

Body as Governance

Envisioning the Way we Work

Since incorporating as a nonprofit in August 2020, members of Righting Relations have been having conversations about how we work together, or how we'd like to work together. Many of our members have experienced harm and trauma from working within toxic organizations, and much of the nonprofit industrial complex is rooted in hierarchical, white supremacist, colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist structures that are designed to undermine the work being done in communities. Our goal was, and still is, to imagine an alternative.

We spent years connecting with and listening to Elders and Knowledge Keepers from Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, learning about different models of governance and protocols for being together.¹ We made mistakes too, that caused harm and challenged us to revisit our own internalised systems of oppression, and as a network we sought to learn from them and incorporate those teachings into our conversations.

In October 2024, the National Steering Committee (NSC) of Righting Relations came together in Tkaronto, on land that is part of the Dish With One Spoon wampum, the territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnaabe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. Over 3 days, the NSC worked to bring together the knowledge and teachings gathered over four years and cultivate a model of governance that would accurately represent the way that Righting Relations strives to operate and enable us to live our core values. This is the image that they created, which they offer for exploration and further discussion.

Overview

The body offers us a vision for a model of governance that is structured yet organic, stable yet flexible, and creates space for the heart and spirit as well as functionality. Our body as governance rejects a colonial notion of the body as a vehicle governed by the mind and instead embraces an understanding of bodies as a collective entity or system. Each of the parts are deeply connected: they each contribute and receive, they produce and rest, and they do so as a whole.

Not all bodies function in the same way, but they are all the same in that the different parts of the body rely on each other to function. If a body doesn't use the eyes to see, it finds a new way to navigate, and it does so with the collaboration of all the other parts. Bodies are not perfect: they are susceptible to illness, pain, indigestion, injury, but they respond and heal as a whole. If

¹ See [Summary of Learnings from June 2022](#), [Governance and the Longhouse notes](#), and [Righting Relations Protocols and Parameters](#)

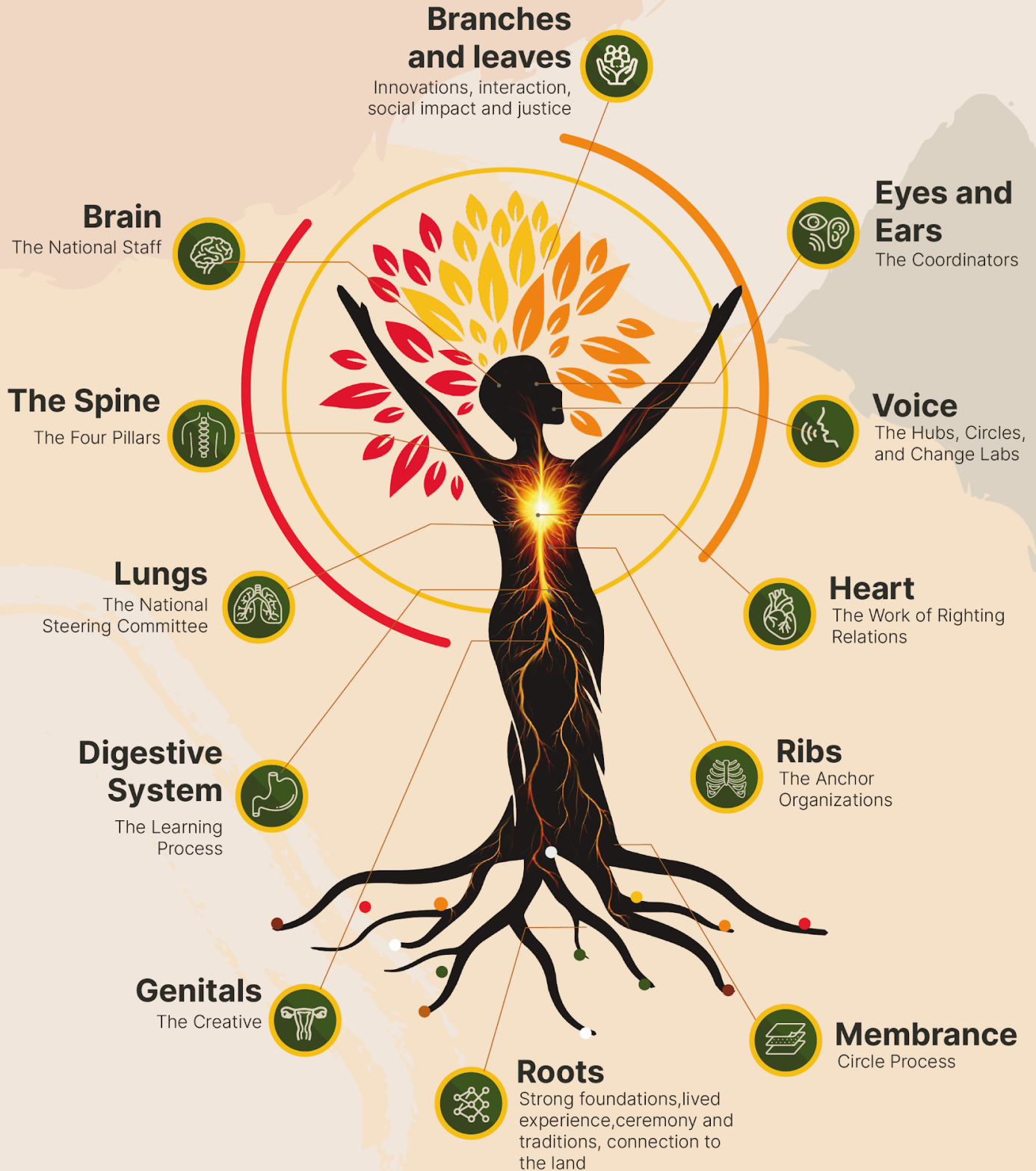


we ignore the needs or importance of one part of our body, the rest suffers, and the body as a whole can break down and cease functioning. The same happens to an organization that devalues its staff, its members, its values, or any other aspect of its being. Body as governance is not a perfect, one-to-one metaphor, nor is it intended to be; instead, it is an invitation to reject hierarchical ways of working and instead focus on all the ways that each aspect of an organization is integral to its success as a whole.

The image of the body as a model of governance can grow and deepen as much as we need it to. We envision our events as our limbs, reaching out into the world, connecting with what is out there, and bringing it in. Just as our feet keep us grounded, ceremony anchors us to the land and keeps us connected with mother earth; our spirit is the healing that we go through as members and as a network. Each individual member is a cell and their lived experience is like DNA, the building blocks of existence. Our hair is our strength and beauty, our collective memory. We see our nose twitch as it sniffs, offering us insight into what surrounds us, the context in which we're working, preparing us for what is coming. We imagine funding and opportunities for collaboration as the blanket that wraps around us: we can function naked, but they offer us additional warmth, security, and connection with others.

In imagining our governance as a body, we invite each other to think about our relationship to this work like we think about ceremony. There is no drive-thru sweat lodge: we all show up, we are all actively engaged in the process. There is reciprocity, buy-in, a token of commitment. The offer of body as governance is for you, for your spirit, to be as generous as you're able, and if that doesn't speak to you, or you're not ready, then it's the promise that we will still be here when you are.

Body as Governance





The Heart: The Work of Righting Relations

The work that we do is at the heart of who we are as an organisation. It is our lifeblood, what animates and sustains us. It is everywhere, in every part of Righting Relations as an organization, and we are led by the work first and foremost.

The Spine/Skeleton: The Four Pillars

The backbone of Righting Relations are [the four pillars](#) of our work - popular education, women-led, righting relations, and building capacity. These pillars provide form and structure for all that we do and that we are. They keep us upright and give us a stable core around which to grow. They not only inform the work, they inform each element of the organization and allow it to move throughout the world.

The Voice: The Hubs, Circles, and Change Labs

We see the regional Hubs and Circles of Righting Relations, and our National Change Labs, as our voice: they are how we share the work with the world, how we connect with community and build relationships. They are how we communicate and interact with others, how people come to know who we are and how they become folded into our heart and our spirit.

The Lungs: The National Steering Committee

The National Steering Committee are the lungs of Righting Relations: their function is to take in information from the Circles, the Hubs, members, and the world at large and to create and sustain mechanisms to provide for the work and allow it to move forward in a good way.

The Ribs: The Anchor Organizations

Our anchor organizations act as the ribs of the organization, providing structure and stability for the heart (the work) and the lungs (the National Steering Committee). By supporting the administrative work of the Hubs, they hold the work together, and offer a foundation off of which the voice is projected into the world.

The Brain: The Secretariat

The National staff, the secretariat for Righting Relations, act as the brain of the organization. Just like the brain receives input from throughout the body and works to coordinate the functions of the whole, they take in information, insight, and feedback from throughout the organization and work to ensure its effective operation.

The Eyes and Ears: The Coordinators

The Coordinators, whether they are a Circle Coordinator or a Hub Coordinator, are like the eyes and ears of Righting Relations. Their core role is to be aware of what is happening in the Hubs and the Circles, to listen to the community and the members, to notice when there is tension or when people are burning out, to look for opportunities, and to share that information with the



rest of the organization. It is their guidance that finds the path for the work and allows us to navigate the needs of community in the work.

The Digestive System: The Learning Process

Imagine that knowledge is the nourishment that we are ingesting; we need time to digest it, to process and reflect on it, to identify what will help us grow, what might cause us harm, and what we might not need right now. We need to eat to live, but without a process for digestion, eating has no benefit. We need our colon, our liver, our kidneys, etc. to filter out the waste - the colonialism, the racism, the violence and oppression - and let it pass through us. Without this system, those toxins will build up, slow us down, and eventually cause us harm. Like with the body, we still sometimes get bloated and have stomach aches, but they, too, are part of that process of learning and digestion.

The Genitals: The Creative

Righting Relations grounds itself in the notion of creativity, renewal, pleasure, joy, and art as a foundation of our values and practise. Just as our genitals in all their diversity are how we perpetuate ourselves as a species, creativity and joy is how we grow as a network and a movement. Like the breasts, the creative can also offer nourishment for future generations, a way of nurturing them and offering them a healthy start from which to cultivate their own bodies, their own ways of being and moving in the world.

The Membranes: Circle Process

Circle process is an essential element of the way that we work together as Righting Relations; we often speak about the protection of the circle, and the need to protect the circle, and in that sense it acts as the skin and other membranes. Circle process is an intentional and mindful way of ensuring that what comes into Righting Relations does so in a good way. No one can demand entry into the space: there must be time to transition and time to learn. The circle provides that opportunity and that protection, but we still need to protect and care for the circle: we can choose who and what we invite into the circle, when, and how. Tools of violence and hatred - racism, white supremacy, ableism, sexism, homo- and transphobia and other forms of discrimination are harmful to every part of the body, and are not welcome.