

On activism as a creative form of healing



Artist, activist, and minister Houston Cypress on taking a joyful approach to storytelling, the power of "no," and why wrestling with the darkness can be vital to one's practice.

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As told to Willa Köerner, 2898 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Poetry](#), [Activism](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Mental health](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

You're a poet, an artist, an environmental activist, and also an ordained minister. Do all these different pursuits blend together into one practice, or do they feel like separate parts of your life?

You know, I used to think that it was all separate. And I had been working that way. But then I started realizing how compartmentalization affects us. I live and grew up in an environment, a wetlands, that has been compartmentalized. Just seeing the effects of me trying to keep things separate in my mind, and how we're trying to restore things in our environment in isolation—this dichotomy made me realize I need to try to heal these divides. Not only in the land, but in my life. So, lately it's all been coming into an integrated whole for me.

Everything comes together for me through language and words. I grew up in the Miccosukee tribe, an indigenous community in South Florida. Our community was almost wiped out in the Indian War era. So, language has always been vital for me and my community. With the words that we speak, we can have an understanding of our family, have a respect for the plants that heal us, and communicate with the universe. In ceremony, in song, in laughter, and in the gardens—all of these things are connected by the language that we speak. So, this great respect for language—for both my Miccosukee language, and then learning about communication in the media—is what connects all of my work. Being a Miccosukee person, I've seen how interpretation and translation processes are vital. It's how we convey everything, from what the elders are suffering from, to what the youth are trying to grow into. We need to be able to translate our ideas from the Miccosukee world into other worlds.

So, how do words get put into action? Is it through science, and proposals? Is it through policies that are enacted into law? Is it through a ritual or a ceremony? Or is it through a community getting together? These are some of the questions that I've been thinking about—translating words into action. Respecting language and the act of communicating, as an outgrowth of my native community trying to survive.



The Tamiami Trail heads west through the River of Grass section of the Greater Everglades, compartmentalizing a dry Everglades National Park & a flooded Miccosukee homelands.

I'm curious to hear more about the [Love the Everglades Movement](#) that you work on. While it's environmental activism, it's obvious you also bring a lot of creativity to the table with it. As someone with a very creative brain, how do you put these skills to use to make a difference for the land and for your community?

Well, we're definitely experimenting to figure this out. One of the things that we do are field trips into the Everglades, which we call excursions. It's a way to invite guest artists to come in and work with us, so we're kind of performing in that environment. We like to describe these excursions as a space for creation. And it's not only about the collaborations that come from bringing these people together—it's also about the conversations that arise from it. But the space for creation includes everything around us. We have to acknowledge the sanctity of the present. For example, when we're facilitating discussions or encounters, we recognize that even these activities make space for creation. In this way, we like to structure activities poetically, with a sense of music and rhythm. We like to bring in different disciplines. And we definitely work to evoke strong images and feelings. We also want to be able to engage with all sorts of people.

These are some of the ways that we invite people to engage creatively as we work holistically to both support the indigenous community, and create positive change in the water and on the ground. In this type of work, there are a lot of opportunities for creative brains to participate or suggest or innovate or experiment. Or to find ways—new ways—to listen and document and reinterpret.

What do you use as your metric for success for these types of projects? Is it more of an awareness thing, or are you looking to generate policy change, or hit certain numbers, or...?

It depends on the project. In terms of the excursions that we do, seeing new projects arise out of those feels like a success. Some examples of projects that have come out of excursions are art exhibitions with students, new curriculums, and policy proposals that we can either support or educate on. Research projects have also come out of our excursions. So I think seeing what comes out of bringing people together is one way of measuring success.

I feel like we do work in four different realms: art, education, spiritual work, and community work. So, for each realm that we're participating in, we can kind of look at things differently. Some of it is about the quality of stories, and other things are about the quantity of people and numbers.

When we come down to political stuff, I think signatures and numbers are good. It's kind of hard to measure spiritual success, but overall, it just depends where we are and what we're working towards.



Jean Sarmiento with the Miccosukee community during their Fall Everglades Water Quality Study

Can you share what you've learned about storytelling in your work? Have you found any tools or strategies that help you tell stories in more powerful or effective ways?

You know, I encourage people to choose their words joyously. In terms of the Love the Everglades Movement, and the environment politics that we have to engage in, it can get very toxic sometimes. Choosing words joyously is important because people are often depressed, angry, or frustrated, and our words can change that.

I also find that when we empower people to tell their own stories, that those stories become more vital and important. So, the workshops where we share skills or trainings—some of the most powerful stories come out of those experiences. Whether it's a poetry workshop with a writer in the Everglades, or a filmmaking workshop, it's always about giving the tools to other people, and encouraging them and guiding them along the way to get their own voices out there. I think that's where we've been most successful.

How did you get started doing all these different kinds of projects? What has been the evolution from when you just started out, to where you are now?

I basically started out by just hanging with my grandpa, and collecting wood with him in the swamp. He was a woodcarver, and he taught me how to carve wood. So, that involved a mix of storytelling, hiking in the woods, watching out for scary things, singing songs for spiritual protection, and just having a good time on the way back. I think those are some of the seeds that started everything for me.

How did you go from this experience, to building out your own practice and platform? Was there one opportunity or breakthrough moment?

You know, I think it was really going to the Art Institute in downtown Miami. I was in my mid-20s, and by that time, my work was more about art and community service, and not necessarily about activism. But I made friends with a fellow student, and invited him to come along to some environment studies that my community was doing. He was really inspired by that experience, and he proposed some ideas for how we could share that experience with others. His challenge was, "How can we get other people to care?" That was about 10 years ago. Since then, we've done a lot more of this collaborative, integrative, community-oriented kind of work.



MDC's JUBILATION DANCE ENSEMBLE performing at our Annual Everglades Symposium—a forum for showcasing community initiatives which inspire action by engaging the environment in innovative ways.

When you're working on a new project, how does your process tend to unfold? Does it flow organically, or do you have a particular routine or set of goals you're always working towards?

What works best for me is brainstorming and words. The text is the foundation, so I always have to start with words. I sketch with words, and sculpt with genre. And then I like to think about, "Audiovisually, how can I realize this project?" I like to think of the whole process as literary and cinematic. This is probably because I've done a lot of work in video, TV, and film. So I just have a lot of training that helps me think that way. Putting together sequences, storyboarding, and always going back to a text as the foundation.

When I get stuck, deadlines help. But overall, I always see time as my biggest friend. I like to work back from the end to the beginning to decide how I'll spend my time. At this point in my career, I realize that I need a certain amount of time to distill and refine and experiment with things. And, I need a certain amount of time to just explore. So I work best when I have a sense of timing, within which I can lay out the general phases of my process. Like, explore, brainstorm, refine, then wrap things up into whatever the form needs to be.

Do you feel like you're always working off some master plan of things you want to accomplish? I'm curious how you decide what to work on, and how you create that time-based structure for yourself.

My work is led by my spiritual challenges. My main challenge used to be about translating and interpreting for my community. And then it became about bridge-building between my community and others. But now I'm kind of looking ahead to more gender diversity issues, because these are the things that some of my community members are struggling with. And I want to be able to support them. These are things that are in my heart these days. So, I guess my work follows my spiritual challenges, and the spiritual growth that I'm working through at the moment.

For other people looking to become more spiritually aligned with their deeper self and community and world, do you have any suggestions?

Well for me, being somebody that works in environmental realms, I find a lot of healing comes for me and others in this space. So I encourage people to get out into nature. And I also like to help people overcome their fears, because a lot of people are afraid of what's in the woods. But there's there's magic in the mysteries out there.

How does fear play into a creative practice? Or into working and living in general?

Hmm, right—how do we overcome our fears. And, do we want to overcome them? Or do we want to wrestle with that darkness? And what does the darkness yield when we wrestle it? We all want to find some sort of a stillness, so yeah, I think these are definitely important questions that people should engage with. Because the darkness also has beautiful magic and power to share with us. But I think that whatever we can do to find stillness, or to find healing, or to recover those parts of ourselves that we have had to compromise, or that got stolen from us through trauma—I think that these are some of the darkneses that are vital to try to unlock. Healing is such an important part of the creative process. Wrestling with that darkness, and making friends with it, is vital.

I like to do that by finding stillness, practicing meditation, being in nature, and by being in ceremony. Being in service, too. Like, okay, all of that isolated activity is fine. But also, you can find a lot of healing by being in a community. So, community service is vital for me, too.



Everglades Cleanups occur regularly during the year, and are often scheduled to coincide with Meteor Showers. This offers participants a chance to help the ecosystem, and sparks wonder and appreciation in beautiful settings like the Big Cypress National Preserve.

Obviously it's a tough time for a lot of people. What do you think is needed to heal, not necessarily on a global level, but perhaps on a national level? What do you think people can do to help this healing process along?

I've been thinking about the need to speak the truth lately. Because the truth has become distorted these days. In the environmental realm, data is often either withheld or distorted. So there needs to be truth told there. And in my own community, we have a legacy of trauma from the Indian War era. And I'm sure that there are a lot of other indigenous communities still dealing with that, too. Truth telling is vital. Not only the truth telling within our own lives, but the truth telling within our communities and within our nations.

So, once we have a good, hard look at that truth, then we can come together around that, and plan strategies for dealing with it. Lately I've been looking into truth and reconciliation processes for that reason. But I'm also critical of these processes. Because here I am [on a trip] in Canada, and I'm definitely seeing how the indigenous communities here are frustrated by, or critical of, the truth-finding and reconciliation processes that have occurred here. So definitely, truth telling is vital to healing. But it's not easy for people, and it's not easy for communities. For some it is, but for a lot it isn't.

In order to heal, I think that a willingness to be vulnerable is vital, too.

Do you think that artists have a particular responsibility to find different ways to tell the truth? How can artists engage with the truth in a way that is helpful?

I like the instigation, the disruption, and the interruption of things. And I like to base that on the idea of the trickster. The trickster is so vital in my own community's mythology, and I like to think of the artist in that role. Or, I like to be the artist in that role. Artists can help things not be stuck, and not be like mud. When things are in that nonmoving sort of space, the artist needs to come in and shake it up. Especially when people think they have the truth, but it's not. When people are so certain about one version of things—that's when we need the other perspective to move the discussion forward. And so, artists play a great role in that. Whether we are provoking new perspectives or new feelings, or leading the way to new processes, or conceptualizing new imaginary worlds. It's about dreaming things into action.

When artists are working to engage politically and shake things up, what's the best way for them to find an audience for their work? A lot of people might feel like they're operating within a bubble. How do you break out of your easy audience, and shake it up and diversify the types of people that you're reaching?

I think that's a big part of community building, and making new friendships. I enjoy meeting new people. It's very easy to stay in your own world, and breaking out of our bubbles is a challenge, but we have to try. We have to try hard to go out of our own communities. I guess that's where I'm challenged right now, too.

We're definitely working to make friends with new communities. We are doing a lot of community service, and trying to break out of our own world by serving other people's needs. And again, I think that this work of empowering others by offering trainings is a good way to break out of your bubble. Because once people have their own projects and initiatives that they're working on, then we can support one another, and it becomes a two-way street.

Is there one piece of advice you'd want to pass on to other people trying to live a fulfilling creative life in this day and age?

Yes—learn the power of "no." Ask yourself, "What can I take on, and what can I not take on? What am I comfortable with, and what am I not comfortable with? What is moral for me, and what is moral for others?" Have good boundaries for yourself, and maintain and respect other people's boundaries. I guess this comes down to sovereignty—just respecting each other's sovereignty. As much as "yes" can be great, "no" is also very powerful.



Excursions are unique explorations that bring people together, spark collaborations, and opens hearts & minds to the majesty of the Greater Everglades.

Reverend Houston Cypress recommends:

Ponder the Disco Ball.
Anything by Zhang Yimou.
Look for the portals between worlds.
Sing often, especially to plants.
Embrace the Medicine.

Name

Reverend Houston Cypress

Vocation

Artist, Activist, Poet, Minister



