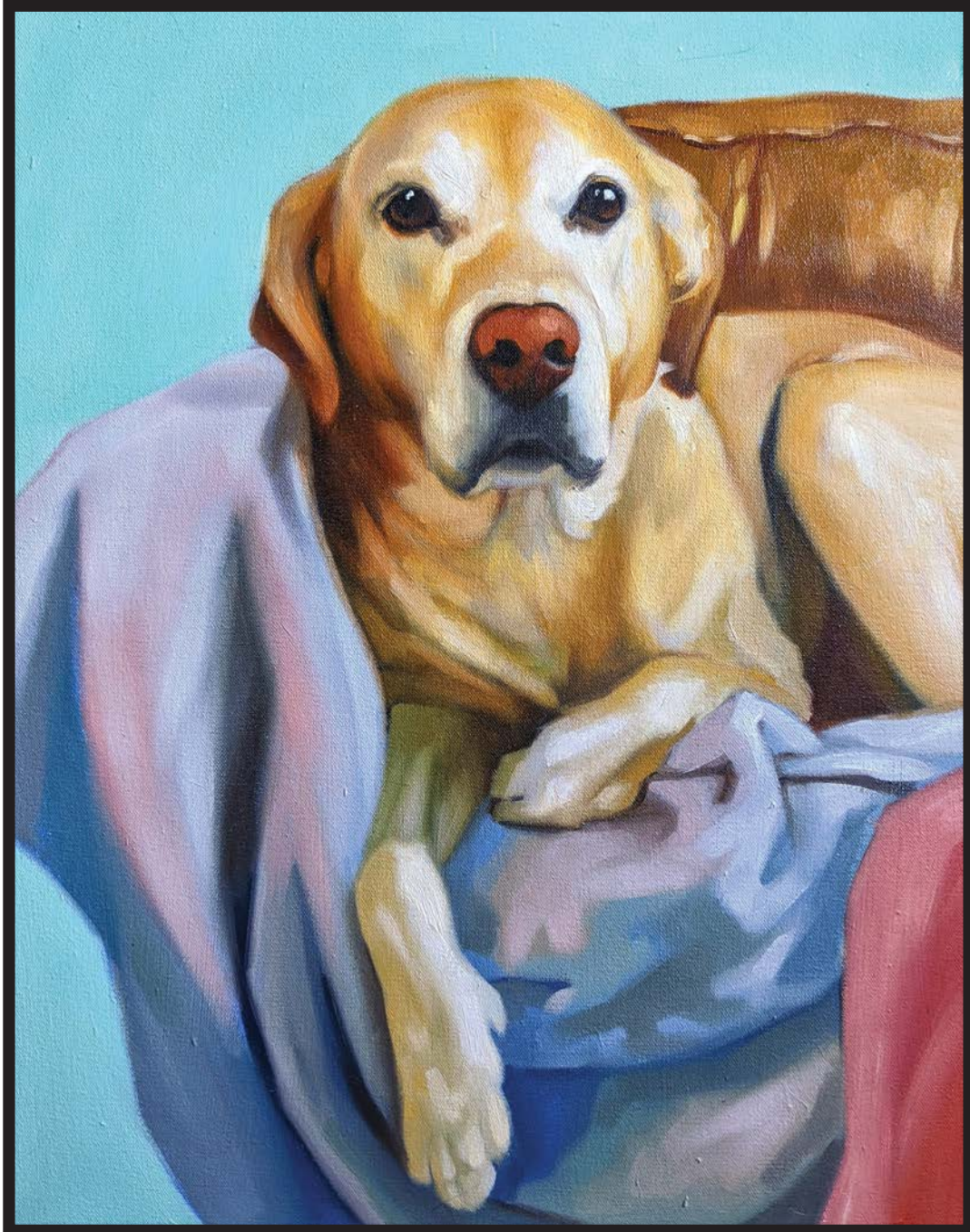




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Self-Care Through the Cycles of Nature

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Abstract

Veterinarians and veterinary teams are struggling and in need of more than simple self-care solutions that offer relief only in the moment. Building a personal and group culture of connection supports a longer-term goal of truly thriving. One possibility for building this culture is by living in closer alignment with the cycles of nature, from the inspiration of a sunrise through natural observance of times for activity, rest, healing, celebration, remembrance, and gratitude. Traditional cultural elements based on these cycles can help to strengthen community connections and support physical, mental, and emotional healing. A nature connection model developed for cultural regeneration is presented.

Self-Care in the Caregiving Professions

Self-care for veterinarians can be an elusive and almost mythical notion in our busy modern lives. How do we find time for ourselves when so many others need us—animal and human? And yet, how can we continue to provide this kind of caring for others without also providing it for ourselves? As we know, burnout, compassion fatigue, and depression are rampant in the veterinary profession (1-3).

It is not sustainable to continue at this pace without a framework of support on both individual and team levels with our veterinary staffs, our families, and our communities.

It is important to recognize normal stress responses early and to develop healthy coping strategies and habits that support long-term mental and physical health. As stress builds, signs of exhaustion, apathy, sleep disturbances, and withdrawal are just a few symptoms that can be discerned (1). The ability to be a sustainably compassionate human being starts with showing compassion toward oneself. Self-care is not a selfish endeavor; we must care for ourselves in order to be able to care for others. Compassion satisfaction, the enjoyment of helping others, can be achieved when we have the energy and personal strength needed for giving. This rewarding feeling is often a significant reason for joining a caring profession in the first place and can keep us sustained during difficult times.

Meditation, yoga, and other mind-body exercises are good methods to reduce stress levels in busy professionals. Mindfulness and meditation techniques can promote better

patient care along with career satisfaction for physicians, nurses, and veterinarians. A review found that the use of mindfulness and compassion-based personal care techniques by physicians correlated with improved patient care, reduced anxiety, improved communication, and reduced signs of clinician burnout and compassion fatigue (4). In a similar study for nurses, mindfulness and meditation exercises led to stress reduction and more focused attention (5).

In addition to techniques for personal improvement, research in the nursing field found that a supportive, cohesive, team-centered work environment was the primary factor in reducing compassion fatigue and burnout. If employees felt supported and appreciated, they were less stressed by their day-to-day work (6). Another factor that affects job satisfaction and stress in many workplaces is inexperience. Quality training and support are needed while skills are being mastered. Oncology nurses having more experience dealing with the challenges of their work were shown to have better confidence and the ability to recover from working on stressful cases (6). This lends hope to new veterinary graduates that in a supportive work environment, personal growth, development of skills, and compassion satisfaction can occur.

It is not particularly surprising for these studies to find that people in the caregiving professions function better when they use mindful meditation techniques for personal improvement, are surrounded by a supportive team, and have gained some experience working in the field. Knowing these 3 beneficial elements, we can do our own inner work with meditation and mindfulness, yoga, Qigong, time in nature, or any of the countless other forms of personal healing. As we develop the individual groundwork, we become more able to transform a team into a more supportive community. With the effective personal work and community building, we can then create a system of mentorship to develop skills and experience in our newer staff members, while also benefitting established employees and ourselves.

On the surface, these goals may seem manageable. Why are they so challenging to achieve? Everyday habits, if performed counter to the rhythms of nature, often get in the way. Disruptions in circadian rhythms such as daily cycles of sleep, rest, activity, and eating have been studied and connected to multiple health conditions, from obesity and cardiovascular disease to mental health disorders and even cancer progression (7, 8). The good news is that these habits can be changed through simply increasing awareness and enjoyment of the cycles of nature.

Self-Care and the Cycles of Nature

As wholistic practitioners, we have the advantage of expanding our concept of healing to include countless factors that affect the wellness of our patients and ourselves. Some of these influences are found in the natural environment and the shifting patterns that occur throughout a day, a year, and a lifetime. Many of the healing modalities we practice, including Traditional Chinese Medicine and Ayurveda, have a basis in the rhythms of the natural cycle. Seasonal changes in diet, herbs, and medications can affect the health of our patients. At first glance, these modalities can seem very involved and complex, and they are, but so is living in the natural world, which is something we were born to do. All human beings at some point in recent or distant history descended from an indigenous culture that interacted closely with nature. When living in connection with the cycles of nature becomes a personal practice, it is no longer limited to paradigms of cultures from other parts of the world, and we are able to dive more deeply into our own relationships with the local environment, seasonal changes, and our unique lives.

Humans adapted over thousands of years to slow down and conserve energy in the winter months and to rest when the sun is at its hottest during the day, just as many animals do. Work was often hard, but people seemed to understand that it was unsustainable without rest, and the Earth had a built-in time clock to help them maintain optimal cycles. In contrast, the artificial environment created by electricity and indoor heating and cooling allows us to carry on, always at the same pace, winter or summer, day or night, and modern society feels the exhaustion of that pace. The Earth, meanwhile, still keeps its ancient time clock, based on the moon's rotation around us and our rotation around the sun. By adhering more closely to natural cycles, we find the space for rest and healing that our bodies crave, enhancing self-care while at the same time deepening our ability to practice medicine. The concept is simple enough that we can relate to it through personal experience, and yet is so profound in our modern-day existence as to be a great change-maker.

The 8 Directions

The 8 Shields Institute (a), founded by Jon Young and others, has been working for more than 30 years to develop a model using what is known intuitively about the cycles of nature as well as what has been learned through the detailed study of multiple traditional cultures. This simple, relatable system expresses the interconnected web of relationships and experiences of humans living in connection with nature. The representation includes aspects of

individual and community relationships based on connections with the natural world that give insight into peace-building and communication skills, review and integration of life lessons, and practices of celebration, honoring, wonder, and gratitude, all within the context of the changing seasons and phases of life (9, b, c). The 8 Shields model is useful for personal exploration and growth as well as group dynamics and relations. It has been applied to educational, community, and business programs for problem solving and building connections.

One way of experiencing these cycles of nature is to break them down into smaller sections of the day and the year, as is done in the 8 directions aspect of the 8 Shields model. Many cultures recognize the compass directions of North, South, East, and West. In the Northern hemisphere, we follow the daily path of the sun as it rises in the East, hangs across the Southern sky through midday, and sets in the West. We can visualize the sun dipping below the horizon, veering toward the North as it slips around to rise again in the East. The 8 Shields colleagues in the Southern hemisphere have adapted the model for a sun that still rises in the East, then leans to the North at midday, sets in the West, and makes the South its primary pole direction. To avoid confusion, this discussion is based on the experience of nature in the Northern hemisphere; nevertheless, there are groups all around the world that work with the 8 Shields model, adapting it to their locations.

In a yearly cycle, the shortest and longest days are marked by the winter and summer solstices respectively, with the spring and autumn equinoxes in between. The directions are associated with winter in the North, spring in the East, summer in the South, and autumn in the West. The 8 Shields model further divides North, South, East, and West into 2 sub-directions, creating 8 points of reference in the cycle of a day or year.

Although there is much Native American influence in this system, from multiple mentors, the model also fits neatly into the Celtic calendar as well as others (9, 10). Many traditional cultures recognize these cycles and divide or interpret them slightly differently depending on their own patterns of weather and ecology. They do not fit rigidly but instead point to a natural flow. This is a flexible system that changes with nature and is not meant to be static. There are parallels drawn between the cycles of nature and the human life cycle as well. It is an interdimensional journey. We flow through the cycles of the days, the years, and our

lives in overlying spirals. The 8 Shields model can serve as a guide to finding our place on this spiraling journey and navigating our own path.

We begin this overview in the East where the sun is just coming up.

East—The rising of the sun brings the beginning of a new day. This corresponds to spring, a time of birth and new life. As birds sing the dawn chorus, it is a time of inspiration, excitement, and welcoming. The morning meal can be a way to celebrate the new day. If we skip this welcoming of the day, the greeting of family, friends, colleagues, and even clients during appointments or the lizard on our doorstep, we may feel that we have started off on the wrong foot or rushed into business without honoring relationships. Even in modern society, some form of greeting is generally expected. Can we enhance that to show how special this coming together is? How can we make people feel more welcome in our presence? What do we need for ourselves to feel welcomed?

Southeast—The Southeast represents early morning, and also the late spring/early summer, a time of rapid growth in plants and children. This time brings a certain momentum and rush of activity, a clearing of stagnation that gets things rolling. It is a time for playfulness and games, physical activity, stretching the joints, and getting the blood flowing. This helps us to get moving on a project or in a meeting; it is the motivation and orientation that pushes into midday.

South—The sun hangs high in the midday sky. This corresponds with the intense long days of summer, a time of hard work, busyness and accomplishment, flowering time for plants, and adolescence in the human parallel. Often in the modern world, people spend too much time in the South, overworking and burning out. Work becomes less focused and more of a struggle, and mistakes are more likely. The concept of following this natural cycle is to rest when you get tired, re-energize and perhaps remember the inspiration and motivation needed to go back to work and finish the project or at least finish the day. The healthy South is one of focused productive work, of being “in the zone.”

Southwest—After the effort of midday and a satisfying lunch, there naturally comes a time to rest, to nap, and to let your thoughts wander in gentle curiosity, rather than continue at the intense pace of the South. This is a time of healing and recovery, a time of internal growth when plants build their woody stems. In the human life cycle, it is seen as

a transition period from adolescence to adulthood; these are the new high school graduates exploring, looking for their purposes. Giving yourself the gift of timeless wandering, without digital distractions, can be one of the most refreshing and beneficial self-care activities to prioritize when feeling overworked.

West—As the sun begins to set in the West, it is time to finish work, come together for a meal, and to hear stories of the day. The West brings us to the time of harvest, gathering, and celebration of a job well done. It is the time of life of adulthood, bearing the fruits of productivity. Again, this time on the wheel is often neglected or shortchanged. We need to truly celebrate our accomplishments and tell our stories to feel the worth of all that we work so hard to do. While communication can be enhanced at many points on the wheel, the coming together of the group in celebration of shared values and accomplishments can be a strong step toward peacemaking.

Northwest—After the sun has set, we come to a time of quiet contemplation, conversation around a fire, and memories of those who have come before us and their influences on our lives. It is late autumn when the plants are settling back into the earth, readying themselves for winter. As humans, we move into leadership roles as we prepare to pass on our knowledge, carrying the memories and sharing them forward. Journaling and poetry can be a way of telling the stories of our days and our lives. This is a time of letting go, of reflection and release. If we do not allow time for grieving and remembrances, this is a place where people can get stuck, unable to move on. The ideal Northwest is a time of deep appreciation of life and living fully. In the veterinary world, this is a time for grief support groups and remembrance of our patients who are often our best mentors.

North—Midnight and deep winter are represented by the North. This is the deep sleep, the dormancy of plants, and hibernating animals. In a supportive human culture, elderhood is honored and as the physical body slows, patience and wisdom come to the forefront. It is a time of looking at the big picture, at the overview of the whole circle. Just as dreams may help us to review our days, evaluation and integration of lessons learned happens in the North, in the quiet introspection of the winter. Planning for the future is part of this as well, as we look toward the new day and the new year. Taking this time to review patient records can go a long way toward improving care plans and preparing for the next cases.

Northeast—Another transition, the Northeast represents the period before sunrise as the skies begin to lighten. Considered a contemplative, spiritual time, this is where endings and beginnings occur. It is the time of death, but also that of conception, creativity, and germination of seeds below the earth. Awareness of the senses, mindfulness, and meditation practices are found here, along with artistic endeavors. A routine of daily gratitude can help to start the day with appreciation and wonder.

Integrating Nature in Self-Care

Simply accepting the fact that our lives have rhythms, recognizing those patterns, and learning to live into them a bit more can help us find that elusive thing called balance. This natural flow, from inspiration and motivation through focused work, rest and healing, celebration, remembrance, review, and back to gratitude and wonder can help to keep us on track as individuals, while also guiding community and business interactions in a positive way.

In my personal life, I strive to take time for gratitude and meditation first thing in the morning; anything from a few minutes to 40 minutes, sitting outside, opening my senses to nature. This correlates with the spiritual time of the Northeast, just before sunrise. I find morning inspiration with the dawn, greeting my family and my animals, recognizing the welcoming time of the East as I start the day. The Southeast time includes physical motivation through exercise, stretching, Qigong, or playing with my dog, and encourages the mental motivation needed to accomplish the work of the day. A good breakfast and a little time spent looking over my schedule and getting oriented on the tasks at hand also provide momentum to go forth. The South then represents the focused work of the day, which for me may involve writing on the computer, teaching a class, or seeing veterinary house call appointments. Throughout the work day, I function better with regular breaks, food, and drink, which is the role of the Southwest in rest and healing. In the bigger life picture, the Southwest includes herbal medicine, massage, and other healing modalities that keep me going. The celebratory time of the West can be a simple evening meal with my family while sharing stories of the day, or a more elaborate recognition of a finished project, accomplishment, or holiday. The Northwest is quiet time spent reading, journaling, or talking before going to bed. It is a time for reflection, remembering ancestors, and for letting go. This is the place on the wheel where I honor the traditions of medicine and the lessons of countless herbalists that have come before me. In the North I am usually sleeping, regenerating for the next

day. During winter, when the cold and darkness naturally draw attention inward and my business schedule is lighter, I find time for dreaming, envisioning the future, and looking at the big picture. Planning and organization are a North activity. Once again, the Northeast brings me back around to gratitude to start the next day and brings renewed energy in the spring. The different points on the wheel represent aspects of life that together help bring us into balance.


I am not always successful in keeping to this daily or yearly routine, so self-forgiveness is a huge part of self-care. Sometimes I work to exhaustion and forget to take breaks. Sometimes it is hard to find inspiration and motivation. Just outside the window I see that awareness of the cycle of nature can be a gentle reminder to get back on track. It helps to view the wheel as a whole and to remember that these elements do not always have to be followed in order; we can bring gratitude, rest, or celebration into the day at any time in order to re-balance after overwork or exhaustion.

Particularly during the work period of the South, it helps to begin each activity around the circle anew—I greet my students or clients, lay out strategy and discuss needs, do the “work” of a lesson or physical exam, take a break by answer-

ing questions, celebrate the accomplishments and hopes for new treatments, review the lessons of the past, plan and organize with goals in mind, and remember to be grateful for all that we have.

In my house call practice, I naturally include most of these elements in a single home visit, sometimes in just a few words or expressions of wonder and delight, appreciation, remembrance, and review. Some components come before or after the veterinary appointment with business planning, communication, cards and small gifts to clients and colleagues in celebration or memoriam. In our teaching at Purple Moon Herbs and Studies, my colleague Dr. Laurie Dohmen and I have been able to create a classroom environment that includes daily gratitude and welcoming in the morning, Qigong or physical movement over breaks, and time outdoors in the garden. We schedule a flow that includes more rigorous coursework in the morning, while generally leaving afternoon time for more relaxed study and integration of material.

Many aspects of nature’s ebb and flow can be brought to an office culture in a more intentional way through gratitude, welcome, playfulness, creativity, celebrations, and



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allowance of time for true breaks in the schedule. Bringing the outdoors inside with aromatic plants, open windows, and natural lighting can improve health on many levels. Optional group classes in mindfulness, meditation, or yoga might be something to consider. Taking time to discuss and review cases with curiosity rather than judgment and to honor the passing of patients can help to generate a healing veterinary culture. Enhanced communication through simple connections, listening to stories, and acknowledgement of individual needs benefits staff, patients, and clients, thus bringing us back full circle to improving the day-to-day work environment.

We can naturally be drawn to these activities of welcoming and connection but feel less than satisfied with celebrations that are more superficial. What would it take for these interactions to feel more genuine? When are the deepest connections to life, nature, and other humans made? For veterinarians and animal lovers the world over, the creatures are a reminder that brings us back into connection as we watch

them practice these same cycles of greetings and playfulness, focus and rest, gathering, connection to the natural world through their senses, or even dreaming. Some of the most important lessons of rest and recovery I learn from my cats, and they are willing participants in my healing.

Many years ago, our species was as much a part of nature as were the animals and plants with which we coexisted. As veterinarians, wholistic practitioners, and herbalists, we have experienced the yearning for that connection. Perhaps we can find more ways to pursue and share the joy of living with nature. There is no need to go back in time to experience the traditional practices that for some cultures have only recently begun to change. We can intentionally recreate some of these natural cycles of work and rest in our modern lives. Unsurprisingly, these changes that benefit mental and physical health can truly help us to be more productive and creative in our work. We need to give ourselves a break, and that break may be as simple as walking outside and spending some time reconnecting with nature.

Acknowledgement

This system, presented with gratitude, is based on the 8 Shields framework created by Jon Young and colleagues. It is a co-created and evolving body of work, made in collaboration with many leaders in, and practitioners of, nature and culture connection, including mentors from many indigenous and traditional cultures.

Endnotes

- a. 8 Shields Institute. Available at: 8shields.org
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