

Frontlines: Encounters with Difference

A Seed Essay for Shared Exploration and Collective Imagination

We meet difference every day.

Sometimes it's gentle: a different accent, an unfamiliar belief, a new way of working. Other times it's more abrupt: a protest on the street, a diagnosis, a cultural or spiritual worldview that sits uncomfortably alongside our own. And not all difference comes in human form; sometimes it's the presence of an animal, a forest, a season turning, or a silence that stretches longer than we're used to. All these encounters shape us, whether we notice or not.

This workshop is the starting point for something more than a conversation. It's the opening move in a shared inquiry, a project we may co-create together over time. Or we may leave behind as an interesting idea...

At its heart is a simple but demanding question:

How can we practice ways of being in which difference is allowed to do its work on us—softening, stretching, stirring?

The idea is not to master difference, or to overcome it, but to let it 'unmake' us just enough, to disrupt our assumptions, to call our habits into question, to expand what we're capable of perceiving, holding, and becoming.

The project we're inviting you to imagine with us will have a definite shape and a clear ambition. The shape, timeline, form, activities, will be decided collectively. The ambition is this:

To create spaces, practices, and relationships that help us stay with difference long enough to be changed by it.

Two Familiar Ways We Tend to Meet Difference

Let's begin by naming two common approaches.

The Utilitarian View

Here, we ask: how is this difference useful?

How can this perspective improve our outcomes? How might this person's background enrich the team? How could this community insight help shape better services? How can I stop this difference from disturbing progress?

There's nothing inherently wrong with this approach. But if we stop there, difference becomes something to be managed or leveraged. We extract its value without necessarily entering into true relationship. Even nature gets folded into this lens, "natural capital," "ecosystem services", as if the forests, oceans, mountains and deserts needs to justify themselves to us.

The Care-Oriented View

A more generous posture asks: how is this difference beautiful?

How can I honour it, protect it, care for it? How can I be attentive to its vulnerability or richness?

This lens is deeply needed, especially when working across experiences of marginalisation, grief, power, class or cultural erasure. But even care, if we're not careful, can be one-directional. It can make the carer the centre, and the cared-for an object of empathy rather than a full participant in shared becoming.

Both of these postures, utility and care, have value. But we are perhaps seeking something deeper.

Other Ways of Meeting Difference

To co-create this project, we'll need to explore and practise other possibilities, ways of encountering difference that are relational, reciprocal, and transformative. Here are a few lenses that might help us think together.

Difference as Ethical Disruption

Sometimes difference stops us in our tracks. It confronts us. Emmanuel Levinas wrote that the face of the Other breaks through our self-centredness and calls us into response. This is particularly true when we encounter someone whose identity, background, or suffering we might usually overlook, because of race, class, disability, hierarchy or history. What does it take to stay in that moment, instead of retreating to comfort or control?

Difference as Dialogue

Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer spoke of a “fusion of horizons”, not collapsing into agreement, but allowing our perspectives to stretch toward each other. Dialogue becomes a space of tension and growth, not persuasion. When we speak across politics, faiths, generations, or worldviews, what matters is not winning but staying in the room.

Difference as Creative Tension

In process philosophy, difference is not a problem to solve, it is the condition of emergence. Newness comes from difference. So we might ask: What can this friction give birth to? What kinds of practices or environments allow difference to work on us, sparking new possibilities for relating, learning, creating?

Difference as Kinship

From many Indigenous and ecological perspectives, difference is not just human. The land, the animals, the seasons, even the spirits carry their own forms of intelligence. These are not resources or metaphors. They are relatives. What happens when we meet more-than-human difference not as background, but as voice?

Difference as Mystery

Sometimes we cannot understand. We don't know what someone has lived through. We can't categorise their choices or beliefs. And that's okay. In these moments, the task is not to fix or even to empathise, but simply to witness, to stay close without grasping. Simone Weil called this kind of attention “a form of prayer.”

What Might We Do Together?

This project will emerge from our shared curiosity. But here are some things we might choose to do, together:

- Create practices of deep listening, especially across power and positionality.
- Develop rituals or spaces where people can encounter difference with care but without control.
- Host story circles where lived experiences can be spoken, heard, and held with dignity.
- Explore creative methods, drawing, movement, poetry, silence, to express what language can't always reach.
- Work with conflict not as a failure but as fertile ground for relationship.
- Learn from more-than-human voices, walking, noticing, listening with the land.

But these are only seeds. What matters most is what you bring.

What Excites You? What Might You Offer?

As we begin this journey, we invite you to consider:

What kind of encounters with difference have most changed you?

What are you curious to explore now?

What skills, stories, sensitivities, or commitments might you bring to this work?

What excites or stirs you about the possibility of co-creating something together?

What kind of space or practice do you long for, but haven't yet found?

This project won't be led from the front. It will be shaped in the middle, through what we each contribute, and through how we listen.

Final Invitation

This is not a project of inclusion. It is not about adding voices to an existing table. It is a project of reimagining the table itself, what it's for, how we sit around it, and who or what gets to speak.

It's not a programme to "develop" anyone. It's a shared inquiry into how we might become more human together, and more attuned to the vast field of difference in which we already live.

If you feel stirred by any part of this, you're warmly invited to help shape what comes next. This is the frontline, not of battle, but of becoming.

Let's listen together. Let's stay with what difference has to teach us. And let's build something we cannot build alone.