



# Re-Rooting: A Landmark Map to the Wild Soul



Written by Courtney Chandrea  
Illustrated by Erica Wilson

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## A Landmark Map to the Wild Soul

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Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation

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Illustrated by Erica Wilson



Dream the Wilderness Books

*For my daughters, Yaya and Pua - thank you for showing me the path home.*

-C.C

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*"The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other.."*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

*"The Earth is not a problem to be solved; it is a living being to which we belong. The world is part of our own self and we are a part of its suffering wholeness. Until we go to the root of our image of separateness, there can be no healing. And the deepest part of our separateness from creation lies in our forgetfulness of its sacred nature, which is also our own sacred nature."*

-Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

*"Truly, to be an effective activist requires an equivalent inner activism."*

- Charles Eisenstein

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# Introduction

We are born wild. Covered in blood and wailing, we enter this world. When we relieve ourselves, a father's lap serves just as well as a diaper, and we have no qualms about disturbing our mother from her square eight hours when we are hungry.

As we grow older, we learn to expect certain kinds of behaviors from ourselves and others. We eat with the proper utensils, we poop in the designated areas, and we know better than to wake a sleeping adult without sufficient cause. However, no matter how many rules of etiquette we learn, something wild remains.

When we laugh or cry, dance or sing, even in church, this wildness is with us. In these moments, our body becomes both temple and fervent prayer—it is a musical instrument, and wildness is the song that it plays.

Nevertheless, most of us live in fear of our own wildness. We try to limit the raw and unexpected from our lives as much as we are able, shutting out that which is not easily tamed.

In denying our wildness, we mute the song of our soul. Our prayers are spoken without heart. Our songs become flat and limp. With no call of the soul, how will there ever be the yearned-for response?

“In denying our wildness, we mute the song of our soul”

When we push down our inner nature, we weaken our hearts and bring illness into ourselves. And when we are ill, we bring illness to the things we touch. As Clarissa Pinkola Estés says in her introduction of *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, "It's not by accident that the pristine wilderness of our planet disappears as the understanding of our own wild nature fades."<sup>ii</sup>

The uncomfortable truth about wildness is that it will always be beyond our control. The wild is so much larger than us and acts through us in ways we can never predict. This can be scary. The wild doesn't care much about our creature comforts, our preferences, our reputations. It certainly doesn't care about human legacy, linearity, "progress," social standing, and it's not afraid of death. In fact, the Wild and Death are close allies and friends.

The good news? We can learn to embrace the wild as *our* close ally and friend. In the process, we learn that championing ourselves doesn't mean self-domination, but rather, it means we learn to see ourselves wholly and to act with integrity—as part of the whole that includes and lives beyond ourselves. We begin to re-member who we are and where we came from.

## What is *wildness*?

There is a significant difference between "wildness" and "The Wild." For one thing, "wildness" is descriptive. It's a quality of being. Creatures exhibit wildness. Nature possesses wildness. The *Wild* however, is a noun. It *is* the Creature--a being, a sentient one that encompasses all things.

We often think of ourselves as being separate from the wild, but we're not. We are part of the wild, because we are born of it.

The wild, as a wraith in the Black Forest or a phantom suggestion in the recesses of one's mind, defies grasping. Go to any basic dictionary, and you'll find that the word "wild" is defined by everything that it's not. But its existence is very present in our lives—omnipresent, even. The wild is something we *feel* more than we *know*.

The wild doesn't want to be found out. The wild will do everything possible to slip out of fingers, because once caught, it will die. No matter how many holes one pokes in its cage, or live animals sacrificed to it for a meal, something of its spirit will be lost until the wild is set free again.

No, the wild does not make a good pet.

The wild does, however, make a great dance partner. She spins, flourishes, jiggles and glides. She puts on a good show, moving even the most stoic of partners. You'll laugh and cry, feel joy, anger, grief, ecstasy, jealousy, freedom...

She makes a challenging dance partner, always asking, "Will you keep up? Will you maintain an agile sense of humor as we rope around each other, or will you stiffen up and fall on a sprained limb?"

There's always that possibility; stiffening up when it would be better to bend. Why we choose to stiffen, I'm not sure. Maybe it's to re-experience that existential delight when you look up and see the radiant face of the wild and you realize that despite your lack of grace, you never lost your partner.

And no matter how well you think you might know the dance steps, the wild will always take the lead.

Despite her bad rap, the wild is merciful. She offers tonics, analgesics and ambrosias to all her children. She can be forgiving, too, offering another chance whether deserved or not. The catch? Nothing will ever go the same way as it did before.

The wild is a partner of paradoxes—both ruthless and merciful, beautiful and horrifying, cyclic yet unpredictable...

The way my life becomes enriched when I begin to see the wild as my lover! I can be walking through the woods without another human to keep me company, yet never feel alone. There, her breath caresses me with a cool touch across my shoulderblades. Yonder, I hear her sing a gently teasing song. I admire her suppleness when eyeing a piling of mushrooms on a nearby tree trunk. I bask in her delicate beauty whilst gazing upon a flower. I feel her power, pulsing and steely, when a hawk swipes before my path to nab a small rodent tucked into the grass.

Because the wild doesn't hide any of herself from me—no part of her nature is shamefully tucked away—I can feel comfortable in her company, as my whole self, without judgment.

“Wildness and vitality are one and the same.

The wild is not only lover, but mother, too. She feeds me, bathes me, tucks me in at night. The wild shows me my limitations and provides me with the experiences I need to challenge them. When I make mistakes, she makes sure I feel consequences brought about by them—but she never punishes in excess. Her motions are fair and just, always.

And *wildness*?

Wildness is the quality that extends from the Wild. It is the dress that she wears, and all of creation is draped in its train. It is that ineffable sheen and smoke wafting over and within all things. It cannot be cultivated, but it is forever abundant.

Wildness comes easy, sometimes overflowing, breaking beyond whatever dams are put in its place.

Wildness and vitality are one and the same. If we are to live holistic, fulfilling lives, we must welcome Wildness into our fold. We cannot return home without Wildness by our side. Being born of the wild, you already possess wildness, or maybe *it* possesses *you*. So, will you hold space for it, work with it and merge with it in harmony and fruitfulness? Or will it be left to break through your walls, and anything else in its way?

## How to Use this Book

This book is set up to be a six-week program aimed to reconnect you, the reader, to your own wild soul. Each week aims to explore a different aspect of wildness and is broken up into three parts: essays, mythos/meditation and activities. The essays can be read in their entirety, or in pieces if you choose. The mythos/meditations can be read as a story, or recorded and listened to as a guided meditation.

The activities are the most important feature of this book. More than the essays and meditations, these exercises are your primary avenue for sparking connection between your every-day and wild self.

This book's program can be approached within the context of a group—where you do the readings and activities separately and discuss your findings together in weekly gatherings—or it can be approached solo-style.

You may find it particularly helpful to keep a journal as you go through this course. A journal can be a great place to reflect upon everything that you discover as you explore the meditations, activities and your own thoughts. A committed journal can help you synthesize all that you learn, as well as offering a direct space for you to relate with your deeper, creative self. Track how your life changes as you explore each aspect of wildness. What are you learning from the wild? What gifts does the wild bring?

Do not feel obligated to read each bit of text, or complete every meditation or activity. We all have full, busy lives and this course is intended to supplement them rather than dominate them. Do what you can, and what feels good. This book is designed to be read several times over if desired, providing a new and unique experience with every read-through.

That being said, when you select different parts of the book to engage with, try to venture beyond what immediately grabs your interest. By all means, do what excites you the most. And once you have done, pick something that you would otherwise pass over —either because you have judgments about it, or it just didn't strike you as interesting. These dismissals can sometimes indicate that you have a block, blind spot or gap in those areas of your psyche, and exploring them has the potential to reveal unforeseen growth.

This book need not be approached as a six-week course, either. Pick it up at will, and open it to a random page. See what you discover. Keep it on a coffee table for frequent, casual engagement. Gaze into each of the illustrations for minutes at a time. What do they move in you? Let your own wild soul guide you through this book. The book is only a resource—it's how you choose to use it that matters.

I.

The Body and the Elements



The body is wildness manifested, and it is the vessel through which one experiences it. Without any consideration for social decorum, it sprouts hair in odd places or sweats profusely through expensive clothing as we stand before a room full of people. The body resists most attempts to control it, just as wildness resists our control. And just like wildness, we can learn to work with our body, developing a relationship of harmony and cooperation rather than one of control and rebellion.

Every little thing in our Universe, including the Earth itself, has a body. Any encompassing discussion of the body must be inclusive of non-human bodies as well. This concept is not radical to Indigenous peoples, and is slowly developing traction in modern legal systems as well.<sup>1</sup> In this section, I will speak to our personal relationship with our human bodies, as well as our relationship to the Universal Body of all things.

### Intuition

Intuition is the knowing of the body. More than just a bunch of New Age mumbo-jumbo, intuition has been important to our species long before the mainstream's recent fascination with dream-catchers and crystal collections. *It lives in our very bones.*

When one says, "listen to your gut," one is calling upon intuition. This is no coincidence. The gut contains the second largest nerve cluster in the body (the brain being the largest). This speaks in great measure to the underrated intelligence of this region of the body.

The intelligence of the gut—intuition—is very different than the intelligence of the mind. Mary Oliver gets at this difference when she says, "This is not fact; this is the other part of knowing something, when there is no proof, but neither is there any way toward disbelief."<sup>ii</sup>

Each of us, however strong, however weak, has a body. We don't know why or how we have a body—we may have beliefs about these things, but we don't *know* it the way we know that Wednesday comes after Tuesday. Nonetheless, we *know* that we have a body. How could we believe otherwise?

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1 For example, the Whanganui River and Te Urewera Park in New Zealand and the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers in Uttarakhand all possess legal personhood status, and similar rights to persistence and well-being have been recognized in New England, Bolivia, Ecuador and Colombia

## The Body and the Elements

Intuition can be a very refined tool—so refined that sometimes, for those that haven't spent as much time cultivating its use, it can be hard to believe in the truth of what another is intuiting. The deaf can't hear the whispers in the hallway as the young child can, and might believe them to be false.

So this is where things get tricky. What if our intuition is wrong? In fact, our intuition is never wrong, but we sometimes misinterpret what we are sensing just as one might hear a sentence differently than the way it was spoken. Often, we confuse trauma responses or conditioned emotions with our intuition, and this can cloud our understanding. It's important to learn to distinguish between conditioned response and true intuition.

So how do we begin to trust it? Use it? Just like our other senses, our intuition is operating whether we pay attention to it or not.

First of all, don't worry about it too much.

Second, pay more attention to those hunches, those gut feelings, those inexplicable moments of feeling good or bad jujitsu about someone or something. What happens when you trust that feeling? Does it lead you astray, or to greater wonders and discovery? When you feel like you may have stumbled down the "wrong" path, did you at least learn something?

“There is an order and an innate knowing behind all that is. What we don't know in our minds, we understand in our bodies.”

In engaging with this sense more, you'll notice it—or at least, your grasp on it—strengthening. You'll begin to detect the *numinous*, when something is riding upon the mystic wind, and when it's merely one of your own foibles or limitations inserting itself into the situation, obstructing the flow.

There is an order and an innate knowing behind all that is. *What we don't know in our minds, we understand in our bodies.*

### Appetite

Mainstream American culture has a lot of stigma around appetite. The topic of appetite, be it an appetite for food, sex, or something else, can open up a lot of vulnerability in a person. To *need*, especially if that need relies upon the cooperation of others, is to be vulnerable. If left unmet, that need becomes a weakness which can ultimately dominate our experience in a very big way.

Sexual appetite is particularly rife with stigma, and it's a heavily gendered issue. "Men only want one thing," for example, is something all of us have heard some time or another. Slut-shaming, too, is hugely problematic even in contemporary American culture; to slut-shame is to implicitly assume that women shouldn't want sex the way a man is expected to.

Fat-shaming is just as common. This, too, is often wrapped up in appetite. The assumption that if one "ate less," they "wouldn't be so fat," is ignorant of the very real biological and social conditions that contribute to unhealthy weight gain and obesity, and perpetuates a rather boring, monoculturalistic ideal of body shape, resting upon an inaccurate perspective that "lean" and "healthful" are synonymous. Health and beauty both arise in all shapes and figures, and have little to do with appetite.

Bodily shame of all kinds is wound up in appetite shame. How many people do you know who feel totally comfortable with every function and expression of their body? We shave, apply fake tans, nail polish, make up, exorbitant amounts of hair products, deodorant and heavily scented soaps, and force our bodies into strict dietary regimens that may or may not have our health in mind. Granted, some make these choices for hygienic purposes, or simply because they enjoy them—but just as often, these choices are made out of expectation, embarrassment or compulsion. These practices, when applied under a forceful hand, indicate a deep, underlying shame of what it means to have a human body.

We need not be ashamed of our own nature, including our appetite. Nor do we need let our appetite command us unchecked. It is *not* our nature to consume everything in our path. I do not subscribe to the belief that humans, by nature, are parasitic. Witnessing the harmonious relationship of indigenous peoples with their land and animal neighbors, over thousands of years, has dispelled this belief. On the contrary, I believe that we are born extremely noble and compassionate creatures. But I believe something has gone seriously wrong.

I believe that this something corresponds strongly to the shame we have around our body and its appetites. By repressing these things, we close down a significant part of our being, divorcing ourselves from what it means to be human. We rarely allow ourselves the feeling of being satiated, so we're often dissatisfied, desperately searching for that one thing that will perfectly fit the hole of our gaping emptiness. No matter what one tries to shove into that hole, it's never enough because it isn't what one actually *needs*.

In his book, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*, Charles Eisenstein takes this concept in a compelling direction:

The things we think we want are often substitutes for what we really want, and the pleasures we seek are less than the joy that they distract us from. From the normal vantage point, it certainly seems that only with discipline can we withstand the temptations that surround us: overeating, drugs, video games, mindless internet surfing and everything else we consume. These things are undeniably destructive to our own lives and beyond; therefore, it would seem, we cannot always trust desire at all. But when we recognize that these are not what we really desire, our goal becomes not to suppress desire but to identify the true want or need, and to fulfill it.<sup>iii</sup>

Whatever you might think about Eisenstein's theory, it's an effective strategy in changing life habits and it doesn't rely upon self-harm or bodily shame. It's the same strategy used by people who manage to quit smoking by picking up knitting, or who replace alcohol with community support.

“Appetite is a crucial element of wildness: it’s the motive, magnetic force that draws two things together to create something different.”

With attentive mindfulness and consistent practice, one can work directly with their own needs to relate with their own body, as well as the Universal Body, in a way that is healthful and harmonious.

Appetite is not a shameful thing. Appetite is a crucial element of wildness: it's the motive, magnetic force that draws two things together to create something different. In sex, artistic collaboration, as well as the consumptive/digestive process, we

see appetite doing its thing. The wisdom of appetite lives beyond us. How could we understand the true reasoning for why we're attracted to this or that person, crave this sweet fruit or that salty-savory thing? Our role is merely to temper that appetite with all of the other elements of our being—nobility, compassion, wisdom, discretion, etc.—and to allow ourselves the contentment of well-deserved satisfaction when our appetite is finally met with the true object of its desire.

### **The Body Beyond**

Spiritual traditions around the world teach us that separation—the conception that the Self is separate from other beings and its environment—is an illusion. These belief systems, which cannot be succinctly summarized but are found within Buddhism, Hinduism, most Indigenous cultures, and others, operate within a core understanding that all things are connected and interdependent by nature. What we do to the world, we do to ourselves.

Through this lens, our body doesn't end at the top of our head and the tips of our toes; it continues onward and outward to the ends of the Universe. When we care for the world around us, that care comes back to us. When we care for ourselves, we also care for the world.

Practically speaking, when we are physically and mentally healthy, we are more likely to participate in the world in healthful ways, and what we do has more impact. When we are ill, we spread dis-ease and disharmony and our actions are often erratic or impotent. A particular strain of bacteria, and a positive mindset, can be equally contagious.

If one has desires to improve the world's condition, one must root their intentions and actions through the Self. This is what Gandhi meant when he said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." This is what Christ meant when he said, "...first remove the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." Only through bettering ourselves can we be of any true service to the world.

When we appreciate the power of life in ourselves, we can appreciate the power of life in all things. When we recognize and tend to our own needs, we become more skilled and able to recognize and tend to the needs of all things.

### ***The Elements***

The four elements, earth, air, water, and fire represent the basic building blocks of our shared body. Our relationship with the elements is rooted in our ancestry, and their symbolic reality can be found in the earliest spiritual artifacts and artistic forms of our species. And as our knowledge as a species

evolves, our relationship with the elements continues to serve, deepening our connection with the planet we inhabit and the body that we share.

“...as our knowledge as a species evolves, our relationship with the elements continues to serve, deepening our connection with the planet we inhabit and the body that we share.”

Earth grounds and stabilizes. Air moves, gives breath, ease, wonder and laughter. Fire warms, ignites and inspires. Water cools and refreshes, cleanses and transforms. Each of these play vital roles in our well-being, and our relationship with them defines the level of care we receive in return.

What does it mean to care for an element? This can be a difficult concept to grasp in abstract terms, so let's ground it.

In practice, when it comes to earth, there's healthy soil, and there's soil devoid of life and nutrients. To care for the earth element, we understand we need an abundance of nutrients and a diverse microbiome—and we act in support of these needs.

When it comes to air and water, we need cleanliness and the ability to flow freely. We need to be aware of what we put into them. Do we exchange and relate with them, using our awareness of how we impact life, operating within a system of balance and well-being? Or do we use the air and water as a dumping ground?

Fire needs fuel, sacrifice. Fire also needs understanding and balance—it relies heavily upon the other three elements for its existence (actually, none of the elements can exist without the others). Without oxygen, fire cannot burn. Neither can it burn without earth. Water balances; if fire scorched all ends of the Earth, it would quickly run out of fuel and oxygen. Symbiosis fosters the continuation of all life.

We find each of the elements present in our lives every day. It is by their existence that we are able to be at all. Together, we are one, and when we work in harmony, we are whole.

### Meditate

It's a quiet, clear night. You are far from the lights of the city. Only the full moon overhead illuminates the night sky. Aside from the crickets and cicadas, the surrounding trees and the glowing moon, you stand alone. Your skin is exposed to the cool night air, and you take this moment to drop into the sensations offered you.

You relish the feeling of the damp grass tickling your toes and the sides of your feet. The light of the moon cast over your lifted face feels like a gentle caress. The thrumming sound of the insects envelops you in their soothing song, and an occasional breeze plays in your hair and kisses your shoulders, chest and belly.

A flood of gratitude warmly washes over you as you savor the wholeness of this moment. You feel grateful for your body and the experience it provides you. Some parts of you are thick and calloused to protect you from sharp edges and too much heat, while other parts are soft and fleshy, inviting all of the richness of sensuality and sweet vulnerability. You feel grateful for all of the ways your body speaks to you, through both pleasure and pain.

You feel the way your bones provide you with form and structure so that you may hold solid like a mountain while the winds of life's changes buffet about you. They are the framework of your body, over which muscle and skin drape. Your bones sing the song of rock and earth—stable and grounding.

At your wrists and below your navel, you feel the pulse of your blood swishing through the tiny canals mapped all over your body. Wherever there is an opening, blood will flow, salty as the sea. Your blood sings the song of the ocean, of life's vital waters.

You follow the trail of blood to your heart and other organs blazing below in the furnace between your ribcage and pelvis. Your insides burn laboriously, unceasingly, warming you from the inside out and ensuring that all the bits of you are fueled, and cleaned, and function. These organs hail the power of fire.

You take a breath, which bears renewal upon its feathery wings. It travels through your nose, throat, lungs, all the way up to your brain, chiming its way through the connected nerve tissue. Sometimes

## **The Body and the Elements**

your mind whirs, other times it is still. In these spaces—in your breath and in your mind—lives air, the wanderer-explorer, and message carrier.

As you complete this inner exploration, rain droplets begin to splash over your skin and your attention is drawn back into the world around you. In the midst of your reverie, some small dark clouds had blown in. Laughter bubbles out of your core. You nod your amused thanks to the water and it replenishes your flesh. You feel the warm, solid ground below your feet, and give thanks. The wind blows through the trees, the crickets' and cicadas' song crescendos. You find fire burning deep in the core of the Earth and twinkling in the stars beyond the clouds high above you and you know all of these things are connected.

One body, or many—either way, the essential building blocks are the same everywhere. All come from the same place, and to that place, all will return.

### Activate

- Take a moment to reflect on your personal relationship with your body. Whether you've intentionally cultivated one or not, you already have a relationship with your body—so what is yours like? Do you take care of your body's needs tenderly, as if it belonged to a beloved child? Or do you ignore it until the last minute, and then shove in whatever will most quickly appease it so you can get back to ignoring it? A positive relationship with one's body is an important component for a life well-lived, and it starts with compassionate care and a willingness to drop your demands that your body be a certain way. It's one thing to try and force your body into health, it's another thing entirely to gently guide it towards well-being. For at least five minutes every day this week, sit with soft acceptance and tender love for your body. Hold an appreciation for all of the experiences your body has made possible. After each sitting, reflect on ways you can better care for your body. Start a list for yourself, maybe with two columns: one for things to "do" and another for things to eliminate.
- Allow yourself a moment of satisfaction, right now. Whatever it is you're experiencing in this moment, even if it's grief, or only the sensations of your breathing as you read this, allow it to fill up your body. Give all of your focus and attention over to this experience and sink deeper into it. What does it feel like in your head? Your limbs? Your torso? Your neck and spine? Fingers and toes? Feel how it lends flavor, depth and meaning to your life. Maybe, just maybe, feel some gratitude for the gifts this experience brings you. Sit with this awhile.
- Do you have a favorite element? Maybe one that has always interested you, or that you particularly relate to? If you don't, just choose one. Can you access that element right now somehow? Even if it's just water running from your tap, or the flame of a candle. Direct your attention to that element for three to five minutes. How does it feel to spend time together this way? Breathe into the element and let it blanket you in its lifeforce. Open up to the spirit of play and engage this element, with your hands or your imagination. How does it feel? What gifts does this element bring? Is there anything you can give it in return? Do it now.
- Do you have a least favorite element? Maybe one that brings fear into your heart, or one you've disliked or never been able to understand. Find a way to connect with this element now. Open a window and let in some air, or put your feet in the dirt. Get close to that element and observe it. What are its qualities? What does it teach you about itself? How do you feel

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about that element after spending some time with it? What gifts does this element offer? Can you give something back? Do it now.

- Think of a song that moves you—something that makes you *feel* strongly (be it blissful, sad, passionate, sentimental, powerful, pumped, whatever) and put it on. Pull out the recording, open your mp3 library or look it up on YouTube. Now, begin to move your body—no pre-thought, no planned choreography, just focus your attention on your arms, your legs, your hips, neck, butt, hands, feet, head, even your eyes, jaw and mouth. Move them any which way, feeling deep into your muscles. If any judgments enter your thoughts, toss them to the side. You don't need them right now. Just feel the music and let it move you. You don't need to be limber or have any sense of rhythm to do this. As long as you can move at least one part of your body, you can participate in this activity. Shake out your worries, shake off your past, at least for this song.
- For one day, make the resolution to pay attention to all of the different parts of your body. Even the smallest bits, such as your forehead and brow, ears, fingers and toes—they all matter here. Hone in to your individual senses: sight and sound, touch. Smell. Notice how you don't have to be eating or drinking anything to experience taste. Each of these bodily signals are communicating something. What do you learn from these signals? If there are any areas that feel pain, what happens if you breathe deeply into them? Be gentle with your pain and see if there's anything you can do for your ailing bits. What parts of your body feel especially good, and when do they feel that way? Appreciate and savor this aspect of the experience. At the end of it, write down your reflections and make a resolution to check in on your body in this way regularly. Set a specific time parameter for yourself, and put it on your calendar.
- Go outside and seek out a patch of grass or dirt. Ideally, choose somewhere that will have a thick layer of earth, at minimum, beneath your feet. Take off your shoes and socks. You can stand or sit if you'd like, or bring a chair, but be sure your feet make direct contact with the ground. Stay here for five minutes or more. This practice is called earthing, which helps to balance one's bio-electrical field and promotes well-being in a number of ways.<sup>iv</sup> How do you feel physically, emotionally, and mentally after engaging in this practice? See if you can do it at least once every day this week.

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- Find a place in nature where you can sit comfortably for a time. Get quiet, still your mind, and draw your attention in to your body. Focus on all of your senses, experiencing one thing with each. One sight, one sound, one taste, one smell, one feeling. Now, try to focus on all of your senses at once without breaking your feeling of relaxation.
- Set aside a few hours this week to really care for your body in ways you don't normally. Ideas for this activity include: going for a walk somewhere beautiful, outside. Attending a sauna. Getting a massage, or if you're on a budget, giving yourself a foot massage with a favorite lotion, oil, or foot roller. Taking an extra-long shower, and maybe adding some essential oils or nice-smelling herbs to the bottom of the tub for an aromatherapeutic touch. Doing some yin yoga or a meditative body scan (look these up on YouTube or Google for inspiration). Sitting alone in a forest and listening to the sound of the birds and the trees. Scrubbing your feet or trying dry brushing. Preparing yourself a healthful, luxurious meal and eating every bite with a deep awareness of all the love present in the food. Taking a much needed nap. Mix and match as many ideas as you like. Call it a "spa day," or don't. The point is to radically care for yourself, so much so that you feel a bit glowy when you're done.

## II.

### Sovereignty



## Sovereignty

The word "sovereign" implies rulership. It's a pairing of the Latin *save*, meaning *over*, and *reign*, which comes from the word *regnum*, or *kingdom*. It's a rather domestic and political word, but also a strong and noble one.

When I think of the word sovereign, I think particularly of *self*-rulership, like the way we use the word in speaking of sovereign Indigenous nations. It is this slant of the word that I am referring to when I speak of the sovereignty of the wild.

Each individual creature has the power and responsibility to choose and care for itself. In the life of a sea-turtle, it may never meet its mother; it must take care of itself from the moment it leaves the egg. The sea turtle knows its own sovereignty from its first breath.

Even the most dependent young of all species, a human child, is responsible for its own well-being by communicating its needs with a plaintive cry. While less obviously so, this too is sovereignty.

“Even when our options appear to be limited by our circumstances, there is always a certain variable of choice presented to each of us in any situation, if one can only imagine them.”

We always have this power and responsibility for self-care and self-determination. Even when our options appear to be limited by our circumstances, there is always a certain variable of choice presented to each of us in any situation, if one can only imagine them.

To really believe in sovereignty, one must be willing to honor it in the Other as well. And not just the sovereignty of the fellow human, but of the plant, animal and mineral kingdom, too. One must be able to work with the trees, rivers and mountains as sovereign beings.

To do so requires a very fundamental shift in perspective. First, one must recognize the life force found in all things. Mary Oliver elucidates this perspective beautifully in her essay, "Sister Turtle:"

"Just where does self-awareness begin and end? With the june bug? With the shining, task-ridden ant? With the little cloud of gnats that drifts over the pond? I am one of those who has no trouble imagining the sentient lives of trees, of their leaves in some fashion communicating or of the massy trunks and heavy branches knowing it is I who have come, as I always come, each morning, to walk beneath them, glad to be alive and glad to be there."

One can't deny the fact that a dog experiences happiness and excitement when he grins, jumps and happily wags his tail at the return of his owner. Or the discontent of a cat who growls and hisses when her tail is pulled by a toddler. We know animals experience stress and trauma, just like people. A rescue dog who's experienced years of abuse shies away from a well-meant head pat. A captive orca who misses her family and has too long suffered the harassment of her male tank-mates, repeatedly bashes her head into the walls of her prison.

We find this consciousness in foliage as well. There are multiple studies that support the existence of complex sentience in plants. In an article reflecting on these recent studies, Ellie Shechet, from the New York Times, says: "Plants share nutrients and recognize kin. They communicate with each other. They can count. They can feel you touching them." Dr. Gagliano, a botanist for the University of Sydney, has performed studies on plants that suggest they have memories, as well.<sup>vi</sup> So, as Mary Oliver says, just where *does* this self-awareness begin and end? Is it such a stretch to attribute such spiritedness to the mineral kingdom as well?

Contemplate the nature that holds a rock together; billions of atoms pressed against each other and buzzing. Nothing can easily pass through. It, like us, experiences change over time and is impacted by this. Meditate on all of the sugary fluids moving through the trees and stalks of flowers so that life can bloom, sleep, and then bloom again as the seasons change. Watch the animals that live all around you, observe how they express themselves and how they are affected by the changes in their environment.

To be sovereign is to be awake at the helm of existence as one navigates through the wild, seeing clearly where one's true power lies.

## Personal Power and Choice

I remember reading T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in high school, and being blown away by one line in particular: "Do I dare disturb the Universe?" This question was something that had sat unnoticed in the back of my mind since I was very little, and to see it there in front of me brought it painfully to my conscious attention. For years afterward, until very recently, I agonized over the intense self-awareness this brought upon me. I agonized over the mere fact of my existence

and I was paralyzed in fear over the ripples I could cause—afraid to act at all, for fear of hurting another out of ignorance, apathy or unchecked rage.

I got over this fear when I realized two things.

First, even non-action has its ripples. Just breathing, I change the chemical composition of the air around me. Therefore, so long as I am *being* I cannot escape *changing*.

Second, at every point in time, I can *choose*. Even if I've made the same bad decision over and over again in my past, I can always choose something more wholesome in the present. It is this choice that is our sovereign power, and nothing outside ourselves can ever take that power away.

The function of sovereignty depends on mutual agreement of the freedom of all things. This is the golden rule, and it does not end with the human.

All creatures of the wild display unspoken respect for other life forms. If the welfare of another animal is trod upon or snatched away, it's only out of need. Need for food, need for safety or for shelter.

Of course, there's no real understanding of property, not even permanent ownership of one's body. A fox doesn't seek the rabbit's permission for supper, but this fact is made up for by the balance of give and take. The fox doesn't eat more rabbits than it needs for its survival, and keeps the rabbit population in check, thus indirectly conserving the rabbits' food source and ecosystem.

It is an exclusively human behavior to take more than what is needed, and even within the human species, there are many cultures that don't behave this way. There are many interesting speculations out there about where this ecocidal behavior comes from, but who really knows why this is?

“At the end of the day, our soul is shaped not by how we are treated, but by how we treat others.”

With the way the world's resources are rapidly depleting, it would appear that when we take more than what we need now, we take from our future selves.

What do we actually need? Broken down to the most basic elements, those things are nourishing food, clean air and water, and adequate shelter (one that can maintain a certain body temperature).

Everybody loves to blame someone else. "Life sucks because of this government or that corporation, because the democrats are sly con-artists or because republicans

are stupid bigots." When will we stop worrying about what the other is doing and start paying attention to our own selves?

At the end of the day, our soul is shaped not by how we are treated, but by how we treat others.

In a time of climate crisis, it can be healing to remember that we are not so important that if we die, all life on earth will, too. So long as the conditions are right, cockroaches will probably still be here scuttling about and transforming with the changes. Some kind of strange fish will be nibbling off the ocean floor. Plants will still soak up sunlight and water and maybe, after we are gone (if we do indeed go), they will have a better shot at cleaning up the air and cooling down the planet so other new species might evolve and thrive.

Conversely, in a time of climate crisis, it can be healing to remember just how much power we have. We throw our trash into the ocean and turtles and monk seals choke on plastic. We fill our cities with fumes and factory emissions and our skies and lungs turn black. We plant our yard with milkweed and purple coneflowers, and birds, butterflies and bees come to make sweet nectar and more fields of flowers, enhancing our local biodiversity and the resiliency of *all* plants. So, how are you using your power?

I'm not here to make a claim for how hopeful we should or shouldn't be. I'm not encouraging idealism here, or even optimism. I can tell you no better than this or that scientist how much time we do or don't have to clean up our act and ensure the endurance of the human species. The point is, when you reach your last day on this earth, whether it's tomorrow or sixty years from now, what will you see when you look back on your life? Did you use this precious gift to make our home more beautiful, or did you cause hurt and destruction? Did you leave a mark at all?

## Boundaries and Protection

What does protection of the natural world mean in the context of sovereignty?

It surely doesn't look like killing "weeds" or certain kinds of bugs in favor of certain groupings of plants. Nature doesn't need to be saved from itself. Nature came equipped with the built-in ability to self-defend and self-propagate.

That doesn't make protection irrelevant, however. Much of the human species is acting alarmingly out of balance with the Earth. The rate of consumption is not balanced by acts of giving back. We quickly burn through resources that could have lasted generations, and yet have the gall to throw away billions of pounds of perfectly functional goods every year. We lash out against the other creatures that inhabit our biosphere, especially those that are nourished by our by-products, such as mice, cockroaches, rats, raccoons, and opossums. We even deprive the soil-dwelling creatures the food of our flesh after it is no longer of use to us, pumping corpses full of formaldehyde and locking them up in treated wood, metal or stone, effectively removing ourselves from the natural cycle of life.

For those humans that are aware of this imbalance and want to change how our species interacts with the Earth, it's time to take a stand and protect what is sovereign. We must make space for all of the Earth's creatures to self-sustain and express freely. We must make space for their right to be well.

In doing this, we are also protecting our own right to be well. It starts small, and with continual attention and effort, grows into an all-encompassing movement. Do just enough to protect, step by step, advancing, raising strength and power in defense until the message is relayed to those that choose profit and power-over dynamics at the cost of the persistent well-being of life. Be as Mother Wild is, herself: simultaneously ruthless and merciful. When the people are truly unified in this, recognizing the interconnection of us all, this can be done without ever having to resort to unnecessarily violent action.

Here are some examples of nonviolent actions that work: stay up to date on current issues involving the environment, especially locally, and spread your awareness, accumulated data and perspective. Speak your mind loudly, clearly, truthfully and kindly whenever possible. Speak in the hearing of those whose actions create large ripples, such as politicians and business owners, actors and religious leaders, but also within the hearing of your friends, family and neighbors. Doing this will embolden others to speak their minds as well—and even if their opinions oppose yours, more conversation benefits everyone. More conversation creates more opportunities for exploring present realities and their likely solutions.

Inform yourself on legal issues at hand, and vote. Send messages to your local representatives. Leverage your civil power to protect what is wild. When officials aren't playing fair, call them out, loudly and publicly. Let them know you're watching. Hold them accountable, and if need be, take your power out of their systems and put it into communities you know you can trust. Do not support

that which doesn't support you. Vote with your dollar. Show up, physically act as a barrier, in strong numbers if possible, and don't let anyone with intent to harm pass.

In Iowa, where I live, one can no longer go down to the nearby river or creek and fill a bucket of water for drinking or cleansing, for fear of ingesting freak blue-green algae or toxic heavy metals. It isn't enough just to boil the river water anymore, because boiling won't clean the water of heavy metals found in most industrial fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. One must filter the water through miniscule carbon filters to cleanse it first, thus ridding the water of many of the minerals that benefit our health. In order to re-mineralize this stripped water in the form of supplements, we sap mineral stores from salt lakes and seas all over the world.

Right now especially, our water needs our protection. All over the world, our water is being polluted by oil, toxic metals from big ag practices, nuclear and sewage plants, and other refuse. Our springs are being sucked dry by large companies that want to sell it back to us in plastic bottles. While this issue certainly has gotten out of hand, it's only because we have allowed it to. It's time we protect the things that are vital for life. Seek inspiration from indigenous water protectors all over the world. The kia'i on Mauna Kea in Hawai'i, and the water protectors of Standing Rock in South Dakota and Honor the Earth in Minnesota are only a few very strong movements exemplifying the depth of possibility available, and they need our support. Our local waters need our support. It's likely that there are already small communities gathered around this issue near you. Find them, connect, and collaborate. A unified effort will be much more effective and integrity-based than a solo-vigilante mission ever could.

## Decolonization

Many speak of colonialism as a thing of the past, but those that study its historical legacy (or have grown up deeply enmeshed in it) can see that it continues to wield its influence into the present day. Many once-colonized, presently independent nations are still coerced by colonial powers through militant and economic manipulation. Some peoples, as is the case in all of the Americas, continue to suffer the violent reality of settler-occupation. Issues of systemic racism, religious persecution, disrespect for the earth and her creatures, fear of the body, widespread disconnection, senseless violence, and imbalanced distribution and abuse of the Earth's natural resources are all direct symptoms of colonial culture.

So what is colonialism, exactly? At its core, it is the hoarding of the Earth's resources - including the labors of humanity - by a small group of people, on the basis of moral hegemony. This small group monopolizes forces, dehumanizes "inconvenient" groups of the population, and casts a fog over the collective memory while claiming themselves as divinely righteous "chosen ones." Current major colonial powers include the U.S., Russia, China, Australia, Denmark, Netherlands, France, New Zealand, Norway, and the U.K. This list is not extensive. The list of colonized and oppressed peoples is even more expansive.

“[Decolonization] is the radical recognition of the sovereignty of all life, and the reclamation of one’s own power in the face of those that might attempt to deny it.”

What then, is decolonization?

It is the radical recognition of the sovereignty of all life, and the reclamation of one's own power in the face of those that might attempt to deny it. It is the defense of natural sovereignty. It is the re-rooting into local community in a time where nearly all of our basic needs are imported and exported. It is the power of knowing who grew your food and what went into it. It is the right of women to present their bodies, voices and minds equally to men. It is the right of people of color to have their lives valued equal to white lives in all arenas of society. It is the defense of the well-being of our soil and water sources. It is the respect of animals who share this planet with us. It is the dissolution of colonial rule over the people and the resources of the Earth, as well as over the Earth itself.

As we walk this path, it will become more and more clear what decolonization demands, and what it will look like. Whatever forms it takes, it is a process that will inevitably uphold the sacredness of *all* life.

### **Meditate**

I am my own, and you are yours. The ocean belongs only to the ocean, the wood, bird, and cat to the wood, bird and cat. Mountains bow to no one, excepting time. Each to each, solitary responsibility and self-determination, though connected to every one. This is the thread that leads into paradox.

Even with arms tethered and stomach empty for days, mind and soul feel the pull, yet are free. The only unbreakable chain is relation. Every second of life, we make choices. Consciously, or otherwise.

Choices in layers. Matryoshka dolls of choices, or choices like knots along a rope. Choices that appear like portals ripping into the fabric of consensus reality—unknown until suddenly, they are there. Choices that fall over our eyes, like too-large hats. Choices that sneak up on us, pounce on us from behind. Our choices shape us, and we shape them.

Once upon a time, a veil descended between us and our choices, making them seem far away. "I don't have a choice," we said. "I do this because I don't have a choice." But every once in a while, we would see through that smoky gossamer cloud and we knew. We knew why we made the choices we did, and we knew with equal gravity, why we played a hand in our own self-deception.

With the unfolding of time, so the dissolution of the smoky gossamer cloud. Or did it harden into glass, a mirror? Reflecting our choices back to us, thousand-fold. Suddenly, it was "too many choices." Fear of choosing the "wrong thing." It's much easier to let someone else choose; the doctor, the congressman, the school board and Amazon reviews. We gave our power away.

But that's the funny thing about sovereignty. As much as we give it away, still it remains. We give only droplets of water from an infinite ocean. As often as we thrust our choice from us, our power, still it remains in infinite supply. It belongs only to us. Our sovereignty is woven into our very being, as much a part of us as our DNA. We can afford to give it away, if only we remember the value it holds.

Sovereignty as lock, and as key. Sovereignty as both power and responsibility. Now, it's time to change the story.

Veil pushed aside, look within. There, your sovereignty—shining, fluid yet strong, like gold. Hold it in your hand. Know it; you own it. It is all that you own, because, like you, every being comes with the same, unique to itself. When two such powers meet, transformation occurs in the way that two drums together create a different sound than one. Play your rhythm true, as one, listening, among all rhythms, as one.

### Activate

- Indigenous cultures all over the world recognize the sovereignty of nature and her many forms. One such way to practice this recognition is to ask permission before entering a space, picking a flower, nearing a den, or any other action that may cause disturbance. Put this into practice. Next time you are about to step into a forest or harvest from your garden, ask permission of the inhabiting plants, minerals and animals first. It isn't absolutely necessary to verbalize this request unless you feel compelled to, but a mental inquiry will usually suffice. After you've asked, listen—if you don't hear or feel any resistance, you're safe to go ahead. Make sure you do so with gratitude.
- All too often, we feel we have license to hold bad attitudes about certain things in life because we "have to" do them. Things like working, paying taxes, caring for our children. In fact, we don't *have to* do anything. Reclaim your sense of sovereignty by acknowledging your choice in these moments. Next time you catch yourself drudging through an activity you don't want to do, ask yourself, "Why am I choosing this?" Go deeper than the first answer that comes to the surface. What are all of the reasons behind your actions? What is the complete result of your actions? The answer should motivate you to either reapproach your task with a new sense of purpose or drop it altogether.
- Make a list of everything within yourself and your life that you have power over. For example, we always have power over our attitudes, how we delegate our resources, or whether or not we show up to the different moments of our lives. Where does your sovereignty begin and end? In your list, are there certain areas in which you sometimes forget you have power over? In what areas might you be over-flexing your power?
- Think back to a time when you denied or neglected the sovereignty of another being—whether a person, animal or otherwise. How might your actions have impacted that other being? How did your choice to deny their sovereignty affect you? Explore your answer in your journal or on a piece of paper.

- What kind of wildlife frequent your neighborhood? Even in cities, one can find pigeons and squirrels. Choose one kind of animal to take notice of throughout your week. Without disturbing them, see if you can follow their behaviors from a casual, distant eye. Pay attention to their mannerisms, their comings and goings. What do you learn about this creature in your time observing them?
- Practice boundary-setting. Are there any regular occurrences in your life that frequently result in your harm? This includes creating challenging situations for meeting one or more of your needs, as well as creating a difficult environment for your mental and emotional health. Maybe you need to set a boundary (or a few). Write the boundary or boundaries down on a piece of paper. Be sure to be very specific, but don't feel like you need to explain your boundary. The next step is to clearly communicate the boundary to everyone it pertains to. In some cases, this will just be yourself. Keep this boundary written somewhere close to you, where you will see it regularly, such as inside a journal cover or tacked onto your underwear drawer. Be sure to hold to this boundary (particularly when it feels tough to uphold) for as long as it serves you.
- Practice boundary-respect. Next time you find yourself face to face with someone else's boundary or "no," don't push or question it. Don't even mull over it in your own head—to do so isn't truly respecting the sovereignty of the other, and you're only wasting your time. Instead, remember this boundary every time you engage with that person in the future and honor it. If you aren't sure about certain details of the boundary, ask clarifying questions. Be specific and respectful. It can feel vulnerable to ask these questions sometimes, but remember, the other person feels vulnerable, too—otherwise they wouldn't need to set a boundary in the first place. Seek mutual understanding without getting defensive. To help yourself remember this practice, write "I respect boundaries" on a piece of paper and put it somewhere you will often see it, such as over your desk or on your bedroom wall.



# III.

## Diversity and Relationship



## Diversity and Relationship

Nature loves repetition. A patch of thirty-some purple forget-me-nots, two leaning cedar trees merged at the root, a brother and sister who purse their nearly identical lips in exactly the same way.

Similarity indicates connection and relationship, whether it's genetic, as in similarities within a species, or something different, like a connection between similar environments (as in the case of birds and bats: both have wings, even though the two creatures do not share a close genetic link) or between frequency (as in a tuning fork resonating when its particular note is played).

It's important to note that even with repetition there's crucial variation. No two flowers are identical, and even so-called identical twins have significant differences between them. Difference is vital to the continuation of life. A small species group with too little genetic variation amongst them will produce diseased offspring and be less likely to adapt effectively to changes in the environment. We see the problem of monoculturalism in plants and animals alike.

Variations are important for relating, too. It is variation that makes each being totally unique, with their own individual role to play. It is variation that makes up diversity.

In our emotions, we experience broad strokes of repetition, cycling through joy, anger, sorrow. But we see important variation here, too. The joy of cuddling with a first love is not the same joy as slowly savoring a favorite meal. Each experience of emotion is flavored by its context, and all of these elements woven together form the tapestry of our lives, shining off nuances in texture, shape and hue.

“One need only listen to a choir, or the song of the forest, to understand the beauty of diversity.”

One need only listen to a choir, or the song of the forest, to understand the beauty of diversity. In music, we have the gathering of different notes played and sung in different ways. The sopranos, altos and basses together create a fullness, a richness of sound. A mixture of rhythms, the rasping of a throat, the high, tangy sound of a violin or the shimmering vibrato of hundreds of strings being played at once. The chirping of crickets and the humming of cicadas, a choir of frogs at midsummer, the call and response of songbirds over a backdrop of rustling leaves.

The scene is set, drama unfolds. Our soul, in all its complexity, is touched. Each element plays an important role as part of the whole.

### The Other

"Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of difference strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters."<sup>vii</sup>

-Audre Lorde

Like the Wild, the Other has a tendency to rebel against any hard labels assigned to it. Nevertheless, the Other is a concept that can be understood with a soft, broad-sweeping gaze. The Other is that which lives beyond the Self. It lives beyond our boundaries and limitations, in the realm of the Great Unknown.

Apprehended with fear, the Other becomes a monster, ready to tear us apart in an instant.

However, when we view the Other with curiosity and an open heart, the Other can become a lover. All great romances are born between the Self and the Other. And from the relationship of the Self and the Other, diversity springs.

In the space of the psyche, the Other is that which we have banished, as well as that which we have yet to explore. It is what arises in us that we don't claim as our identity. It is the reason we can dream ourselves in different times, as different people, in places we've never been in our waking life. It is the reason we are capable of inner conflict, and the satisfaction of its resolution. The Other provides us the means with which to grow; to become more than what we once were.

Rather than push the Other away, open your arms and heart to what it has to offer. It has much to teach. It is in relating to the Other that we can know our Selves more fully. In this relating, we begin to diversify within our own selves.

### Interbeing

"...there exists a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else, and that our dignity and our chances are one. The farthest star and the mud at our feet are a family, and there is no decency or sense in honoring one thing, or a few things, and then

closing the list. The pine tree, the leopard, the Platte River, and ourselves—we are at risk together, or we are on our way to a sustainable world together. We are each other's destiny."<sup>viii</sup>

Mary Oliver

I touched on the concept of interbeing in the first section when I spoke of the Universal Body, but the principles of interbeing don't start and end at the physical level. The beloved Buddhist monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh, coined the term interbeing to make up for a gap in the English language that describes our inseparable connection to all that is. <sup>ix</sup>

“Relationship is innate to our very existence.”

Interconnection is a foundational truth of nature, as well as a vital resource towards understanding and befriending the Wild. Every particle of this Universe has influence upon the rest. That influence spreads outward in ripples, to varying effect. While there are certainly important boundaries in the world, distinguishing one Self from another, these boundaries aren't as solid as we might think. Our boundaries can be as fluid or diffuse as light turned to shadow. Sometimes, it can be rather

challenging to determine where one thing stops and the next begins. That's because, at one and the same time, each of us is an entire being in and of ourselves, and a minuscule part of a vast Interbeing.

This is one of the ways Charles Eisenstein describes the phenomenon of interbeing in his book, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*:

"This interbeing is something that we can feel. Why does it hurt when we hear of another person coming to harm? Why, when we read of the mass die-offs of the coral reefs and see their bleached skeletons, do we feel like we've sustained the blow? It is because it is literally happening to ourselves. Our extended selves."<sup>x</sup>

An important teaching of the principle of interbeing is that we do not create relationships, per se, because they already exist prior to our recognition to them. Relationship is innate to our very existence. We can, however, change the way we operate in our relationships—how we come together and spread apart, engage in different power dynamics or dance in an equilibrium of exchange.

### Belonging

"**True Belonging** is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to *change* who you are; it requires you to *be* who you are."<sup>xi</sup>

Brené Brown

By the very fact of our having been born, we belong here on this Earth. We are born of everything that came together and split apart so that we could be here, and through us, the future is made manifest. We are a part of an ecosystem that provides us with all we need to feed, clothe, water, warm, and shelter ourselves, and when we are in balance, we give all of that back to young and old, to the neighboring animals who depend upon us, and to the Earth.

Our belonging is innate, and yet, so many of us trade our authenticity, our sense of self-belonging, for some superficial version of societal belonging. We do this when we dress ourselves based on how others will view us, when we get a certain kind of job because we think we're supposed to, or when we shut our mouths to avoid confrontation rather than risk speaking what we believe to be true. When we make nice in this way, we do so at the cost of our own self-respect. That is too dear a price to pay for pseudo-belonging when we are born belonging to ourselves.

To experience true belonging, we must drop all of our masks, costumes, pretenses and societal fears. All of these things might serve us at one point or another, but if we can't see through them, then we are holding them too dear. To experience true belonging, we must first start with self-acceptance. Not a resigned sense of self-acceptance, but one based on understanding, experience and compassion.

With the knowledge of oneself as a complex being made up of both an archetypal Self and Other, we can begin to approach ourselves with curiosity rather than judgment. To experience true belonging, stop alienating yourself and ask, "Why am I this way?" In those moments of self-frustration or bewilderment, choose self-exploration instead.

Just as belonging to any swath of land involves an intimate knowing of its features, quirks, characters and histories, so too does belonging to one's Self.

### Meditate

While the Universe encompasses your being, so too do you contain a Universe, made up of a multitude of worlds, landscapes and characters. You are vast and beyond knowing, because you are ever-growing and changing.

Ways of being, ways of seeing, ways of expressing and manifesting.

Within and without, diverse parts and pieces work together (and in opposition) encouraging, stimulating, challenging, and solving problems. Conflicting interactions move each of us out of our comfort zones, bringing our attention to the shadows and teaching us how to inhabit unfamiliar territories with awareness. Harmonious interactions teach us we can endure, and that there aren't really "sides" in the battles we imagine for ourselves, that we're in this together. Both conflict and harmony, in their pushing and pulling, save us from the proverbial death that is stagnation.

Love thy neighbor as thyself, because even when there's much difference, the bond that holds us together is stronger. And by the same standard, love thy cat and dog, love thy grass, flowers and trees, love thy neighborhood wildlife, love thy lakes, rivers, soil and sky.

Each of us is cut from the same root. Over time, we have diverged, transformed into individuals down to a genetic level. We have individuated as a result of differing environments, experiences, and sprawling time. Down to a genetic level, each of us is irreplaceably unique and yet, each of us relies upon the same clean air and water, nutritive soil, and the light of the sun, and we rely upon each other.

In any American metropolis, one might find a number of cars driving around with a "coexist" bumper sticker plastered to its backside, maybe to encourage religious tolerance, or maybe to remind us that we are, whether we like it or not, actively engaged in co-existence. For better or worse, we share this air, this water, this Earth and sun's fire. We belong to ourselves, and we belong together. We fill each other's gaps. Unto ourselves, we are whole. Together, we are one.

Inside and out, many parts, one song. The blood flows beneath our skin, playing the drum of our hearts in this place of many rhythms, this world-wide drum circle. Everything has its own vibration, its own rhythm, its own message to relay.

### Activate

- Contemporary music favors melody over harmony in a big way—and a lot of what is on the radio contains more sounds of the domestic than of the wild. It is commonplace to hear the ring of a telephone or a doorbell, cars honking, sirens blaring, coins clanging or a gun firing. It is not so commonplace to hear recordings of birdsong, humming insects or the crashing of the ocean on radio recordings. Treat your ears to something that features Wild diversity—with range and depth pulsing through the aural experience. Examples of this kind of music can be found in jam bands, Nat King Cole's "Nature Boy—in fact, almost anything from that era will do—groups with diverse vocals or instrumentation, or classical music (which often drew inspiration purely from the sounds of the natural world, by the way). No written reflections with this one—just immerse yourself in the complex sounds of the Wild.
- Plan a day to visit some place totally new to you. Public institutions, such as libraries and museums, can be good for this activity. Nature reserves are an excellent option as well. You could choose a place you've already visited, so long as you explore a section that bears novelty for you. Or, go someplace totally wild, based on improvisational direction selecting (Do I turn right or left at this street? Flip a coin). The point of this exercise is to step out of your comfort zone and engage with the Other. Go somewhere you wouldn't ordinarily choose, and get curious. While you're there, maybe find a small souvenir, such as a new book, pamphlet or a photo on your phone to remind you of your journey to the Other side. Maybe this souvenir will become a portal to draw you in even deeper...
- Utilize the power of diversity in something you create. Choose a medium, such as painting or drawing, writing, sculpture, some kind of fiber art, woodworking, whatever calls to you. See how many different elements you can use in a single piece, be it colors, textures, words from different languages, different kinds of stitches or materials, knots, strokes, what-have-you. Allow yourself to fall deep into the spirit of play, and don't worry so much about the final outcome.
- Grab yourself a piece of paper, a pen or pencil, and a timer. Set the timer for 10 minutes and begin writing a list. Start with the first color that comes to mind, and build on the list by writing down the first thing that the prior item on the list makes you think of. This is word association. For example, maybe you choose to start with the color chartreuse, and your

## Diversity and Relationship

ensuing list looks something like this: chartreuse, mint ice cream milk-shakes, the 50's, red bar stools, diners, pancakes, syrup, Canada, maple leaves, fall, orange, pumpkins, squash...and on and on. When the timer goes off, take a moment to reflect upon the natural diversity that arose in this exercise of relationship. If you created an ecosystem with all of the things on your list, what would it look like?

- Go for an idle-wild walk in one of your favorite places. Essentially what this means is, without pre-planning, wander around your chosen place in a leisurely fashion with a sense of opportunity. Follow your eye, or any one of your senses, as you go. Allow yourself to sink into that dreamy space you might fall into when you're picking out books from a library or selecting a gift for a close friend. As you meander, collect found objects—bits of trash, rocks or twigs that draw your eye, or maybe you decide to take pictures or draw sketches instead. After you've completed your journey and have arrived at home, compile your treasures into a single piece of art, a collage, a sculpture, a diorama, whatever inspires you.
- What do you do when you encounter the Other? Do you turn it into a monster and hide from it? Or do you peer into it, trying to better understand what you see? Our first encounters with the Other, before we've begun to integrate it into our Self, often appear as a shadow, or a psychological projection. What does this shadow look like? Where does it draw its shape from? Under what light is it made visible? How does it transform the objects it casts itself over? Muse over these questions for a time, and write your reflections down in a journal or on a spare piece of paper.
- Get to know the Other in yourself. What behaviors do you exhibit that you have a hard time claiming? What things have you done in the past that, at the time, made you feel like you weren't yourself? Make a list of everything you can think of.

Now, choose the thing on the list you feel the strongest reaction towards. Sit with it awhile, and then, with detached curiosity, ask yourself, "What might have led me to act this way?" "What part of myself was acting in that moment?" "What was the purpose of acting in that way?" Recognize any needs you were working to fulfill by acting in those ways. Explore any other questions that might spontaneously arise as you dig deeper into this scenario.

When you finish, give that part of yourself a name. For example, I might have a smoking habit that is creating inner conflict for me. Through my reflections, I discover that this habit is coming from a need for comfort, familiarity, and mental space. I name this part of myself the

## **Diversity and Relationship**

Comfort Seeker. Once you've named this part of yourself, consciously accept that once-unfamiliar part of yourself, that archetypal Other, as part of you. With compassionate understanding, give it a mental home in your identity. You may not appreciate some of the behaviors it manifested in your life, but by bringing it into the light of your Selfhood, you can begin to work with it so it might express itself in ways to benefit your whole Self in the future. Throughout the rest of this week, gradually work through the other behaviors/scenarios on your list.

# IV.

## Motion



## Motion

A basic understanding of chemistry teaches us that all things are constantly in motion, whether fast or slow. The air that we breathe, even on a still day, is moving rapidly on an atomic and subatomic level. Even things that are seemingly solid and stationary, like a piece of quartz or a plate of steel, still vibrate at an atomic level. And if you suspend an atom in a vacuum, one finds that movement still occurs at a subatomic level.

Time, too, is motion. So long as we are in time, we are in motion. The change of seasons births the mythos of time in its imagery: the blooming, the dropping of fruit, the falling of leaves and then snow. Or the ticking of the clock. Bones stretching, hair lengthening and graying, skin growing freckles, scars or lines.

Can one draw solid boundaries between change, time and motion? One flows into the next in a triangular möbius loop.

What is stillness then, in relation to all of this motion? Is it a background, a unified field? Is it death? A threshold? Merely an illusion? An imaginary reference point, perhaps, like the number zero in an infinite stream of positive and negatives stretching out in either direction?

“So long as we are  
in time, we are in  
motion.”

And can one find something akin to stillness while in motion? Call it balance, or call it flow. Call it peace, stability, or endurance. Call it the bond that holds it all together.

All of this motion, operating in jarring synchrony, is the dance of the Wild. It teaches us that even the slightest shoulder shimmy is as important as a dramatic swaying of the hips or the shake of a limb. Each conveys or communicates something a little different; each plays a different function or role. Each creates its own chain of events.

## Cycles

"To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which is seen and felt as beauty."<sup>xii</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Change and motion occur in cycles. Cycles are rhythmic and repetitive, yet leave room for variance within them, differentiating one iteration of the cycle from the next.

The planets cycle around the sun, the moon cycles around the Earth and we cycle through the seasons. Water cycles between sea and sky, and women's bodies cycle through the processes of fertility and purging. With each passing cycle, things change both microscopically and macroscopically both. Snow falls, melts, the grass greens and flowers grow in the snow's wake. We grow older, and so does the Earth. Even rocks break down over time, becoming sediment, lining the coasts and the bottom of the sea until covered over by new sand and packed into the Earth's many layers, hardening to rock as it nears Earth's molten core.

Cycles bring inevitable transformation; no amount of resistance can withstand the shifting sands of time and yet, cycles can be stabilizing, too. In the knowing of the cycles and their rhythms, we can find a sense of peace and place. If we move in alignment with the cycles, they bring us a natural motion to flow and grow in, just as we rise with the sun and retire with the night sky.

Let's use the change of the seasons as an example, since it occurs in a regular motion that every one of us experiences in the turn of a year:

In the warm summer months, it becomes easy to spend more time outside, engaging actively in our local spheres and "doing." The summer is a great time for working out of doors, and ourselves. Not only is it a good time for sprucing up the yard, playing in water and soaking up the sun, it's also an excellent time for cultivating interpersonal relationships, community building efforts, environmental relationships, and external-growth oriented activities like dietary or financial habits.

Winter, on the other hand, is a time for going inward. We spend our days cozy in the home, surrounding the hearth and seeking out comfort. The winter is also a poignant time for inner reflection, exploring untouched memories and reintegrating them into our psyches in ways that warm and serve us. The winter is a good time for opening up to the relationship with the self, observing what is true about it, and what might be needed—most often, all it needs is time, space and loving awareness, and winter is a great time to offer all of these things.

Fall is a time for shedding and preparing for days ahead. While we winterize our houses, we also want to winterize our minds and souls. In the fall, let go of that which is no longer needed or useful and

return it to the earth, just as a tree would shed its leaves. The fall is also an excellent time for pulling in what nourishment will be needed for hard times ahead. What nut-shells of heart-warming sustenance can be buried for when a search out into the cold might prove dangerous? The fall marks a time of transformation and transition as we prepare to hunker down and turn inward.

“Without change, there could not be growth. Without change, there could not be life.”

Spring, on the other hand, calls for a different kind of transformation. Spring asks that we break out of our crusty shells and open up to the world around us. It's a time for budding, blooming and birthing—time for new ventures and dreams of the future. It's time to prepare the garden for the things you want to enjoy in the summer and harvest in the fall, be it fruits and vegetables, or new skills, relationships and perspectives.

As we move through each cycle, our relationship to each stage will undoubtedly change, as it should. Without change, there could not be growth. Without change, there could not be life. But with each turn of the cycle, we'll find the things that are familiar to us, that move us, and inspire us, and it is in these things that we might make ourselves a home.

## **Stillness and the Dark**

Our culture struggles with ensuring proper rest for its members. As a capitalist society, we tend to value productivity at the cost of our physical and emotional well-being, and our peace of mind. Many of us are now realizing that this approach is ultimately counter-productive because once burnt out, we require substantially more time to recover than it would have taken to have rested properly to begin with.

We need rest, stillness and darkness as much as we need activity and the light. In the modern age, we are bombarded with light. Even in some parts of the country, street lights pollute our night skies, and all over, electric lights, TV and phone screens are often used until just before we go to bed, despite the fact that such use has been proven to lead to insomnia and lower sleep quality.

In our culture, there is an equation of darkness with evil, but is a bride's veil evil? Are the curtains over an opera house's stage evil? Our eyelids? The night? The shadow of the Earth upon the moon?

We need not fear the dark, nor stillness. Both are a natural part of life on Earth—together, they are keepers of cycles, rhythms and balance, the ones who give rest, refreshing life as it is due. Darkness is the veiler and the unveiler; stillness is the pivot upon which the pendulum of motion swings.

When we make time for darkness and rest—and it has to be *real* rest, not just physically but mentally, too (meaning, no worrying, planning, list-making or brain-stressing of any kind—then we are not only able to be more productive, but our lives become more enjoyable and fulfilling as well). It becomes easy to feel good about ourselves and what we're doing in the world, because we know we're doing it well.

When we rush through, ignoring our own need for rest and darkness, our actions—and thus, our work—becomes sloppy. We're tired and have a hard time maintaining focus. We have no real emotional energy to put into the thing, so we become careless. No matter how much love and care we might have for what we're doing, when we're totally beaten down, we have a hard time demonstrating that care.

Luckily, just a few deep moments of darkness and rest—true body and mind relaxation—can be enough to fuel our doings for another complete cycle, be it the cycle of a day, the work-week, a season, or a year. And the better we are about proactively providing those moments of rejuvenation, the better our days will be as a whole.

## Meditate

You are held in stillness and in motion. In stillness and in motion, you find your place.

Your legs lie flat upon the ground, your back straight, hands resting on thighs with your arms hanging loose. Neck is tucked back, head held light and facing forward. Eyes closed. To the outward gaze, you appear to be totally still. However, from this place, you feel the motion of your breath filling your lungs. Air streams, burning, through your nose and into your chest. It stretches your ribcage as it enters you, then eases out soft and warm through your slightly open lips. With only slight pauses in between, this process occurs in a loop.

As the air enters you, both it and you are fundamentally transformed. As oxygen, it enters your lungs, renewing the life of your cells so that they may continue to perform the necessary functions that keep you alive. It leaves as carbon dioxide, ready to bring breath to a leafy-green being somewhere nearby. In this way, it cycles between oxygen breathers and carbon dioxide breathers, propelling the onwardness of life.

The breath cycle is intimately connected to the cycle of blood. Blood enters your heart where, transformed by oxygen, it begins its journey circulating your body. Blood brings breath to the places that need it, undergoing another transformation in the process. Now devoid of oxygen, it must return to the heart and make its journey all over again.

All of this occurs without any notice from you, though you feel its turn of motion in the expansion and deflation of your chest and belly, and in the pulsing of your heart under your ribs, at your wrist and neck, under your navel.

Behind your head, the clock ticks. The red second hand jolts around the clock's face, and the slower motion of the minute-hand follows with every revolution of the red. The hour hand moves too, almost imperceptibly, in its own drawling time, with the others.

Outside your window, cars pass. In the morning and late afternoon they congeal behind stop signs, with exception only for the weekends, when the flow is more steady. Two neighbors walk along the sidewalk in stride with each other, one carrying an overflowing reusable grocery bag, the other with a gray stocking cap on her head. Tomorrow, they'll be here again, wearing the same stride but different clothes, speaking with the same voices bearing fresh conversation.

The last light of the descending sun blinks between the shadowed forms of houses. The moon, though higher in the sky than the sun, is beginning its descent as well. In a few days' time, it won't be visible at all, no matter the hour.

Like every other night this time of year, the bats are waking up, swooping low over the neighborhood pond to seek out mosquitoes and gnats. Everyone else is beginning to quiet down, preparing dinner, chatting with friends nearby or over the phone, taking their play indoors. By the time the dark is deepest, people of this region will have mostly turned inward, eyes closed or not, dreaming in some fashion or another.

And in the morning they will rise and you will, too, making preparations for the day ahead. A day wildly different than this one, yet the clock will still tick. The two neighbors will walk under your window. A series of fresh breaths of air will enter your lungs, oxidizing newly formed blood cells. Air and blood will flow through your body just the same.

And in three months, the mosquitoes will bury next year's eggs and the bats will fly south. The sun and moon will rise and set at slightly different times and in slightly different places, in the same way they do every year.

The sun and moon can't protect you from the passing of time, nor are they impervious to it themselves. Like you, they move with it, marking time's cycles with change and return. Though constantly in motion, these celestial orbs and all they represent make for you a place, offering up life, belonging, home.

## Activate

- Reconnect to the seasons of life by immersing yourself in their qualities of expression. Select the activity that corresponds to whatever season presides as you are reading this:
- Spring: This is a time of birth—outside, everything is starting to wake up. Rivers are thawing and flowing, the grass is gaining back its green color and all of the summertime birds are returning. Tune into this time of renewal: plant some seeds, or start a community project. Dive into that hobby you've always wanted to try.
- Summer: This is a time of growth. Flowers bloom and fruit begins to drop. Animals born in the spring are learning how to hunt or forage. Tap into the expansion of the times by learning a new skill to enhance your current abilities, donate to a favorite charity or community organization, or save a sprouting tree alongside the city streets from being mowed over and relocate it to where it will be left undisturbed.
- Fall: This is a time of harvest and preparation. Celebrate the change of season, and all that has brought you to this moment, with a meal that is special to you. Give thanks to the earth's abundance that brought food to your table. Enjoy the space in-between. Make sure your home is prepared for harder months ahead: repair any gaps in the roof or windows, make sure you're stocked with blankets and warm clothes, and fill your pantry with nourishing vittles.
- Winter: This is a time of rest and turning inward. Allow yourself to sleep, cuddle, and relax more if you feel so inclined. Take warm baths, and fill your tub with herbs and teas that comfort you or feel beneficial to you. Invite the warmth of good friends into your home. Avoid filling the space with too much television or other kinds of media--make sure you have plenty of space for inner reflection, contemplation and time to sit with all of the emotions, thoughts and memories that come up when the outside world isn't so busy. Above all, be gentle with yourself.
- Get in touch with your daily cycle. Every day this week, keep a log recording everything notable that happens to you and the time it occurred. After you've collected your data, look over your log and observe what patterns arose. Did you feel hungry, cranky, inspired or social at the same time most days? Do you notice that a certain event, which you had previously thought was irregular, actually arose in some sort of pattern? Did you notice any of your

regular cycles become irregular for some reason or another? Feel free to use this strategy to get in touch with larger time cycles as well. The more rotations you observe, the more accurate and useful your data will be.

- Tune into the cyclical patterns of a single element of your life for a week. You could choose to focus on a routine, like a morning or bedtime routine, or it could be something more general such as your sleeping, eating, or spending habits. If you have any "problem" areas in your life, it might be particularly useful to choose that to study over the week. With the day as your unit of cycle, track your observations in a notebook and pay attention to any patterns that arise. If a week isn't long enough for you to get a solid grasp on these patterns (in most cases, it won't be) consider committing to study them for a longer period of time.
- For ten minutes, find some place comfortable to sit still and close your eyes. Set a timer if you need. Settle into yourself, and take three deep breaths, drawing your attention away from your thoughts and into the present. Like the scene set in this week's "Meditate" segment, focus your attention on all of the motion occurring within your body. Shift your inward gaze in a way that feels easy and natural to you, resting upon each moving thing. Then, begin to draw your attention outside of your body, seeking motion with your senses. What do you observe?
- Engage yourself in an activity involving rigorous motion within the framework of your body's current abilities. It could be a number of things: running, biking, swimming, dancing, jumping, or even shaking some part of your body vigorously, preferably for 10 minutes or more. Focus your awareness on how this motion feels in different parts of your body, including the parts actively engaged in motion as well as those less directly engaged. Make sure you focus on your heart, lungs, head, and mind as well. Next, come to a stop, holding yourself still while keeping your attention on your body. Do you still feel the motion coursing through you? Stay here until those feelings have mostly subsided. Do you still feel motion, maybe of a different kind? How does it compare to the feelings of motion you experienced earlier?
- Create a makeshift cave for yourself in a room where you won't be disturbed. Make the room as dark as you possibly can, blanketing windows and unplugging electronics. Outside of the "cave," set yourself a timer for 5-15 minutes, and place your timekeeping device just outside the door so its light (if it has one) won't disturb you during the exercise—if it's not already clear, that means don't bring your phone in with you either. After entering the cave space, find a place to get comfortable; sitting, standing and lying down are all fine options. Get really still, move around, or combine the two. Whatever you end up doing, draw your awareness deep

within, paying equal attention to your body, mind and soul. How does the darkness feel? How do you feel? What sense are heightened, and which ones diminished? After the timer has gone off and you've left the room, take another moment to check in with yourself. Do you feel any different coming out of that exercise than you did going into it?

- How can you offer yourself more darkness during your every-day life? Whether it's turning the lights out earlier, purchasing darker curtains for your bedroom, or just taking some time to sit with your eyes closed a few times a day, how can you better bring the solace and stillness of darkness into your life?

V.

Birth, Growth and Decomposition



## Birth, Growth and Decomposition

Within the space of our lifetime, every one of us will first handedly experience birth, growth and death. Our culture typically depicts this journey in a linear fashion, as in the metaphor of "the path of life," implying a distinct beginning, middle and end. The voyager starts in one place, and after a series of experiences, ends up someplace different. This is a simple view, but also a limited one.

When we view life as cyclical, we see that there is not just one beginning, middle and end, but many. Beginnings, middles and ends. We begin in one place, end up somewhere new, and inevitably return to the same place we started, but only after we have changed. From our own new vantage point, the old becomes renewed. When we experience life as cyclical, our understanding of life's functions broadens. We clearly see that within the framework of the Universal Body, all life rolls onward, transferring energy from one place to the next.

“When we view life as cyclical, we see that there is not just one beginning, middle and end, but many.”

I titled this section, "Birth, Growth and Decomposition" rather than "Birth, Growth and Death" to evoke this cycle. Death emphasizes finality.

Decomposition, however, speaks to the breakdown of matter into simpler particles. In a sense, it speaks to a return rather than an end, as in, "dust to dust, ashes to ashes." After a carcass decomposes, it becomes new life as it is transformed into something else—a flower, or a meal for a worm.

The Wild favors life. In the wild, there is only life and that which serves it. In the wild, even death serves life, creating space and fertile ground for newness to be born, and thus, the cycle spins onward.

### Birth

Birth is a painful and giddy paradox. It is trying, awkward, and often violent. It's powerful, exciting, and often ecstatic. It's where the larger-than-life force of the Wild bursts its way through the small, under-prepared circumstances we create for it. We are never totally ready for birth when it comes.

At least, if what we mean by "ready" is equipped to handle anything with an unequivocally guaranteed positive result. Birth is too wild and messy for all of that. For every situation we feel prepared for, there are ten more potential situations we couldn't possibly have anticipated.

## **Birth, Growth and Decomposition**

Nonetheless, when it's time, we drop all of our hems and haws, the planners and diagrams, and spring into action. Because when birth arrives, it is a swiftly flowing river. To throw stones in attempts to dam it brings fatal risk to all involved.

If, however, we stop our thrashing and learn to rise when needed, and rest when we can, we just might make it to the other side successfully. And on the other side we find new life, vital or weak, vibrant or dim or somewhere in between, and ready to grow.

### **Growth**

In between birth and death, growth happens. Contrary to deep-set cultural attitudes, growth is not something that must end when our bodily height maximizes. We always have potential to grow, no matter how old, and I'm not referring only to girth.

This is not to put pressure on elder generations to "keep up with the times." If learning new technology is of interest, by all means pursue that education. Let's not equate growth with following society's lead, unless those things are relevant or important to the growing being.

In theme with the rest of the book, inner growth is what's being implied here. Inner growth is relevant to individuals of every age group, but can be a hard thing to pin down due to its rather subjective nature. So what is it exactly?

Examples of inner growth include: learning a new technique to improve one's mastery at something; finding a new way to approach an old problem, or a fresh perspective to view it through; re-walking a previously abandoned journey, and going even further than before; choosing a livable, living future, especially when the same old challenges crop up; leaving behind ways of being that no longer serve and facing the present moment with every bit of courage, strength and attention that can be sustained.

Like the growth of plants, inner growth demands nutritive soil, clean water, and gentle sunlight. In psychological terms, we must be willing to offer ourselves kindness, patience and grace. With these three things, we increase the odds of our survival—and our thrivance—through all of life's storms.

### Rest in Peace

"Even the corpse has its own beauty."<sup>xiii</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson

The change of seasons is inevitable. On this Earth, all things have an expiration date. At one and the same time, this truth is both tragic and exquisitely beautiful.

For one thing, this transience, this gorgeous ephemerality lends value to what is—the limited nature of each life makes it more precious. And without the passing of one life form, we wouldn't ever see another.

“Death is not just the one who takes away, but the one who gives back as well.”

Death is not just the one who takes away, but the one who gives back as well. Out of the death of the fallen, rotting tree, springs the mushroom. From the soil, fertile with the decomposing bodies of plants and animals long gone, springs the garden. The nutrients of no-longer-occupied bodies serve to feed those presently growing.

Before stone coffins and the mortician's formaldehyde, our bodies were a part of this process.

We could talk about how, under Death's auspices, nothing goes to waste. Everything breaks down and becomes something else, no matter how long it takes and no matter how strange the results. What does this tell us about ourselves, about the human species, as it operates within the expanse of diverse life all around us?

How beautiful it is, to be of service to life even after it's stopped coursing through our used up bodies! How miraculous that the skin we once wore might be resurrected in the form of a flower or a forest, which might in turn feed a rabbit or a deer, which might feed our grandchildren!

### Rebirth

If decomposition were a door, you'd find death on one side and rebirth on the other. After the dissolution of death, there is rest and re-formulation. Before the quick out-burst of birth, there is slow gestation, incubation. This in-between place is rebirth's domain.

Rebirth closes the circle between "death" and "birth" and opens up a space in between these doorways. Rebirth involves the germination process that precedes new life—before it has fully emerged into the light of birth. It encompasses those undefined stirrings that, while being rather difficult to sense and understand in any clear and concise way from an outside perspective, are absolutely vital to the new life coming into being. Under the darkness of death's veil, rebirth assembles pieces both necessary and otherwise into evolution's latest seedling. In the light of birth, rebirth's signature becomes visible.

Rebirth unfolds space in the liminal, between veils, where the tail ends of the previous life are woven into the new one becoming, drawing in elements otherwise untold and unaccounted for. An *X factor*, one could say. Consequently, something totally original is created. In this way, the past and future are woven into the uniquely present and vital moment. Upon this cloth, the world is made new, over and over again.

### Meditate

First, was the birth. A tiny drop of light in a cosmic sea of darkness. A seed in the void. And then, like every seed to follow, it grew, unfolding itself exponentially. With each unfolding, it outdid its own expectations of itself. It surpassed its own prophecies and proved the impossible, possible, every time.

More births followed. New life popped into existence like round, golden corn kernels in sunshine-hot oil. These beings grew too, each in their own way and time. Some ballooned, some elongated or spindled, twisted and curled. Others broadened, fanned or drooped. In the life of each one, growth reached a peak of abundance, expansion, hearty physical expression, after which they began their process of dying.

## Birth, Growth and Decomposition

Some went slowly, creeping closer to their destination over long stretches of time. Others were quick, blinking out like fireflies. Some would wilt, sag and wrinkle, color slowly leeching from them as their life-force fed into the beings surrounding them, continuing the cycle as was their due. Some had nothing to show for their long lives lived, looking about the same as they did when they arrived, but with an absence of breath and no distinguishable pulse.

Around and around turned the cycle of life—life being born, growing, growing old and dying. The birthing of planets, the birthing of a planet with land and ocean, green grass and a life-sustaining atmosphere, the birthing and aging of single-cell organisms, water-dwelling creatures, water-and-land-dwelling creatures, land-dwelling creatures, flying things. Things with hooved feet and tusks, things with fur and fangs, or scales and fangs, things with tails and fingers and thumbs that could grip. A creature that traded its hair and tail for the ability to stand on its hind legs and make its coat with its own hands. A creature who would pretend to be things it was not.

Millions and billions of lives passed before you were born. And then you were born, breaking free of your mother's flesh, suddenly your own creature. And with enough support for your survival, and with hardship riding on your tail, you began to grow, and grow, and grow. And here you are.

In your life, you see new things being born all the time. Living, breathing creatures, plants and animals, and also new possessions, identities, relationships, jobs, phases of emotional experience, particularities, habits, obsessions. Some grow fast, and blink out, looking about the same as when they arrived. Others grow slowly, day after day, for months or for years. Some age slowly, gradually slipping away, color leeching out and into other things. Some go away without a moment's notice.

Cycles within cycles within One Cycle.

Maybe one day, all of this will blink out. Maybe the color will slowly leech out of the sun and stars, or maybe it'll all just flash into the ether. And when it does, where will all this color and life-force go? Will it condense, into a new seed? Or scatter outwards, unfolding in ways that will surpass every one of our expectations of what all of this is and can be?

### Activate

- On a blank piece of paper, or in your reflection journal, make a list of all the activities you do regularly. Include everything you can think of: brushing your teeth, things you do for fun, work, duties, everything. On another sheet of paper, draw a three-columned table. Label each column "birth," "growth," and "decomposition." Now, look back at your list and see if you can fit each activity somewhere on this table. Generally, creative endeavors will fit into the "birth" category, maintenance of well-being and other projects will fit into the "growth" category, and restful activities will fit into the "death" category. It's fine if some of your activities fit into multiple categories—write each down wherever it applies. After you've found a place for each activity, observe it with these questions in mind: How does your table balance out? (A well-rounded chart won't necessarily have the same number of activities in each column, so go by feel based on how much time, emotional energy, physical resources, etc. go into—or come out of—each activity) Do you feel to be lacking in any of these areas? How might you bring more balance into your life? What activities can you add? What existing activities could be lengthened or shortened? Are there any activities you'd like to eliminate?
- Engage yourself in the act of making. This activity doesn't require purchasing any physical materials—you can experience the act of creation for free with song, words, or piles of grass and dirt found outside. Approach this any way you please, whether you plan or improvise, or borrow an idea from someone else. The point is to experience what it feels like to bring forth something new.
- We are being born, growing and dying all the time. What are you doing in your life to support your growth? What can you do more of? Do you need more nutrient-dense food to support healing, muscle or fat growth, or brain power? Do you need more exercise? Do you need more rest? Community involvement? Reflection time? Create an idea list of ways you can support your growth this week. Commit to doing at least one of the items on your list every day this week.
- Are there any elements, habits, activities, ways of being that are ready to phase out of your life? Maybe you no longer have passion or patience for them, you can no longer afford them, they've come to a natural end, or no longer serve you. Name them, and create a rite of passing for them. Light a candle or a stick of incense, offer up a prayer if you like, bury a symbolic

## Birth, Growth and Decomposition

representation of it (with consideration of biodegradability/toxicity please), hum a significant tune, but most importantly, take some time to reflect upon it. Get ceremonious, considering this time to be more of a celebration of life than a funeral. What did you learn from these habits, ways, etc.? How did they prepare you for your next phase of life? How do you want to remember them?

- Ramana Maharshi, spiritual teacher loved by thousands, experienced his awakening moment while lying on the floor of his father's office. While he was lying there, he felt himself experience his own death, and in the process, discovered the nature of his true Self. (This story can be found in more detail online—search "Ramana Maharshi Death Experience") While this sort of experience can't necessarily be summoned by force of will, it is generally beneficial to contemplate death from a clear, calm and loving state of mind. Go out into nature or find somewhere peaceful indoors, where you won't be disturbed, and find yourself a comfy place to sit and do just that. It might be helpful to take a few deep breaths first—find a calm center, be present. Then, ask yourself, "What is death?" Allow the thoughts to roll from there. Let them come naturally, never forcing them. Give yourself at least 20-30 minutes for this exercise.
- Experience rebirth by resurrecting an object that might otherwise be discarded. Whether you're up-cycling or simply reusing something, what old thing can you make new? A holey t-shirt can be cut up to make kitchen rags, a new duster or a reusable bag. Old magazines can be turned into beautiful and inspiring collages, or even baskets and beads. Every grandmother knows an old toothbrush can be used to clean between cracks in tile. Empty food containers can be reused for bulk food items, spices or craft and office supplies. Scrap paper can be hydrated, blended to a pulp and spread flat over cheese cloth to make new artsy paper. Both the internet and the library are full of inspiring ideas for clever reuse.
- Take the concept of the last activity, and apply it to the conceptual realm. Resurrect or renew seemingly dead ideas, habits, relationships or practices. That poem you wrote in the tenth grade could be chopped up and polished into something with refreshed meaning and relevance. Pick your favorite parts of your current exercise routine and recycle ones that aren't working as well, while bringing in new things you'd like to try. Pick up that old hobby you had quit (because you couldn't take the frustration anymore) but still somehow have feelings for, and see if you can approach it with new eyes.

# VI.

## Acceptance and Trust



Everything has its own time. Nothing one desires ought ever be rushed. The Wild teaches us this.

Plant a seed, and it will grow, or it won't. Give it water regularly, house it in nourishing soil, and make sure it sees sunshine. But once it's in the ground, there's no hurrying the process, or ensuring the results are what we desire. Show up to tasks regularly; don't let the sapling dry out, and guard it from those that might cause it harm. Fret over it too much though, and the plant will drown, its leaves yellowing and drooping from root rot.

“At some point,  
one must leave  
the rest up to  
fate.”

At some point, one must sit back, resting easy in the fact that all that can be has been taken care of. At some point, one must leave the rest up to fate. Sometimes we plant bad seeds, sometimes there are circumstances we couldn't have planned for. We can have peace with these things, knowing there are more seeds to come and more days for the harvesting.

While we can't create a life in avoidance of problems, we can plan based on continual observation of our environment, employing strategy, a sober mind, and patient care. We must seek a balanced steadiness in our approach. *Festina lente*—make haste slowly. Relaxed diligence, casual attention, peaceable action. Prepare for the future and don't worry about the rest.

### Letting Go

"He who binds to himself a joy  
does the winged life destroy;  
but he who kisses the joy as it flies  
lives in eternity's sun rise."<sup>xiv</sup>

William Blake

As a society, we place particular emphasis on physical longevity. We wield youth as a status symbol—something that can be achieved by the wealthy without ever having to sacrifice their recklessly consumptive lifestyle. As we age, we demand serums and lotions, compression underwear, pills and surgeries to give us young-looking bodies, a free ticket out of normal sexual dysfunction or menopause, and replacement organs after ours crap out on us. In short, we expect that capitalism well-played will give us the power to beat death in life's game of chess.

As it stands, we can only buy small increments of time, or the appearance of time, with these measures. And yet, our culture continues to be fixated, which demands the question, is it just the fighting human spirit that motivates such expenditure for such futile return? Is all this merely a healthy show of competitiveness and a desire for life? Or is there something deeper lurking in the shadow, such as crippling fear of death and that which can't be controlled?

Regardless of the answer to these questions, there is no clear payout in clinging to life. Why shell out the vital innards of our present situation in the form of time, money, or mental and physical well-being simply to gain a theoretically longer future? It's one matter to set ourselves up to live a long healthy, happy life, and another to rely upon last-minute, costly measures in a final attempt to avoid what is inevitable. It calls forth one more, extremely vital question: How can one truly enjoy living when one is so caught up in the fear of losing it?

### On Hope, Gratitude and Patience

"The misery of man appears like childish petulance, when we explore the steady and prodigal provision that has been made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats him through the heavens."<sup>xv</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson

When cultivating the practice of acceptance and trust, no three tools are more valuable than hope, gratitude and patience. In the wake of things going wrong and the absence of a guaranteed future, we can turn to the bitter-sweet elixir of these three things.

Some days, hope comes easy, rising with the sun and lighting up the soul. Hope doesn't need a guaranteed future to make positive effort feel worth it. Hope comes with its own desires and momentum. On the days hope breaks through the clouds, may we let it shine its brilliance upon us.

But on those days when the slightest scent of hope smells sour in the nose, synthesized to cover up something grotesquely wrong, may we at least turn to gratitude. When there is nothing else, there is gratitude. Unlike hope, gratitude is humble and slow. Most of the time, gratitude will not propel us into action. On the contrary, it will anchor us, exquisitely, to the here and now. It will bring us into our senses, remind us who we are and what we have been given. Where hope is sunlight, gratitude is the

soil. There will be days to come when the light of the sun will be shrouded, but may we never live a day without gratitude's sheltering embrace.

And then there's patience. Patience is the workhorse of this trifecta. It is the most humble and most trying of these, and yet it offers equal reward. That is not to say, as some do, that "good things come to those who wait," or, "the best things are worth waiting for." While these statements are sometimes true, it must be acknowledged that in many cases, even perfect patience can't bring the sought after reward.

Sometimes the greatest reward we gain from patience is patience itself.

Patience has a way of making the most unbearable circumstances livable.

Patience, like gratitude, has a way of slowing down and opening up the present moment. In surrendering to this process, it becomes easier to access both gratitude and hope because the blinders of ambition, anxiety and desire have fallen away. Patience can seem gloomy and gray, but so like a raincloud, it's also deeply cleansing and plump with fertility.

“Patience can seem gloomy and gray, but so like a raincloud, it’s also deeply cleansing and plump with fertility.”

With the aid of these three things, it becomes possible to move past the impulse to run around and *fix*, an impulse that can only bring damage, and settle down into a place of rest, acceptance and letting go.

## Meditate

In comes breath, filling up your lungs. Breath. Seeps. Out.

Notice how you don't have to *do* anything to breathe. Without a command or even a thought, your body handles all of its most basic functions regardless of your command on it.

Have you ever overthought your breath? You suddenly become aware of it, and maybe you find yourself doubting that actually, this *is* something that happens without your help. For a moment, it's like you aren't breathing right anymore—the rhythm is wrong, or you feel like you aren't getting enough air in your lungs. Even though you've been breathing without help since the day you were

born, suddenly, it's impossibly difficult. Only after you no longer hyper-focus on your breath is it able to return back to its normal, perfect rhythm.

Any overthinker can tell you about all the things that go wrong when we course over the same neural pathways too many times, chafing our nerve endings and running our minds ragged. But what about all of the things that can go right when we learn to let things well enough alone?

Breath flows smoothly in its own time, filling up the cells of our body with cleansing life-force. Cells and organs operate together, making it possible for us to do the things we do with our bodies. Our bodies age and our minds adapt, simply as a matter of operating within our environments. Each of us learns our roles, serves our communities, tends to life with loving hands, and we grow.

Sometimes we stumble. We fall, we fail. We get burned, parts of us break or fall off. And if we let well enough alone—if we gently tend our wounds and then leave them to do their own healing—we grow. We regrow our limbs, sometimes stronger than before, or we grow in memory, learning from our pain.

When we overplan, overthink, and overfuss, we can't help but get in our own way. But when we learn to step back and accept what is (when appropriate, granted), we make space for Something Greater. We open up our lives to the intelligence of the Wild. It's rarely ever what we expect. We will often find ourselves disappointed, or even shattered. But we will often witness success as well. And some days, we will witness miracles.

### Activate

- Gratitude isn't something that needs to be faked—we already have the capacity for it within us no matter what we're going through, but it is always useful to get in better touch with it. For every night this week, write a list of five things you are grateful for. See if you can do this activity without repeating anything. Be as broad or as specific and detailed as you like. As you make your list, allow yourself to appreciate all of the blessings and bounties each thing has brought into your life.
- Think back to a time when you thought something in your life was about to go horribly wrong, but somehow, everything ended up alright. What things happened that helped assure you that everything was okay? Did anything just sort of fall into place, without much effort or manipulation on your part? What roles did you play that helped the situation? Did you do anything that seemed to make things worse? Explore these ideas on paper.
- As adults, many of us develop the habit of carrying around mental to-do lists: pay that bill, pick up those things from the store, call that relative, write and send those thank you notes, fix the leak in the bathroom, and on and on. I'm often surprised by how quickly this list can build up and start to feel rather suffocating. Think about your own list, and maybe write it down so you can start to pin it into place a bit. Is there anything on that list that you can let go of? Anything that is causing more grief than its completion could possibly make up for? Anything that doesn't truly need to be done, or that you can delegate somehow? Whatever it/they may be, begin the process of letting go and acceptance of what will or won't come because of it.
- Are there any areas in your life where your inability to control a situation frightens or frustrates you? Reflect on this issue for a time and ask yourself, why don't you have the control you desire here? What power *do* you have in this situation? What's at stake, and what does it mean to you? After you've dug deep into the situation, I want you to write a prayer about it. Acknowledge where you have power and where you don't, and commit to making what positive action you are able to. Express your desired end result, and request the highest good for all involved. When you're done writing it, read it aloud in the presence of God, the One, the Universe, whatever you call that primordial All-Being.

## Acceptance and Trust

- Write an extensive list of everything that you don't have the ability to change or control, from the past on into the future. Bonus points for items that cause you particular stress and anxiety. When you're done, go outside, and, over a firepit or a large swath of concrete, light your list on fire and let it go (without burning yourself or the neighborhood, please).
- Grab a pen and a piece of paper or your journal, and in stream-of-consciousness writing, begin to reflect upon the areas in your life where you have the hardest time with acceptance and trust. Start by reflecting on recent memories when you struggled with this, and then start dissecting those memories. See if you spot any patterns. Do you struggle finding acceptance most in times of pain, or fear? Do you struggle most around money, work, relationships? Maybe your most challenging moments are when things are going well for you. When you feel like you've noticed a pattern, or patterns, make a plan to keep an eye out for these moments in the upcoming week. Set the intention that when your trigger pattern arises, you'll find a place to sit and hold space for what is going on inside yourself. After you've practiced this a few times, ask, What does this practice do for you? Do you feel more at peace? Do you find solutions that weren't there before? Keep this practice going for a full week—or longer, if you feel so called.
- Build a boat using only biodegradable materials. Some leaves and twigs could do the trick. Maybe you decide to make a miniature raft by twining some grasses around a row of small sticks. Spend at least ten minutes on this, and really put some love into it. It doesn't need to be perfect. When you're done, take your boat to a nearby stream or river, place it in the water—say a prayer if you wish—and let it go.

## Conclusion

"When traveling through the forest,  
stick to the trail  
and you will find home.  
However, if it's your self that you seek,  
or better yet, true love's kiss,  
then heed the wolf's call  
and roam.<sup>xviii</sup>

No matter where we are or what we're doing, if we've heard the call, odds are we're on the wild path.

Listen, can you hear it? It comes from within. Be still, can you feel it? That stirring—pleasure and pain.

We are born wild. We belong in, and to, the Wild. The Wild lives within us, always, and is alive and well in our lives.

And how are you? Are you alive and well? Do you remember your wild bones? Do you honor them? Do you allow them to move you?

When we are fearful, we clamp down on our bones. There's nothing wrong with this. The Wild knows about fear. And when we forget about our fear, or more aptly, when we hold onto it in one hand, yet reach out with the other for something else, the Wild will be there to grasp our outstretched fingers.

When we feel that pull, let us dance.

In the words of the Lakota people: *Aho mitakuye oyasin*. For all our relations.

# Endnotes

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**Courtney Chandrea** is a fiber artist and writer. She was born and raised in Iowa, and with the exception of a two-year adventure on the Big Island of Hawaii, has lived in the corn state all her life. As she grows older, her love for its land and people only deepens. She dreams of living her years in service to this Earth through writing, gardening, raising her two daughters to be healthy, responsible world citizens and creating beauty out of "garbage." You can find more of her work at [dreamthewilderness.wordpress.com](http://dreamthewilderness.wordpress.com).

## About the Illustrator

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