



Action Learning Fellowship – 2020 Final Shareout Series

By Maya Carlson, ALF Fellow

The BKF Fellowship has brought me to think about cycles of growth and the time it takes for things to fully take form. The seasons we all need for rooting, for hibernation, for growth and fruit. As someone who strives to be in deep relationship with land, particularly with plant medicines, I wanted to find a plant ally that could help to orient myself, and you dear reader, to the growth I've experienced with BKF in the last 10 months. The plant that felt right is called mullein.

Mullein is a wild medicinal, biennial herb with soft velvet leaves and a burst of yellow flowers when in blooms. It takes two years to fully flower. As I have been with Bioneers for two years, a biennial cycle felt apt for this particular revolution.

In its first annual cycle, the mullein plant grows roots and a small bushy rosette. It establishes its body in the earth, though remains small and low to the ground. My first year at Bioneers seems to mirror that of the mullein lifecycle. It was a year of learning the soil beneath my feet, of understanding the drives of other life within the ecosystem. It was a dance between wanting to grow and not yet having the resources to fully do so. I needed that time to deepen my relationships with the web of life that I was connected to and feel into what nutrients, energy and conditions were there to nourish my work. In the Fall of 2019 I joined the BKF Fellowship at the end of this first full year with Bioneers. I came into the BKF Oasis-Retreat just a few days after the Bioneers Conference both buzzing and depleted. I had big visions for the projects and partnerships that would unfold in 2020. I was eager to get underway, offering more gatherings for youth working in climate justice and felt so held by the circle of inspiring women around me on the cliffside looking out at the Pacific Ocean.

However, as foreshadowed during the Oasis-retreat through our Fireweed Expedition and a statewide electrical blackout to mitigate rampant wildfires, the conditions I was working in would continue to be in perpetual upheaval. I would need to continue adapting to meet the circumstances as they arose with grace and care. By January of 2020, the project I initially intended to explore with BKF was no longer growing, and I needed to revision where my energy needed to go.

Mullein, after its first year, enters a period of dormancy during winter months. Some say it needs the shock and refuge of cooler weather to provoke its growth to come. In the winter and early months of the BKF Fellowship my attention turned inwards. I deepened my personal commitment to somatic practices, unpacking my own white supremacy, and I began hosting an online convening series to discuss Polyvagal Theory with a group of friends using the Art of Convening. My work with Bioneers re-oriented away from designing new initiatives towards telling a better story of what we do. It was a necessary season of reflection and reprioritization, rooting deeper rather than stretching outwards. The BKF community continued to remind me to come back to *my* Heart of the Matter, giving me permission to focus on who I wanted to be in authentic engagement with my work and my relationships.



As Covid-19 re-oriented all of our ways of being with the world, I felt as if I had been preparing for some time. All of the steps I had been taking to turn inwards and store energy close to my center were supporting my resilience through the tumultuous uncertainty of a global pandemic. It felt right to have contracted my outward growth and focus on my sturdiness in the soil. A few months into Covid-19, we are all existing in a different world. With new paradigms, come opportunities for re-imagining what is possible in how we relate and engage with one another. My ecosystem saw an arrival of new partnerships both professional and personal, inviting me towards deeper connection and commitment to my projects.

When springtime comes, the mullein plant bolts, growing flowers, fruits and seeds in the summertime. Despite the physical limitations of connecting in person during Covid, my energy still expanded outwards as I began to work with an herbalist collective, plant my own garden, recommit to local justice and mutual aid work and explored new collaborations with a youth partner organization of Bioneers.

During the spring, in one of our BKF Oasis calls, the theme of legacy was brought up.

What do I wish to be remembered for? What is my legacy? What are the fruits I want to offer?

The BKF Oasis and the Goddesses that are its wellspring brought me back to my knowing that my *being* is my work, my wisdom, and my gifts. The initiatives I design through Bioneers are one of many ways in which I am in relationship. Just as important are my offerings of land restoration, plant remedies, somatics, justice, mutual aid, and other forms of care.

Every part of the mullein plant can be used at different parts of its life cycle. It is a gentle and calming herb that soothes inflamed and irritated nerves. The soft, velvet leaves can be used for all forms of respiratory ailments. They can be smoked to coat and cleanse the lungs or to line your shoes for a long walk. Mullein leaves can be steeped in an infusion to aid in digestion and in chest pains. Mullein flowers offer a soothing and cleansing effect on the skin and can also be used as a yellow dye. The full stock can be lit as a torch and has been used for centuries as a protector against dark spirits.

In summertime, the bright sturdy stalks of mullein take over roadsides, parking lot cracks and riverbanks across the country. Bees and other pollinators make their rounds, casting off seeds into the next life cycle of this plant, weaving their medicine into the larger web of life around it. I've also felt more embedded in the communities around me, sharing resources and mutual support in all kinds of ways.

The collaborations and projects I've seeded this summer at Bioneers are only possible through our diverse ecosystem of partners and allies. In partnership with a group called Mycelium Youth Network, I have been designing an initiative called *Weaving Circles of Collective Resilience (WCCR)*, which will be made up of Talking Circles and Storytelling Mentorship for youth across the country. These convenings for youth to be with culturally-representative elders, advisors and movement leaders will foster self-awareness, resilience, and relational leadership. Our society is experiencing a reckoning moment. Many people are more fearful of and more isolated from their neighbors. Many feel less stable and less safe. The intention of WCCR is to address these issues by providing youth with tools and support from an intergenerational intercultural ecosystem that nurtures a felt sense belonging, resilience and agency.



The seasons to come will not be familiar, there are no precedents for these times. In the midst of so much rupture and rebuilding, we need each other and ourselves all the more. I'm so very appreciative of the spaciousness and refuge that we created in the Oases. It gave me permission to slow down and listen a little more. It gave me room to find unexpected answers in myself and others. It helped me lean into trusting the seasons we all move through in our own time.

May our fruits be plentiful and varied, may our cycles be patient and attuned. May our ecosystem continue to thrive in all of its reciprocities, complexities and multiplicities!

With so much gratitude,
Maya