

(Human) Nature

A Place to Heal

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The ramifications of homophobia, microaggressions, or othering leave lasting traces of pain on a minority. The course of a minority's life is surrounded by messages that are negative, hateful, and are either blunt or subtle. A minority belonging to the Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, and Queer plus (LGTBQ+) community is exposed to severe homophobia within their own ethnic culture and within their immediate family. Add to that the ethnic-culturally constructed concept of the female gender and the status as an immigrant. These messages of “no” and “rejection” serve as a constant reminder to not draw outside the lines. We are conditioned by our ethnic culture to understand that the manner in which we exist is wrong, and worse, that we must change or adapt to be “less wrong.”

These negative messages elicit an upheaval of emotions and various forms of mental illness. We spend time fending off these messages by striving for survival instead of living life and loving oneself is often non-existent. Minorities are bound to their own ethnic culture by a force only other minorities can fully comprehend; you don't leave, you don't turn your back on your family; you are not an individual. Doing any of the above brings shame to the family and to your ancestry. This force complicates the decoding of the negative messages for the minority; when and where do we draw the line of living life free of distress? Is it selfish to lead a path of individuality for simply existing? Coping mechanisms are often harmful to the physical body or the mind, or both. Often one finds solution in suicide.

Nature is a place with messages that are not readily or easily understood by someone surrounded by negative messages: positivity, hope, strength, and courage. Frequent access to nature and its positive effects allows a minority to unlearn that how we are composed is wrong. Nature's power to heal lies in the absence of human influence. Long-term exposure to nature allows for peace to be felt onto the physical body, the mind, and even the soul; a place to heal.



Aura is a non-traditional student pursuing a baccalaureate degree in English and Spanish. The purpose of this piece is to demonstrate a relationship between nature and human life based on the author's personal experiences.

The ocean has been a constant in my life. I was about 10 when my family and I made it a tradition to go to the beach. Together we said goodbye to the day as the sun kissed the horizon. I especially liked it when we went to the “*quiebra olas*” or where the waves would break on a walkway, in a town off the central coast of California. My brother and I would run toward the area we thought the wave would break next. The excitement of listening, running, and wanting to get splashed was what we lived for during those visits. Ten years forward I found myself, of many, at the beach once more. I was alone.

The dim streetlight in my neighborhood provided limited sight as I struggled to run and hold an armful of clothes in one arm and drag a half-zippered luggage in the other arm as I hastily crossed the street. It is two years prior to being alone on that beach and night had fallen; the residential street was absent of traffic at that moment. Except for the shouting and the sound of slamming doors coming from my brother's condominium, the neighborhood was quiet. I had just come out to my mother and her expected violent temper was on a roll and now the whole family was being let in on the news. My sister-in-law ran across the street in an attempt to keep me from fleeing. She pleads with her eyes as she says, “Mija, Mija! Wait... wait... It doesn't have to be this way, it was a misunderstanding, come back.” With panic and hurt in my eyes I reply in one swift breath, “No, you don't understand, I'm gay and that is not going to change.” The look of shock and horror filled the space between us as she slowly retreated across the street without uttering a word. The distance between my family thereafter grew alongside a spiritual pain that would attempt to break me and one I would attempt to grow accustomed to in order to keep them in my life.

Those days, months, and years I woke up to survive. I did not wake to live. Moods reflected the gloomy weather of San Francisco; a new city with unknown people. Visits to the ocean were a necessity and a vice to ignore the turmoil of war within. This turmoil masked the endless view of the sea, the gritty feel of the sand, and the distant sound of the crashing waves. Yet somehow each visit was calming. Upon parting, it felt like the weight of it all entered each foot and by the time the sand met concrete the weight was felt all over the body. Nothing seemed better, nothing felt better. The visit was simply a fix I wanted to last forever.

It was seven years after coming-out to my mother and I was visiting for the holidays, a “tradition” I kept up until then. For the first time, she was going to teach me how to cook one of my favorite dishes from my birth country of Guatemala: a vegetarian version of *chile rellenos*; the kitchen had always been her domain. The scent of the pine tree in the living room mingled with the scent of the chiles on the hot pan in the kitchen. Elvis was playing in the background until a phone conversation disrupted the mood. The words she uttered were accompanied by a lack of hesitation and a firm Spanish tone: “Of course I will vote no. I do not want homosexuals in my church.” A click,

the call was over. Elvis was still in the background but the silence between me and her was deafening. I stood still deciding to speak or remain silent. I took a deep breath and spoke. She was unapologetic about her decision and proceeded to inform me that she had not invited me to church earlier that day, that I went on my own accord and that judgement was out of her hands. I was also informed that I was required to ask permission to bring *a friend* to my brother's home because doing otherwise would be disrespectful, he was after all, the head of the family. My counter, that my nephew need not partake in this process because *his friend* is of the opposite sex as him, was met with yet another judgement that was also out of her hands. She returned her attention to the food indicating the end of exchange of words. We did not raise our voices, but they were filled with emotion. I grabbed the car rental keys and fled. My swollen eyelids prevented me from closing my eyes that night; my spiritual pain reached unknown levels and my mind knew no peace as this incident replayed over and over for a long while thereafter. The choice of shelter was the lesser of two evils: my brother's condominium. A recurring thought: The only approval I cared for caused me the most pain and it came from those that raised me and had claimed to have loved me, no matter what. Seven years had gone by and still no progress.

Between visits to the beach, music substituted the sound of the ocean in my ears, and it made moments bearable. All I could bear to see was one foot in front of the other. I was in a dream-state: I held on to a picture in a frame... I wanted them to see that love without acceptance was not enough. I found myself surrounded by others like me, yet I hid behind my smile. I blended in and felt detached from everyone and everything. Inviting others to my dream-state would only have invoked pity and missed the point of erasing the damage I was experiencing; I remained silent. Visible were the neon-colored stickers with the 10-digit line for help. At hangout spots, at subway stations, at the center where I volunteered. I wore the help-wanted suit, but I didn't feel deserving of it. After all, I had been doing an excellent job at disguising my help-wanted suit since the eighth year of my life; the knowledge of rejection had been with me since then.

My silence inhibited me from accessing that 10-digit line; the attempt on my life did not take, anyway. The attempt spoke volumes to my family members of what I tried to do but not why. They spoke for me, about me, and through me about where and with whom I should live with; the final decision, go back “home” and live with my mother. To this day I can still recall every step I took during the attempt, but I do not remember how I arrived back in my hometown after their decision.

It was night then; dread and fear were all I felt. I knew in my soul that I could not remain with them beyond that night. I didn't have a flight plan, but I knew I was leaving somehow. The thought of meeting up with the rest of *la familia* crawled into my head with a heavy burden. The existence of sin committing another sin: the lesbian that tried to commit suicide.

I could feel the imposed shame that I should feel because to them I am a sinner. The predictable conversations of *guidance* on how to rid myself of that shame played in my head like a marquee with an endless battery life. A window of opportunity presented itself. I called a known number from memory. Panic in every moment and in every step was felt during the process of fleeing. Did my brother need to come back for something he forgot? Would he call me? Would a missed call give him cause for concern? Would he race back to the place? I heaved the same piece of luggage that I had dragged across the street that painful night almost one year ago, onto the bed of my friend's truck. She took me to the bus station and helped buy a ticket back to my home. My eyes said thank you more than my words, a brief hug, and withheld tears, I climbed onto the bus and heaved a sigh of relief; the feelings of burden started to dissipate. I started to feel slightly safe. I was still in my dream-state. So, I kept on dreaming. How do you make a negative-tangible-thing go away?

I found myself bombarded by sunny days, shimmering clear ocean waters, and bountiful nature wherever I looked. These elements jabbed at my dream-state but no crack or puncture or rumble was felt. I concluded that I was to co-exist with the knowledge of rejection and the pain that trailed it. Still, the elements of nature persisted but I continued to be oblivious. The tides of Hawai'i brought friends; amongst them, a lifeline, someone who squirmed their way into my heart and soul; gradually, we made things better. Over time and in between bonding experiences with others, I no longer could neglect the beautiful different shades of green that clung to a life with roots. I could not look away from the iridescent blue of magnanimous force. I grew accustomed to the feel of the cool, hard, and uneven gray surface on my feet. Unfamiliar energies were taking over my being. Out of unknown courage, I uttered the words aloud to the source of my pain in Spanish "I'm tired! I cannot do this anymore... It's been fifteen ***damn years!" I didn't need the helpline, this time. I woke up.

I saw the perpetual bond between myself, the ocean, and my found family. Like nature, the image had no borders. Like the ocean, the image was fluid. Salty drops flooded my face, and the healing began. The dead grass, the stubborn bushes, the uneven dirt boulders, and the ocean are imperfect and seek no justification. Together they complement each other and know their purpose; I saw a reflection of myself.

Every time I visit this place, after parking and walking toward it, a sense of calm comes over me. My ears tune into

the sound of my sandals and the small pebbles they step on. My eyes notice where the concrete jungle ends. This place is governed by what nature throws around and I am privileged to bear witness. The sun starts to greet the world. The cool of the ocean breeze is beckoned away by the warmth of the rising orb and in that moment, there is no other place I'd like to be. Mini rainbows appear after a wave has crashed on the rocks and excitement rushes as I wait for the next one to appear. The colors of the morning come to light, and they revitalize my being. Looking upward, I feel the warmth on my face, my neck, and my ears and I smile. I squint past the rays to see the eternal baby blue above, grateful that nothing is blocking my view. The perfectly shaped plumeria and its delicate scent reaches my nose and is whisked away by the ocean mist. Looking forward, my eyes feast on the wonder and beauty of the big blue. In this place, I simply exist. I do not endure being objectified because of my anatomy; or of being labeled this or that because of my brown skin; or of being told I am a sinner; or hearing it is not enough for lack of enjoyment when heavenly bodies move around a pole. I simply am.

I revere the calmness between the swells and the violent loud crashes of the waves. This rhythmic pattern serves as a reminder of my days past and how to face the now. A few moments here and the scent of my car freshener, the coffee I am holding, and the bagel I had on the way are forgotten. Water lands differently every time on the cliffside, it is beautiful and artistic and yet not permanent. I get lost in observing how the critters on the rocks move in concert with the gushing water that intrudes on their path or of the splash that lands on them. I notice how they peacefully go along with it. Their bodies do not show a sense of panic, but a mere movement to this side or that side, as if in a dance. I wonder what it would be like to come out of a hole burrowed, a hole that kept them safe, and encounter moving water and strange creatures such as myself. Of both entities, I wonder which one they would deem friend or a foe.

The immersion of colors and radiance from the sun saturates me and as I go to leave, the path behind me is colored with all that I feel. The sound of my sandals stepping on small pebbles and the slight creak of my car door have become familiar. I am privileged to have stepped into nature. I relish the thought of witnessing the changes in it and of those around me. I see the path I stand in and imagine the road ahead. I wake to live. I wake to live.