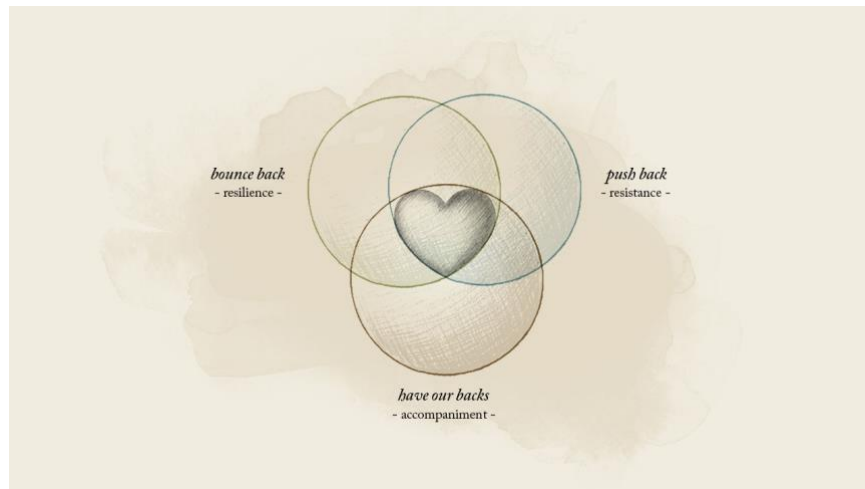
These tensions suggest that in long-term social change we must take more seriously wholeness and integrity as the pathways to persevere, proliferate, and flourish.

*Wholeness* requires a more comprehensive understanding of the significantly different – sometimes seemingly contradictory – pursuits that will be needed to continuously renew and persevere, urging us to hold them together.

*Integrity* makes a case for how these dynamics are interdependent and highly interactive. What lies between them serves not just as connective tissue but may in fact be the catalytic energy that makes enduring creativity possible. Each dynamic offers the others a fulfillment of their greater potential: integrity embodied.

### *Coming Back to Each Other*

So, what might we call this place where these three dynamics meet, converge, go their ways, and then return and interact again?



In reflection on this inquiry, we remember these words from theologian Howard Thurman: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

The heart of the matter suggests that at the source of a generative ecosystem, one that expresses wholeness as vibrant health and persistent creativity, is aliveness and coming alive together.

There is a pattern to these dynamics of permanent generativeness and to the ways in which they weave together. Bounce *back*, push *back*, have our *backs*.

They each require our coming *back* to ourselves and to one another. And that we do so with what Roshi Joan Halifax called developing the practice of forging strong backs and soft fronts.

A strong back cultivates a strength of courage and conviction. A soft front refuses dehumanization and risks remaining open, vulnerable, and accountable in our relationships. Together these qualities enhance deep care, connection, and transformation.

The below and beyond of well-being requires integrity of presence in our relationships and our efforts to transform systemic harm. We continuously learn from our teachers, friends, and more-than-human kin that this quality of presence emerges from a deep commitment to recognize and embody the relationship between resilience, resistance, and accompaniment.

If we take advice from our dandelion, here seem to be the keys:

Root deep and wide. Be creative in learning into and holding fast to ultimate purpose. Be strategic in the use of the winds of change. Ensure there is sufficient spaciousness within the seed to sustain the journey. Seek even the smallest patches of protective soil to root and grow. Reciprocate care to those and that which encourages you.

Simply stated, staying alive and whole in a world of hurt is best served by cultivating, practicing, and integrating our ability to bounce back, push back, and have our backs, together.

written by: laura webber, zoë newcomb, and john paul lederach  
illustrations by: marta ribeiro  
august 2025