

# THE CONNECTION PROJECT

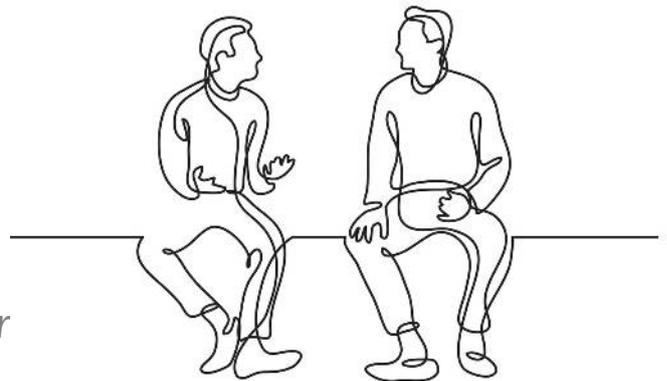


*“The nervous system is shaped in relationship, so... that means that it can be reshaped in relationship.”*

*— Deb Dana*

*“Only through our connectedness to others can we really know and enhance the self. And only through working on the self can we begin to enhance our connectedness to others”.*

*— Harriet Lerner*



*“Connectedness is a biological imperative.”*

*“It's not just safety we seek, but safety in the arms of another.”*

*— Stephen Porges*



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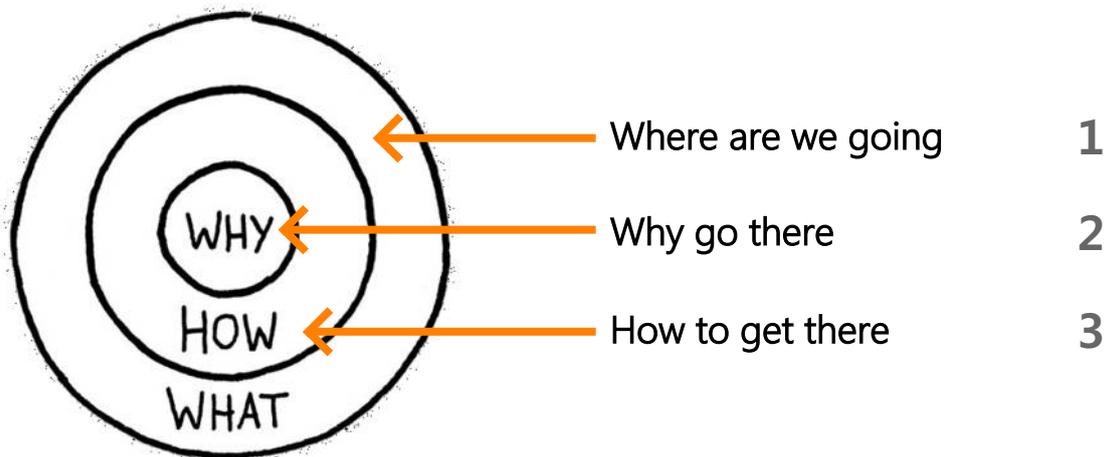
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# In a Nutshell

The project offers a supportive community for those seeking to strengthen their relational capacity. We believe that conscious human connection holds the key to the next leap in human evolution. This collaborative initiative is designed and built by its members, and it costs nothing to participate.

If cultivating authentic relationships and pioneering new ways of relating resonates with you, we invite you to read on and get in touch. In our increasingly disconnected world, the project provides a platform and the tools to practice the art of connection. Together, we can learn, grow and spread the power of connection.

# Road Map



*“We are here to awaken  
from our illusion of separateness.”  
— Thich Nhat Hanh*

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*“Co-creating physical and online spaces focused on connection, authenticity and trust, for vibrant, adaptive, self-replicating, nurturing communities and organisations, that are environmentally friendly and offer compassionate and inviting experiences, that are supported by functional, secure, safe processes.”* — The project vision statement.

## IT'S ABOUT CONNECTION

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This project is all about connection. OK, so we know that relating can sometimes be challenging. But things are changing. Now we have robust science and powerful new tools and frameworks to help us. We are here to show you that it's possible. That it's wonderful, and that it is the future.

We invite you, if you will, to take a little visual journey with us. Imagine, for a moment, the extended families and close knit rural communities that were once the bedrock of our world. For the most part those families are now atomised, scattered geographically, and divided politically. Once, those families met our needs for belonging and for emotional support. Who meets those needs now? Chances are, you've found yourself in the pressure cooker that is the nuclear family. Or, somehow, living alone, despite your best efforts. And maybe that's not all a bed of roses.

Now lets imagine something else. Picture a visionary tribe of people who understand the need to find a new balance between our sense of our authentic, autonomous self, and our capacity to develop and nurture our relationships. And who are fascinated by the idea of the collective mind, that inter-subjective field that exists between us. Imagine these people coming together to build a self-governing, non-hierarchical, grassroots community organization. One that reinvents a new type of social unit, one that is comprised of small human scale support and learning pods.

Imagine the members of these pods coming together regularly and often. To celebrate, to learn, to laugh and play. To share vulnerability, and to listen with an open heart. To breathe in tearful moments deeply. To be seen, safely held, and accepted without judgment. Finding that their mystery aches and pains start to fade away. And, imagine the tribe coming together to dance, to sing. To hug and be hugged. To belong.



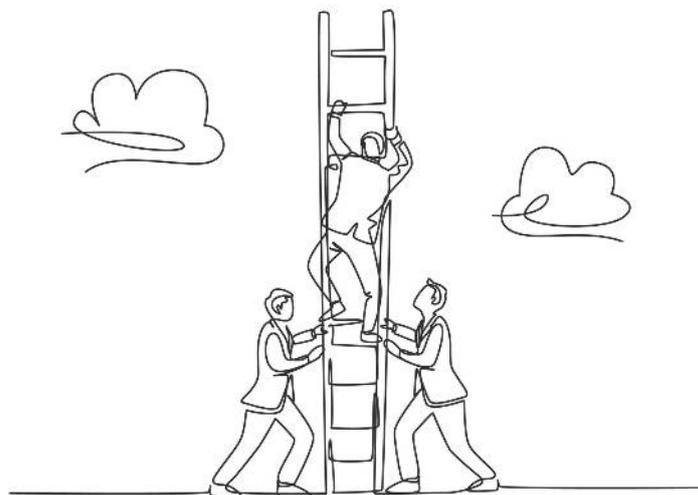
## IT'S ABOUT BUILDING CAPACITY

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So, this sense of community is the first major pillar that the project rests upon. The second pillar is support for growth. As humans we have a deep, deep quest for meaning, purpose and reinvention. It is said that global change starts with personal change, and yet the old model where you are supposed to fix yourself first before you can engage with others seems broken. It is a paradox, and we find ourselves called to explore a third path, one that involves mutually supporting each other as we personally heal, develop and evolve.

If we were to again close our eyes for a moment, and start by painting a picture of our old selves. We might see our deeply in-grained pattern of rugged self-reliance. Society taught us well that independence was the one true way. But in our much needed stretch into autonomy and agency, maybe we over-corrected. We might see how we inadvertently adopted a strategy of minimising close contact with others, so as to avoid disturbing old developmental wounds. We might see how casually we distrusted and disregarded those outside our in-group, and how this once useful adaptation stems from evolutionally conditions that no longer exist. We might even smell and taste the acrid way that we had to be nice at all costs, in the naive hope that others wouldn't hurt us, or that they would somehow magically figure out what we needed. Finally we might also notice our heroic notions of leadership, where a magical someone will charge in on a white horse and save us.

And in this scene, looming over us, is a tidal wave of economic and environmental crises gathering steam. Rapid advances in AI and nano/biotech, it all has the potential to overwhelm us.



Now, let's come forward in time and paint a different picture. This time the background is washed by a new story. A story that speaks of the innate capacity and drive of human beings to change. In this picture, groups of people are choosing to take off their masks, and to let down their guard. They are sharing their vulnerable sides, empathetically and reciprocally. They are remembering the importance of laughter, playfulness, and holding their constructed identities lightly. They are building the capacity to witness, to hold an internal dialogue. And, in doing so, finding that the older parts of the brain start to integrate with the newer parts, in a way that allows some exciting new fusion to emerge.

As they relearn to trust, and to openly share, they discover radical honesty, boundaries, curiosity, and actual listening. The kind of listening, where you not only aren't speaking, but you aren't thinking about speaking. The kind where your non-verbal language says, I want to know you.



These courageous people are together creating a kind of social laboratory tasked with incubating new relational technologies. They are both researchers and lab rats. As they work together, they are taking the idea of mindfulness and repurposing it into relatefulness—a kind of collective presence. They are engaging with a process of their own evolution. And, in doing so, before their eyes, they are finding the pain of their developmental wounds gently melting away, almost as a side effect.

These visionary people hold a dream in their hearts and minds. They dream of a world where inspired self and relational awareness powers a renaissance of regenerative culture... of collaborative culture. You might see this bold transformative work emerging from the ground like water springs and streamlets, and then coming together into the one flowing river that is our common humanity. Pods seeding more pods, self-propagating, spreading out into the world. The big house that is our planet. Our home.



## THE PROJECT IS A STEPPING STONE

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Thanks for dreaming along with us. Now, perhaps you are wondering what this intriguing picture looks like in practice? What does the project do? Our answer is that, by definition, the project is an experiment, and, that the building of it is very much in the hands of the participants. But here is what we know so far:

1. The project is incrementally building a web platform / social network. It is this platform that hosts the practice life which powers the project's capacity building agenda. It is also home to the project's research, rich process toolkits, and other open source learning resources. The platform offers social support to participants, and supports the training and outreach work of the collective.
2. Looking ahead, a future project centre or centres is one possible place this journey could ultimately take us. Places where people can go for shorter or longer periods to immerse deeply and richly into the work.
3. Who knows, if we were to dream really big, maybe when the project's network reaches critical mass, seeding or inspiring a new generation of housing cooperatives, ecovillages and cooperative businesses in various places. Built from a new foundation of conscious relating.

In summary, the project is immersive, decentralised, open source, future looking, and neuroplasticity and nervous system informed. It is a community about community. We know it is ambitious. It is precisely the thing that no one of us can do alone. For this reason the project is membership based, and if you feel called to this work, we invite you to get involved. There is no cost to participate. It just requires your energy, your passion to show up and practice. To hone and share new ways of being.



# Why / Our Purpose

## 2

*Exploring and developing safe connection to our authentic core, and integrating with others and to nature, out of a place of compassion and deep humanity, as a passionate, mutually supportive, self-determining group focused on curiosity, equality, and collaboration as a pathway of social and planetary regeneration and evolution.*

— Project statement of purpose.

In this section we explore our why, and what drives us to choose the path of connection. In doing so we would love to share with you three major sources of inspiration. While we love to learn by doing, we also love science. We believe that WHY is super important, and hope that it helps you understand why this unusual organization exists, and why we have adopted its practices.

### GETTING OUR HEADS AROUND OUR INTERNAL PROGRAMMING

The first of our major influences is Deep Decolonisation. This is about becoming aware of the software programs installed into our nervous systems by our social conditioning, and which we tend to inhabit for the most part unconsciously. It's about how our beliefs and experiences shape our identities and behaviour. It involves inspecting our habits, our cognitive biases (such as the negativity bias, in-group bias, social status formation among others), our victim and saviour mentalities, and our tendency to assume, to judge, to over-conceptualize. It is an ongoing process of learning, unlearning, and relearning. It requires moving beyond surface perspectives to probe deeper levels of consciousness and being. It involves discovering and cultivating the witness within.

For us, being trauma informed is about recognising that our experience is inextricably and universally impacted by our pasts, that our operating system is predominantly unconscious, and that trauma is just a side effect of the evolutionary processes we find ourselves caught up in.



The following forms part of our invitation to participants:

We aspire to help realise the birth of a regenerative, more engaged and connected culture. In order to avoid re-projecting the old upon the new, I agree with the need to deconstruct my education and the standard societal norms. My commitment to examining old ways of being requires me to reorient my compasses away from separation, certainty, comfort and control, towards trust, responsibility, transparency, introspection and a deeper capacity for intimacy.

We are willing to make space for difficult conversations, without relationships falling apart. I accept that at times this work may be challenging, and know that by tapping into a deep inner resourcefulness, with the support of each other, I can find the courage to learn, heal, adapt, and discover.

We want to be connected closely and authentically and undertake change-focused work together. However, there may also be times when I reach my stretch limit, so I will actively look for help to re-gain my balance.

— Adapted from Vanessa Andreoti, PhD, with permission.

## BEFRIENDING OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

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The second of our major influences is Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory, which shines a bright light on the important role of the nervous system. For us, PVT is the missing piece of the collaboration puzzle.

Connectedness is a biological imperative. We don't survive as human beings unless we can co-regulate and connect with others.

— Steven Porges PhD

The theory tells us that as humans we find ourselves living out this fascinating transition from our reptile predecessors, that are slowly adapting to the mammalian world of functioning in groups. This transition is incomplete, and as a consequence, the visceral reality for humans is that our life experience has aspects of the reptilian drive for autonomy, and at the same time the struggles to integrate the collaboration required to live in proximity with others. Furthermore, as we evolve from lower order mammals into humans, we are literally witnessing the evolution of consciousness. The ability to dialog with our own experience.

Porges has given us a profoundly useful framework to understand all this, particularly the tension between autonomy and belonging. When we recognise it's biological underpinning, then the tension of our relational interactions suddenly all starts to make sense. First, connection is primary to our sense of well being; it's mediated unconsciously by the autonomic nervous system; and it's relatively new from an evolutionary point of view, thus vulnerable to damage. Second, that our nervous system detects safety primarily from facial expressions, vocal intonation, and related non-verbal cues. And thirdly, that we express the



loss of that safety using a predictable set of defensive behaviours such as aggression or collapse.

Most people think that safety is the removal of threat. Our nervous system doesn't buy that, it wants specific cues that it can directly identify. So it's not saying I'm a safe person, but we don't look at the person and our voices are not modulated and we have high muscle tone and we're skittish. We're not safe to the nervous system of the other.

— Stephen Porges

In other words, there is an element of hive mind to the human neurobiology, and recent studies have begun to empirically confirm this. For example, the fMRI studies of James Coan. The findings from his laboratory take PVT beyond a theory, and demonstrate that we do indeed employ those around us to help regulate our nervous systems.

When you have your friends next to you the hill feels less steep because you feel like you have more resources. How do you get their resources? You do that by expanding your sense of self to include them... The evidence suggests that attachment figures, including relational partners, are incorporated into neural representations of self as vital resources that promote survival, the dilution of risk, load-sharing, and the regulation of negative emotion.

— James Coan PhD

His team arrived at this conclusion by scanning subjects' brains while giving them electric shocks. Having a trusted support person nearby reduced neural activity in the pain centres of the brain. Conversely, when instead the support person was shocked, the test subject's pain centres light up in the same manner as being shocked themselves.

The concept of the social nervous system is part of the field of interpersonal neurobiology. The work of Siegel, Cozolino, Badenoche and others show us how our [minds](#), brains, and relationships integrate. Disrupted early attachment, leads to inadequately developed neural pathways, which leads to interpersonal struggles throughout life. But on the flip side, neuroplasticity enables us, even as adults, to reconstruct these pathways through conscious attention to body sensations, emotional balance, fear modulation, attuned communication, empathy, insight and intuition.



## IT'S EXPERIENCE THAT BUILDS EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

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Our third major influence is EFT, developed by Susan Johnson. Emotionally Focussed Therapy is based on attachment theory. Decades ago John Bowlby showed us that human adults attach with each other just as strongly as infants and caregivers do. Here again we find this biological underpinning to our need to connect. From an evolutionary perspective, we expect the support of others in the same way that we expect gravity and oxygen.

Whatever our mental models about attachment, working with our biology is foundational to our health and well-being. But in EFT, attachment goes beyond well-being into the realm of personal development.



Unlike social affect regulation... self-regulation is a more costly, effortful, top-down process involving extensive cognitive and attentional processes... The ongoing construction of selfhood is a process that occurs within the web of close interpersonal relationships.

— Sue Johnson PhD

Johnson's most significant contribution is an evidence based therapeutic model that acknowledges both attachment and the central role of emotion in our relationships and healing.

EFT focuses on the relationship between partners in terms of an emotional bond, rather than a bargain to be renegotiated. It focuses on emotional engagement and corrective experience rather than teaching skill-building... [These] emotional experiences are the primary instruments of change.

— Sue Johnson

EFT offers significant value in enhancing relationships of all kinds, because it gives us a formula to help adapt primitive mammalian interactions into a powerful vehicle of personal and social change. In conscious relationship we become part of our own evolution. For clarity, we repeat that it is through relationships that we can best develop, rather than by solitary practices alone.

EFT shows us that you can't emotionally upskill by reading a book. It's a relational practice! The relationships themselves transform our relationality. And, so too, as an inevitable consequence, our sense of authentic self. This model says that it is not an either-or choice, we develop both levels together. While it's certainly very tempting to try to avoid the messiness of emotions and relationships in our practice life, for us, committing to the path of connection is just the juicier path.

In short, our purpose is to practice connection as a developmental path, and that the project is a practical application and testing ground for the ideas of DD, PVT, and EFT.

*Our mission is to create opportunities for people to practice connecting authentically and safely. To offer, and support more vulnerability and compassion, to share strategies, tools and games to help each other understand our nervous systems better, and to learn how to regulate ourselves and help co-regulate others. Our mission is to continue supporting communities both existing and forming, by assisting with clarifying Vision, Mission and Values, by sharing useful, effective conflict management strategies and communication styles and agreements.*

— Project mission statement

## ALIGNMENT IS KEY

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Having a dream is one thing. This section explores how we can make any of this happen. Our first how is alignment. In order for people to work together, there has to be sufficient working alignment to hold an exploration of our differences, edges, and frontiers. For this reason we have together created, along with the document you are reading, a fairly extensive set of written agreements and organising processes. The container created by that alignment, is informed by the following set of values.

- **Growth:** The continuous pursuit of personal and group development through curiosity, learning, and acquisition of resilience.
- **Dedication:** Showing up with integrity, beneficence and accountability, using structured, interdisciplinary and creative approaches.
- **Support:** Reciprocal physical and emotional support of each other with compassion, generosity and a focus on the positive.
- **Engagement:** We lean into collaboration, with authenticity, courage, gratitude, and compassionate communication.
- **Contribution:** Actively participating in the movement to create social change for a thriving planet.

## SAFETY UNDERPINS EVERYTHING WE DO

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Closely followed after alignment, comes safety. PVT tells us that everything we do has to be infused by the central ideas of safety and nervous system regulation. It is this safety that allows us to learn, to be curious and creative. While there is no guarantee in this life that we will never feel pain, PVT shows us the importance of non-verbal cues to our emotional well-being. Therefore, our practice life prioritizes establishing nervous system regulation before the verbal world can be successfully navigated. Another way to understand this is the Gottmans' twenty to one ratio. By creating a strong base of trust and positive interactions, only then can we make space for difficult conversations.

We also note that embodiment and the somatic senses play a huge role in this work. We have participants with experience in various bodywork modalities. And so, the capability of embodied practices to rewire triggers and core beliefs, and to increase resilience, inherently flavours our work.

## **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE**

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Ok, so our why tells us that practice is at the heart of the work of this project. One powerful practice tool is the exciting new movement that is Authentic Relating. AR is an incredibly good fit for us, and a natural application of PVT. (Our contribution is to take AR and make it more nervous system informed).

Also because of what we now know about brain neuroplasticity, we have adopted a design involving short experiential learning sessions. These structured sessions are just 1 to 2 hours long, and participants report rapid progress and increased resilience from as little as 6 months regular practice.

We want to make this work accessible, and to reach a fledgling audience that is, for the moment, scattered about the globe. Thus these practice sessions are available online, anywhere in the world. The goal is to practice, practice, practice.

The first series of practices serves as an introduction to the work, and is completed prior to becoming a member participant. These sessions, as well as being fun and stimulating in themselves, offer a foundation language model that informs our work together. We have developed several such series of practice sessions, that incorporate wisdom from all of the above disciplines.

As participants gain experience, and progress through the various series of practices, they may gain accreditation to in turn step into facilitation. Because, facilitating is actually the best way to learn. Because, it is not rocket science. And, because it gives something back to the community. That's when there is a leader in every chair.

## **THE STRETCH INTO CO-GOVERNANCE**

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Because the project is essentially a cooperative, the project needs one more how. It involves the head shift into co-governance. Few of us were taught the skills of collaborative decision making, so for many this is a journey. Fortunately, our group has considerable experience with consensus based decision making models.

And, looking forward, we are fascinated by the emerging organizational technology, so-called teal organizations, best described by Frederic Laloux. Teal organizations are those that grow beyond traditional democracies and hierarchies, into ones that more closely resemble living organisms. That deeply embody small team work, showing up in a whole way, the advice process, embracing feedback, prototyping, and learning for learnings sake. For us, organizational development is an important foundation that permits groups to work together, and it's something we take seriously.

Regular gatherings of participants take place in small human scale pods. It's a scale that our nervous systems understand. These pods provide that sense of support and mutual mentoring that is, in our mind, connection in real life.

## THE HOW AND WHY COME TOGETHER

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While the project is relatively non-commercial in nature, our mission does present opportunities to generate income both for the project and for its participants. We started this journey with our Collaboration Skills Courses which ran up and down the country. Moving forward the plan is to offer some sort of programs externally. Our aspiration is to develop innovative training vehicles that are highly interactive, open source, and member created and delivered. We know that this cooperative approach is unorthodox and will likely be challenging. But this path reduces barriers to access, supports participants' facilitation practice, and provides a sense of meaning, purpose and contribution.

So, to recap, our how involves alignment, safety, practice and co-governance.

Our discovery of AR, was a light bulb moment for us, because we immediately saw the value in its practices as a way to apply the theory from our theoretical frameworks. As a way to learn immersively and experientially. As a way to become more physically embodied in our work together.

PVT gives us the principles of regulation, resonance, and reciprocity. EFT gives us the value of dyadic work, and the therapeutic skills of reflection, validation and curious questions that are so central to AR. Deep Decolonisation gives us the value of practice, noticing, hard conversations and working within our stretch limit.

If we throw in Positive Psychology, we get the gratitude and appreciation that are intuited by AR. Neuroplasticity informs our emphasis on keeping it light / the role that positive emotion and repetition of practice plays in the formation of new neural pathways. The more times we dip our toes in the water of structured, authentic, joyful interaction experiences, and discover that it doesn't kill us, the more we want to do it. The more we do it, the better we get at it. It's that simple.

So we practice, until this new way of being puts down roots in our psyches. Until we reinvent the social fabric of our world. Until, like mushroom circles, the work becomes self-propagating. For this reason the project is committed to the principle of open source in all its work, research, processes and materials. Everything we do is released into the Creative Commons for the common good of humanity.



# What next?

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We are so excited that you made it this far. Do we assume correctly, that some of this resonates with you? If so, and you want to know more, we would like to offer you the following resources, most of which can be found on the project's website.



1. The place to start, is to watch our Practice Primer video. It gives a brief introduction to the social nervous system, explains why the practices are so important, and outlines the structure of the practice work.
2. After that we suggest that you have a look on the schedule for the introductory practice sessions. These cost nothing except your time, and run on a 5 weekly continuous loop. You may start anywhere and pick all 5 of them up at your convenience. When you have all 5 you are eligible, should you wish, to start the joining process. Before attending these sessions, be sure to read and digest the Practice Guidelines document.
3. After that, if you think you might like to explore joining, on the website, under the resources section you will find our policies and procedures, which took us a year to create. They contain interesting information about how we handle decision making, conflict and much else.
4. People often ask, which is the one book to read. At the moment that's Stephen Porges', newest book, Our Polyvagal World. Finally a book on the subject written in plain english. After that, Ryel Kestano's Book, Authentic Relating, is a good grounding in the practices of AR. If you are still hungry for more, check out the reading list on the website.
5. Connecting is our thing! If you have any curly questions, or just want to chat, don't hesitate to write to us. It would be our pleasure to have a conversation with you.

## Contact

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