



In the Absence of the Ordinary

Essays in a Time of Uncertainty

Francis Weller

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*A night full of talking that hurts,
my worst held-back secrets. Everything
has to do with loving and not loving.
This night will pass.
Then we have work to do.*

-Rumi

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Prologue

Day by day, we shape a life. Sometimes rather aimlessly, and at other times with deliberation and intention. The more we pay attention, the more we notice the many ordinary moments that add texture and meaning to our lives. Greeting a friend on the street; a shared meal at a favorite restaurant; a quiet walk on the beach; going to a movie or the post office. Nothing special. Simply the ordinary rounds of coming and going, connection and engagement. We depend upon these gestures to sustain the currency of belonging.

And now, suddenly, the fabric of continuity and participation has been radically altered. There is nothing ordinary about these days of viruses and deaths, masks and social distancing. Our language has adapted to the pandemic. We speak of peaks and ventilators, hot zones and flattening the curve, washing hands and wiping down surfaces. No baseball games or concerts. All too often, the dying are forced to cross the threshold with no loved ones nearby, as are those who are bringing life into the world.

We have entered a time of descent that takes us down into a different geography. In this shadowed terrain, we encounter a landscape familiar to soul—loss, grief, death, vulnerability, fear. We have, in the old language of Alchemy, crossed into the Nigredo, the Blackening. This is a season of decay, of shedding and endings, of falling apart and undoing. This is not a time of rising and growth. It is not a time of confidence and ease. No. We are hunkered down. Down being the operative word. *From the perspective of soul, down is holy ground.*

We are not very familiar with the descent as something valued and essential. We live in an ascension culture. We love things rising up...up...up...always up. When things begin to go down, we can feel panic, uncertainty and even dread. How can we meet these unpredictable times with any sense of presence and faith?

To do so, we must become fluent in the manners and ways of soul. We are required to develop another set of skills and ways of seeing as we descend ever further into the collective unknown. We are being asked to hone the faculties of soul that will enable us to navigate through the long dark.

Primary among the skills we will need to cultivate is our capacity to grieve. My previous writings have focused on the way grief and loss touch our personal lives. From deaths of loved ones to the loss of homes or relationships, to the shattering experience of trauma, we are visited by sorrow in many ways. In these current times, we have entered a new constellation in which our grief is collective. We are in a deep dive into the unknown, riddled with pockets of loss. Jobs, health, life, touch, gatherings, even our basic trust in the future has been shaken. Covid 19 has forced this into our consciousness, but this truth has been there for some time now, embedded in the emerging climate crisis and the eroding of the social fabric of culture. We have been quickened by the pandemic to realize a vital truth: We are entering a *rough initiation*.

Many of the great myths begin in a time such as this. The land has become barren, the king, corrupted, the ways of peace, lost. It is in these conditions, that a ripeness arises for radical change. It is a call to courage (from the French for full heart) and humility. Every one of us will be affected by the changes wrought by this difficult visitation. It is time to become immense.

This collection of essays and reflections were written over the years, often in response to local or cultural experiences, like the wildfires here in California in 2017/18/19. They form a primer on ways to hold this time through practices rooted in soul. May they offer you some ground upon which to find solace in these unsettled times. Stay safe. Stay well.

Green blessings, Francis
Russian River Watershed

Introduction. In the Absence of the Ordinary

W

e are living in anxious times. Uncertainty has come into our homes and found its way into each of our lives. What was once stable and familiar, has been shaken and we have entered a steep descent into the unknown. Here, the invisible world asserts its power, reminding us of the folly of control. In these times, it may not be the gods and goddesses affecting our fates, but something equally mysterious: something unseen moving through the air, rattling our deep psychic ground, affecting everything.

Fear and anxiety readily appear in times like these. Our work is to turn toward these jittery guests and make a place at the table to offer tea and soup, a warm place to rest. Grief may also come knocking as our plans and expectations of normalcy fade into shadows, and we are left with our faith in the world being shaken. This too is a loss worthy of our attention and kindness. The Covid 19 virus reminds us of something inevitable but strangely denied: we are vulnerable, interdependent animals, clinging delicately to our little thread of life. The old Zen phrase, “Not knowing, is most intimate,” rings true. We don’t know what will happen today or tomorrow, and this brings us into the intimate truth of our own tender existence.

We are tumbling through a *rough initiation*, when radical alterations occur in our inner and outer landscapes. It is simultaneously deeply personal and wildly collective, binding us to one another. Everyone we meet in the grocery store, in line at the gas station, walking their dog, is tangled up in this liminal space betwixt and between the familiar world and the strange, emergent one. Hang on!

Much is asked of us during threshold times like these. In my work with the Cancer Help Program, I often hear how lost someone feels once they receive the diagnosis, undergo treatment and become a part of the medical machinery that often consumes much of their daily routine. The frequent lament is, “I don’t know who I am anymore.” This is the deep work of initiation. It is meant to dislodge our old identity, the sediment of self that we affix to our sense of who we are. We are meant to be radically changed by these encounters. We do not want to come out of these turbulent times the same as we went in. That is the invitation in this moment of history. Radical change.

There are shifts happening along the fault lines of this evolving crisis. The insane pace of modernity is being brought to a screeching halt. The dominant ideology of power/privilege is cracking, coaxing a more compassionate and heartfelt response to our mutually entangled lives. Suddenly, productivity is not the primary value, but connection, affection, love, encouragement. In the pause of sheltering in place, we remember neighbors and kindness, mutuality and empathy.

So now what? How do we navigate this tidal surge of uncertainty? How do we engage the world in the absence of the ordinary? Our first move could be to re-imagine *social distancing* as an

experience of sanctuary and solitude, and not one of isolation. Social distance is a cold term, lacking any sense of the rich invitation that awaits us when we turn toward our internal worlds. Solitude is a state of hospitality, a welcoming of all that is in need of attention. Solitude offers a ground that is embracing and inclusive. Everything can be made welcome in the broad arms of solitude, even fear. For as long as humans have sought counsel with the sacred, much of it has happened in a space set apart from others. Here, in silence and a nourishing aloneness, we can become receptive to the influence of soul. As Rilke said, "I am too alone in the world, and not alone enough to make every minute holy." As we *shelter in place*, may place become a shelter for each of us.

What else? Can we coax a few words of praise from our lips? Maybe sing a song or two, like they are sharing across balconies in the streets of Italy. Perhaps recite a poem to the birds, plant seeds, call a friend, pray, read the great myths that tell us, again and again, how we might find our way through the impossible. This is a season of remembering the ancient rhythms of soul. It is a time to become immense.

To become immense means to recall how embedded we are in an animate world--a world that dreams and enchants, a world that excites our imaginations and conjures our affections through its stunning beauty. Everything we need is here. We only need to remember the wider embrace of our belonging to woodlands and prairies, marshlands and neighborhoods, to the old stories and the tender gestures of a friend.

Fear can rattle us and activate strategic patterns of survival. These patterns enabled us to endure, but they cannot help us across this tremulous threshold. For that, we need to amplify the potency of the adult. As is true of any genuine initiation, it requires a ripening of our being and stepping more fully into our robust identity rooted in soul. We become immense, not in some grandiose, "I've got this," kind of way, but in a way where we become flexible like a willow, taking into our open arms and offering shelter to all that is frightened and vulnerable.

So, we return to simple things: stillness, beauty, compassion, patience. This will not resolve quickly. The art of repetition has great value in shaky times. Beyond frequent hand washing and bowing to one another, we can come back to practices that enrich the field we inhabit. Rituals, prayer, meditation, dance, are all ways to foster an intimacy with the ground of soul and the soul of the world.

Section I. When the Bough Breaks

Chapter 1: Rough Initiations

S

everal years ago, I wrote an article called “The Movements That Made Us Human,” in which I related an experience I had learning to flintknape; the making of arrowheads and spear points from stone. In the process of learning this ancient skill, a body memory flickered into my awareness: we have been making this gesture, this exact movement of lifting stone above our heads and striking down on stone for over 1,000,000 years. This movement, along with others, such as making fire, cordage, tracking game, basket making, communal rituals, initiation and storytelling are what slowly gave shape to our psychic and communal lives. We have made these movements generation upon generation and now, in the barest wisp of a moment, we have stopped. What happens to our psyches, to our very beings, in the absence of these movements? What happens to our cultures in the absence of these sturdy and reliable rhythms?

It appears entire areas of our nature remain inactivated. By extension, entire areas of the commons of right relations and good manners with the living world are also missing. These movements were highly engaged with the surrounding world: gathering plants for baskets and cordage; tracking deer, bison and antelope; tending the passages from youth into adulthood through sacred initiations; all were done with an attitude of reference. By silencing these movements, a distinct language of intimacy with the enveloping world has been lost. This strikes a profound note in the collective hum of grief.

One of the essential movements that made us human was our ability to hold one another in times of grief and trauma. This skill has, for the most part, been lost under the extreme weight of individualism and privatization. This has had a profound impact on how we process and metabolize our personal encounters with loss and intense emotional experiences. Without the familiar and reliable container of community and family, these times can penetrate our psychic lives in a shattering way, leaving us shaken, frightened and unsure of our next footstep. This is the experience of trauma. Trauma is any encounter, acute or prolonged, that overwhelms the capacity of the psyche to process the experience. In these times, what confronts us is too intense to hold, integrate or comprehend. The emotional charge that arises saturates our capacity to make sense of the experience, and we become overwhelmed and alone.

We’ve all become familiar with the term PTSD. (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) We hear stories of veterans returning from war carrying the violence they experienced and witnessed within them. Victims of natural disasters, car accidents, school shootings, rape, or the sudden death of someone we love, are all forms of acute trauma.

There are other forms of trauma as well. Trauma can also arise in our psyches, not so much from an event, but through erosion; the slow wearing away of the sense of trust, security and

worth through prolonged exposure to neglect, abandonment or shaming. This is what is called *Developmental Trauma* or what I call, *Slow Trauma*.

What makes an experience traumatic, in addition to the pain of the encounter, is the absence of an adequate holding environment capable of supporting us in these times. “Pain is not pathology,” as Mark Epstein noted in his book, *The Trauma of Everyday Life*. The pathology emerges from the isolation that all too often surrounds our experience. What we needed in these times were attuned and attentive individuals who could sense the distress we were experiencing and offer us assurance, soothing and safe touch to help us re-modulate our inner states. The holding environment is a form of ritual ground, within which we can pour our grief, fear, and pain and trust that it will be held.

Trauma is inherent in being human. From suffering and loss, to broken hearts and betrayals, we will all encounter many moments of trauma. In the absence of the village—which was the original holding environment—these times settle like sediment in our beings, taking on a feeling of overwhelm and frequently of shame. It is as if we intuitively know that someone should have responded to our distress, and when they didn’t show up, the thought fell on us like ash that it must be because of our unworthiness. It confirms our lack of welcome and belonging, reinforcing our isolation and exile.

In my work as a psychotherapist, I have seen many people who were experiencing circumstances that profoundly affected their lives—life-threatening illnesses, the lingering effects of neglect in childhood, violations to body and soul through rape or molestation or the haunting remains of war. In their stories I began to see the parallels between their traumatic experience and traditional initiation. I began to call their experiences “rough initiations” to provide a greater context for their experiences. Offering this wider lens with which to perceive their experience, helped to broaden their ability to hold their wounds with compassion and mercy.

In any genuine initiatory experience and in all truly traumatic events, the following circumstances occur:

- The individual is ushered into an alternate reality, outside consensus reality.
- There is a radical alteration in the sense of self.
- There is a realization that nothing will ever be the same. There is no going back to the old life. We are meant to be radically changed by the encounter.

Traditional initiation occurred outside the familiar landscape of family and friends, the daily rounds of meals and work. It occurred in a time outside time. What was known and accustomed was left behind as the initiate entered a strange and unpredictable world while simultaneously being held within the sacred container of the community. For the cancer patient, the soldier, the victim of rape, or the child of neglect, the world takes on new hues, colored by the wash of pain and terror that accompanies their experience. They too, have entered an alternate reality, yet one devoid of the sacred container of ritual and village. In this unfamiliar and often frightening terrain, they encounter the unraveling of the known existence.

Ritual initiation radically reshapes our sense of self. It is meant to break us open to the widest possible experience in identity. This shift in identity shows itself in times of trauma as well. I hear the phrase, “I don’t know who I am anymore,” every time I meet with the participants in the Cancer Help Program. The same is true for other forms of trauma as well, shaking them to the core, greatly reducing the arc of identity.

In an ideal situation, identity slowly emerges from the rich loom of inner and outer threads, woven together to craft something unique and beautiful. Until the age of initiation, the coalescing self is meant to be sheltered and protected and allowed to burrow deep into the womb of family and village. This identity, however, is not large enough to contain the wild edge of the soul’s calling or the demands of the daimon. *When the safety of the familiar confronts the yearnings of the soul, it is time for initiation.* It is a time of disruption and eruption as the demands of the soul make themselves known. It is at this point that the elders recognized the need to end the life of the youth, as they knew it, and ritually escort them across the threshold into a new sense of self.

Trauma enacts the same shifts in identity, often without the guidance, witnessing and containment of the village. This freefall experience can leave us feeling as though we have little sense of who we are any longer. And now, no matter how hard we try, we can’t put the pieces together again. We cannot go back to how things were before the cancer diagnosis, the accident, the war, the hurricane, the death of our child: Nothing will ever be the same and too often, we are asked to carry it alone, in silence.

Traditional initiation is what I call a ***contained encounter with death***. Initiates were often put through a series of intense ordeals such as prolonged fasting, being buried overnight, or dancing for hours until the body collapsed from exhaustion. Death is ever present during initiation, signaling to the initiate the gravity of the moment. These ordeals dislodge the current sense of self and radically reshapes it through encounters with vastly larger energies. No amount of personal strength or control can outlast the conditions that are evoked by the ritual process of initiation. Only by releasing the old forms will something possibly emerge on the other side. The initiate, in a very real sense, dies and is rebirthed at the end of this process into a wider cosmological story and identity. They have died to the solely personal and have entered the sacred dimension of mythic life.

In the indigenous context, initiation was never meant for the individual. It had nothing to do with personal growth or self-improvement. It was an act of sacrifice on behalf of the greater community into which the initiate was brought and to which they now holds allegiance. They were being made ready to step into their place of maintaining the vitality and well-being of the village, the clan, the watershed, the ancestors and spirit. It was never about them, but about the continuum of generations to come.

This thought is very difficult for us to digest in our highly personalized/psychologizing way of thinking and perceiving. It is always about us—our wounds, our growth—which keeps us at the center of the wheel. Traditional initiation, in contrast, breaks us into a wider and more inclusive experience of self. We become part canyon, part Meadowlark, part cloud bank, part village. We are made porous through these profoundly deranging experiences, broken open to allow ourselves to be penetrated by the holiness that pervades all things. Through this communion,

we feel our kinship with the singing, breathing world/cosmos. We become immense and connected to the whole. We fall in love with the world and learn to protect what we love.

I called initiation, a *contained encounter with death*. Martin Prechtel said those, “who don’t fight death in adolescence, are destined to live in a walking death.” This failure to confront death during initiation, dooms many of us to become agents of death, eating life wherever we go. Any sideways glance at our culture reveals a massively consumptive, parasitic energy, feeding off the life force of the planet. Restoring rituals of initiation is at the heart of any meaningful cultural change.

Trauma, in contrast, is an *uncontained encounter with death*. Few, if any, of the conditions needed to meaningfully process the trauma were present. We felt naked and exposed to the bitter winds of neglect or violence. Our internal environment shifted and rearranged itself in our attempts to mediate these extreme states. We withdrew from the world, found substances that eased our distress, sought security from anyone we could convince to enter our emptiness. We established sentinels at the periphery of awareness to keep us safe and kept a vigilant watch at all times. We were reshaped by these traumatic times. It became difficult to regulate our inner worlds, which could be suddenly tossed about by any event in our life.

I know in my own life, how the neglect and violence I experienced made me wary and distrusting of love, certain that it was fleeting at best and certain to disappoint. I leaned heavily on distraction and dissociation to remain at a safe distance from my pain and grief. Eventually, however, the soul finds cracks in the floor and brings to the surface what we attempted to bury, all in hopes of completing the initiation that remained latent in the trauma.

The German word for trauma is “selnershutterung,” which means *soul shaking*. This feels more alive than the clinical word, trauma. We are shaken in times of trauma, disoriented and disjointed. Ed Tick, author of *War and the Soul* wrote that, “The Hopi people called trauma, *tsawana*, meaning, ‘a state of mind in terror,’ and “The Lakota called trauma *nagi napayape*, meaning, ‘the spirits leave him.’” Trauma enters our beings at profoundly deep levels, not unlike the conditions of initiation. However, without the mediating conditions that contained traditional initiation processes, these experiences leave us shattered and alone—the exact other end of the spectrum that accompanies initiation. While initiation breaks us open to the widest possible aperture of inclusion in connection to the breathing cosmos, trauma isolates us and fragments us into the smallest imaginable hub of existence. One man I worked with shared how his goal was to live at or below zero; to take up no room in the world since he had no right to be here.

Trauma leaves us thinned and exhausted. Strategies of survival consume much of our life energy. The condition that befalls us following trauma resembles in a powerful way what traditional cultures called *soul loss*. This was the most feared condition to indigenous people. It led to a flattened world, disenchanted and emptied of vitality, joy, and passion. Relations with the living, singing world were silenced in this condition, leaving one stranded in a deadened world.

Soul loss is experienced as a depletion in our vital essence, leading to a decreased sense of potency and power. In mythological imagery, we have entered the *wasteland*. Here, images

appear in dreams of ghettos and prisons, ragged orphans and barren stretches of empty buildings. Psychologically we call this depression, but to the indigenous soul, depression is the symptom, not the illness. The illness is soul loss and that is not amenable to medication.

To heal from our traumas, from soul loss, we must restore the conditions which offer something alluring and compelling to coax the soul back home. In other words, what reconstitutes the psyche after trauma, in addition to understanding what happened, is reestablishing our place within the wider cosmological context. We must be restored and re-storied to complete the rough initiation that was precipitated by the trauma. In other words, we must return to our lives as vital and engaged participants in the deep song of the world.

For many years, I had the honor of leading the *Men of Spirit* initiation process; a year-long intensive rite of passage. What I began to understand from the work we were doing and from studying initiations in other cultures, is that a certain set of variables must be in place to contain the encounter with death and make the transition possible from youth to adult. *These same conditions are what help us restore the psyche after trauma.*

1. *It requires a certain context: Community.* Initiation is meaningless outside of the village. We need something to serve: We do this for the sake thereof. In other words, initiation was not meant for the sake of the individual; it was done for the welfare of the greater circle to which they belong. Initiates returned to the village, the community or tribe, as newly created members of the wider cosmos. They were now authorized to participate in the care and maintenance of the community.

Similarly, a traumatized individual needs to feel the arms of the community holding them in their extreme condition. Through the eyes and hearts of the circle, the violated soul can begin to feel the resonance that is available to them inviting them home.

2. *It requires a certain energetic: Ritual.* Ritual is a highly focused process that provides sufficient heat to cook the soul. The particular gestures, which are unique to each culture, are guided by ritual elders. Ritual invites the potential for derangement—the process of shaking us out of the agreed-upon constructs of family/culture and into a larger, soul-based sense of living. The community requires potent adults who are guardians of their own sovereignty.

3. *It requires a certain vibration: The Sacred.* Ritual opens us to the Mystery, the invisible world of the sacred. Initiation without the engagement of the sacred fails to open us to our expanded sense of identity. It requires invisible allies and energies to help us slip off the coat of our small lives. This happens, as poet Rainer Maria Rilke said, by “being defeated decisively by constantly greater beings.”

4. *It requires a certain spaciousness: Time.* Many initiatory processes last six weeks to six months out in the bush. During this prolonged time, all ties to the familiar are broken and you enter the cocoon of your own disappearance. This takes time. This alternative rhythm enables the psyche to let go of the conditioned cadence that accompanies daily life. We need to slip into soul time, “geologic time,” as my mentor Clarke Berry called it.

5. *It requires a certain terrain: Place.* Initiation occurs in place, a geography with familiar hills, caves, trees and rivers. Traditionally, mythic places where the old ones gave shape to the landscape, were the grounds upon which the initiates were taken, providing an ancestral root to their own experiences. Now watersheds, a bioregion particular to your being, are the terrain into which we are invited. We are initiated into place as surely as we are into our communities. Place is very particular. We can see this today where indigenous people are fighting to the death to protect their lands from oil and mining companies. To these traditional people self and land are one.

When these five elements are woven together, the container is fortified and we are able to cross the threshold and enter into our own adult lives with the capacities of honoring life and feeding the soul of the world. These primary constituents help to stabilize the internal movements of self-attunement, self-regulation and our capacity to more readily hold steady in our adult life. We begin to suture the tears in our coat of belonging.

A recent study of Native American and non-native American soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq was revealing. It showed that the soldiers who only participated in conventional PTSD treatments, had a 40% success rate for the treatment. However, those soldiers who participated in traditional Native practices such as sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies and vision quests, had a 70 to 80% success rate in recovering from their symptoms. The difference being the restoration of the cosmological ground—the soldiers returned to the larger field of belonging. To the indigenous mind, it is impossible to separate body, mind, soul, and spirit. Any approach to healing must include all of these aspects of our being. What is worth noting, is that when non-native soldiers were put through the same rituals, they also experienced an increase in recovery.

Laurens van der Post, speaking of Carl Jung, said:

Healing without a quickening of religion, as he put it to me, was “just not on.” He was back at the moment far in time when the word “heal” formed itself first on the lips of living men, and to heal meant to “make whole,” and the word whole and the word holy are both derived from “heal” to describe an invisible concept of life, so that in the beginning, as in this hour, so much later than we think, the condition of wholeness and holiness are synonymous.

Healing trauma requires a restoration of the matrix of life. When we are able to return to the original ground of our belonging, we come home and remember who we are, where we belong, and what is sacred.

Chapter 2: Some People Wake Up: Reflections on Initiation

Again and again
Some people wake up.
They have no ground in the crowd
And they emerge according to broader laws.
They carry strange customs with them,
And demand room for bold gestures.

The future speaks ruthlessly through them.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

15

No doubt you have noticed that we are living in turbulent times culturally and as a planet. All pretense of immunity is collapsing as we realize how completely entangled our lives are with one another, with kelp beds and calving glaciers, with refugees and the dreams of young people everywhere. The disequilibrium shaking the world feels like a continual tremor on the fault lines of our psychic lives. Very few things feel stable. It is like a fever dream. It may be that this is the initiatory threshold we require to wake us up. Whatever is happening, much will be asked of us if we are to make it through the whitewater of this narrow passage. We do not know what lies ahead, but one thing is sure: This as a time for bold gestures. It is time to wake up and humbly take our place on this stunning planet. The future is speaking ruthlessly through us.

The immediate need of our time is for ripened and seasoned adult human beings to take their place in our communities; individuals who carry a deep and abiding fidelity to the living body of this benevolent earth, to beauty and to their own souls. Traditionally, these were the ones who had successfully crossed a series of initiatory thresholds and had come through as protectors and carriers of the communal soul. They were the ones whose artistry and wisdom kept the current of culture alive. We live in a society that has all but abandoned rituals of initiation. Consequently, we are languishing from the absence of mature and robust adults.

How do we become seasoned adults, a true human being? This is not a given. Traditionally this was the work of culture. Through the long labors of multiple initiations, individuals were gradually crafted into persons of substance and gravity. The process yielded someone more attuned to responsibilities than rights, more aware of multiple entanglements than entitlements. They were initiated into a vast sea of intimacies, with the village, star clusters and gnarled old oaks, the pool of ancestors and the scented earth.

Through the sustained attention of culture, individuals were ripened into adults capable of sustaining culture: A marvelous symmetry.

We are meant to cross many thresholds in our lifetime, each a further embodiment of the soul's innate character. Yet many of us carry the uncomfortable thought that we are unsure of our place in the world, still anxious about our sense of value and our right to be here.

The *unfinished business* of adolescence haunts us and makes it hard to live into the larger arc of our lives.

Crossing the threshold from adolescence into adulthood requires an ordeal, a tempering of the individual that *begins* the process of ripening. There is no easy passage. Many traditional cultures escorted their youth into the world of adulthood and the sacred through an elaborate series of rituals. These rituals occurred in nature, in the holding space of forests and caves, savannahs and bush. It was a space outside the ordinary world of the village, apart from the community and often took place over many weeks and even months. It was a time of tempering the young ones with intense ritual ordeals that took them beyond their capacities to endure. Something died in the process. Something needed to die in the process. And something needed to come forward. Some new shape of identity that was wedded to the silt and slope of the land, that spoke the feathered and furred language of the creatures and the song of the dawn. This new identity was comingled with the holy topography. They became one and the same.

Underneath and holding up this initiatory process was a deep and abiding relationship to the wild world and the spirits of place. This passage was rooted in a nearly endless succession of generations that had come to learn the necessity of such a transition. The awareness for this is essentially universal: our souls must be shaped by a process of intense ritual encounter, communal reflection, and immersion in the natural and supranatural worlds. In other words, to become an adult, certain gateways needed to be crossed for that territory to be fully embedded within the person.

What we witness daily in the litany of injustices and exploitation of others and the world are the actions of uninitiated individuals. It is not difficult to see how questions of adequacy and inclusion are often portrayed in gross exaggerations of power and force. Nor is it a stretch to see how the persistent hunger in the unripened psyche of so many is at the heart of our violent consumption of the planet.

Initiation is an entrance into a place, a terrain. It is a courtship of a large dreaming animal. It is not an abstract ideal of psychological accomplishment, but rather an entrance into the specificity of locale, of geography, of rhizomes and crab thought, mercurial imaginings, moon cycles, and seasonal rhythms, with eyes that regard these as sacred. Through these intimacies, a grand landscape comes into vision: a world riddled with spirit, ancestors, community, cosmos and the dreams of those yet to come.

Initiation, in its deepest traditional sense, was meant to keep the world alive. The purpose was not individual, but cosmological in scope. *It was never for the individual.* This is very hard for us to get our minds around, having been conditioned within a psychological tradition that fixates everything upon the “self.” It is always about me and my growth! Here’s the truth, however: *Initiation was an act of sacrifice on behalf of the greater circle of life into which the initiate is brought and to which they now hold allegiance.*

Can you feel your longing for just such a knowing?

At the same time, initiation profoundly affects us as individuals. It activates and authorizes the particular soul thread we came to offer the waiting world. Much like those seed pods that only

germinate in the heat of fire, the soul seed we carry responds to the heat generated by initiation.

The soul is fully aware of the reciprocal relationship it has with the wild world, with the worlds of spirit and the ancestors. Soul recognizes the innate requirements for maintaining these connections. It was the role of mature individuals to honor our *place in the family of things* by carrying out the rituals of gratitude and renewal that sustain our relations with the breathing, animate world. Initiation embeds in us a fundamental requirement of being human:

We are meant to feed Life in an ongoing way!

As we mature, we are asked to come into a more reciprocal relationship with the earth. We are called to develop the manners which help sustain the body of this exquisite world. Values such as respect, restraint, (our least developed spiritual value) gratitude, and courage help to fortify our ability to stand and protect what we love. We are here to participate in the ongoing creation, to offer our imagination, affection, and devotion to the sustaining of the world.

It is not difficult to see how far we live as a culture from these practices. The central question is, how can we, once again, recognize the transforming cadence of initiation in a time of amnesia, a time in which the old forms have been abandoned?

The truth is *initiation is not optional*. Every one of us will be taken to the edge, pulled by the gravity of soul to engage the rigors of ripening us into something substantial. No one is exempt. Imagine if we could see the circumstances of our lives as the raw material necessary for the movement across the threshold into our adult lives. This could free us in radical ways. From a mythic perspective, these are the conditions that can cook the soul and bring us closer to the mystery of our own singular incarnation. The *rough initiations* of loss, trauma, defeats, betrayals, illness, become the *Prima Materia*, the beginning matter, for undertaking the crossing into our more encompassing life. So much depends upon how we perceive what it is that is happening in our world. Taking a mythic view enables us to see our circumstances as necessary, even required, for the work of deep change to take place.

The need is clear: we must cultivate a robust collective of adults whose primary fealty is to the life-giving world upon which we depend. We must be able to feel our loyalties to watersheds, migratory pathways, marginalized communities, and the soul of the world. We must feel the bedrock of our aliveness, and the reality of our wild and exuberant lives. Initiation tempers the soul, drawing out its hidden essence and calls forth the medicine we came to offer this stunning world. It is time to wake up!

Chapter 3: Everything is Burning

*To speak of sorrow
works upon it
moves it from its
crouched place barring
the way to and from the soul's hall.*
- Denise Levertov

These last few weeks have seen radical changes in the physical and psychic landscape of Northern California. The fires that began late Sunday night, October 8th, 2017, quickly engulfed homes and dreams, woodlands and security. Many of us awoke in the middle of the night to the acrid smell of smoke, sensing that something was wrong. Only later, with the dawn light, were we able to see the extent of this disturbing truth.

The German word for trauma is “Seelenschütterung,” which means “soul-shaking.” Clearly our souls have been shaken by this catastrophic event. Everyone has been affected, whether we lost a loved one, a home, a beloved pet, our place of employment, a trail that we cherished or simply our sense of faith in the ordinary assurances of daily life. No one in our community has been spared the sorrows that have fallen upon us like ash. We are living in a collective field of sorrows that will take a long, long time to metabolize.

In some northern European cultures, the season of grieving the loss of someone close was known as a period of *living in the ashes*. This extended time was an era of descent, a movement into the underworld where the bitter tincture of grief was meant to be churned and metabolized into a medicine for the community. It was a sacred time, a time out-of-time, in which the primary work was digesting sorrow. We have felt and seen the swirl of ash in the air. We are all being asked to do the sacred work of transmuting loss into wisdom.

How are we to respond when life confronts us with overwhelming circumstances? How can we hold all we are feeling when the source of the feelings is far beyond our ability to control? How do we recalibrate our inner lives to further the healing reflex of psyche in times of trauma? Here are a few offerings for a medicine kit for tending our souls during traumatic times. And who isn't living in traumatic times?

1. Practice self-compassion. During periods of stress, we often fall back on old patterns of relating to ourselves and the world. We can be harsh and critical, withholding and brittle, especially with ourselves. Self-compassion offers us the opportunity to hold what is vulnerable with kindness and tenderness, allowing these places to remain soft and open. Times of great uncertainty call for a level of generosity to ourselves that helps to offset the effects of trauma that can often envelop our emotional body. This must be our first and primary intention: to hold all that we are experiencing with compassion; to offer a safe place for our fears and grief to land.

Self-compassion is the foundation for befriending our lives. It is the great work of the heart to behold our life as eminently worthy of compassion and love. We will not figure our way through this maze of grief and suffering. We must, instead, learn to turn toward our sorrows with kindness, tenderness and affection. Lean in. Offer love, a touch of affection. Nothing ever heals in an atmosphere of judgment or criticism. We contract and get small under such conditions. We open and soften only when the space around us invites revelation and connection.

A working definition of self-compassion is that it is the *internalized village*. Imagine how a dear friend would respond to your pain and suffering, fear and grief, when they arise. While we can be impatient and judgmental about our inner states, a good friend would offer us a holding space big enough to be with what it is we are experiencing and touch it with mercy. We are all worthy of compassion and when we can turn toward our pain or grief with kindness, we open our hearts and grant the conditions necessary for healing.

2. Turn toward the feelings. There is no bypass or strategy of avoidance that can help resolve the difficult emotions we will encounter. Turning toward our suffering is essential. We must not only endure our times of pain and sorrow, hoping to get to the far shore of them, we must actively engage them and feel them fully. This move takes great courage. It is hard to open ourselves up to the painful emotions that await us without an adequate level of compassion and support.

There is a premise in the alchemical tradition that says we must keep the materials warm for them to ripen in the vessel. If we do not, our sorrows and fears will harden and congeal, making movement impossible. When we hold these challenging emotions with affection, concern, compassion and interest, they stay flexible and fluid, capable of change. We keep them warm by holding a steady vigil with these difficult guests and not turning away and neglecting what these pieces of our soul life need from us. When we offer this kind of devotion, our sorrows and fears will change. As the poet Rilke reminds us, “No feeling is final.”

To feel it fully, however, we require the arms and hearts of others, tethering us to a wider circle of belonging. The weight of grief and suffering that we are facing is more than we can hold in isolation. Be willing to share what has gathered in your heart with another. Call three or four friends together and share the communal cup of loss that we are all feeling in this uncertain time. Be mindful of how much conditioning we have received that tells us to go it alone; to not need anyone or bother anyone else with our struggles. Challenge those thoughts. “This is,” as one of my teachers said, “the solitary journey we cannot do alone.” Coming into the company of others reassures us and adds to the internal feeling of safety.

3. Be Astonished by Beauty. Trauma has a profound impact on our feelings of aliveness, often generating a state of numbness or anesthesia. This state protects us for a time from having to encounter the raw, searing emotions that often accompany trauma, but it also dulls our sensual engagement with all that surrounds us. At some point we will be required to meet the painful emotions and the sediment of sorrows that have accumulated around us. Beauty’s allure helps to open the full aperture of the heart. Sorrow and beauty side-by-side. The soul has a fundamental need for encounters with beauty. It is a central source of nourishment that continually renews our sense of vitality and awe.

Beauty calls us outward into the world. It quickens the senses, awakens the heart and pulls us deeper into an intimacy with the folds of the world. The poet Robinson Jeffers said we are meant to “fall in love outwards” with the astonishingly beautiful world that surrounds us. Immerse yourself in beauty. Bring flowers into whatever space you occupy, along with fragrances that enchant and soothe. Play music that touches your heart and sing along. Read the poetry of Akhmatova, Dickinson, Machado and Neruda. As Rumi said, “Let the beauty we love, be what we do.” The felt encounter with beauty increases our sense of ease and connection.

4. **Patience.** Healing from trauma takes time. Patience offers a courtesy to the vulnerable pieces of soul life that have been splintered by the presence of trauma. Knitting a bone takes time. Mending the soul takes even longer. Be patient with your process. There is a deep wisdom in the soul that knows the value of going slowly. Stepping out of the manic pace of modern culture is essential to regain our footing in the world of soul. Patience is a discipline, a practice that offers assurance to the places of vulnerability and a ground for absorbing the benefits of our efforts. As James Hillman noted, “In your patience is your soul.”

Patience creates a state of spaciousness where the deeper rhythms of soul can re-emerge. Patience also invites a creative emptiness where the unimagined can arise. We are not the authors of our healing. Our task is to generate a space of receptivity to dreams, images, insights, intuitions, inspirations, all through the hospitality of patience.

The Buddha said, in one of his sermons, “Everything is burning.” In these extreme times, the truth of impermanence strikes at the very heart of our lives. Everything we hold dear—loved ones, homes, photos of family and ancestors, objects that hold a sense of the sacred—can all be gone in a flash. What remains are the bonds of love and friendship. What we witnessed during the smoke-filled days following the onset of the fires, were acts of kindness, gestures of generosity and a recognition that our lives are mutually entangled with one another. May this spirit endure. May we find the courage we need to keep our hearts open to one another and to this wild, fragrant earth. Stay safe

Chapter 4: An Apprenticeship with Sorrow

This night will pass, then we have work to do.

- Rumi

Grief and loss touch us all, arriving at our door in many ways. It comes swirling on the winds of divorce, the death of someone dear, as an illness that alters the course of a life. For many of us, grief is tied intimately to the ravages we witness daily to watersheds and forests, the extinction of species, the collapse of democracy and the fading of civilization. Left unattended, these sorrows can seep underground, darkening our days. It is our unexpressed sorrows, the congested stories of loss that, when left untouched, block our access to the vitality of the soul. To be able to freely move in and out of the soul's inner chambers, we must first clear the way. This requires finding meaningful ways to speak of sorrow. It requires that we take up an *apprenticeship with sorrow*. Learning to welcome, hold and metabolize sorrow is the work of a lifetime.

Our apprenticeship begins when we come to understand that grief is ever-present in our lives. This is a difficult realization, but one that has the opportunity of opening our heart to a deeper love for our singular life and for the wind-swept world of which we are a part. We begin with the simple gesture of picking up the shards of grief that lie littered on the floor of our house. Nothing special. Nothing heroic. Not unlike the young novices entering their apprenticeship with the master teacher, we begin humbly—sweeping the shavings, mixing the pigments, cleaning the brushes, tending the fires. We begin the process by building our capacity to hold sorrow in the womb of the heart. Through this practice, we become able to welcome the pervasive and encompassing presence of grief.



Grief works us in profound ways, reshaping us moment by moment in the heat of loss. We are also asked to work grief and to take up our apprenticeship with fidelity and love.



It takes tremendous psychic strength to engage the wild images, searing emotions, chaotic dreams, grief-stained memories, and visceral sensations that arise in times of deep grief. We must build soul muscle to meet these times with anything resembling affection. The apprenticeship is long.

Grief is more than an emotion; it is also a *faculty of being human*. It is a skill that must be developed, or we will find ourselves migrating to the margins of our lives in hopes of avoiding the inevitable entanglements with loss. It is through the rites of grief that we are ripened as human beings. Grief invites gravity and depth into our world. We possess the profound capacity to metabolize sorrow into something medicinal for our soul and the soul of the community. The skill of grieving well enables us to become *current*—to live in the present moment and be available to the electricity of life. We gradually turn our attention to what is here, now, and less

on our need to repair history. We remember we are more verb than noun, more a jumpy rhythm, a wild song, a fluid leap than a fixed thing in space. As Spanish poet Jaime Gil de Biedma said, “I believed I wanted to be a poet, but deep down I just wanted to be a poem.”



This apprenticeship is, at heart, about the shaping of elders; the ones capable of meeting the pain and suffering of the world with a dignified and robust bearing.



After years of walking alongside grief, working with its difficult cargo, we gradually come to see how we have been reshaped by this companionship. We see how we have cultivated a greater interior space to hold more of what life brings to us. What slowly emerges from this long apprenticeship, this vigil with sorrow, is a spaciousness capable of holding it all—the beauty and the loss, the despair and the yearning, the fear and the love. We become immense: *The apprenticeship patiently crafting an elder.*

After years of holding steady with sorrow, a distillation of wisdom occurs. We develop a capacity to see in the darkness and find there, in the depths of it all, something holy, something eternal. We touch the indwelling sacredness of the life we inhabit, digesting bitterness and returning with a determination to feed the community. We become a hive of imagination, dispensing what we have gathered over this extended education of the heart. What was learned was not meant for us alone, but was meant to be tossed like seed into a fertile mind, a waiting community, a hungry culture.



Elders are a composite of contradictions: fierce and forgiving, joyful and melancholy, intense and spacious, solitary and communal. They have been seasoned by a long fidelity to love and loss. We become elders by accepting life on life’s terms, gradually relinquishing the fight to have it fit our expectations. An elder has no quarrel with the ways of the world. Initiated through many years of loss, they have come to know that life is hard, riddled with failures, betrayals and deaths. They have made peace with the imperfections that are inherent in life. The wounds and losses they encounter, become the material with which to shape a life of meaning, humor, joy, depth and beauty. They do not push away suffering, nor wish to be exempt from the inevitable losses that come. They know the futility of such a wish. This acceptance, in turn, frees them to radically receive the stunning elegance of the world.

Ultimately, an elder is a storehouse of living memory, a carrier of wisdom. They are the voice that rises on behalf of the commons, at times fiery, at times beseeching. They live, at once outside culture and are its greatest protectors, becoming wily dispensers of love and blessings. They offer a resounding “yes” to the generations that follow them. That is their legacy and gift.

When the season is right, when we have been tempered sufficiently by the heat of life, we are asked to take up the mantle of elderhood as the most ordinary of things. Nothing special about it. It is ordinary to know loss and sorrow, to be taken below the surface of life and be reshaped by the currents of grief. It is ordinary to be deepened by the draw of sorrow and its intense wash, clearing away old debris and outdated strategies. It is ordinary to feel the aperture of the heart open because of our intimacy with grief. No longer compelled by the allure of being

special, we are free to take our place in the world, casting blessings by the simple offer of our presence, seasoned by sorrow.



*This is how elders are crafted: tempered between the heat of loss
and the weight of loving this world.*



We are all preparing for our own disappearance, our one last breath. It is difficult to pick up this thread and hold it in our hand. Each of us is fated to leave this shining world, to slip off this elegant coat of skin, to release our stories to the wind and return our bones to the earth. Saying goodbye, however, is not easy or something we give much thought to in our daily lives.

How do we say goodbye? How do we acknowledge all that has held beauty and value in our lives—those we love, those who touched our lives with kindness, those whose shelter allowed us to extend ourselves into the world? How do we let go of sunsets and making love, pomegranates and walks on the bluff? And yet, we must. We must release the entire fantastic world with one last breath. We will all fall into the mystery. We are most alive at the threshold of loss and revelation.

Chapter 5: Baptized by Dark Waters

"I have faith in nights"

- Rainer Maria Rilke

There are times, more akin to seasons, when we are brought down into the terrain of shadows. These times are not caused by something happening in our day-lit world, nor by history or genetic inheritance. It seems we are required to periodically surrender and meander in the vast uncharted terrain of the underworld. These are times initiated by soul. Most of us will have times like this. They will descend upon us, as they say, "out of the blue." In truth, it is more blue bending toward black.

In Alchemy, these seasonal migrations were called times in the *Nigredo*, or the Blackening. It is helpful to see that this as an inevitable and necessary time, a time of shedding and letting go, of sitting close to the furnace of death as it cooks away all that is spent and no longer serving life. Our time in the *Nigredo* is a period of dissolution. Old patterns and perceptions, old, outworn identities begin to dissolve as we are unmade. Things fall apart. There is an unraveling, an emptying of hope and an undermining of our great heroic enterprise to be in control and rise above our suffering. We are taken down to the ground and asked, as psychotherapist Jennifer Welwood said, to "dance the wild dance of no hope!"

Anyone who has ever been escorted into the underworld, knows full well how uncharted this place feels. We are without fixed stars, known destinations, familiar markers or guideposts. The *Nigredo* was called the "subtle dissolver" in alchemy and was viewed as a necessary element in the great work of creating the *philosopher's stone*. The work could commence through the attainment of the *Nigredo*. Only when the familiar structures were eroded was it possible for something new to arise. It is difficult for us to see our time in the underworld as something required for the deepening of our soul life. One major challenge to this understanding is that we are highly conditioned to strive for the light, to rise above everything and overcome every obstacle. Not so when soul pulls us downward.

We meet a different self in this grotto of darkness, someone closer to the dream world and comfortable in shadowed places. This one knows about melancholy and hasn't been swept up in the pursuit of the light. We need to know this other one who is more kindred with the nature of shimmering moonlight and soul than the brilliant sunlight of consciousness. This self sees through the layers of conditioning we all endure that oppress and domesticate. This one expresses something true and alive whether through the complex rhythms of the blues, in shades of nuanced speech or in the tender intimacy of vulnerability. This other is inclined to silence, the night sky, the poetry of Neruda and Machado and the friendship of solitude.

When we find ourselves walking through the ink-black night of the underworld, we quickly

begin looking for the exit door. The old myths and the teachings of alchemy suggest we take a different direction. The work, they say, is to move closer to the heart of the darkness. The alchemists said it clearly; the work is to make the black, “blacker than black,” the “color of a raven’s head.”

Not exactly the news we were hoping for.

Our attempts to leave the loom of night too soon, however, may deprive us of the work being done in the dark, often without our awareness. Much happens in this underground domain outside of our attention and control. What is missing is our engagement with the black threads of soul. This is a time of courage and faith, but not necessarily one of hope. Courage that we may keep our hearts open. Faith that this is a place of value, a terrain filled with richness—not unlike the black earth—something capable of nourishing new tremulous pieces of soul into life. Coming to understand that much happens outside of our conscious interventions is freeing and adds to our faith in the capacities of soul to take us where we need to go in these unexpected times of descent.

Our sojourn in the darkness, while difficult and painful, is also a time of alteration and change. The process of change, however, is not one of addition and growth, but rather one of letting go, decay, subtraction and death, what the alchemists called *putrifactio*. It is a *via negativa*. Like nature, it is a returning rhythm of slow movements or stillness, repetitive thoughts and feelings, memories that arise again and again. We come to see that this season is necessary for any spring to unfold. With a measure of fidelity to the work, this season of uncertainty is gradually digested into something dense and full. When we are able to carry these times with faithfulness, it yields a gravitas, a tincture of wisdom for the waiting village.

Our times in the underworld brings us close to sorrow. Our grief carries love in it; love darkened by loss; of friends, homes, marshes, marriages, children, animals, dreams. It is this particular mode of love that leads us toward the black tones of *duende*. It is a fierce love—musty, gritty, and suffused with powdered glass. We weep tears of darkness, gripped by what is calling us close to the earth. *Duende* is a wild, vital energy and when it touches us, as it often does when sorrow’s fingers caress the soul, we feel strangely unsettled as though something in our underground world has been violently shaken. We feel a strange mixture of immobility—weighed down by the sediments of grief—and activated in the deep cavern of soul when *duende* move us. *Duende* asks for movement, for some form of expression that honors the depth of feeling that is present. It rises through the soles of our feet, carrying the black earth into our bodies aching for full voice.

The great Spanish poet and eloquent writer on duende, Federico Garcia Lorca, wrote that whoever is touched by duende, is “baptized by dark waters.” This is a potent image that intimates that these are holy waters that arise when we find ourselves moving through the terrain of the underworld. This baptism is one in which we are washed by the waters of our own tears, the very salt of the soul, and united with the realm of the sacred. It is no wonder

that we often return from our time in the arms of grief, changed and ripened. “The duende’s arrival,” Lorca says, “always means a radical change in forms.”

It may be that the “most important secrets hide in the shadows,” as Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax writes. To find them, we must be willing to enter the darkness and discover what is waiting there to be brought back to the hungry world. Dive deep!

Reflection Question: Recall a time when you found yourself in an unexplained darkness: A mood that settled upon you for an extended period that crowded out the light. Sit with this memory, not so much to figure it out, what it meant, but more, what affect did this time have upon you? What was asked of you in this time of shadows? Write for 15 minutes.

Section II. Care of the Soul

Chapter 6: The Grandeur of the Soul

During the Renaissance, when the world still possessed a sense of enchantment, when animals and the dreaming earth spoke and were worthy of our attention, poets and philosophers conjured an image to depict the grandeur of the soul. What they came upon was the night sky. That is how vast and mysterious we are. That is how unfathomable and beautiful we are. Pause and think about this. Breathe it into yourself. This is our true inheritance: the wild, undulating majesty of soul. When we let this larger reality fall upon us, we drift into the grand expanse of the soul. This is what we long for and it is nested in the heart of our ancestral memory. Soul as root, as well, as heartbeat, the perennial ground that binds the human and the more-than-human worlds together.

The emphasis in our time, however, is upon the self. The “me” that we most often identify with inside our definitions. It is curious that we often feel small and isolated when embedded solely in this identity. That may be because the self is experienced as insular, interior, segregated and partitioned off from others in the world. Matters of boundaries and individuation abound. Specialness, mastery and self-improvement flood the psychological landscape. And yet, for all the offers of psychological development, the feelings of separation still linger. We have forgotten the grandeur of the soul, our innate inheritance, and have been reduced to trying to keep ourselves afloat in the boat of self.

I am not denying the presence of a self, an identity that gives each of us a bearing in the world. What I am calling our attention to, is that without soul, the self remains marooned in its isolated hut of interiority. It is soul that leads us into the wild interplay *between* self and world, between self and ancestors, the Dreamtime and spirit, and the profusion of images arising continuously from psyche. Soul is there, betwixt and between, eliciting connections and intimacies. We fall *into* the world via soul’s erotic desire for this sensuous life.

Soul offers continual intimations of belonging. And isn’t that what we need in these times—a sense of belonging that is entangled with melting glaciers, cedar waxwings, the cries of families separated at borders, whispers shared deep in the night between lovers. To step into the domain of soul is to enter a rich and vibrant terrain riddled with images and eruptions of affection. It is to step across a threshold and find ourselves enraptured by the *deep story* of the soul displayed in myths, metaphors, and mystery.

Soul is a shapeshifter, wearing many coats. While the self prefers definitions and structure, soul is too rambunctious to be contained in one simple story, particularly our biographical narrative. That is, in part, why there are so many variations of fairy tales and myths. Soul requires a multitude of ways to express its full nature. The extensive array of images found in these wisdom tales reminds us that the ground of our being is wide and deep. We are part wind, part track of moonlight on water, part dreaming coyote, part slumbering bear. To attend these wider strands of soul life binds us with the dreaming earth, the soul of the world. Loneliness

abates and the edges of our identity thin and become permeable. We remember our expanded self and find ourselves at home.

When we look up into the bowl of night and take in the exquisite beauty of the stars, we are catching a glimpse of the eternal and a mirror of our own immense lives. We have been gifted with this stunning life and along with this comes an innate responsibility to live it fully. And since the soul is at home with all the manifestations of this world, from joy to sorrow, despair to astonishment, and everything in between, let us risk seeing ourselves as part of the grandeur of the soul.

Exercise: Take some time one of these nights and lie out under the canopy or stars. Let your imagination go and let it invite you into a reverie that suggests that what you are seeing is also a reflection of your own vastness. What if that is true? What if you, as Whitman suggests, are large and contain multitudes? How might you walk differently in the world? How would your story of yourself change to account for the larger and wider sense of identity? Write about this for 15 minutes or share with a friend.

Chapter 7: The Reverence of Approach

Several years ago, I came across a passage by the Irish poet and philosopher, John O'Donohue. His words profoundly impacted my thoughts and have become somewhat of an interior anthem in my life. In his book, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, O'Donohue writes, "What you encounter, recognize or discover depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach... When we approach with reverence, great things decide to approach us."

This passage is rich with implications. As I have sat with it over the years and offered it to others in my therapy work and in workshop settings, I have continually seen its wisdom and value. For example, when we turn our attention to the inner world, we frequently do so with an eye toward evaluation and critique. We look for flaws and defects, casting about for evidence of failure. This gaze is harsh and causes the soul to retreat. Over thirty years in my psychotherapy practice, I have never seen anything open or change in an atmosphere of judgment. An approach of reverence, on the other hand, is foundational to a life imbued with soul. From this way of seeing, we recognize that everything possesses a measure of the sacred, including our sorrows and pain. Clearly, how we approach our inner life profoundly affects what comes to us in return.

What we encounter, recognize or discover, depends on the quality of our approach. An approach of reverence invites revelation. To pause and reflect on this can make all the difference between living in a cold, detached world, populated primarily by judgements and cynicism, and living in a world riddled with intimacy and offers of communion. When our approach is one of reverence, we find ourselves falling into a deeper embrace with all that is open to encounter, both internally and in the surrounding, breathing world. If we approach superficially or from a perspective of what can we get out of this exchange, then the encounter will be limited, what we recognize will be thin and what we discover will be nothing at all. We will simply be meeting my own well-rehearsed stories in the moment.

There is an intimation in O'Donohue's passage: He tells us that great things will approach us when we practice the etiquette of reverence. It is as if the aperture of our perception widens when we bring reverence to bear. We become able to recognize the holiness that exists in the moment, as I experienced this morning on my drive to work. As I came around a bend, winding through vineyards and meadows, the mist was threading its way at the base of the hills and in that glimpse something great approached me. I was moved by the vista, brought to tears through the intimacy shared between my heart and the world.

An approach of reverence establishes a foundation ripe for amazement. We are readied for surprise and awe by a posture of reverence. It is a stance of humility, recognizing that the otherness that surround us—that infuses the world—is vast and powerful and yet curiously open for connection. An approach of reverence invites the mystery of encounter where two solitudes meet and become entangled, creating a *Third Body*, an intimacy born of affection. All

true intimacy requires an approach of reverence, a deep regard, an *unknowing* of who or what we are meeting. It is our bow honoring the exchange.

O'Donohue advises us, however, that "The rushed heart and arrogant mind lack the gentleness and patience to enter that embrace." We must be able to step out of the frantic and breathless pace that consumes much of our days. Reverence requires a rhythm akin to prayer. We are asked to slow down and rest in the space of silence and deep listening. There is a saying in the Zen tradition, "Not-knowing is most intimate." When we suspend our preconceptions and static stories of who we are, or who our wife, husband, or partner is; when we let go of our predetermined expectations of how it all should be, then we come into a place of reverence, of deep respect and the freshness of the encounter is once again available to us. When we pause and notice, we are free to drink in the delicious thickness of the moment and all that it offers.

Reverence, rather than expectation or entitlement, acknowledges we live in a gifting cosmos and that we do best honoring creation by singing praises. As the poet Rilke said, "To praise is the whole thing! A man who can praise // comes toward us like ore out of the silences // of rock." Reverence acknowledges that what we are seeing or seeking is holy; that we depend utterly on this world to breathe and to dream.

We are designed for encounter, our senses are rivers of connection in a continuous exchange with the world around us. How deeply we experience this encounter, what we come to recognize and discover, is a question of presence, of reverence.

Exercise:

Inner work: Experiment with reverence over the coming days. Be mindful of how you approach your inner world. Is it characterized by criticism and judgement? Imagine coming to your experience with reverence, especially around our more vulnerable states like fear or grief. Notice the difference when you come to your experience with reverence. Take ten minutes and write about your experience.

Outer work: Take a walk and let something call to your attention—a tree, a rose, a budding maple, an old barn. Soften your gaze and let the qualities of reverence fill your being. Simply notice what takes shape between the two of you. Allow the connection to come full and then offer your gratitude for the encounter. Remember, everything is open to the conversation. Take ten minutes and write about your experience.

Chapter 8: The Art of Vesseling

*"If God had not given us a vessel, His other gifts
would have been to no avail."*

- Albertus Magnus

The idea of the vessel is one frequently referenced in spiritual traditions and in the work of therapy. The idea suggests that deep psychic work requires a holding space, a secure container, within which the work of change can take place. When grief arises, in any one of its many shapes, it asks to be held by us, carried close to the heart and nourished by our affection. We are asked to slowly build a vessel spacious enough to contain all the wild movements of a soul in grief. Grief, as we know, pulls us into another terrain, shadowed and dense, littered with the debris of loss. Uncontained, the swell of sorrow can overflow, and we can be carried away in a wash of grief. We need a space strong enough to contain the associated threads that accompany grief. It must be able to hold bitterness, remorse, heartache so intense that we know for sure we will not survive. It must be able to hold cries of despair and hopelessness, long stretches of emptiness, and the writhing pains of betrayal. The vessel must be strong.

Grief activates the move to build the vessel. We intuitively know that what is moving in the hallways of the soul requires our attention, our time and devotion. These very acts are what generate the vessel. The vessel is created by work that takes place both within and without. It is shaped by how we hold what is present in our lives and it is enriched by how we are held by the surrounding field of friendships and world. The inner work is one of noticing and responding to the push and pull of sorrow. It is about a courtship with lamentation, welcoming the many moods, old memories and dreams that repeatedly arise. The inner work invokes silence and solitude as places of hospitality to our suffering heart. The outer work takes on the wisdom of sharing wisely what is moving in us with those who are capable of receiving what it is we are expressing without judgement or advice.

Inner and outer overlap, strengthening the vessel, enabling us to do the hard work of ripening grief into something dense and fortifying. We are asked to not solely endure our times of grief, but to actively engage the materials, the weighty lead of loss, the black pitch of regrets, the salt mines of old wounds, and cook them slowly into a rich substance. The offer of attention keeps the material in the vessel warmed. Grief, left unattended, turns cold, hardens and congeals. In this state of neglect, there is no possibility of movement. We become a chronic holder of grief, a permafrost forming in our subterranean lives. We are deadened and dulled when grief remains untended. We are asked to bring our warmth to the material and slowly allow it to cook. This is the work of alchemy.



The work of the vessel is both to contain and to further the material.



Only what is held can flower. Only what is contained can become something more than how it began.



The sorrows we encounter work their effects on us, if we can engage the grief in a meaningful way. Held in a vessel of our making, shaped by vigilance and compassion, our grief is slowly ripened into a tincture of medicine for the waiting community.

Containment enables us to engage the difficult dialogue between ourselves and the core of the melancholy, that would otherwise be dismissed by our enterprising mind that has no time for such conversations. And yet, it is here, in the flux of loss and sorrow, that soul is deepened. Here, in the valley of grief, is where the character of soul is shaped.

The offer of attention keeps the material in the vessel warmed. Grief, left unattended, turns cold, hardens and congeals. In this state of neglect, there is no possibility of movement. We become a permanent holder of grief, a kind of permafrost forming in our lives. We are deadened and dulled when grief remains untended. We are asked to bring our warmth to the material and slowly allow it to cook.

Central to the work of alchemy was the image of the vessel. As one noted alchemist, Albertus Magnus stated, "If God had not given us a vessel, His other gifts would have been to no avail." Without the vessel, the work cannot proceed. But what is this vessel and what does it offer to us in times of soul work?

To the alchemist, the vessel was a literal container, usually made of glass, within which the physical operations of transmutation took place. It was in the vessel that the base materials were placed. They were then subjected to heat and various modes of change, moving them toward the goal of the *stone* or *lapis*, often referred to as *gold*. In order to aid these processes of transformation, the alchemists would subject the material to various operations such as *separatio*, *calcinatio*, *mortificatio*, and *coagulatio* among many others. Each operation intended to hasten the work of nature, which the alchemists said was the movement from base metal to the *Philosopher's Stone*. In psychological language, it is the work of redeeming the complex in service of the soul. James Hillman says it this way:

The alchemists had an excellent image for the transformation of suffering and symptom into a value of soul. A goal of the alchemical process was the pearl of great price. The pearl starts off as a bit of grit, a neurotic symptom or complaint, a bothersome irritant in one's secret inside flesh, which no defensive shell can protect oneself from. This is coated over, worked at day in and day out, until the grit one day is a pearl; yet it still must be fished up from the depths and pried loose. Then when the grit is redeemed, it is worn. It must be worn on the warm skin to keep its luster: the redeemed complex which once caused suffering is exposed to public view as a virtue. The esoteric treasure gained through occult work becomes an exoteric splendor. To get rid of the symptom means to get rid of the chance to gain what may one day be of greatest value, even if at first an unbearable irritant, lowly and disguised.

All of this happens in the vessel. The vessel, however, must be carefully tended. There are frequent warnings in many alchemical texts about the need to pay rigorous attention to the condition of the vessel in order to assure the success of the effort. In particular, they were concerned about the ability of the vessel to tolerate the effects generated by the various operations—pressure, heat, rising vapors—so as to not spoil the work through a failure of the vessel.

The 17th century alchemist Philalethes wrote,

Let your glass distilling vessel be round or oval...Let the height of the vessel's neck be about one palm, hand-breadth, and let the glass be clear and thick (the thicker the better, so long as it is clear and clean, and permits you to distinguish what is going on within)...The glass should be strong in order to prevent the vapours which arise from our embryo bursting the vessel. Let the mouth of the vessel be *very* carefully and effectively secured by means of thick layer of sealing wax. (From the Hermetic Museum, vol. 2)

His guidelines suggest much for our work with soul. First, we are told that we must attain some clarity in order to note “what is going on within.” We must be able to see through our projections and defenses, our strategies and fictions in hopes of seeing things as they are. No small feat! A degree of courage is in order here asking us to look into our psychic lives with a clear and discerning eye.

Secondly, we are instructed that the work requires a degree of strength; that the “glass should be strong” so that in the course of our efforts, it does not break. We all have known times when we were broken by the events in our lives. We felt shattered and fragile, the vessel compromised. It takes strength to engage the energies emerging from the psyche. It takes a strong vessel to engage the wild images, surges of grief and remorse, the difficult memories that return, the agitations and depressions, desires and longings. The vessel, strengthened by our attention and devotion, becomes capable, over time, of containing it all. In fact, that is one of the central goals of the work. It is not about resolving our issues or repairing the past, but becoming more spacious and capable of holding all that psyche and life bring to us. Again, not an easy achievement.

The poet, Federico Garcia Lorca declared that our ability to engage this work requires, “Disciplina y pasión,” discipline and passion to move the work forward. Discipline is the effort and muscle of vasseling, without which the vessel breaks. We all want to invoke the wild, passionate, creative energies in our lives, but without discipline, without containment, we will burn out. We only need to think of many of the ones we have lost over the years—Monroe, Joplin, Holiday, Hendricks, Morrison, Cobain—burning brilliantly but without sufficient containment, reduced to ash. Part of the strength we require to do the work of cultivating soul, is relational. We cannot do this work in isolation. As Jung noted, “The soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a ‘You.’”

And lastly, we can hear in the old alchemist's words, the dictum, “Let the mouth of the vessel be *very* carefully and effectively secured.” This is the essential practice of restraint, one which we often struggle to follow. In *Psychology and Alchemy* Jung writes, “The *vas bene clausum*

(well-sealed vessel) is a precautionary measure very frequently mentioned in alchemy...the idea is to protect what is within from the intrusion and admixture of what is without, as well as to prevent it from escaping." What is cooking in the vessel must not be allowed to escape or leak nor is it good to add to the material once the work has been engaged. If this occurs we run the risk of diluting the work or spoiling it all together. We often share an insight too soon or expose a newly inspired project to others prematurely and suddenly the idea fades, the insight withers. Learning to seal the mouth and "treat the work-in-progress as a secret," is a vital necessity in the work. Let it simmer, ripen, mature. Let the material become what it desires to become, not for our sake, but for the sake of soul.

Vessels separate as well as contain, offering us a way to identify the particular piece that is presenting itself and calling for our attention. In a very real way, we cannot cultivate a psychological or soulful life without containment. Hillman, once again, reminds us that "Psyche appears to be only what it contains." In other words, without our capacity to notice and attend, reflect and witness, engage and love, we would be bereft of any psychic life. When we practice these *arts of vesseling*, we extend an intimacy to what is moving in the soul. This happens through slow, continuous building of the vessel. Think of therapy, for example, and the ongoing repetition, hour-upon-hour, turning over the materials of psyche—images, dreams, moods, memories, fantasies, confusions, complexes, relationships—all requiring a space to be witnessed and deepened, allowing the *masa confusa* to slowly yield some new precious drop of insight.

The image of the vessel is ancient and was most notably developed in the work of alchemy. Carl Jung reclaimed alchemy from obscurity when he discovered hidden within the arcane imagery of the alchemists, a profound description of the processes of psyche. He recovered a stunning array of images, metaphors and operations that offer us a way of approaching the work of soul that is immediate and tangible rather than abstract and conceptual. Images of kings and queens, fountains and snakes, peacocks and ravens, dragons and furnaces, filled the depictions of alchemical texts. They worked with the materials of the physical world—lead, iron, Sulphur, mercury, salt—all inferring an interior resonance with the ways of psyche. We have all felt leaden from time to time; slow, heavy, weighed down by life. And we have all tasted the bitterness of regret, the raw salt mines of our wounds which we return to over and over again and bathe with our salty tears. The rich metaphors offered by alchemy lend themselves to a more imaginative psychology, one alive with soul.

Chapter 9: The Gifts of Restraint

In a series of talks I offered in early 2018, called *Living a Soulful Life and Why It Matters*, I shared multiple ways to see the daily manifestations of soul, how it reveals itself through our encounters with wounds, images, creativity, friendship, grief, the ancestors and more. Underlying these epiphanic displays are the *values* that soul holds, values that were shaped over thousands of years and which emerged as central to our survival as a species. In these times of disorientation and uncertainty, recovering these essential nodes of being may help us navigate the coming challenges in a more considered way.

We begin our exploration of the values of soul in a somewhat unexpected territory: *restraint*. The choice is intentional. In an age of instant gratification and excessive consumption, the value of restraint must come acutely into view. We are drowning in our possessions and our garbage. We are exhausting the very fabric of the world, consuming the equivalent of 1.7 earths every year. The depletion process is far outstripping the regeneration capacities of the planet. Restraint, however, is one of the least developed soul values we have. It may not be as sexy as courage and boldness. Nor is it the most popular at the party. Exuberance and abundance get that award. Restraint is more introspective, contained, held back. It is a bit austere, preferring not doing to doing.

There are both internal and external forms of restraint.

Internally, restraint invites a pause, a breath, a moment of reflection. How rarely we do this—pause, breathe, reflect. It is a core practice in the art of ripening. We must grant time and space for things to ripen and mature. Insights, intuitions, encounters, dreams, all require time to incubate and consolidate into something substantial. We continually reveal and share things too soon, rarely allowing a new revelation time to mature and become part of our psychic ground. We need to hold, contain, cook the material before sharing it with the world. It must be allowed to go through its own process of distillation prior to being revealed to questioning eyes. The value of restraint acknowledges this truth and creates a space where something can take shape according to its nature.

Our constant management and manipulation of all things psychic, reveals a lack of faith in the movements of soul. It is essential to practice non-interference, letting the deep work of soul go on without our interventions. As the great German mystic, Meister Eckhart said, “We must let go and let God.” Or as Jung said, paraphrasing Eckhart, “We must let go and let be.” Restraint is a form of trust in the deep workings of soul.

When we honor the value of restraint, the door to genuine receiving opens. Grasping to satisfy every hunger leaves no room for the generosity of the world to find us. Restraint is a form of faithfulness: faith that we will be cared for; that we will be offered kindness and care from

others when our hearts and souls are troubled. Restraint opens the aperture where we can be found.

There is a marvelous tempering of psyche by the heat generated through non-action. It is a *via negativa*, a path of negation. To restrain means “to bind back” and “to hold back.” This creates heat through the tension of resistance. It is this heat that creates contour and shape to our interior lives. You can feel it when you hesitate to act on some impulse, desire or craving. Space is created when we let go of something. It requires strength and fortitude, commitment and devotion. It is a move toward holding steady, allowing the deeper and often hidden rhythms of soul to emerge.

The lyrical poet of Duende, Federico Garcia Lorca called us to live in the dynamic tension between discipline and passion. Restraint is a form of discipline. It offers a holding space, a vessel in the old Alchemical language, for cooking the raw material, the *prima materia*, into a new shape.

We place a great deal of emphasis on desire, longing, expression, and wildness in our lives. All of this is beautiful and necessary. Without its other side, however, we lack the tempering that is provided through the tension of restraint. It’s possible, that holding back is as necessary as action is to the soul.

Restraint offers a powerful antidote to our self-focused psychologies and our consumptive economics. It loosens the tight grip of the self as the sole signifier of importance. Through the agency of restraint, we can attend to the needs and voices of others, human and more-than-human, in our concerns. Many traditions practiced gestures of restraint, such as fasting, as a means of returning the individual, again and again, back to the ground of humility.

Externally, at the heart of restraint is an awareness that our well-being is entangled with all others. Many myths and fairy tales speak of the necessity of restraint, particularly in terms of our relations with our plant and animal kin. These wisdom tales warn of the dangers that accompany selfishness, greed, and taking more than necessary. To practice self-control is to maintain the tender equilibrium between the worlds. In many of these tales, the animals would withdraw their consent to be offered to the human world when we acted out of balance. Consequently, the game disappeared, and the people suffered. Their intuitive knowledge was meant to prevent wholesale depletion of what it was they required to survive. We have forgotten this life-preserving value in our times. Overfishing, mountain top removal, clear-cutting of forests, loss of topsoil, emptying and poisoning of aquifers, are all outgrowths of the failure to practice restraint.

Restraint moves contrary to the goals of acquisition and accumulation. It is, rather, a value that serves the commons, arising as it does, from our long story of mutual survival. It is rooted in an embedded truth that we have endured together. Our survival is possible only in collaboration with the many others with whom we share this stunning world.

The Iroquois Confederacy in the Northeast territory of the continent practiced a principle of considering the 7th Generation in their deliberations. Any action they took, would have to be sustainable for those generations yet to come. This is the embodiment of cultural restraint.

There is a potent connection between restraint and humility. The action/non-action of restraint suggests that there is a value in holding back, of limiting the movements we are wanting to make. Restraint recognizes the dangers of continuous growth, addition, and consumption. It leans into the wisdom of moderation—another word not praised in our *no-limits* culture. In an age of “You can have it all,” there is an implicit entitlement to consume, extract and possess. What drives this rapacious appetite is an interior sense of emptiness and lack. We have forgotten the *primary satisfactions** in our lives and have been left with a deep absence in our core.

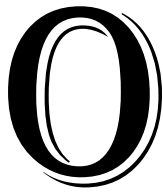
Restraint, along with patience, offers a pause, a moment of reflection where we can take in the needs of another. In the space of holding back, we recognize that our well-being is intricately entwined with the health of the commons. To act in a selfish manner is to put our own lives in jeopardy. To take too much disturbs the delicate balance of watersheds and communities. Restraint asks us to cherish the fact of our mutually entangled lives. We are inseparable from all that surrounds us.

In the coming years, we will inevitably be required to reduce, not only our consumption, but also our sense of needing so much to live a rich and soulful life. Let us come to see the value of restraint, of creating space through the practice of not doing. It may be there that we find ourselves escorted into the chamber of what it is the soul truly longs for.

** Primary satisfactions are the undeniable and irrefutable needs of the psyche that were established over the long journey of our species and are imprinted in our beings as expectations awaiting fulfillment.*

The primary satisfactions are the elemental constituents of a healthy psychic and physical life. These included matters such as: adequate and available touch; comfort in times of grief and pain; abundant play; the sharing of food eaten slowly; dark, starlit nights; the pleasures of friendship and laughter. They also are centered on a rich and responsive ritual life that addresses concerns central to our lives such as initiation, healing and other major transitions; continual exposure to and participation with nature; storytelling, dancing, and music; attentive and engaged elders; a system of inclusion based on equality and access to a varied and sensuous world.

Chapter 10: The Value of Repetition



Our exploration of soul values began with the often-neglected practice of restraint. We now venture into another underappreciated quality of soul, and that is repetition. Like restraint, repetition is not glamorous or sexy. It is ordinary and ebbs and flows through our daily lives in both conscious and unconscious ways.

We struggle with the idea of repetition, anything that seems too familiar in this culture. We want things to be novel, new and improved, the latest. There's nothing wrong with this. It does, however, tinge the old and traditional with a feeling of being antiquated and outdated. (It's interesting to note that to many traditional people, anything new was approached with an attitude of suspicion. Where did this come from? Will it serve the people? How will it affect the land?)

We live in a society that prizes constant innovation and novelty. The singular focus on growth and development has provided us with many new devices and technologies and granted us a degree of ease seldom known by our ancestors. It also casts a long and weighty shadow. Embedded in this ideology is an obsession with progress.

Progress is holy scripture in this culture. It is the one-directional arrow of time and productivity that surrounds us and informs us daily. We feel it in the constant pressure to have more, be more, achieve more. There is something inherent in the concept of progress, however, that leaves a residue of discontent in its wake. The better life is always just beyond the horizon, awaiting the arrival of the latest product, accomplishment or discovery. We are taught to crave what's next, the up and coming. The old and familiar are considered outworn and outdated. We are quick to discard anything considered old—including people—leaving us skimming the surface carried along on the swift moving current of progress.

This pressure is felt in our psychological lives as well. There is an ongoing focus on improving and being better. How we are is rarely good enough. We must constantly strive to grow. Growth and progress are the two primary imperatives within psychology. Consequently, discontent is built into the way we approach our psychological lives. The focus settles on what we don't have, what we haven't achieved, the progress we haven't made.

Soul, on the other hand, values repetition. Repetition is a form of sustained attention, returning us repeatedly to a place, a person, or a practice, that engenders depth and familiarity. It is in the very essence of repetition that we come to know something more intimately, whether a partner, a friend, or our own interior worlds. Any movement toward depth requires repeated contact. Gary Snyder, Zen poet and nature philosopher, wrote that "Getting intimate with nature and our own wild natures is a matter of going face to face many times." There is no depth without excavating and digging into the marrow of what matters to soul and culture. Repetition is a form of courtship.

Soul engages repetition in many ways. Consider how often we are brought back to the cave of our wounds. We are taken to these places, often unwillingly, as a way of remaining close-by,

not straying too far from something essential in the making of soul. It is through the ongoing entanglement with our suffering, that flavor and shape are delivered into our lives. James Hillman says our wounds and traumas are “salt mines from which we gain a precious essence and without which the soul cannot live.”

Our sense of discontent, in part, arises out of neglecting the core practices that were repeated unbroken for hundreds of generations. Now, under the fevered pitch of individualism and the heroic ego, the original practices that wove the individual and the community together, have been largely forgotten. Consequently, the ritual of life is reduced into the routine of existence. That is repetition without soul. That is the drone of addiction. That is repetition that deadens.

Soulful repetition offers a way to foster the art of remembering. We live in a culture that encourages amnesia and anesthesia; we forget, and we go numb. In our obsession with progress, the roots of memory have deteriorated and faded. “Repetition,” says anthropologist Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, “is a form of permanence.” This was vital for our survival. The dances, rituals, songs and stories, the intricate knowledge of plants and animals, how to shape adult human beings, all combined to form a means of maintaining the trail through the world. The continuity of wisdom passed on generation to generation was crucial to our ongoing survival. When we forget the old ways of our ancestors, we lose contact with the roots of wisdom.

We live in an ongoing tension between forgetting and remembering. Nearly all enduring cultures developed practices designed to help us remember three central things: who we are, where we belong, and what is sacred. Prayer, meditation, and ritual, are, at root, designed to help us stay awake. These practices serve to sustain the ground of remembrance, which is, in turn, a form of permanence.

Soul exerts its gravitational pull repeatedly in our lifetime, calling us into the rich loam of image, emotion, memory, dream and longing. Living cultures exert a similar compelling quality, drawing the community together through the repetitive gestures of ritual, initiatory cycles, pilgrimages to sacred places and the ongoing rounds of tending the village. Oral traditions are rooted in the rhythms of repetition. The great stories were told over and over again. It was in the retelling that the multiple layers hidden in the tale were slowly revealed. Our earliest shared acts were designed to weave and knit the community together, and then by extension, into the surrounding field of nature and cosmos. Repetition serves to continuously renew and reaffirm the entangled nature of our beings.

Soulful repetition is not boring or bland. It is musical, rhythmic, and enduring. We require touchstones of return to stay connected to what matters to soul and culture. Ultimately, repetition is a gesture of affection, of fidelity. We return again and again to tend what it is we love and by so doing, we keep it alive and vital.

Practice/Reflection: In what ways do you nourish the ritual of everyday life? What core practices help sustain your intimacy with soul? In what ways do you engage in repetition without soul?

Chapter 11: The Generous Heart: The Gift of Self-Compassion

“You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.” – Buddha



At the heart of every spiritual tradition, we find the teaching of compassion. Through the gate of compassion, we are invited to enter the wider conversation with all life. Compassion binds us with all things through the shared encounter with suffering. Compassion: From the Latin, *com patti*, “to suffer with.” It is through our shared experience with loss, sorrow and pain that we deepen our connection with one another and enter the commons of the soul.

But how are we with *self-compassion*? Too often our caring is reserved for those outside of ourselves, as though we haven’t earned the right for kindness. We struggle with judgments and resist offering gestures of mercy to ourselves. Yet, every one of us knows loss and defeat, loneliness and failure. We hurt and harm others, are hurt and harmed by others; we close our hearts to the world and often choose self-protection as a way of life.

Bringing compassion to our suffering is an act of generosity. It helps us remember that we too, are part of this breathing, pulsing world and worthy of compassion. We are reminded that, by the mere fact of our being here, we qualify for the soothing waters of compassion. We can then come out of our sheltered world of self-scrutiny and make our way back into the fuller embrace of our belonging.

When I work with groups on the topic of self-compassion, I often begin by describing our time together as a project in “non self-improvement.” So often our efforts at change in our lives mask subtle and not so subtle acts of self-hatred. We attack portions of our life with a vengeance, fully believing that our weakness or inadequacy, our neediness or our failures are the reasons for our suffering and *if only* we could be free of them, then we would enter into a state of perfection; all would be well. Our obsession with perfection is itself a strategy that we cling to, to overcome our feelings of being outside the wall of welcome.

Giving up our muscular agendas of self-improvement is an act of kindness. It says that by befriending our life, we deepen our capacity to welcome what is, what comes, whoever arrives at the interior door of our soul’s house. We don’t often get to decide who or what shows up the “guest house,” as Rumi says, but we can cultivate an atmosphere of curiosity and receptivity. Self-compassion gradually becomes one of the basic elements of maturation. We slowly relinquish the harsh program of ridding ourselves of our outcast brothers and sisters for the sake of fitting in; we simply set another place at the table.

This is not to say that we do not seek change. At a recent gathering, a man said to me, “I noticed that you don’t talk about progress in your work.” I said, “No. I don’t see the soul moving in a linear way, from Point A to Point B. Sometimes it moves downward or sideways, sometimes it regresses and at other times it holds still and doesn’t move. Progress is one of our cultures most cherished fictions, but it can do great harm when applied to the life of the soul. As soon as we are not moving forward or progressing, we feel something is wrong and that we are failing, so we redouble our efforts. What self-compassion offers us is the space and breath to listen and

take notice of how our soul is moving in this moment; what it is asking us to pay attention to at this time.”

He then asked if I was okay with having goals. I said, “Well, I’m not real comfortable with goals either, but if I had to use that language, I would say that the goal of this work is to extend the level of participation of the soul as widely and deeply as possible. One of the deepest sources of depression for the soul is a diminished range of participation in our life. To be fully alive; that would be the goal.” This is the change we truly long for.

The foundations of self-compassion arise from the fertile ground of belonging. Belonging confers a feeling of worth and value, which in turn filters into our whole being as a blessing. This gently translates into a relationship with oneself that is respectful and caring. Herein lies our problem: For many of us, the experience of belonging has been fractured and frustrated. We often feel as though we are living outside the warmth of a recognizable welcome. In this state of exile and loneliness, we feel unworthy of compassion or kindness. I have heard countless times in my practice someone saying, “I feel unlovable.” It is very challenging to cultivate a feeling of compassion for oneself in an atmosphere of self-judgment and hatred.

Nearly everywhere I go to teach, there is an ongoing call for some dressing to heal the wounds around belonging. Fortunately, most every one of us has been able to forge some friendships, small circles of welcome, even if we feel they are provisional. This can be enough to help stimulate the practice of self-compassion. One of the working definitions that I am playing with is that self-compassion is the “internalized village.” Pause for a moment and think about how we tend to respond to a friend who is suffering. Usually we feel an immediate opening in our hearts of caring and sympathy towards their pain. We don’t typically recoil in judgment or condemnation and yet, that is often how we respond to our own moments of pain. Imagine instead, that these dear people in our lives are dwelling inside of us, that the little village in our world has been taken into our hearts. Now, when suffering arises, our interior friend can say to us, “Be gentle. Be kind. Be compassionate with this suffering part of your life.” It is soothing to imagine the village residing inside our chest. Perhaps the Golden Rule needs an addendum: “Do unto yourself as you would do unto others.” This *pilgrimage of friendship* towards our own life is essential to any move we wish to make into the larger and more fulfilling life that awaits us.

Self-compassion is a fierce and challenging practice. Every day we are asked to sit with pieces of our interior world that lie outside of what we find acceptable and welcome. We must explore our *learned responses* to our places of suffering and actively engage these pieces of soul life. We have often treated these parts of ourselves with indifference, if not outright contempt. I recently invited a group of men to share in a ritual where we turned towards these outcast parts of our lives with compassion and apology. The ritual was deceptively simple. We placed five large stones on the ground near the base of an immense ancient oak. As I drummed and we all sang, men approached the stones and knelt on the ground and slowly lifted one of them off the ground. In their minds and imaginations, they were seeing an outcast brother lying under the stone. He had been weighed down under it and unable to stand upright again until this gesture of kindness was offered. Men wept as they lifted the stone off of these parts of themselves and slowly welcomed the fragments of life these brothers carried for them. It was beautiful and healing.

Lifting the stones off the backs of these parts of our lives, may help to restore what poet David Whyte calls a state of innocence. I cautiously use this term as well, not to insinuate some childlike state of purity, but to suggest that through self-compassion, we are offered the possibility of new beginnings. No part of us releases in a state of judgment. The overly critical mind creates a state of contraction, whereas compassion softens and makes possible a state of beginning, a fresh and unshaped ripeness. Rebecca del Rio offers this poem as an invitation to renewal and beginnings:

Prescription for the Disillusioned

Come new to this
day. Remove the rigid
overcoat of experience,
the notion of knowing,
the beliefs that cloud
your vision.

Leave behind the stories
of your life. Spit out the
sour taste of unmet expectation.
Let the stale scent of what-ifs
waft back into the swamp
of your useless fears.

Arrive curious, without the armor
of certainty, the plans and planned
results of the life you've imagined.
Live the life that chooses you, new
every breath, every blink of
your astonished eyes.

Self-compassion is not an event, but an ongoing daily practice. It is *the* root practice for our inner life and also for our relational lives. I remember giving many talks on shame and sharing how we want to be in loving relationships, while simultaneously hating ourselves. Our ability to receive love is proportional to our capacity to welcome all of who we are. Self-compassion is a skill that needs to be exercised and developed regularly in order for us to remain open and available to life. It is the gift of a generous heart.

Section III: Meanwhile, the World Goes On

Chapter 12: A Beautiful and Strange Otherness

I was recently in the pine forests of Northern Minnesota to teach at the Minnesota Men's Conference. I was invited to the gathering to speak about the role of grief as it related to the conference theme: *Dark Talk with Screeching Pines: Why Men Listen to Nature's Voices*. The land was familiar to me, shaped by ancient glacial activity as it receded at the end of the last Ice Age. Having lived the first twenty-two years of my life in Wisconsin, I recognized the terrain immediately. It was in my body and it spoke a familiar language.

The first thing I did when I arrived at the conference was to ask Miguel Rivera to introduce me to the Spirit of the Lake. While the land was familiar to me, I was unknown to the place and I wanted to step onto this land in a respectful way. We walked out on the pier and with tobacco and sweet words in Mayan, Lakota, Spanish and English, we said hello and offered our greetings to this place. I brought greetings from the redwoods, the salmon people, madrone and Douglas Firs, the familiars from my coastal Northern California home. In beauty, it had begun.

The first night we stepped immediately into ritual. It was clear to me that these men were carrying something deep and powerful. This was no mere conference, but an established ritual ground whose intention it is to dream and feed a new culture, one invigorated by ancient practices like ritual and renewed by the vital waters of myth and story, poetry and singing. I was walking onto sacred ground. Some part of me felt deeply at home and grateful to find another place devoted to the mending of culture and the culture of mending men's souls.

I was asked to prepare a couple of talks which would be shared over the week. I realized I had a good deal of material on one topic and that it would probably fill the two times I would be invited to teach. My talk was called, "A Beautiful and Strange Otherness." The title comes from a passage of human biologist, Paul Shepard that occurred in the course of an interview. He was asked what role the *others* played in our development as a species. The others here referred to the animals, plants, rivers, trees; the entire surrounding field that was the ongoing reflection we encountered for hundreds of thousands of years. Shepard's response was stunning, ending his thought with a sentence that has captivated me ever since I first read it many years ago. He said, "The grief and sense of loss that we often attribute to a failure in our personality, is actually a feeling of emptiness where a beautiful and strange otherness should have been encountered."

As is always the case when I share that quote, there is an immediate request to repeat it slowly as everyone scrambles for pen and paper. After I shared the passage, I said, "We could spend the rest of this gathering metabolizing the gravity of this one sentence."

The weight carried by this phrase astonishes me. We were meant to have a life-long engagement with a beautiful and strange otherness. It was meant to be an ongoing presence, not an exception or something that we capture on our cameras while on vacation in Yellowstone or by watching it on the Nature Channel. Shepard spoke adamantly and repeatedly how the others shaped us and made us human; how the lessons of coyote and rabbit, mouse and hawk taught us core values and how to live here in a sustainable way. Animal images were the first to appear in recesses and cave paintings, the first to be conjured in myths and tales. Their ways were integral not only to our survival, but to the very shaping of our souls.

Now, in the shortest wisp of a moment, the perennial conversation has been silenced for the vast majority of us. There are no daily encounters with woods or prairies, with herds of elk or bison, no ongoing connection with manzanita or scrub jay. Their myths and stories about the exploits of raven, the courage of mouse, the cleverness of fox have fallen cold. The others have retreated and have essentially vanished from our attention, our minds and our imaginations. *What happens to our soul life in the absence of the others?* Shepard says that what emerges is a grief-laden emptiness. How true. He was wise, however, to recognize our tendency to attribute the emptiness to a “failure in our personality.”

Nearly every day in my practice, I hear someone talk about feeling empty. But what if this emptiness is more akin to what Shepard is suggesting? What if what we are experiencing is the deep silence, a prolonged absence of birdsong, the scent of sweetgrass, the taste of wild huckleberries, the cry of the red tail hawk or the melancholy call of the loon? What if this emptiness is the great echo in our soul of what it is we expected and did not receive?

“We are born,” wrote psychiatrist R.D. Laing, “as Stone Age children.” Our entire psychic, physical, emotional and spiritual makeup was shaped in the long evolutionary sweep of our species. Our inheritance includes an intimate and permeable exchange with the wild world. It is what we expected. Ecopsychologist Chellis Glendinning calls this original enfoldment in the natural world *The Primal Matrix*. We were entangled, embedded in this matrix of life and knew the world and ourselves *only* through this perception. It was an unmediated intimacy with the living world with no trace of separation between the human and the more-than-human world.

What was once a seamless embrace has now become a breach, a tear in our sense of belonging in the world. This rip in the fabric of our belonging is what Glendinning calls our “original trauma.” This trauma carries with it all the recognizable symptoms associated with this psychic injury: chronic anxiety, dissociation, distrust, hyper-vigilance, disconnection, as well as many others. We are left with a profound loneliness and isolation that we rarely acknowledge. It is as if we have completely normalized our condition. And yet, this feeling of separation profoundly affects the range of our reach into the world, the ways we participate in the landscape and sense our allegiance with the living world. Our soul life diminishes, flickers dimly and rather than feeling a kinship with the entire breathing world, we inhabit and defend a small shell of a world, occupying our daily life with what linguist David Hinton calls the “relentless industry of self.”

Sigmund Freud recognized the reduction in our life that accompanies the process of enculturation. He wrote:

Originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed all embracing—feeling which corresponded to a once intimate bond between the ego and the world around it.

We did not come here to be a shrunken residue of a formerly intimate life. This “beautiful and strange otherness” was also meant to be seen in one another’s eyes. We too, are meant to embody a vivid and animated life, to live close to our wild souls, our wild bodies and minds. We were meant to dance and sing, play and laugh unselfconsciously, tell stories, make love and take delight in this brief but privileged adventure of incarnation. The wild within and the wild without are kin, the one enlivening the other in a beautiful tango.

When we pause and allow our separation from the living earth to rise, we feel the “grief and sense of loss” that begins Shepard’s phrase. When we open ourselves and take in the sorrows of the world, letting them penetrate our insulated hut of the heart, we are both overwhelmed by the grief of the world and in some strange alchemical way, reunited with the aching, shimmering body of the planet. We become acutely aware that there is no “out there;” we share one continuous presence, one shared skin. Our suffering is mutually entangled, the one with the other, as is our healing.

On those nights when the skies are clear, my wife and I sit outside and let our eyes fall into the bowl of darkness. Wrapped in the blanket of night, we take in the beauty of Andromeda, Cassiopeia and Albireo, feeling the larger home to which, we belong. To come home is to remember our birthright; it is to recall that we are all indigenous to this stunning and wild world with its rumbling storms and lapis seas. Whatever fiction we ingested from a society that says we are separate from this animate world, we are, in fact, completely entangled with the beautiful and strange otherness that surrounds us. Our home is here, nestled with pine boughs and crows wings, rambunctious otters and rolling waves. Becoming attuned to this way of perceiving the earth is at the heart of what we are called to remember.

An Apprenticeship with Slowness. To notice these bonds of connection, however, we need to be moving in a way that is in accord with the rhythm of the soul. We need to move at what my mentor, Clarke Berry, called “geologic speed.” The first move we can make to help restore our connection with the beautiful and strange otherness, is to recall the soul’s primal rhythm. This rhythm was established over hundreds of thousands of years when we walked the earth. Our senses and minds were syncopated to streams and night skies, to times around the fire, to the long, patient wait of the hunter and listening to stories told by elders. We moved slowly and drank in the entire spectrum of life through our bodies. We need to take up an *apprenticeship with slowness* and remember this ancient mode of being.

Slowing down offers us an opportunity to establish bonds of intimacy with those around us: partners, children, friends and out into the wider terrain of the beautiful and strange otherness.

Imagine creating a friendship with a birch tree, a raven or a stone. Let something capture your attention, call to you and engage you in an extended conversation until you and other become entangled. Become good friends rooted in the practice of familiarity and repetition. It takes time and repeated exposure to know another. I know when I walk through certain woods, how good it feels to come upon familiar trees that I immediately recognize as an old friend and we step into one another's embrace and sit for a while in a restful silence falling deeper into our conversation.

Uncentering the Human. The practice of entering into the mind of another is what I call, "uncentering the human." This is an ancient practice and an invitation to encounter the inner life of the beautiful and strange otherness. The thought comes from a poem called "Carmel Point," by Robinson Jeffers, where he writes,

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;
We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident
As the rock and ocean that we are made from.

This is the second move we can make to connect with the wild otherness that abounds around us. While psychology encourages us to get centered, the wild soul wants to experience the multi-centric world in which we live and breathe. To do so, as Jeffers notes, is to once again become confident by being rooted in an intimacy with the world. This is an amazing thought. What if our confidence was not based on some sense of personal power but more truly on the depth of intimacy we have with the animals, plants and trees that inhabit the watersheds around our homes? What if our sense of confidence comes from letting the ambling bear, the jumpy towhee and the curving arc of a feather touch our inner world, reminding us that we are part of it all.

Let yourself recall some place, some presence that has been with you all your life. In your mind, walk around it, touch it, and breathe in its scent. Come to know this other in a new way. After you feel you have fully contacted it, let your attention slip inside of it and become this other looking back at you. This totemic shift in awareness was something very familiar to our ancestors and offered an extended experience of identity. Notice how you feel. Be as particular as you can, feeling into the contours and movements of this being. And when you are ready, slip off this coat and come back to the one you recognize as yourself. Spend some time writing down what you encountered.

When we loosen the tight collar of civilization and step into the "culture of wildness" as storyteller Martin Shaw calls it, we recall the mutability of the self. We are part wolverine, part samba, part oak savannah. We come into the wider and wilder reach of our souls as we feel our branches stretching towards the sun, our roots penetrating the dark and mysterious soil. We feel ourselves as raindrops seeping into the dry ground. Our inheritance is this shape-shifting, storytelling, song singing existence that we occupy for a short while. When we uncenter our lives and feel ourselves falling into the embrace of the world, we remember our greater life, the one brimming with aliveness and connection. It is here, on this outcropping of awareness that the beautiful and strange otherness turns and looks back into our eyes. We shiver at this gaze, reminded that that same wildness is in us. Our identity widens and we once again find

ourselves with talons and beak, fur and claws and taking in sunlight through a hundred thousand tongues of green. We remember dancing around firelight, singing songs and telling stories, ritually honoring this ancient bond between us and the beautiful and strange otherness.

Drinking the Tears of the World. How can we fail to love this achingly beautiful world when we are so completely jumbled together with it all? It is our myopia, our species-centric blindness that cuts us off from the actual world. To love this world, however, is to also know sorrow. Our grief is intimately connected to how far we allow our love to reach into the world. Think of those indigenous tribes willing to fight to the death to protect their homelands from being destroyed by mining or oil companies. They know their lives are inseparable from the animals, plants, rivers, spirits and ancestors of their lands. Our love was also meant to spill out into the world, into the forests, the rivers and cloudbanks. It was not meant to congeal in a single person or even a single species. As Thomas Berry said, "We have become a singular species talking only to itself." When this happens—when the arc between our bodies and the great body of the earth breaks—we fall into an attachment disorder of epic proportions and everything suffers. Grief work is the third way we restore the bond with the world we inhabit.

The good news is we are supremely crafted to feel kinship with this breathing world. We are giant receptor sites for taking in the blue of the sky, the taste of honey, the caress of a lover, the scent of rain. Paul Shepard said we are more like a pond surface than a closed system: We are permeable, exchanging the vibrancy of wind, pollen, color and fragrance. Life moves into us and through us like a breeze, affecting us and shaping us into a part of the terrain. We are inseparable from all that surrounds us. To mend the attachment disorder, we simply have to step out of our isolated room of self and into the wider embrace that awaits each of us. When we do, something magical happens. As we build our capacity for transparency and allow the world to enter us, our feelings of love blossom and an erotic leap occurs, bringing everything close to our heart. David Hinton writes in *Hunger Mountain*,

I become broken clouds drifting frontier passes, Star River, chrysanthemums and clotted dark...I wander the changing forms of my unborn identity, and with each new form I am more myself than ever...I become winged sky and the talon-torn kill caught in the open fields of snow, warm meat I tear from sinew and bone slice by slice, kill I leave among wing-prints when I flap away downslope into an early-winter thermal, all sky again bearing taut, well-fed wings up into open sky.

My heartbeats sound like dried grasses in gusty wind, like wingbeats and snowfall, like silent hunger-stares and pulsar, pulsar, pulsar. Heartbeat like footfall, silence and shelling, like cosmic background microwave radiation, wingbeat and snowmelt trickle-down ten-thousand-foot granite, shrapnel cries and silence, pulsar, dried grasses, my heartbeat heartbeat heartbeat heartbeat.

Something good always comes of me sooner or later; I have lungs and veins of quartz. I have ions, thorns and ancestors, tools, glistening vulvas, I have fruit, mitochondria, star-carbon and pollen, matted hair, blood, laughter. I have laughter, canyons, fire and feathers, death and sky. I have origins in the Triassic. I have memories, distances, enzymes, finds, fur, sediments, erections, wars, magnetic fields, hormones, hunger;

have extinctions, words, antibodies, bark, hatred, chromosomes. I have silence, bone, ash, have sight, beauty, mitosis, silica, food chains, heartbeat, heartbeat, heartbeat, rivers, grief, beachglass, tongue, love. I have blowholes, continental plates, strata and sub-strata, shadow, nests, touch, sinew, silence, breath, peaks, milk, migrations, gills, lichen, others, roots, talons, centrioles and spindles, redshift, endorphins, flight, flight then and now, flight, flight.

Hinton goes on from there, but his words give a glimpse into the larger Self that awaits us when we greet the beautiful and strange otherness. Our loneliness subsides and our feelings of exile wane. Imagine this level of belonging when pulsars and chromosomes are all weaving themselves through you and are you. There is no sentimentality in his words, however. They include death and grief, war and hunger. It is all there as need be, and yet, we can feel the confidence that arises from such a wide reach of inclusion.

Entering the Storehouse of Myth. A fourth pathway leading us back to the tracks of the Beautiful and Strange Otherness, is through the sensuous world of story and myth. Here, spirit horses and shaggy bears of desire move through our inner landscape. In this craggy wilderness of the soul, we wrestle with longing and loneliness, power and love, danger and surprise meetings with strange allies. Our interior story merges with the great stories of all cultures and we see how these deep streams come from a shared ocean of experience. The myths of the world emerge from the earth, from the great fertile ground beneath our feet. Becoming familiar with this rich storehouse of wisdom helps us feel our kinship with the wild earth and the deep rivers of culture.

We are being asked to dream, or more accurately, to become receptive to the dreaming earth and hear the lingering echoes of styles of being that are latent in our psychic lives. We are completely designed for a life of soul and community, that twining trail through the thicket of intimacy and sovereignty. At times we must crawl on our hands and knees to recover the trail, but it is there, rooted in body and psyche, anchored by ancestors and the land—those perennial roots that hold us close to one another and to the singing soil. The most encouraging news is that we are not alone; we are surrounded by quivering aspens and the invisible hands of deep time ancestors. We possess a secret, wild language, living stories and songs that carry love and remind us of the vast landscapes of beauty that live in us.

We are rooted to place, to soil, to brambles and oaks, to the stories that have risen out of the night mist around an ancient fire, told by the old ones who no longer inhale the sweet scent of smoke or sage. To remember our eternal bond with this beautiful and strange otherness, is to recall our deep-time heritage, our mythic inheritance which is embedded in bone and breath. We become a burrowing badger of belonging, nosing our way into the soil, nuzzling the ground with sharp claws and an instinctual knowing that is determined to claim what is ours. The Beautiful and Strange Otherness that Shepard calls us to encounter, is within us and around us. Slow down, uncenter and forget about yourself for a moment, let the world find you, love what is nearby, share your grief with others, say thank you, learn the stories from where you live and from where your ancestors came, be a wee bit wild in your imagination, and come home.

Chapter 13: Redwood Speech, Watershed Prayers: The Erotic's of Place

Place, to indigenous cultures and the indigenous soul, is a living presence. Familiar watering holes, majestic mountains, sacred groves of trees, painted rocks and caves where initiations were held, added another dimension to life that is quite foreign to modern consciousness. To live within a sentient geography is to find oneself embedded in a rich and engaging terrain; a land that speaks. To our ancestors, and many indigenous cultures today, the landscape was another voice, a territory imbued with mystery and power. What this offered was another way to encounter the sacred and to enliven the imagination. This fertile exchange between place and psyche established a bond with the land, which, in turn, created an ethos of respect for the land. When the ground holds value, when it is the dwelling place of the spirits and the ancestors, when magic swirls through the canyons and across the plains, the relationship between the people and the land becomes sacramental.

Place is sensual, particular, felt as a presence offering itself to us for connection and spiritual sustenance. In traditional cultures, specific and revered places were saturated with stories, the ground filled with mythological rumblings, for example, the well-known storylines found in the landscape in the Dreamtime myths of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. Likewise, the Western Apache in Arizona can name hundreds of sites where events took place “in the before time.” To their ancestors, these pathways marked the ways of survival. They led to water and food sources, but even more, they also provided a palpable way of encountering the sacred through geography. To know the world this way, as a living icon, is to know in your body that you are walking upon holy ground. The Aboriginal peoples knew this quality as *djang*. James Cowen explains what this word meant:

For them *djang* embodies a special power that can be felt only by those susceptible to its presence. In this way my nomad friends are able to journey from one place to another without ever feeling that they are leaving their homeland. What they feel in the earth, what they hear in the trees are the primordial whispers emanating from an ancient source. And it is this source, linked as it is to the Dreaming, that they acknowledge each time they feel the presence of the *djang* in the earth under their feet.

Two days after my fortieth birthday I made my way to Armstrong Woods in Guerneville, a small town located about 10 miles from the Pacific Ocean in Northern California. The town is situated on the Russian River, a beautiful waterway that begins some ninety miles to the north. From every perspective you see the tall ones, the redwoods that tower above the valley floor, and during the winter these trees draw an amazing amount of water out of our storms. The town was named after George Guerne, a man who made his mark in the timber industry late in the 1800's. At that time great stands of redwoods covered most of this area. Now, this woods, set aside as a nature preserve by Colonel James Armstrong in the 1880's, is one of the last remaining old-growth redwood groves in Sonoma County.

It had been raining hard for the previous few days and on this day the rains persisted. I had been planning this pilgrimage for a long time and when I woke that morning the heavy rains disappointed me. I lay in bed for a while, unsure of what to do, but finally I decided I had to

go anyway. I gathered my gear and got in my truck for the drive to Armstrong. It poured all during the forty-minute journey to my destination.

When I pulled into the parking lot of the woods, it was deserted. The heavy weather had made a visit unappealing to others and so I had the old ones to myself. These trees, *sequoia sempervirens*, are among the oldest living beings on the planet. They can grow over 300 feet high and live for over 2000 years. I came to a stop and turned off the truck. The moment I did, the rain stopped, and the sun appeared.

I got out of the truck and made my way through puddles and mud to the trailhead. Since it was late January, the air was cold, and the mist was high in the treetops, adding to the sudden brilliance and beauty of the day. The ground was saturated and I had to make my way slowly down the path. The fragrance in the woods was musty, earthy, rich with the smell of decay and growth, both at the same time. Each tree carried a profusion of jeweled droplets suspended from its branches. I came to one old giant known as "Parson's Tree," and gazed up toward its peak. Some 300 feet high, out of my sight, it broke into the open. But down here at its base, I was the recipient of the most exquisite shower of gems. Each drop that fell from the tree carried the sun's light, came to the body of the earth pulled by the force of gravity and offered itself to the earth as a blessing. I was mesmerized for a long time, drinking in the beauty of this combination of water and light. In deep gratitude I reached out to touch the skin of this elder. Still I knew I had to continue on, not knowing what I was searching for.

Deeper into the woods I went, enjoying the profound silence that the woods offered to me on that day. Even the bird life was subdued. The occasional blue jay announced its presence with a loud bark, but other than the sound of water running in the creek beds, I was walking in silence.

At one point in my sauntering, I came to a redwood with one of the familiar natural openings often featured in pictures of these trees, openings deep enough to enter and stand inside, like a natural cave in the tree trunk. I felt moved to do so now. I stepped down a foot or so to the inner forest floor and stood there surrounded on three sides by the living membrane of this enormous presence. In this stillness, where only my breathing was audible, I heard another voice. Clearly and distinctly the voice said, "I am the Buddha." I waited quietly and heard the words repeated. "I am the Buddha. This is the dharma and this is your sangha."

I recognized the words and their meanings. I myself had not spent much time studying Buddhist's teachings but was aware of these specific terms. The Buddha was the teacher, the dharma was the teaching and the sangha was the community that protected the student and provided the student with support and spiritual encouragement. I could only surmise that these words were coming from this ancient redwood. This old one *was* the Buddha, *was* the teacher; the forest and its complex interplay of kingdoms and phyla, species and families was the teaching and the community of sorrel and ferns, bay laurels, Douglas firs and redwoods, creeks and stones, mushrooms and lichen, live oaks and blue jays were indeed, my spiritual community.

I stood motionless to see if the message would be continued. I finally responded and said that I understood the message. Despite the brevity of this redwood's speech, it was profound. I had never heard nature speak so directly. I'd had moments of intuition or images that conveyed a meaningful exchange but nothing this tangible. And so I stood a long time in the darkness of the tree, within this great being's body, feeling as though I was wrapped within its essence.

For the next few days, I thought about this encounter. This redwood's speech was so intelligent. Somehow, in some way, it knew to use those exact words. I say that because I am so quick to question the legitimacy of mysterious messages from the spirit world, particularly experiences that are outside the familiar. When the tree chose to speak to me in those words, Buddha, dharma and sangha, it forced me to recognize that the origin of this thought was outside my own consciousness because I would never have used those terms to speak to myself. That thought sent me into a period of wondering about the link between the outer world and myself, a link that I previously had thought was less definitive. However, this experience revealed to me that perhaps the passage between outer and inner was more porous than I had known, than I had been led to believe. Perhaps I am known by the outer world in ways that I had not permitted myself to imagine before.

What was equally important, however, was the event itself and the teaching it carried for me. For far too long we have been detached from nature, from the particulars of the world and her ways of instructing us in how to be a part of the mosaic of life. This knowing is what made our ancestors human in the best sense of the word. "Human" shares the same root origins as "humus," meaning "of the earth." Despite all our fantasies of transcendence, resurrection and ascension, despite all our technologies that separate us and insulate us from the sensual world, we are creatures of this earth and our substance is informed by the speech of the world.

I go back often to visit this redwood tree with a feeling of friendship and a growing familiarity, realizing that I am hungry for a language that conveys the truth of our bond with the world. Traditional cultures rarely had words that specified generalities like "tree." Instead they had ways of identifying an individual presence—a specific tree—in the woods. This language of particularity generates a much more sensuous relationship due to the simple fact that naming requires knowing. Conversely, I think of how little time we spend in the woods, along riverbanks, in the hills and mountains. These places have become our vacation destinations but we seldom develop and nurture relationships with them that can evolve and endure through time. How can we come to know the individualities that exist in the world without time and patience, without attention and relationship? It may be that much of what the soul suffers from is directly related to this severing of its vital connection with the animate world.

When we create an intimate relationship with place, it becomes for us a refuge. This communion offers us a more thorough expression of our innate complexity. Our entire biological structure is designed for engagement with the world. Every sense organ is a gateway for encounter and through this exchange we achieve a greater definition of who we are. The senses are the means by which our bond with the world is consummated and made

sacramental. The radical genius William Blake said, “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.” It is through the blood and sensuality of this flesh that we become incarnate. Till then, till we know that our place is in the world and that our bodies emerged from this earth, we cannot know who we are.

Language too, is rooted to place, to the land. Our imagination is shaped by landscape and topography. Language can either reflect the abundance, the richness of our belonging to a complex and vital community of life or it can reflect a poverty borne of exile.

I am enthralled with the language of indigenous people. Not only does it carry a beauty in its sound, but also the words themselves reflect an unbroken arc between the speaker and his or her surroundings. In many of these languages there is no dichotomy, no separation that strands the human in a point of separation as a cold observer. When a Diné or an Inuit man or woman speak, the cosmos is imminent, not abstracted or referenced. There is seldom the separation between subject and object that we find in our English language. This is hard for us to comprehend, but it is invaluable for us to know that there are other ways of knowing the world. For example, the Kalahari Bushmen possess an onomatopoeic language that is as close to the sensual world as possible, its cadences mirroring the sounds of the living earth—rain, bird calls, animal sounds. The complex clicks of their speech mimic the rhythms of the actual life around them so that they are constantly immersed in the surrounding terrain.

I feel a deep grief when I think about how far we have deviated from the intimacy we once knew with the earth. Sitting here along the northern coast of California while my wife gathers sweetgrass, I see a tree with a golden ladder rising from its base. A fungus has emerged from this dying elder, an enormous Monterey Pine, and this stairway arises from its decay, orchestrating a new beauty. The sun is illuminating the new growth and it offers itself to me with a radiance that makes me think of Jacob and his celestial stairway.

I have been trying to place myself back into the world, as if I could leave it! Yet, spiritually that is what my culture has taught me to do. I carry a deep conditioning shaped by two thousand years of images, stories and ideals that renders life here on earth as some form of sentence to be commuted through death. We console ourselves with the deaths of those we love by saying that they are now in a better place. The earth is to be transcended: heaven is the *better world* that will somehow make up for the pain and sorrow of time spent here, our *final reward*, as it were. I find this offensive and could never believe that the Jesus I know would have ever felt such contempt for the earth. This was the man who constantly referred to the earth, to her creatures and the growing things as examples in his teachings. This was the man who retreated to the wilderness on a number of occasions to gather himself back to himself. Nature, the wild, the world contained and held him.

The wild undoubtedly shaped our original words: imitations of animal sounds, wind, thunder, the music of ocean and river. This lustrous blend of sounds quickened the imagination of our ancestors and, as I said above, even a cursory glance at tribal language reveals a richly textured, complex syntax of metaphor and imagery deeply imbued with the surrounding world. In the Amazon, for example, language is riddled with metaphors of the jungle to

express a multitude of situations and aspects in the lives of the people. Jay Griffiths writes, "Metaphor is where language is most wild, spirited and free, leaping boundaries, and it may be no surprise that Amazonian languages can be as matted and dense with metaphor as the forest is tangly with vegetation. The Amazon seems a place of boundless allusion, this unfenced wild, where meaning is twined within meaning; words couple and double, knotted together." Our modern lexicon, however, reveals an erosion in our formerly flowering language. We are now speaking in acronyms, abbreviations, texting our words through phones and other devices. My feeling is that as our senses are deprived of the multiple cadences from a living world, so too does our language atrophy. We are left with bare rhetoric instead of a kind of speech that can bring us to tears or into symmetry with the many others with whom we share the world.

In a very real way language and place are synonymous. Words reflect what we inhabit, where we dwell. Thomas Berry said that our imagination is only as rich as the diversity of the life around us. If we inhabit a terrain of microchips, cell phones and video monitors, we speak two-dimensionally, abstractly because there is nothing sensual about these realities.

If, on the other hand, our daily round includes sunlight, fragrances from the green earth, songbirds, tastes of berries picked from the bush, then our sensual minds stir and the words become as richly textured as the terrain. Our language has an ecology and it is as varied as the experiences it is given. Jay Griffiths speaks to this in her book, *Wild: An Elemental Journey*, "All languages have long aspired to echo the wild world that gave them growth and many indigenous peoples say that their words for creatures are imitations of their calls. According to phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, language 'is the very voice of the trees, the waves, the forest.'" (pg 25. *Wild*)

Oral traditions are metaphorical and creative, filled with rich imagery. Stories were held in memory, that is, *by heart*, and the wisdom was continuous from generation to generation. We have a hard time memorizing our social security number let alone a phenologic account of a living system. What migrates when? What is ripe now? When do we relocate to the winter grounds? How do we prepare the acorns? How do we resolve conflict? How does one become a man or a woman? Stories were the carriers of this wisdom and the words used to transport the stories were alive with meaning and significance.

I want to see our words jump off the ground, erupt from a sensual earth, musty, humid, gritty. I want to taste words like honey, sweet and dripping with eternity. I want to hear words coming from my mouth and your mouth that are so beautiful that we wince with joy at their departure and arrival. I want to touch words that carry weight and substance, words that have shape and body, curve and tissue. I want to feel what we say as though the words were holy utterances surfacing from a pool where the gods drink. What if our words could once again echo the larger reality of the sacred and not solely the world of economics? But that would take an act of remembrance, a slowing downward into a state of presence, awareness and being. And this means being in the world. Enough of this talk that makes us strangers! I want to know I belong here. And if my words can say to you that I am a man of this earth, this particular piece of earth, then I will feel like I have arrived. My language must be redwood speech, watershed prayers, oak savannah, coupled in an erotic way with fog,

heat, wind, rain and hills, sweetgrass and jackrabbits, wild iris and ocean current. My land is my language and only then can my longing for eloquence be granted. Until then I will fumble and fume and ache for a style of speaking that tells you who I am.

Chapter 14: Gratitude for All That Is

There is a tradition among the native people of the Iroquois nation that goes back over a thousand years. It is known as the Thanksgiving Address. In the language of their people it is called, "Oh'nton Karihwat'hkwen," which translates, "Words Before All Else." The tradition involves the invocation of creation in a manner that extends thankfulness to all living things for their gifts to us. In this way, the people are brought into alignment with Nature. This eloquent ritual practice places gratitude as the beginning point for any further matters. Words Before All Else. What if our daily practice was to include this deep-seated reverence for creation and to acknowledge the never-ending flow of blessings that come our way? I remember Brother David Steindl-Rast saying, "It is not happiness that makes gratefulness, but gratefulness that makes happiness."

Gratitude is a central value to the indigenous soul. It forms the very heart of a life rooted in the awareness and recognition that we truly live in a gifting cosmos. Our deep time ancestors, and those remaining indigenous cultures still living in the old ways, know that everything we need has been given to us. In the ecology of the sacred our responsibility is to receive these blessings with gratitude. After all, what is the proper response to a gift if not gratitude? This understanding formed the basic attitude of traditional people and it is also readily recognized when we too, turn our attention to this fundamental truth.

Gratitude furthers the soul, calls it forth into the world in an act of intimacy. The simple gesture of receptivity paired with the expression of thankfulness completes the arc that binds the soul and world together in communion. Doing so confirms our relatedness with the cosmos and it is relationship that we are so in need of today. Our isolation and loneliness are in great part the consequence of forgetting to say thank you. This may sound simplistic, but the opposite is true. We live in a completely interdependent world and gratitude is the acknowledgement of this fundamental reality.

There is an old thought that says the strength of a community is reflected in the presence of generosity. In other words, the richness of the village is made visible by the expression of appreciation, recognition and thankfulness for the ways the people support one another and the way the world holds the people together. It seems that we are bereft of such a unifying ingredient at this time. Rather than acknowledging the multiple layers of gifting that are offered to us, we focus more on lack, on what is missing. This isn't some cynical move but rather a consequence of conditioning that continually references us back to what it is we don't have. Modernity keeps us hungry for more by turning our gaze towards absence. Psychology colludes in this as well by focusing primarily on what's wrong, what we didn't get in childhood, and so on. This chronic feeling of not enough makes it difficult to register blessings and to feel gratitude. It is our task to stay aware of what is being gifted here and now and to register the primary satisfactions that enrich our soul life, our emotional and bodily life. These are what make the moment thick with meaning and contentment: we have enough.

Gratitude is a spiritual responsibility. A grateful heart acknowledges and participates in the ongoing exchange with life. Gratitude is an act of faith, of trust in the ways of life. It is a confirmation that we are inextricably bound to each other thing in the cosmos. In this sense it is a reflection of belonging. Another thought of Br. David's was that we can feel either grateful or alienated, but never both at the same time. Gratefulness softens our sense of alienation. Our belonging is celebrated in thanksgiving, in full appreciation that we are both giver and receiver in the exchange of blessings.

How do we develop gratitude? Perhaps the most fundamental practice is listening. This attentive move slows us down to the speed of life where we are more resonant with the movements of the world. By listening we can register in our bodies just how fluid this flow of blessing is in our lives. Think about that. The constancy of the sun, moon, and stars, the generosity of the rains, rivers, the earth, the abundant richness of birdsong, the fragrance of roses, wet streets after a downpour, the delectable sweetness of blackberries warm with the heat of the day, the luscious colors of fall, all are offered to us freely. When we listen and take in the astonishingly sensuous earth, we come awake to the thunderous beauty that surrounds us. We are literally inundated with the world pouring through every opening and in this awareness, we recognize a fundamental truth: we are of the earth. In fact, as cosmologist Brian Swimme suggests, humans were put on earth to gawk. That is our cosmological destiny! To be astonished, amazed, delighted in the intricate weavings of the cosmos is to listen fully and to send out our sigh of appreciation is what is asked in return.

A second means by which we develop gratitude is through ritual. Ritual is the pitch through which our personal and collective voices are extended to the unseen dimensions of life, beyond the point of our minds and into the realms of nature and spirit. There are many opportunities for daily rituals that can drop us into a felt connection with life. Every meal we eat is a cosmological event. Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that through the practice of mindfulness we become aware of the deep story within every meal. We are wedded to the cycles of sunshine and rain, the movements of microbes and root systems, the farmer and butcher, the animals and plants, the grocery store clerk. The entire cycle that brings the morsel to our mouths is what we are ingesting and to behold that movement with gratitude is to sacralize the moment.

Our annual Gratitude For All That Is ritual is a beautiful gesture to the visible and invisible worlds. To communally send our prayers of thanksgiving into the world is a rich and verdant act. Our ritual is eloquent and simple. After building a gratitude shrine, we make our prayers and offer small gifts to the other world of tobacco, corn meal, agates, or whatever has been brought. These offerings are made in a small crawl-in grotto made of fir boughs and ferns ere they are left over night. In the morning, some children are asked to gather the offerings together and we then make our way singing across the grounds into the woods where a small opening is waiting to receive the gifts. At that time, the children that are there come forward and place handfuls of the offerings into the Mother's body and for that moment we are aligned with the rightness of our lives and the community. We have placed something back into her body in an act of recognition that everything we have, comes from her. It is sweet medicine.

Gratitude is the other hand of grief. It is the mature person who welcomes both. To deny either reality is to slip into chronic depression or to live in a superficial reality. Together they form a prayer that makes tangible the exquisite richness of life in this moment. Life is hard and filled with suffering. Life is also a most precious gift, a reason for continual celebration and appreciation. To everything, as the old prophet said, there is a season. This is the time of Thanksgiving.

Section IV. Closing Thoughts

It is raining tonight. What a blessed gift amid another potential drought year, here in California. The air is sweet, the creeks are running, and the world seemingly goes on undeterred. Everything is in bud. We too, are being readied for some new ripening. Whatever lies ahead will be shaped by the strength of our convictions. James Hillman wrote that “The world and the gods are dead or alive according to the condition of our souls.” I believe this is true. When we tend to the vitality of our soul, we keep the world humming.

In the days to come, everything we do will be significant. Never doubt that each of us is essential to the welfare of the village. Everyone is a vector. Choose what you spread.

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About the Author

Francis Weller, MFT, is a psychotherapist, writer and soul activist. He is a master of synthesizing diverse streams of thought from psychology, anthropology, mythology, alchemy, indigenous cultures and poetic traditions. Author of *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*, and *The Threshold Between Loss and Revelation*, (with Rashani Réa) he has introduced the healing work of ritual to thousands of people. He founded and directs *WisdomBridge*, an organization that offers educational programs that seek to integrate the wisdom from indigenous cultures with the insights and knowledge gathered from western poetic, psychological and spiritual traditions.

For over thirty-five years Francis has worked as a psychotherapist and developed a style he calls *soul-centered psychotherapy*. As a gifted therapist and teacher, he has been described as a jazz artist, improvising and moving fluidly in and out of deep emotional territories with groups and individuals, bringing imagination and attention to places often held with judgment and shame. He has created three CD sets, two focusing on healing shame and one on *“Restoring the Soul of the World.”* His latest offerings are a 10-session audio series on *“Living a Soulful Life and Why It Matters.”* and *“The Alchemy of Initiation: Soul Work and the Art of Ripening.”*

Francis received a B.A. from the University of Wisconsin Green Bay and two Master’s Degrees from John F. Kennedy University in Clinical Psychology and Transpersonal Psychology. His writings have appeared in anthologies and journals exploring the confluence between psyche, nature and culture. His work was featured in *The Sun* magazine (October 2015) and the *Utne Reader* (Fall 2016). He is a frequent presenter and keynote speaker at conferences, bringing insight, poetry and a breath of humor to his talks. Francis is currently on staff at Commonweal Cancer Help Program, co-leading their week-long retreats with Michael Lerner. He has taught at Sonoma State University, the Sophia Center in Oakland and has been the featured teacher at the Minnesota Men's Conference. He is currently completing his third book, *A Trail on the Ground: The Geography of Soul*.

For more information on upcoming workshops, to sign up for the newsletter, or purchase books and audio series, please go to www.francisweller.net.