2023 Retreat Summary

Written by Aiden using the audio transcripts of the retreat conversations.

The **Musagetes Board Retreat** convened on June 20–21, 2023, with a focus on exploring how art, relational practices, and systemic readiness can support communities in facing the intensifying crises of our time. Attended by board members, staff, artists, and collaborators, the retreat offered space for reflection on how to live and act meaningfully in the face of ecological collapse, social fragmentation, and the enduring effects of colonial systems. Through a series of thematic discussions, the group engaged in deep dialogue on how artistic and organizational practices might serve as tools for navigating complexity, fostering accountability, and nurturing more equitable relationships.

The opening session began with a sobering reflection on the reality that each year seems to bring new levels of crisis—whether ecological, social, or existential. Participants explored the concept of hope and its limitations in such a context. Hope, it was observed, can easily collapse into disillusionment if it becomes untethered from grounded action or if it fails to accommodate grief, anger, or complexity. Several voices noted the risk of emotional disengagement and the tendency toward numbness in the face of overwhelming challenges. As such, the retreat called for a nuanced approach to hope—not as naïve optimism but as a grounded disposition that supports presence, care, and courage.

Shawn framed the retreat's overarching inquiry with a powerful set of questions: In what ways can artistic and life practices enable us to relate differently to crisis, beauty, joy, collapse, and each other? How can we respond to climate catastrophe and systemic decay without falling into despair or paralyzing anxiety? He emphasized the role of **relationality**—not only between humans, but also with land, the more-than-human world, and future generations. The organization, he proposed, is positioned at the intersection of art and social transformation, and its programs can be seen as experiments in making sense of our moment and building new patterns of coexistence.

Elwood expanded on this theme through a reflection on **Indigenous Otherwise**, a program that emerged out of past retreats and continues to evolve. He spoke about his journey from skepticism to trust in Musagetes as an institution, noting how the program has prioritized depth over performance, and process over product. He described the need to support Indigenous artists and thinkers who are already deeply engaged with collapse, colonial trauma, and spiritual healing. Elwood emphasized the importance of "reading the room"—a metaphor for being attuned to context and relational dynamics—and called attention to the need to interrupt cycles of trauma and commodification in art spaces. His collaboration with Taqralik and other Inuit artists was highlighted as an example of long-term, trust-based relationships that resist the transactional nature of much of the contemporary art world.

As the day continued, the retreat shifted toward highlighting active programs and collaborations. Sidd and Justin presented updates on **ArtsEverywhere** and the **GOAT PoL (Polity of Literature)**. They shared stories and insights from creative partnerships across global geographies—including border-crossing narratives in El Paso and Derry, youth resistance movements in Myanmar, and documentary filmmaking in China. These projects reveal how

storytelling, especially by refugees and displaced communities, can function as a form of soul work, resistance, and political witnessing. One particularly moving story involved Bidi Bidi, the world's largest refugee camp in Uganda, where storytelling and podcasting have become lifelines for expression and dignity. Participants discussed how these narratives could be incorporated into curricula, development policies, and public awareness campaigns, making a case for storytelling as both educational and transformative.

The presentation also raised critical questions: Why do people tell stories? What motivates refugees and displaced individuals to document their experiences? Several participants referenced both spiritual and psychological needs: to reclaim self-worth, to share cautionary wisdom, and to articulate identity in the face of erasure. The conversation turned philosophical and pedagogical, as Frances suggested the development of teaching modules to bring these stories into classrooms. Tim, referencing programs focused on climate activism, emphasized the need to find language that moves youth to act without overwhelming them with guilt. Collectively, the discussion revealed how ArtsEverywhere is cultivating a living archive of resistance and imagination in the context of crisis.

Anna followed with an update on the **"Complicated Care"** publishing series, which examines the layered, often uncomfortable ways in which care is enacted and weaponized. From medical institutions to activist circles, the series explores themes such as death doulas, burnout, assisted dying, and vulnerability. Anna framed care not as a romantic ideal but as a contested, sometimes painful practice that reflects broader systems of inequality. Shawn linked this work to Dani's "Radical Tenderness" project and pointed out its resonance with other Musagetes-supported initiatives addressing trauma, climate catastrophe, and collective healing. Joy added that storytelling—particularly personal narratives of struggle and resilience—is a powerful mechanism for cultivating empathy and reflection across difference.

Additional discussions focused on the evolution of **Publication Studio Guelph** and the **Improv Institute** partnership. Shawn described the decentralized publishing model as an experiment in disrupting conventional economies of publishing. The studio emphasizes relational publishing, committee-based editorial decision-making, and a profit-sharing approach that aims to democratize access. Anna shared that the network of studios is vibrant and growing, with ongoing events, book fairs, and literary dinners helping to foster local and international engagement. New projects, including Inuit-authored books and multilingual publication initiatives, are underway. There is also an intentional push toward accessibility, physical community-building, and more nuanced conversations about the purpose of publishing in an era of social upheaval.

On Day 2, the retreat turned to the theme of **organizational readiness** and the idea of inner transformation as a prerequisite for systems change. Kira Cooper proposed the development of a **Readiness Index (RI)** that would assess whether organizations are truly prepared to engage in transformation—not only structurally, but emotionally and ethically. Drawing from her background in infectious disease research and transformative theory, she warned against surface-level interventions that fail to address deeper patterns of dysfunction. Kira highlighted the "polycrisis" nature of our moment—overlapping ecological, social, political, and psychological emergencies—and stressed the importance of developing new tools for learning and unlearning.

This led to a rich and sometimes contentious conversation about the value and definition of "inner work." While some participants saw inner development as essential—citing psychoanalytic concepts like "shadow work," emotional maturity, and bounded rationality—others critiqued the term for being overly Western, individualistic, and potentially exclusionary. Frances suggested reframing it as "readiness" rather than inner work, allowing for a broader, more inclusive understanding of organizational transformation. Elwood emphasized the importance of both inner and outer responsiveness, noting that Indigenous traditions often prioritize what is useful and needed in the moment over abstract notions of psychological growth. Dan argued for the necessity of confronting the shadow aspects of organizations, not just individuals, and developing collective practices that allow institutions to metabolize discomfort and complexity.

The final major theme of the retreat was **accountability in philanthropy**. Drawing on Shawn's research and writing, the group examined how philanthropy might shift from a top-down, donor-driven model toward one rooted in reparations, relational repair, and ethical redistribution. Participants explored three forms of accountability: rules-based (e.g., legal regulations), judgment-based (e.g., public critique), and harm/relationship-based (e.g., ethical reparations). A key point of discussion was how to deal with "tainted money"—funds derived from exploitative or colonial industries—and how to avoid perpetuating harm while using philanthropic tools to support social change.

Tim and Doug emphasized the importance of shifting the central focus away from money and toward relational integrity. Frances shared an example of foundations actively soliciting critical feedback from long-term partners, suggesting that humility and responsiveness are possible within philanthropic frameworks. Shawn highlighted the need to go beyond equity and inclusion rhetoric to actually engage in structural redistribution and ethical reckoning. Dan added a systems theory perspective, pointing out that the most effective leverage points are often "trans-paradigmatic"—requiring shifts in values, relationships, and worldviews. The group also considered the psychological dimensions of philanthropic power, including the distortions created by donor admiration and the seductions of control.

The retreat closed with heartfelt reflections from participants on the emotional and intellectual journey of the two days. Many praised Shawn's thoughtful leadership and the collective growth of the Musagetes team. Joy reflected on the ethos of **hospitality and gentleness** that defines the organization's culture, while Frances and Tim urged continued exploration of emergent patterns and educational pathways. Elwood called for greater clarity in language and concepts, especially when discussing reconciliation, relationality, and decolonization. He noted that without shared understanding, even well-intentioned relationships can falter. Stephanie asked whether better relationships are the ultimate goal, or whether what is needed is the ability to sit with discomfort, conflict, and deep historical wounds.

A final reflection emerged around the paradox of hope. Some participants rejected the term entirely, seeing it as passive or naive. Others reclaimed it as a disposition of care, commitment, and daily presence. Doug suggested that in the face of collapse, what matters is not optimism, but the ability to keep doing meaningful work, even without guarantees. The retreat concluded with the reaffirmation of a core ethic that had surfaced repeatedly throughout the conversations:

“Do what’s needed, and be kind.” This simple yet profound principle, drawn from Taqralik and Elwood’s work, resonated across the room as a guiding light for the uncertain paths ahead.