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Native
Spirit

SACRED PRACTICES FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

DENISE LINN



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DEDICATED TO HARRY FINKS

*THERE IS NOTHING AS PROFOUND OR
WONDROUS AS ONE HUMAN BEING
SHARING FROM THE DEPTH OF THEIR
SOUL WITH ANOTHER HUMAN BEING.
THANK YOU FOR BEING IN OUR LIVES.*

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PREFACE

Sometimes I think I can hear the ancient ones whispering. On silent, windless nights, when the stars are bright against a black sky, I lie in bed and I'm sure I can hear the voices of my native ancestors. These whispers come to me at points of intersection in my life; they call me to the wisdom of the natural realm. They remind me that every decision has consequences and to be mindful of the journey. When I take the time to be still and listen, I can feel the native spirit emerging.

The native spirit surfaces in many forms. I felt its arrival early one misty morning, as I stood alone at the edge of an isolated mountain lake in the Cascade Mountains. Mists shrouded the water; everything was still. Not a bird or an insect—nothing—not even the subtle sound of water lapping at the shore. Total stillness. It felt like the world had inhaled, and now it was waiting. Waiting for the next breath? Waiting for something big to happen? I didn't know. I felt like I'd also inhaled, and I was also waiting. But for what?

Then the world around me seemed to exhale, the song of birds pierced through the mists. I could hear the lapping sound of the water at the shore. Sunshine began to filter through the thick fog, and the water sparkled in places where the light had penetrated. Remarkably, the rising mists seemed to be shifting into strange shapes. When I refocused my eyes, I “saw” thousands of luminous beings almost as if they were hovering just above the surface of the lake. There was a solidarity and nobility in their countenance. Without knowing how, I knew these were my ancestors. It was not just my Native American ancestors . . . it was *all* of my ancestors. There were so many of them; I could see them to the farthest end of

the lake and beyond, as if they were floating out of the mountains and across the surface.

They said nothing, but I had the feeling of a powerful community standing together who were saying, “You’re a young sprout on a very old root. We’re here for you. Remember, you’re not alone.” Then, just as the mists evaporated, so too their diaphanous forms dissolved into the sunlight.

I knew something important had happened, but I didn’t know what it meant. However, looking back at this event in my life, I feel certain that my ancestors were foreshadowing this book, shepherding and gently encouraging me to write it.

Sometimes the call from the voices of spirit may be dramatic like my experience in the mountains, but most of the time it’s like a soft breeze or a nudge in your dreams. It might have even been “a call” that brought this book into your hands. If so, I’m glad. My intent is that *Kindling the Native Spirit* becomes a mystic map that lights the way for you to follow in the footsteps of the wise ones who have gone before you. And in a deeper way, it can also help ignite the majestic native soul that dwells within you, which in turn reestablishes your connection to the sacred whole.

As you journey through these pages, you’ll be invited to step outside of ordinary reality into the realm of the natural world where Spirit dwells. When you do so, the native spirit that exists within you will awaken, and then everything changes . . . in remarkable and mystical ways.



INTRODUCTION

When I was younger, I thought I'd live forever, but I'm no longer under that illusion. I know that my time on the earth is limited. I used to be passionate about learning as much as I could. However, now, in my autumn years, I have a profound desire to share what I've gained over my lifetime. I want to ignite, even more, our sacred connection to nature and to the ancient traditions that evolved from living in harmony with the land. This is more important than ever before.

In the relatively short time I've been alive, I've seen many native cultural practices extinguished as a result of the technological advances that have surged across our planet with such rapidity. Ancient, sacred traditions are disappearing in alarming numbers. Potentially, in one more generation, much of the native wisdom could be destroyed, and we could be left with only notations and photographs in history books and reenactments for tourists, serving as echoes of lost wisdom.

Increasingly, it's not possible for people to live on the land as their ancestors did for very practical reasons such as regulations, land rights, and federal rules affecting every aspect of native life. Additionally, it would be arrogant to deny native cultures use of modern conveniences like satellite dishes, the Internet, televisions, cars, and phones because of our concern about the old ways dying. And as former Eastern Band Cherokee Chief Youngdeer said, "We hate to lose them, but the old ways don't put bread on the table." Even though the old ways are indeed dying, my prayer is that the native spirit will live on within each of us.

Here's the truth: I am not an expert in any culture. I am not a medicine woman, nor do I represent any tribal tradition. I'm sharing

my perceptions from my time spent with various native cultures, and hopefully you'll find this helpful in your own life. My experiences are viewed through the lens of my life and my passion about each of us being co-caretakers of our beautiful Earth for future generations. I believe there's extraordinary value in embracing some of the old ways and kindling the native spirit that resides within. The future of our planet may depend on this.

Although I am a member of the Cherokee Nation (and I am proud of my heritage), this book doesn't represent a particular tribal tradition. In the United States alone, there are over 600 different tribes, and around the world, there are thousands of varying tribal traditions, and each community has its own unique practices. This book is not about adopting a particular tribal tradition (nor should it be, for that is the responsibility of the elders of each clan to pass down). This is a book about igniting the native spirit that dwells inside of *you*, for if you trace your ancestry back, you'll find that your forebears lived in a native way. The ancestral memory of those times dwells in your genes. In this book, I share general indigenous practices that, in many cases, span the globe. Most of the information can be easily incorporated into your life, and by doing so you become an Earthkeeper—a sacred guardian of the earth's wisdom.



Before we jump in, however, it might be valuable to share a bit about my journey and how I came to be so fervent about igniting the indigenous spirit within each of us. My Cherokee heritage comes from my mother. I wasn't raised on a reservation, but I was very aware of my lineage. My mother seemed to be in a constant state of anger about the way that *Indians* (as they were called when I was a child) were treated. I remember when my mother, my sister, my brothers, and I were stuffed into a 1950 Chevrolet on our way from Ohio to Oklahoma to visit my grandparents. In the late afternoon, after driving all day, my mother piled us all out of the car into a motel reception area that had a vacancy sign in the window. She walked up to the counter and with a weary voice said, "We'd like to get a

room for the night, please.” The motel clerk looked at my dark-skinned Cherokee mother, and then gruffly replied, “There’s nothing available. We’re filled up for the night.”

As we were leaving, another family with kids in tow (all with fair skin) arrived and asked if there was vacancy. This time, the clerk said, “You’re in luck! We have one room left.”

Experiencing prejudice was not an unusual experience for my mother. In the era that she lived, Indians were second-class citizens. For example, although other minorities and women had the right to vote much earlier, it wasn’t until 1948 that all individual state laws denying the vote to Native Americans were overturned. Many Native American soldiers, who fought valiantly for the United States in World War II, were unable to vote when they returned because their state laws forbade it. My mother enlisted during WWII and worked as a surgical nurse, to the point of severe exhaustion. She explained her desire to join the military in this way: “Denise, I know what it feels like to be part of a defeated Cherokee Nation. I will fight rather than be a part of another defeated nation.”

But there was no fight in her that night as we left the motel. Her downcast eyes, pursed lips, and the way her shoulders drooped spoke of an extinguishing rage interwoven with a forbearing resignation. We got in the car and drove silently until we found a motel that accepted us.

As I was growing up, my mother alternated between uncontrollable anger and deep sorrow about the way her people were treated. She had several pages of well-worn papers that listed all the treaties that the “white man” never honored. When her frustration mounted, she would pull out these lists and clench them in her shaking fists.

“These are the treaties that the white man broke. He didn’t keep even one of them. Not one!” My siblings and I knew it was best just to lie low and wait until the rant was over. My mother had all the sorrow of her ancestors, but little access to their traditions. Without the healing ceremonies of her people, her wounds continued to bleed. Eventually my mother was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and was institutionalized in a mental hospital. Although schizophrenia is a genetic condition, her anger certainly magnified her symptoms.

Perhaps if she'd been raised in a traditional way, it might have been better for her. But my grandparents wanted to protect their family from the rampant prejudice at the time, so they told their children not to tell anyone they were Native American. My mother and her sister were told to try to bleach their skin with lemon juice. My grandparents felt that for their kids to thrive, they needed to integrate with white Western culture. My mother resented this. (Even as a young girl she understood the value and importance of claiming her roots and honoring her ancestral path, and she used to sneak out at night to join the stomp dances of other tribes. She didn't go to Cherokee tribal ceremonies for fear that her parents would find out.) I pay my respect to my mother for her pain, and I also pay respect to my grandparents, who tried to do the best they knew at the time. Of course later, in the late 1960s, being Native American became something to take pride in, but it was too late for my mother and her parents.

I never planned on pursuing an interest in my Native American heritage. I wanted to be a scientist. My father had a master's degree in chemistry, and my mother had two master's degrees and worked as a chemist before having children. Growing up, our parents taught us that the only things that were real were those that were tangible. They were also both atheists. My mother wasn't interested in the spiritual traditions of her ancestors; without being raised in a traditional way, she found no comfort in them. She wanted the security of the physical world that science could provide. My parents told me that if you can't prove something using measurable facts, it doesn't exist. As a child this made sense to me. I loved the purity of science, and I planned on following in my parents' footsteps. However, I had a very dramatic experience as a 17-year-old that changed the course of my life and nudged me in the direction of my native heritage.

My journey into the realm of my ancestors began on a summer afternoon in the Midwest, almost 50 years ago. It was a glorious day, with a golden haze dusting the fields. Rows of tall corn sailed by me, on either side, as I happily drove my motorbike down the back roads of our rural farming community. Suddenly, the serenity was shattered by a bullet. My unknown assailant left me for dead. In that one

piercing instant, my life and all that was familiar to me spun crazily. And when it settled, I was no longer the same person.

Someone driving by, who saw me on the side of the road, summoned an ambulance, and I was taken to a nearby hospital. As I lay in the emergency room, struggling with severe pain, abruptly it all subsided, and I was enveloped in a quiet stillness. A velvet-soft blackness descended. *Was I dead?* Then, suddenly I was bathed in brilliant light. It was a most peculiar experience—because I was that luminescent light. I then became aware of music that ebbed and flowed like shimmering waves. It was more exquisite than any symphony I've ever heard. This undulating harmony pervaded me until I became the music. In that moment, I was made only of light and sound.

I had no sense of time—no past or future. Everything was Now . . . and at the same time, I felt so loved and so very loving. It was love that's as natural as breathing, like an unlimited ocean penetrating every cell of being. I wanted to stay there forever . . . because I'd been there before. I was home.

Then, unexpectedly, a deep and powerful voice declared, "You may not stay here. There is something you still need to do."

I shouted, "No!" as I felt pulled back into my body.

I later discovered that my experience was similar to what many describe as a near-death experience. These individuals often report seeing a bright light, feeling an extraordinary peacefulness, and experiencing a sense of familiarity. My near-death experience profoundly challenged my beliefs about the nature of reality. Everything that I'd previously believed to be true began to slowly disintegrate; and in its place, a new understanding started to emerge.

It seemed that my life was to take an entirely new direction. As I recovered from my injuries, I began to see lights around objects and around people. Everything had varying color and intensity of hue. Every blade of grass, every tree, every person, even stones and inanimate objects all had light radiating out of them. I also began to hear tones that no one else could hear. Every leaf, every cloud, every animal had a kind of harmonic sound. I experienced the world in such a different way; it wasn't composed of separate parts, but it

seemed to be one great weaving of consciousness, light, and sound. Everything was connected to everything else.

Another astonishing revelation was the awareness that *I* wasn't my body. As a result of the shooting, even though my physical being was damaged—my body lost a spleen, an adrenal gland, and a kidney; there was damage to my stomach, intestines, lung, and diaphragm; a hole through my spine; and also a plastic tube was inserted to replace part of my aorta—I was whole. To me, this was an amazing realization. It was a subtle shift, but simply beginning to identify with my spiritual essence—instead of my physical presence—allowed me to recover more quickly. I became extraordinarily healthy in spite of my injuries.

As a result of my shift of perception, my desire to become a scientist waned and was replaced with a burning desire to understand more about what I was experiencing. I eventually discovered that the way I was sensing the world, was, in fact, similar to that of my ancestors and other native people around the world. The ability to see light around people, hear the songs of the grasses, connect with spirit beings, and perceive the world as a great weaving of energy was something that those in earth-based cultures knew and understood.

I wondered, *If this was the way our distant ancestors experienced life, why have we lost that ability? And how can we regain it?* (I write about my experiences of being shot and subsequent realizations from that event in my book *If I Can Forgive, So Can You.*)

Coming Home

My passion for exploring my own native soul ignited an odyssey that took me to various places around the globe. I met and studied with many remarkable teachers from whom I gleaned much of the wisdom that I'm sharing in these pages.

My first teacher was named Mornah Nalamaku Simeona. She was a recognized kahuna *lapa'au* (traditional Hawaiian healer) and

was eventually called a living treasure of Hawaii. I was 19 years old and living on Oahu (where my younger sister had moved before me) when I met her. I wasn't looking for a teacher at the time, but as the saying goes, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears."

I'd never had a massage, but I'd heard it could be relaxing, so I flipped open the Yellow Pages (which had hundreds of massage listings), and I randomly picked a name and made an appointment. The massage studio was in Waikiki, in a basement spa located in the Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

I was sitting in the waiting room when the door opened and the masseuse—a robust, gracious Hawaiian woman—stepped forward. Upon seeing her, I burst into tears. I didn't know what was happening or why I couldn't stop crying, but I felt like I had come home. It was such an overwhelming experience that I wanted to drop everything in my life and learn from her. (This was a big leap, since in those days if a young woman said she did massage, most people thought she was a prostitute. To obtain a massage license, all you needed to do was be fingerprinted, register with the vice squad, and get a syphilis test. That was it. But what people might think of me didn't matter. I wanted to learn from Mornah.)

For months I begged her to teach me, and she always said no until one day she found out that I was of Cherokee heritage. She said, "Ah, then you will understand the old ways." (I have since learned, however, that kindling the native spirit depends more on your heart than your blood, but for Mornah my heritage was important.) And thus began my training. She taught me massage, and I worked with her in the same spa. During our time together, she taught me about the ancient Hawaiian ways of healing, herbal medicine, and even about the "little people" (the elf-like *menehunes*) and earth spirits. She also taught me how to unblock stuck energy, enlist the help of ancestors, release earth-bound spirits, clear possessions of stagnant energies, help those that had passed on, and talk to land spirits. In this book, I share some of her wisdom with you.

Keep It Simple

Another teacher who made a deep impact on me was Dancing Feather, a Tewa Pueblo Native American. He also came into my life in an unusual way. I was living in Seattle at the time, and one day I received a phone call. The man on the other end of the phone spoke in a native accent that was so strong that it was hard to understand him. He explained that he'd read an article about me a year before and for 12 months he'd been praying about it in the *kiva* (an underground traditional place of prayers). He explained that he was old and wanted to pass on what he'd learned, but the younger tribal members only wanted phones, televisions, modern conveniences, and fast cars. They didn't want to learn the old ways, so he'd been praying for someone to teach when he ran across the article. He told me that he prayed about it for a full year because he wanted to be sure . . . especially as I was of a different tribe.

Eventually I made numerous journeys to Taos, New Mexico, to learn from him. Dancing Feather was humble, serene, and only spoke intermittently; yet, over time he taught me about shape-shifting, listening to the land, ancient protection methods, and the power of the red earth. (Although what I learned from him helped me in my own life, I do not in any way represent Tewa tribal knowledge, nor should I . . . as that is the role of the elders of the tribe.) A few years later I was with him as he lay dying in the Santa Fe Indian Hospital. I was very sad, and I also felt guilty for not having learned more from him. He'd chosen to teach me, yet because I was so busy in my life, I hadn't taken the time to learn as much as I could. I knew his knowledge would die with him, and my regret was palpable.

In a plea to garner any last wisdom from him, I asked, "Dancing Feather, what is the most important thing that you would have me know?"

With his gnarled, weakened hand, he beckoned me to come close to him. I lowered my ear near his mouth. Then he whispered these words: "Denise . . . keep it simple."

Keep it simple? Surely he hadn't said that. I didn't move my ear because there had to be more. But that was his dying wisdom to me: "Keep it simple." It took me years to understand how these last words were his most profound.

We Are All Connected

I had many inspiring encounters with native healers from various cultures; however, in the early 1990s, I was invited to travel to South Africa, where I met another teacher who touched me in a compelling way. In Bophuthatswana I had the honor of spending time with Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa, a Zulu *sangoma* (healer, shaman), high *sanusi* (visionary, seer). He's recognized as one of the most distinguished and revered spiritual leaders of the Zulu. We huddled together in his hut made of straw and mud in a traditional Zulu village. This large, impressive man, dressed in skins and wearing various bones and stones around his neck, seemed primal and noble, and yet at the same time, he was one of the most articulate people I'd ever met. For example, when he found out I was of Cherokee descent, he began a discourse on the similarities between the Cherokee language and his own.

He knew details about the Cherokee traditions that I wasn't aware of until I went back home and did extensive research. How could he possibly know about the Cherokee language and their traditions? He didn't attend any school until he was 14 years old and then only sporadically. Somehow, even living in a hut without library facilities and long before the Internet, there was no subject about which he couldn't converse. Some people told me that he'd even speak in different languages to those who visited him from far-off lands. It seemed that he was able to tap into some form of collective unconsciousness.

In my time with him, he shared his concern for the spirit of the earth and how she's grieving because of the ecological disasters that are occurring. He talked about the urgency for people to see the living entity in every tree, plant, animal, and stone. He said this was essential in order for our planet to survive into future generations. He talked about a need for experiencing the interconnection between all beings and all forms of life. He also shared ancient Zulu prophecies that are being fulfilled today. He believed that, in no small way, the survival of the planet depended upon us returning to our native roots.

Being Native Isn't What's in Your Blood; It's What's in Your Soul

The first time I met the respected Australian Aboriginal elder Nundjan Djiridjarkan, he was wearing skins—kangaroo skins, to be more precise. I met him when he came up to introduce himself at the end of a lecture I was giving in Perth about astral travel. He had a wooden staff and large initiation scars across his upper arms that could be seen through openings in the kangaroo skin. It seemed so out of context to see someone looking like this in a city. He looked like a bushman who'd stepped out of time. (He was so revered by his culture that when the Queen of England came for a visit, this was one of the elders with whom she met.)

He introduced himself, and explained that he'd heard there was an American woman speaking about astral travel. He said he came into town because he was skeptical of what I might have to say. However, evidently I surprised him. He then explained to me that Aborigines have always had a tradition of astral travel—traveling without the body over long distances—and he wanted to teach me more about their traditions, but first we needed to see if we were of the same clan. Otherwise, it was taboo.

Through a set of experiences in the bush, we discovered that I was the same clan, and so I learned from him and his people. In this book I have included some of the things that I learned from him, but only the things that I'm allowed to share, because much of Aboriginal spirituality is not to be shared. One of the most profound things I learned from Nundjan Djiridjarkan, however, was that *being native isn't what's in your blood, but instead what's in your soul*. He talked a lot about the importance of people finding the native spirit that dwells inside of them. It was an honor to learn from this respected elder.

Although some people in the Northern Hemisphere think of Australia and New Zealand as very similar, the native population is, in fact, very different. Years ago, when I was lecturing in Auckland about the native spirit, a Maori woman who had attended the lecture told me that what I was teaching was very similar to the beliefs of her people. She invited me to visit her *marae* (sacred communal meeting

place). This was an honor, so a time was arranged and I prepared gifts. (Whenever you visit a native clan, tribe, or village elder, you should bear gifts. This is important.) When I arrived at the marae I brought gifts, but the Maoris were a bit dismayed because I didn't have lots of people with me. Formal meetings are very ceremonial and, as I learned, the formal visitor arriving at the marae is supposed to have their people with them. Luckily I was "loaned" some Maori people for the meeting ritual.

For the ceremonial greeting, we stood outdoors in a line—me with my "borrowed" people—in front of the *wharenuī* (meeting house). The *tohunga* (spiritual leader) lined up with his people facing us. "My" people began to sing. It was beautiful and seemed to echo to the heavens. Then those standing with the *tohunga* began to sing in response. This went back and forth for a long time as we slowly moved forward, until the two lines were standing across from each other. Then we all went into the *wharenuī*, where more ceremony occurred and where each person stood and shared his or her ancestry and then more songs were sung.

Over the years, I visited with the people from this Maori tribe many times, and the *tohunga* came to visit us in the States, as he was interested in learning Native American traditions. From the Maoris I learned about the healing power of the oral tradition, songs and chants, storytelling, offerings to nature spirits, how to speak to the spirits of the land, "little people," and the importance of honoring one's ancestors. One time I asked why they were willing to share their traditions with me, as I wasn't of Maori blood, and I was told in words nearly verbatim to those of my Aborigine teacher: "*It's not what is in your blood, but what is in your soul, and you carry the Maori native spirit in your soul.*"



I've only mentioned a few of the many people and cultures from which I've had the honor of studying. Sometimes the meetings were brief but meaningful—a shaman in Brazil, the hill people in Thailand near the Myanmar border, healers on the Mekong in Vietnam, Mayans in the Yucatán, a Lapland shaman in Finland, and various

elders from different tribes of the Americas. And sometimes I was immersed in the culture for longer stretches of time. But in every case, there were similarities that spanned countries and cultures. For example, every native culture around the world considers the natural world to be alive and conscious; every tree, mountain, and river is thought to have a conscious spirit with which we can commune. Those in native cultures also speak of treating nature with reverence; there's the belief that what we do to the land, we do to ourselves because we are intimately connected. All the native cultures that I spent time in believe in having gratitude for even the simplest of things, such as being thankful to the sunrise, and to a cooling breeze, and to corn spirit for providing food for the people. The similarities are what I call the *native spirit*.

There's immense value in igniting your native spirit because when you do, your intuition expands exponentially. Gateways to spiritual realms open, and life-force energy fills you. You'll find that more often you'll be at the right place at the right time. And your self-esteem expands because so many in the spirit world are guiding you and believing in you. This book is a way to find that place of inner wisdom within you.

In the first chapter, "The Call," you'll gain an understanding of how to connect to and hear the call of the forces of the natural world. You'll also discover how to answer the call of the forces of nature to activate sacred aspects of your life—thus, tapping into your authentic self and remembering who you are. In the second chapter, "The Gateway," you'll learn how to tell what your personal spirit animals, plants, and stone totems are and how to hear secret messages from beyond. In the third chapter, "The Deepening," you will practice communing with Spirit by discovering how to find your true spirit name, make a spirit stick, and call Spirit with a drum or rattle, as well as understand the power of creating your own medicine bag and more. In the fourth chapter, "Great Mystery," you'll learn how to "see" fairies, create your own vision quest, become invisible, use your dreams for remarkable insights, and shape-shift. Finally, in the fifth chapter, "Right Relation," you'll begin to live in sacred balance and discover how to create powerful ceremonies, learn the importance of sharing your personal story, and know the ways in which prayers of

gratitude can transform your life. I look forward to sharing this journey with you.





DENISE'S GRANDMOTHER

CHAPTER ONE



THE CALL: REMEMBERING WHO YOU ARE

We sat huddled in silence around a tree-sheltered campfire on the side of the mountain. Holding the palms of our hands out to be warmed by the flames, we gazed up at the stars. The sound of a lone owl punctuated the stillness, as tiny embers spiraled up and dissolved into the darkened sky. I inhaled the damp night air—it smelled of moist earth, smoke, and pine—and looked at the faces of those who sat around me. Their bodies glowed like wavering, liquid amber in the flickering light. These were healers from various indigenous cultures who had gathered for a special ceremony high in the Cascade Mountains. Afterward, around the fire, we took time to absorb the events of the day. Then quietly, a Maori healer from New Zealand pointed up to the sky and said, “Do you see that star, Denise?”

When I followed his finger to the heavens, I didn’t see just one—I saw thousands of stars. I tried to convince myself that I knew the exact star he was pointing to and mumbled, “Umm, yes?”

“That’s your personal star. Each of us has a star, and that one is yours.” He said it with certainty. “I’ll ask you where it is tomorrow night, and I know you’ll be able to find it.”

I wasn't so sure of that, but I asked him what he meant when he said that we each had a star.

He replied, "When I was a child, the Old Ones told me that when each person is born, a star is given to them. The star oversees their life, and all anyone ever needs to do—when they've lost their way—is to look for their star in the night sky. Their star calls to them to remember what's truly important in life." The other elders around the fire nodded as he spoke.

I don't know if I can find my exact star, but I've found that simply looking up at a starry sky and knowing my star is shining down on me makes everything that isn't important in my life fall away.

The call to remember who you are can come in many forms. It can come from the land, from your ancestors, from the depth of your soul, from the elements . . . or even from a star. It's a beckoning to evoke the awareness of who you really are. It's a hallowed request to step beyond the boundaries of your identity into the vast, vibrant realm of the universe. However, until you answer the call, there may be a kind of yearning for something that you can't quite grasp. It's like being homesick for a place that you can't remember.

When you answer the call, you'll find the ancient landscape deep within you, where sacred mountains carry memories of creation within their folds. You'll discover inner rolling hills that hold vestigial memories of your past and your future. These memories undulate between hidden plains like great buttocks, breasts, and pregnant mounds of life. It's where mysterious gorges within you are filled with forgotten dreams and sparkling rivers of your essence that carry the scent of life. And when you travel to the center of this inner realm, you'll know that you're home.



Being home means looking beneath the surface of life . . . and tapping into the powerful natural forces that dwell there. Native people understood how to access those streams of energy to gain vitality and significant insight into their lives. In this chapter, you'll learn how to achieve a greater understanding of the potent energy influences around you. You'll discover how to connect with the innate majesty of the elements of air, water, fire, and earth, as well as the sun, the moon, and the Spirit Keepers of the directions. (For example, you'll learn how simply facing in the different directions can invite various kinds of energy to flow into your being.) You'll also realize how to answer the call to activate the passionate wilderness in your soul. This is one of the most extraordinary journeys that anyone can take in their lifetime . . . and it's vital to do this sooner rather than later.

Answering the Call

From scientists and politicians to psychics and visionaries, predictions about the future suggest that we have entered into one of the most challenging centuries of human history. We stand at the crossroads of either the destruction or regeneration of our planet. At the same moment as rapid advances in medicine, science, and technology are occurring, our ecology is on the verge of collapse. And it's happening at an accelerated pace. Each step has potential consequences. We can be mindful of those steps, knowing that the wisdom of the natural world is always present . . . or we can acquiesce to the modern paradigm of attempting to control the earth rather than walking in harmony with her.

In many ways, there has never been a more powerful time in the evolution of our planet than right now. It's a period like no other in history. What we do in this single generation will dictate the destiny of generations ahead. And it's not simply about physical acts, such as planting more trees or saving the whales (which, of course, are worthwhile and necessary activities). In a deeper sense, it's about a shift of consciousness, the ripples of which can radiate out in all directions, touching the hearts of many.

“We are each reflections of the earth. What we do to the earth, we do to ourselves.”

— GRANDMOTHER ELIZABETH ARAUJO, RESPECTED MAYAN LEADER
AND MEMBER OF THE COUNCIL OF MAYAN ELDERS

The challenge is that most humans don't see themselves as a part of nature, but somehow superior to it. If we didn't feel separate from the earth—if we could feel her soul inside of us—we would treat her so very differently. Even though modern technology has made our lives easier, our subconscious tells us a different story. Our disconnection from the natural world has made many become spiritually disorientated. And not only are we disconnected from the land, but also we're becoming increasingly disconnected from each other.

It's not uncommon for people to go out to dinner and then spend much of the time on their electronic devices, rather than in conversation. Modern mothers today often look more at their cell

phones than into the faces of their infants as they are nursing. (Not having direct facial connection can diminish mirror neuron development in the child.) The rise of electronic communication in our society has begun to replace human contact, and we've suffered a loss of quality and quantity of close friends as a result. Since 1985 the average number of close friends most people have has dropped dramatically . . . and the numbers keep decreasing.

Research has also shown that the use of computers has a dramatic effect on a child's brain development—even educational games. Computer games affect neurological reactions, hormones, and biochemicals (such as adrenaline) that increase heart rate and muscle changes for a fight-or-flight response, *which can become an ingrained, permanent response to life*. Also, the overuse of computers during childhood development through adolescence can cause the prefrontal cortex (which regulates emotions, complex thought processes, and problem solving) to not reach its potential. And every year more and more people spend more time with their electronic devices than in conversations with "real" people.

As a culture, we're in such a hurry that we wait only a few seconds when we phone someone before we hang up. Additionally, we've become myopic and only think of short-term profit and benefit. We aren't addressing how our actions affect the seven generations beyond us—this is about 140 years—as decreed in native tribal traditions. The way we're going, the future of our planet will be bereft in a relatively short time simply because of our actions today. How different our lives would be if corporations and policy makers carefully considered the ways in which their actions affect our descendants in the future.

However, it's possible to reinvent our own personal destiny, as well as that of our planet. In the native cultures that I've spent time in, repeatedly I've heard that we're entering a time of darkness. This might be true as our seas, air, and land are being polluted and disregarded. Yet there is a universal law: "The greater the darkness, the greater the light." *There has never been a more compelling time than right now for your light to shine fiercely, graciously, and beautifully*. You are needed. It's time to answer the call.

Each of my native teachers brought an understanding about this pivotal time and shared strategies that we can all use to survive and thrive in the years ahead. They each believed that survival depended on courageous individuals stepping forward and embracing their own native soul. Those who welcome their inner indigenous spirit know how to push off from the shore of normal reality and enter the vast flow of life where the world is alive—where every tree has a voice, every mountain has a soul, and every flower has a song. We think that we've forgotten how to take this journey, but inside each of us is a place that remembers . . . and the voices of our ancestors are calling us to awaken.

The ancestors I'm talking about aren't just the ones that dwell in a spirit world; they're the collective ancestral soul that resides deep inside of you. This book isn't just about heeding wisdom or learning new techniques; in its deepest sense, it's a touchstone to help you recall the knowledge that already exists within you. If you trace your ancestry back far enough, you'll discover that you have earth-based ancestors who lived in harmony with nature and understood that all things are connected. Their very survival depended upon their ability to interface with the natural world . . . and you carry their DNA. You carry their memories. *The native spirit already dwells in you!*

Interestingly, recent science has been giving credence to the idea that memories can, in fact, travel through the generations in our DNA. Researchers from Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta have shown that it's possible for information to be inherited biologically, through chemical changes that occur in DNA. During their experiments they learned that animals could pass on learned information about stressful experiences to subsequent generations; in one case, it was a fear of the smell of cherry blossoms. This suggests, from a scientific perspective, what earth-based cultures have always intuitively known—that our experiences can be transferred from the brain into our genome, allowing them to be passed on to later generations. Professor Marcus Pembrey, a geneticist at University College London, said the work provided “compelling evidence” for the biological ancestral transmission of memory.

You contain the blueprint of your native ancestors that dwell within you. When I was with the Aborigines in the bushland of Australia, Nundjan Djiridjarkan told me that young Aboriginal children, who had never been taught the old ways about particular ancient Aboriginal art motifs, had been spontaneously creating them *without ever being instructed*. He maintained it was the ancestral soul.

We are at a turning point in the history of our planet, and many of the old ways are dying. This we know. Of course change is the way of life, but if the old ways that help us establish deep connections to our living planet continue to die, then our souls are deprived. It's my intent that, by following some of the suggestions in this book, such as drumming, creating a spirit stick, and listening to the messages in the wind, you'll be answering that hallowed call. And your life will be enriched as a result.

The Call of the Spirit of the Land

The first step to ignite the native spirit within you is to connect with the natural world. This begins by understanding that everything in the universe has consciousness. Even the most hardened skeptics would agree that animals are conscious beings. And modern science has discovered that plants can respond to the energy field of humans. However, even though science hasn't decreed it to be so (at this time), no less conscious are the stones, mountains, and rivers. Native people always knew that everything has a consciousness. Blessings were asked of the Spirit of the Sea before a fishing trip and the Rain Spirit during a drought. To those earth-based clans, the spirits of the natural world were real. The earth was called "mother" or "grandmother," and clemency was asked before digging into her flesh. In every way, native people honored their connection to the living, conscious world around them.

The idea that something as big as our planet might be alive is very difficult for some people to comprehend. However, it's fascinating to notice that the earth regulates her environment in much the same

way that the human body self-regulates in order to maintain constant conditions within itself. For example, a human body in good health maintains a temperature of approximately 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. During the summer and winter, despite the fluctuations of outer temperature, the body adheres very close to this norm. When body temperature drops below this, you begin to shiver and your skin contracts, raising body temperature. When body temperature rises above 98.6 degrees, your pores will open and release perspiration, thus bringing body temperature back down through the cooling process of evaporation.

Similarly, the temperature of the earth has remained at an average of 55.4 degrees Fahrenheit for 3,800 million years, *even though the sun became 25 percent hotter and brighter during this period of time*. As the sun became hotter, the plants on Earth drew in more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, thus reducing the greenhouse effect warming the planet. In other words, Grandmother Earth devised a way to maintain her constant temperature for millions of years . . . until now, when human interference over a short period of time has made it difficult for her to stay in balance.

Another example of the remarkable ability of the planet to self-regulate is the salinity of the sea. The level of salt in the ocean has remained at 3.4 percent for thousands of years, even though rivers are continually washing salt from the earth into the sea. Similarly, the oxygen content of our atmosphere stays at 21 percent, which is the necessary level for life to exist on the planet. When you know, in the depth of your being, that the earth is alive and each of her elements is alive, it can transform your life in subtle yet profound ways.

The Call of the Elements

In native traditions the world is often thought to be divided into four elements—air, water, fire, and earth—which are thought to be each imbued with a spirit that can be accessed for balance and wholeness. In other words, the four elements are not just inanimate

aspects of nature. They are actually alive—as alive as a friend or family member.

Almost all indigenous people honor and acknowledge the elements. However, in our modern culture, it's often difficult to feel our intimate connection to these living elemental forces, because most of us only identify with our bodies. We draw a kind of boundary that stops with our skin. Sometimes we identify with our possessions or even our family members, but it's a limited experience of "self." Our true self is so much larger, more majestic, and far-reaching than this. To answer the call of the Spirits of the Elements—sky, lake, lightning, and mountain—is to allow your personal identification to expand so that you begin to recognize yourself in the universe and the elements around you. In other words, *your identity grows beyond the confines of your physical body and becomes part of the collective whole*. Additionally, when you connect with the innate energy of the elements, there is a profound, positive effect on every aspect of your life. Answering the call of the elements is simply a matter of taking time to be aware of them . . . and now the journey begins.

THE SPIRIT OF WATER IS CALLING YOU

In tribal traditions of the past, water was lifeblood. Watering holes formed the central axis for the tribe or clan. It was there where the women did their washing and collected water for cooking. These were the places where people would convene to discuss the weather, share news, and talk about the latest hunt or crop. When those in an earth-based culture called upon the Spirit of Water in a ceremony, they weren't just saying words. There was the understanding that there was an actual, *real* spirit that they were addressing. They believed that the Water Spirit was healing and renewing; likely, the Christian tradition of using water as a baptismal way of being born anew has its source in much older, native cultures.

To answer the call of the Spirit of Water, simply be aware of the water that is within you and around you from rain, fog, and snow. Also take note of the water you drink, bathe in, and ingest when

eating fruits and vegetables. The water you just sipped may have at one time been frozen high on a snowcapped peak, or maybe it cascaded down a mountain stream or came from deep within the earth. It's believed that the water inside of you carries all these memories; it has an energy echo of having been in a cloud above the earth, falling as soft, gentle rain on a high plateau, and flowing as a current at the bottom of the sea. *In the deepest sense, the water inside of you is not separate from all water on our planet . . . and it remembers.*

From soft mists to rain, fog, streams, rivers, waterfalls, lakes, oceans . . . even from the water in the blood that surges through your veins . . . the Spirit of Water is calling you. It's calling you to understand that you are not separate from the waters of our beautiful planet. There are many ways to do this. For example, before drinking a glass of water, my Hawaiian kahuna teacher would place her hand over the top of the glass and give thanks to the Water Spirit for its blessings. She said this awakened the Water Spirit and that water that was blessed and energized had life force in it. *Answering the call of the Spirit of Water activates flow in your life and brings emotional balance, as well as cleansing and healing energies.*

THE SPIRIT OF AIR IS CALLING YOU

When you answer the call of the Spirit of Air, you know that the air you breathe is connected to all the air on the planet. In a purely physical way, the oxygen in the breath you just took contained argon atoms that were inhaled by your most distant ancestors . . . and will be inhaled by your descendants. It has been in every nook and cranny of our planet. The air in that breath also contained at least 400,000 of the same argon atoms that were inhaled by a shaman on a high mound in ancient Mongolia, an aesthetic in the Himalayas, and a native storyteller in the Amazon.

The life force in the air around us is the common element that we share with all living creatures and plants on the planet. Native people looked to the skies to connect with the Creator and thought that the

winds and the birds were spirit messengers. They believed that though you cannot see it, the Spirit of Air was real nevertheless. As a suggestion, whenever you're aware of a breeze or the wind, turn to face it and be still. It's not uncommon for a message to emerge for you when you do this.

The Spirit of Air exists in the inhalation and exhalation of your breath, soft breezes, warm autumn winds, rippling grasses, delicate seedpods lofted into the air by a gust, an eagle soaring on warm air thermals, and aspen leaves quaking in the wind. Even hurricanes and tornadoes carry the Spirit of Air. A simple way to connect with the air is to raise your arms high and inhale deeply, with awareness of that breath. *Answering the call of the Spirit of Air activates freedom, perception, communication, and seeing life from a higher perspective.*

THE SPIRIT OF FIRE IS CALLING YOU

Since the first cave dwellers discovered how to ignite flames to dispel darkness and disperse coldness, fire has been considered sacred. The constant interplay of light and shadow affects every part of life. Native people were inspired and fascinated by the power of fire that ranged from the radiance of the sun to the warmth of an evening campfire; in some tribes the sun was even honored as a god. The Cherokees had a sacred fire burning constantly, which was rekindled once a year during the Corn Festival. It was thought that the ceremony held the spirit of the tribe together. The sacred fire provided a sense of connection to the ancestors, the stars, and the Creator. The oldest Mayan ruins from 1,000 B.C.E. suggest ancient solar rituals and fire ceremonies. Ancient native people believed that the Spirit of Fire was a living and breathing organism essential for life.

The Spirit of Fire exists in the single flame of a candle in a cave, the warmth of a campfire, the stars above, the red flaming sunset, the dappled golden sunlight in a summer meadow, and the radiant sun above. As a suggestion, simply light a candle and look deep into

the base of the flame with the sense that you are not separate from the deeper energies of fire. *When you answer the call of the Spirit of Fire, vitality, purification, transformation, and life-force energies are activated within you.*

THE SPIRIT OF THE EARTH IS CALLING YOU

Of the four elements, none has been as revered as the earth. Our connection to the earth goes back to the beginnings of our history. Myths in native cultures abound with stories of human beings emerging from its fold. The earliest native and ancient cultures honored Grandmother Earth as a conscious being who oversaw life in all of its phases. She was considered a fecund provider and nurturer for all her inhabitants. The ancient sensibility was one of living with the earth, instead of merely on it.

In native traditions, there is profound love of the earth. People sit or lie on the earth with the feeling that they are being mothered and healed. Here is one example from Lakota Chief Luther Standing Bear:

It was good for the skin to touch the earth and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred earth. Their tepees were built upon the earth and their altars were made of earth. The birds that flew in the air came to rest upon the earth and it was the final abiding place of all things that lived and grew. The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing and healing.

That is why the old Indian still sits upon the earth instead of propping himself up and away from its life-giving forces. For him, to sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly; he can see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer in kinship to other lives about him [*Land of the Spotted Eagle*. Boston and New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1933].

The idea that we are a part of the earth isn't uncommon. When I invited an Aboriginal elder from Australia to visit us in the United States, he replied that he couldn't be separated for that long from his spirit, for his spirit lived in his homeland. He said he would potentially weaken and even die if he did. I've heard, over and over, a similar

belief throughout my time in native cultures. There is the belief that part of our soul is embedded in the earth, and that we can be diminished when we travel if we don't take our spirit with us. Perhaps this is part of the reason why travel can be so challenging for some people. Here's one family's cultural practice, as told by Wilma Spear Chief of the Blood (Kainai) Tribe, we can adopt that can help with this:

I am from Alberta, Canada—I'm a Blackfoot woman, as well as a member of the Blood Tribe. Our people were not afraid to travel because of a practice we had. When we were children, my mother use to call out our names whenever we would go somewhere. It could be to a nearby town or just to visit relatives in another part of the community. We would always respond, and she would say, "No, I am calling your spirits so they can come with us and not linger."

The belief is that if you didn't call your spirit, a part of you would feel lonely for the place you left behind . . . and not fully be present in your new surrounding. To this day I continue this practice and have taught my children to do the same thing, as they travel often. Perhaps because we were a nomadic tribe—our people were hunters and followed the Buffalo—we needed to develop ways to keep our spirit with us.

Our belief in a sentient Earth has almost disappeared in modern society. The dismay at the waning of this long-held understanding was passionately expressed at the end of the 19th century by Smohalia, an Oglala Lakota Sioux holy man:

You ask me to dig in the earth? Am I to take a knife and plunge it into the breast of my mother? But then when I die she will not gather me again into her bosom. . . . Then I can never enter her body and be born again. You ask me to cut the grass and the corn and sell them to get rich like the white men. But how dare I crop the hair of my mother?

Since we have lost our sense of connection to a living earth, in many ways we've lost our place in the cosmos. But perhaps buried deep in the psyche within each of us dwells the idea that human life springs forth from the earth, because more people are beginning to gravitate toward this ancient outlook.

From her majestic mountains, resplendent forests, open savannas, vast deserts, fertile valleys, and sweet meadows, the Spirit of Earth is calling you. As a suggestion, go outside and put

your hands into the dirt. No gloves, no shovel. Simply reach your bare hands into the soil. Inhale the earth's loamy scent. Imagine that your hands have roots that are rapidly growing and traveling beneath the surface to far mountains, to valleys under the sea, and all throughout our planet. *When you answer the call of the Spirit of Earth, stability, grounding, healing, ancient wisdom, and power are activated in your life.*

The Call of the Sacred Circle of Life

Physicists acknowledge that the atoms and molecules in all things are in constant motion. They declare what ancient native mystics have always known—that beneath the surface of physical objects, energy swirls into form, dissolves, and coalesces once again. The world is in a constant dance of fluid patterns of ebbing and flowing energy. Underlying this motion is a cyclical, spiraling cosmic order. This understanding of the great cycles within all of life is what Black Elk, the renowned holy man of the Oglala Lakota Sioux, called the sacred hoop or sacred circle:

Everything an Indian does is in a circle and that is because the power of the world works in circles and everything tries to be round. . . . The sky is round and I have heard that the Earth is round like a ball and so are all the stars. The wind, in its power, whirls. Birds make their nests in a circle for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons, from great circles in their changing, always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle . . . and so it is in everything where power moves [*Black Elk Speaks: The Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (1961), as told to John G. Neihardt].

In past times, native people honored the sacred circle and what it represented. The circle was so important that it played a central theme in tribal ceremonies throughout the world. Rituals of purification were often performed in a circular manner. When the elders came together in council, it was in a circle so that all were

included, each having an equal say. Sacred dancing was often performed in a circle. The circle evoked the feeling of completeness and wholeness; it allowed one to align with the center of the universe. The circle represented totality—the beginning and the end. When asked to delineate one's life with some kind of timeline, those in Western culture usually draw a line, while those in native cultures often create a circle. *This linear/cyclical vision of life is one of the major differences between a Western view and a native view of the world.*

The sacred circle is a healing tool that can be used to soothe your soul by symbolically molding together the fragmented parts of the self. In the following sections, you'll learn to answer the call of each of the four directions that comprise the cardinal points of the circle and to integrate each of them into your life.

THE MYSTICAL MEDICINE WHEEL

In Western culture we usually think of medicine as the pills that a doctor gives us, but to Native Americans, *medicine* is what heals. It's a very different definition of the word, and it's one that puts the emphasis on wellness and balance rather than sickness. To a native person, spirit heals, right actions heal, and living in harmony with the land heals. All of this is a form of medicine.

Many people think of a medicine wheel as simply a Native American circle of stones. However, what they don't understand is that a medicine wheel is much more than a gathering of stones; it's a symbolic representation of the cyclical cosmology of life.

Medicine wheels have been used for mystical purposes by tribal cultures for a long time. Some of the oldest found by archaeologists date back 4,500 years ago. Presumably, this tradition goes back even further. The stones are only a physical representation of the sacred circle that encompasses creation. It's an outer manifestation of an inner mystical force. It represents the four elements and the four directions. It's also a circle of protection and healing.



Using ceremony, intent, and love, you can create a medicine wheel that can be a protected sanctuary and a sacred space where a vortex of energy can build. As you spend time in stillness in your medicine wheel, it can help you become even more balanced. (In [Chapter 2](#), you'll learn how to build your own medicine wheel.)

The Call of the Spirit Keepers of the Directions

Reverence and gratitude for the directions is beautifully captured by Charley Elkhair of the Delaware Tribe:

We are thankful to the East because everyone feels good in the morning when they awake, and see the bright light coming from the East; and when the Sun goes down in the West we feel good and glad we are well; then we are thankful to the West. And we are thankful to the North, because when the cold winds come we are glad to have lived to see the leaves fall again; and to the South, for when the south wind blows and everything is coming up in the spring, we are glad to live to see the grass growing and everything green again. We thank the Thunders, for they are the manitous [the spiritual and fundamental life force, understood by Algonquian groups of Native Americans]. It is omnipresent and manifest everywhere that brings the rain, which the Creator has given them power to rule over. And we thank our mother, the Earth, whom we claim as mother because the Earth carries us

and everything we need [M. R. Harrington, *Religion and Ceremonies of the Lenape: Indian Notes and Monographs*. Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, vol. 19, 1921].

In modern times, directions are something you hope your GPS will accurately relay. But, there is a more in-depth energy associated with east, south, west, and north. In some cultures “above” and “below” are added, making six sacred directions, and some even add a seventh, which is the center point. In native traditions, the directions are vibrant, alive, conscious energies that affect us in every moment. To embrace the native spirit, heed the call of the directions, which in some cultures are called the *Four Winds*, the *Four Guardians*, the *Four Protectors*, or the *Spirit Keepers*. In every moment the four directions carry messages to you . . . and when you answer, they’ll guide you in all areas of your life.

Indigenous people honor the Spirit Keepers of the directions. The Aztecs used the directions to divide the world into four regions. The Olmec temples in Mexico were built in alignment with the magnetic directions, as was the entire sacred Mayan city of Teotihuacán. Navajo sand paintings symbolize the four directions and are created during a ceremony reenacting the creation of the world.

When Black Elk was nine years old, he became very ill and was unresponsive for several days. During this time he had a vision in which he was visited by the Thunder Beings and taken to the Grandfathers—the spiritual guardians of the six hallowed directions. In his writings he says that the “spirits [of the directions] were represented as kind and loving, full of years and wisdom, like revered human grandfathers.” In his vision, Black Elk was then taken to the center of the earth, to the central mountain of the world at the axis of the six sacred directions.

Black Elk’s vision speaks of the holiness of the circle and the living spirit that flows from the four directions and above, below, and within. Even though you may not be aware of it, in this moment the directions are affecting you. Literally, they are encoded in your brain and their energy flows through you. From the beginning of time, we’ve defined the space around us in terms of four orientations—that is, we see things as being in front of us, behind us, and to the right or left of us. This corresponds to our experience of our planet, which

rotates on an axis, defining north and south. Our awareness of the directions is also associated with the rising and setting sun, which gives us a deep-rooted sense of the east and west.

Our sense of direction may also be connected to the magnetic flows of energy around the earth, called the Van Allen belt. Birds navigate their migration routes by sensing these subtle variations in the earth's magnetic field. Neurons in the brains of the birds are tuned to respond to signals from the directional magnetic field and register its strength. Research has shown that humans also have neurons that can sense directional magnetic flows. However, when we're in our homes or in cities, there are strong electromagnetic fields from power lines, appliances, and other forms of modern life that disrupt our sensitivity and connection to the natural magnetic flows of the earth.

In many ways, as we've lost our ability to sense the directions of the natural world, we have lost our direction in life. However, we can still answer the call of the directions, and following is some information about how to do that.

Note: In the Northern Hemisphere, we associate the Spirit of the North with winter, coldness, and darkness; however, in the Southern Hemisphere since south is the direction of cooler climates, you'll need to reverse these meanings. But because the sun and the moon always rise in the east and set in west, no matter where you are on the planet, these qualities remain the same and are relevant to both hemispheres.

THE SPIRIT KEEPER OF THE EAST IS CALLING YOU

The east is the place of the rising sun. In earth-based cultures, the morning was the time to face east and send prayers to the Creator. Often when homes were constructed their entrances faced east to allow Spirit Keepers of the East to enter the home and empower the coming day. The east is associated with awakenings. It is the place of hopes, dreams, and new plans. To answer the call, arise before dawn and then open your arms to the rising sun. Inhale the fresh

morning air. If you're not a "morning person," you can welcome the rising of the moon. (The moon always rises in the east, though the exact location and time will vary depending on the time of the year and the phase of the moon.)

Symbolically, the beginning of the medicine wheel is in the east. The east is the home of new beginnings. The energy of the east symbolizes spring, the dawning of the day, and the waxing of the new moon. New life. New birth. Seeds are planted. New sprouts push through the soil. Eggs in nests wait to hatch. Babies are born. In the creativity cycle, the east is the place of activation of ideas.

The Spirit Keeper of the East is calling you. To answer this call, face toward the sunrise. Allow the coming light to ignite new energy in every area of your life. *When you answer its call, you activate the energy of new beginnings, potential, new ideas, inspiration, optimism, growth, vigor, and enlightenment.*

THE SPIRIT KEEPER OF THE SOUTH IS CALLING YOU

Moving around the sacred circle in a clockwise direction, you journey to the south. This is the symbolic home of summer, the midday sun, and the full moon. Corn is high. Days are warm. It's the time of fullness and expansion. As the east represents the time of birth, the south is associated with growth and the time of childhood.

Ideas born in the energy of the east are nurtured and magnified in the south. Imagine yourself embraced with sunlight and feel your heart expanding in all directions. This is the energy of the south.

The Spirit Keeper of the South is calling you. To answer this call, face toward the south. Imagine that the light of the midday sun is illuminating your heart so that your heart may illuminate the world. *When you answer its call, you activate the energy of expansion, fruitfulness, passion, activity, exuberance, vitality, and life force.*

THE SPIRIT KEEPER OF THE WEST IS CALLING YOU

In the cycle of life, the west is the realm of autumn, the setting sun, and the waning moon. Crops are harvested. Leaves are falling from the trees. It's the time when the new beginnings of birth and childhood have been surrendered, and the teenage and early adult years have emerged. It is a time of discovery, transformation, and experimentation. In the creativity cycle, after you activate an idea in the east and nurture it in the south, you then experiment with it in the west. To put an idea into form, you need to see what works and what doesn't work. In order to do this, you must try it out, watching it change and go through various transformations.

The Spirit Keeper of the West is calling you. To answer this call, face west and travel in your imagination to the top of a high plateau. The sun is setting. The colors of the day are fading into the deeper colors of the night, as the warmth around you ebbs into the coolness of the evening. A profound peace settles over the land. *When you answer its call, you activate the energy of completion, harvest, transformation, change, transition, surrender, release, and letting go.*

THE SPIRIT KEEPER OF THE NORTH IS CALLING YOU

As you complete the circle, you arrive in the north. In the cycle of life, the north is the realm of winter, the darkest night, and the dark of the moon. It's also rest, contemplation, completion, and consolidation. In the human cycle, the north is associated with the achievement of maturity, the accomplishments of the middle years of life, and the transition to old age. The energy of the elders resides in the north. The north is the home of darkness and inner mysteries. It's also the realm of death and rebirth. An idea that was conceived in the energy of the east, nurtured in the south, and tried out in the west, now reaches the place of consolidation and realization in the north.

To answer the Spirit Keeper of the North, face north and imagine that you're standing in the cold darkness of a winter night. The stars are shimmering overhead, and a blanket of snow covers the land as far as you can see. But, you're aware that beneath that stark chill

and quietude, preparations are under way for a time of new beginning. *When you answer the call of the north, consolidation, introspection, tranquility, meditation, retreat, rest, renewal, dormancy, inner guidance, incubation, wisdom, and reflection fill you.*

THE SPIRIT KEEPERS OF ABOVE, BELOW, AND CENTER ARE CALLING YOU

The Spirit Keeper of Above, sometimes called Grandfather Sky, is calling you to see things from a higher perspective. Allow your spiritual branches to rise high into the heavens. Raise your arms overhead. *When you answer the call of above, openness and freedom fill your life.*

The Spirit Keeper of Below, sometimes called Grandmother Earth, is calling you to take your spiritual roots deep and to honor the earth and gain wisdom from her. Stand with your arms at your side, palms open. *When you answer the call of below, you stand tall in your truth, grounded, stable, and strong.*

The Spirit Keeper of the Center is calling you to the place of unity, wholeness, and healing. The center is where all the directions emanate from and return to. It's where the separate parts of self come together to become whole. The Hopi of the American Southwest use the word *tuwanasaapi*, which means the place of belonging, the place where you're in your true home, the centering place, or the spiritual axis of the universe. When you understand the hallowed energy of the four directions, you began to understand the cycles within your life, and your own journey around the sacred circle of life. You recognize that *each part of the wheel symbolizes a different aspect of yourself and your life.* The center of the circle is the dwelling place of the Creator, where the forces of the universe merge into one.

The Spirit Keeper of the Center is calling you to remember who you are and from where you have come, and to know that the Creator dwells within you. Stand with your hands on your heart.

When you answer the call of the sacred center, loves flows through you and to you.

EXERCISE: THE FOUR GATEWAYS

This exercise is most powerfully done in nature, but you can also do this in your home as long as it's quiet.

*Close your eyes and imagine that you're standing in the center of a medicine wheel, and in each direction there's a gateway. Through each gateway, a spirit guardian approaches you with a message. Turn to each of the four directions to sense the energy flowing from that direction, and then ask yourself, If I knew what the Spirit Keeper of *this direction* would want me to know, what might it be?*

As you connect with the sacred center of the directions, find the sacred center within yourself. From this place, all things are possible.

The Call of Celestial Bodies

Almost all living things, including human beings and even the smallest single-celled organisms, have some sort of internal time-keeping system that depends on the sunlight. Our native ancestors intuitively understood this and knew how to live in harmony with the cycles of the sun. They realized that the sun synchronizes rhythms of growth and dormancy, rest and activity.

We are each profoundly affected by the cycles of light and dark, and most of our biological rhythms require sunlight. Within our bodies are numerous biological clocks, which are highly complex

with deeply ingrained, repetitive cycles. For example, our body temperature and serotonin levels change with remarkable precision every day. The level of hormones regulating growth is higher in the summer than in the winter. In fact, every biological function of the body follows precise cycles that are dictated by the sun. These rhythms evolved at a time when humans lived more closely with nature. A body's metabolism, for instance, slows down in the autumn, probably as a way of conserving body fat for the long, cold winter when food would be scarce.

Although some of our biological cycles have evolved to the point where they can be maintained without natural sunlight, our well-being decreases without regular exposure. The modern inventions of electricity and lightbulbs have increased our productivity; however, these advantages have also disconnected us from the natural cycle of day and night. Interestingly, research has found that for those who have trouble sleeping, one week in nature (without any electrical devices) could reset their biological body clock and synchronize their melatonin hormones (which aid in sleep) with the sunset and sunrise.

Our bodies are programmed to be active in the day and to wind down in the dark; in native cultures, one would work in the daytime and relax around the fire in the evening to share stories, recount the events of the day, and enjoy a meal together. This rhythm of work and rest allowed one to renew one's energy, and it unified the family energy. In our modern life, it's not always possible to do this, but whenever you have a choice, try to be active in the day hours and rest in the dark hours. *When you answer the call of the cycle of the sun, a natural rhythm begins to arise within you, which in turn brings a natural rhythm into your life.*




EXERCISE: RHYTHM OF THE SUN

One of the ways you can reestablish your connection to the rhythms of nature is to emulate natural cycles of light in your home. For example, if it's still dark outside when you wake up

on a winter's morning, instead of immediately turning on bright lights, begin your day by lighting a candle or using very dim light. Gradually progress to full-intensity lighting. This modulation reflects the way morning sunlight starts with pale light, which slowly increases in brightness and intensity.

Also, as much as possible, spend time outdoors in natural light, or sit near a window. This process can be reversed at night—rather than having the lights on bright at night, dim them and light some candles or make a fire. This gives the message to your body that you're in alignment with the natural rhythm of the sun, and this in turn ignites the native soul within you, and it also helps balance your inner biorhythms.



Another potent cycle, especially for women, is the cycle of the moon. Its gravitational pull affects the tides and the surfaces of the earth, as each month it actually subtly distorts the earth, pulling one side toward it. This cyclical pulling dramatically impacts our energy, our body fluids . . . and for a woman, her menstrual cycles. It's not a coincidence that a woman's menstrual cycle and the cycle of the moon are the same number of days. In native cultures, moon ceremonies were considered as powerful as sun ceremonies, and it was just as important to adhere to the cyclical nature of the moon as that of the sun. Someone who's in touch with the cycles of the moon will be more connected to his or her own internal rhythms. Each cycle of the moon is divided into four phases—new moon, waxing moon, full moon, and waning moon. There are not set times when one ends and another starts; they just flow into each other, as does your own energy cycles. Here are some traditional meanings:

- *Waxing Moon:* This is the time when the light radiating from the moon is growing. It's the time for the seeds of ideas that were planted in the new moon to begin to grow. This is an excellent time to put the wheels in motion for your new projects.

- *Full Moon:* This is the time for the culmination of projects; and it's a great time to celebrate, expand, and expound. Let your creative juices flow! Participate with friends.
- *Waning Moon:* This is the time when moon's light is receding; a time to surrender and release what isn't needed in your life. It's also a time to assimilate and absorb what you've learned in the previous weeks.
- *New Moon:* This phase begins with the dark of the moon. This is the time for reflection and introspection. It's the time to be still and listen to your inner voice. Sleep, dream, meditate. Renew your energy.

A WOMAN'S MOON CYCLE

Eons ago, when people slept under the stars, women's bodies naturally harmonized with the phases of the moon. Most women had their monthly cycle during the new moon. The full moon was thought to be the time of fertility. During the expansive energy of the full moon, it was not uncommon for ovulation to be at its height. Menstruation (also called "moon-time") was a time of powerful community among women in earth-based cultures. Often women would have their moon cycle at the same time, so their gathering renewed connections with each other. Females in a tribe would gather in what was called a "moon lodge" in Native American traditions, or "the red tent" in Middle Eastern traditions. They didn't forage, cook, or prepare food. They allowed themselves time for rest and renewal. (The older and younger women would take over the chores so the menstruating women would have this time in the moon lodge.) As they gathered together, the women pulled their energy inward and replenished themselves, in preparation for the month ahead. Unfortunately, our modern-day culture doesn't allow women to have downtime during their moon cycle, so we no longer honor this important tradition.

Since we have become separated from the natural world, our body rhythms and our moon-times no longer correspond with the lunar rhythms, and hence we are out of balance with nature. However, there is a way to help harmonize your body rhythms. During the new moon, make your bedroom as dark as possible, and during the three or four days of the full moon, if the moonlight shines directly into your bedroom, open the curtains. If not, consider sleeping with a small night-light, which will serve to mimic the moon's glow. There is a place inside you that will respond. Women who have done this report that it feels like something that had been out of sync moved back into balance.

When you answer the call of the rhythm of the moon, life becomes less of a struggle. You'll find an easy flow occurring in your life.



EXERCISE: HONORING THE MOON

Stand outside at nighttime as often as you can, and take a "moon bath" by allowing the light of the moon to wash over your body. Or, stand by an open window and open your arms to the moon.



The Call of the Cycle of the Seasons

My mother used to say that it was important to be cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Hence, we had very little heat in the winter, even when the snow was deep. And we never had air-conditioning and rarely had fans in the summer. She said it was Cherokee wisdom to feel the seasons; it would keep us healthy. I don't know that this is true, but my brothers and sister and I were healthier than most kids.

Our native ancestors respected the cycle of the seasons; it was the great medicine wheel of life, and it was essential for their survival. However, in Western culture we spend so much time indoors that we've lost our connection to nature's ebb and flow and to the vital energy it can bring into our lives. The cycle of the year contains times that are better suited for busy activity and other times that are better for withdrawing. As with the four directions, each of the seasons has its own energy: birth, expansion, cultivation, and renewal.

Consider making seasonal altars. An altar doesn't need to be religious. It can simply be a place to honor what is sacred in life. For example, to create a spring altar, you can place spring flowers and seeds (to represent the springtime and new beginnings) on a shelf, a nightstand, a coffee table, or a window ledge. Various fruits and grains can be placed on a seasonal altar to represent summertime. You might also consider creating ceremonies to welcome the spirit of each season. When you place autumn leaves and small gourds on your seasonal altar, for instance, you can do it with prayers for bountiful harvests in life. As you take the time to honor the cycle of the seasons, you'll find that your life becomes more harmonious. Here are some things you can do to live in balance with the seasons:

- *Spring:* Earth-based cultures planted seeds in the spring, and just as seeds germinate and sprout in the spring, this is the best time to start a new project or break free of an old limiting pattern. The energy of spring can give you the boost you need for your projects. This is also a great time to clear out the old: spring-cleaning and clutter clearing are beneficial in this season.
- *Summer:* Traditionally summer was the time of activity and working hard. The seeds that had been planted in the spring grew to be plants that needed to be cultivated, pruned, and weeded. It was also the time of celebrations and festive gatherings. In your life, summer is the time to be active. Expand. Take risks. Play. Celebrate. Weed out what you don't need in life. The energy that you put out now will bring bounty in the future.

- *Autumn:* In earlier times, this was the period of the harvest and for gathering food supplies in preparation for the winter. It's an excellent time to finish projects because the psyche recognizes autumn as the season for completion. It's also the occasion for harvesting, so this is a good time to organize your storeroom, throw away foodstuffs that are out of date, and replace them with new ones.
- *Winter:* In native traditions, this season was the time to repair tools, clothing, and household belongings. It was also the time to share stories and myths around the communal fire and to rest and renew oneself. In the winter, whenever possible, relax and put your feet up. Get more sleep. Repair things that need fixing. Evaluate your life. Begin to make plans for the future.

When you answer the call of the seasons and begin to live more in alignment with the cycle of the seasons, relaxation and inner peace start to grow.

The Call of the Wild

Rush-hour traffic noise has replaced early morning birdsong. Streetlights have replaced the stars. The flicker of television sets has replaced the tribal campfire. This diminishment of direct experiences of the wild is especially evident in today's children who have constrained lives with little or no intimate connection to the natural cycles of life. They are lost in a sea of video games, cell phones, texting, and e-mail. The baby boomers are probably one of the last generations to have spent their childhood hours playing hide-and-seek in the woods, exploring creek beds, scrambling up trees, and sledding down hills.

The latest research declares that when children have direct experiences with nature, they reap profound benefits. Researchers

cite less anxiety and depression, less prevalence of ADHD, higher levels of creativity, improved self-esteem, enhanced brain development, and a sense of connection to the community and the world around them. This gives credence to the belief that within our ancestral coding is a memory of—perhaps, even a yearning for—the sounds, colors, textures, and smells of the pines in the mountains, the high grasses on the savanna, the verdant green of a rain forest, and the vast expanse of the desert.

One of the most powerful ways to move into harmony with your life is to spend time in nature. This dramatically increases your instinctual reaction to people and situations. However, it's not enough to take a stroll in the woods. While you are in the wilderness, imagine that you are dissolving into the environment around you. Additionally, visualize energy tendrils from the earth reaching up inside of you to activate *your* inner wilderness. Answering the call of the wild means that more and more, you trust your gut. Even if someone says the right words and even if (on the surface) everything looks good . . . if it doesn't feel right, step away. Don't always believe what you see and hear. Believe what you feel and know. The soul loves the truth, and it's easier to discover the truth when the instinctive, wild place within you has been activated.

When you answer the call of the wild, you recognize that you are not separate from the wild and uninhabited places on our planet, and your intuition and instinctual reaction to life increase.

How to Call

Not only can you answer the call, but also you can “put out a call.” Indigenous people developed the skill of calling animals to them as a necessity for survival. They spoke with the elk, deer, and buffalo spirits, asking for guidance in regard to the hunt. There was reverence involved in any taking of life, as it was believed that the spirit of the animal sacrificed itself to provide sustenance for the tribe and should be honored for its gift. There was also calling to find

berries or roots, or calling rain when crops were dry. One could call for bravery during battle, or call for strength during childbirth. The ability to “call” leads to a deepening of your connection with the earth’s cycles. Even those who are certain that they can’t master the technique are able to do so with practice.

Learning to call helps you connect to the unseen realms of natural surroundings. You can call animals, plants, weather, opportunities, and even personal qualities. Here’s a little-known secret: if you want to call something into your life, find its sound and imagine the tone deep within you. Every part of our splendid universe has a sound. Every blade of grass, every stone, and every star has its own tonal vibration. Even qualities like integrity, truth, and love have specific sound vibrations. When you discover the tone of something you desire, you can draw it to you by allowing its sound to expand inside of you. This is how some native tribes did their hunting and gathering. For example, they imagined the sound of a particular plant or animal and allowed that sound to hum inside of them; this would lead them to the healing herb or game.

You also have an individual sound that resides in your core. When you find your personal sound vibration, you can harmonize with the universe. To learn how to find the sound of things takes practice. For example, when you’re calling animals, you can tell when you got the right sound because the animal will appear. Here are the steps to learn to call:

1. *Believe*: Believe that it is possible.
2. *Imagine*: Imagine the sound of the animal, plant, or quality that you desire. I’m not necessarily talking about a tone you make through your voice; this is an internal sound that vibrates within you. (Ask yourself, *If I knew what the sound was, what might it be?*)
3. *Dissolve*: Dissolve into the sound. By doing this, you become one with whatever you are calling. Each animal and plant has its own inner frequency or vibration, so imagine what the sound is and imagine that you’re making the sound. This is the “call.” Don’t

doubt yourself or your ability to do this. (Doubt is the greatest barrier to success with this technique.) You can also practice the call just before sleep. Call for a particular animal to come in your dreams, and then listen carefully to the message given in each dream.

4. *Practice*: Be patient and practice often. My calling has sometimes backfired. Once, when I noticed a swarm of bees in the neighborhood, I impulsively decided it would be wonderful if the bees could hive in our backyard so that my daughter could watch them through the window. I'd never attempted to call anything in the insect world, but I imagined it wouldn't be that different from calling a plant or an animal.

First I tried to find the vibration, tone, or resonating quality of the bee kingdom. Once I had a sense of the tone, I repeated it mentally. I sent out the call and waited . . . nothing happened. About an hour later, I heard my daughter screaming. I ran outside and was greeted by a huge swarm of *wasps* that were settling in to make our backyard their new home. The bees didn't appear, but wasps did, so I imagine that my tone was off by an octave or so and the wasps came instead.

Please be patient, and remember that learning to call takes practice. Start with calling animals, as this way you can tell if you got the right sound or not. Always give thanks to the animals that appear, and when you're calling, be sure to add the intention that it's in the highest good of all. You could start by going into a park and calling a squirrel or a crow and see what happens. Once you find that you are gaining success with animals, you can go on to other things or qualities.



To activate the native spirit within you, the first step is to honor, acknowledge, and realize the depth of your connection to the natural world. As Black Elk said:

The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Tanka [Creator], and that this center is really everywhere, it's within each of us [*The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (1953), as told to Joseph Epes Brown].

Let nature and her cycles become your teacher and your healer. The awareness that you're not separate from the seasons, the ebbing and flowing of light and dark, or the elements and the directions of nature will begin to awaken within you echoes of ancient memories of who you are and what your true destiny is. It's an act of power to begin this journey.



CHAPTER TWO



THE GATEWAY: HEARING MESSAGES FROM BEYOND

My Cherokee grandfather used to tie himself to large trees during tornadoes in Oklahoma; he loved the exhilaration of experiencing it all . . . but didn't want to blow away. This was dangerous and luckily he lived through those storms. Other family members thought he was crazy, but I secretly thought it was really cool. When everyone else would run for cover during a storm, like my grandfather, I would race out to watch the dramatic shards of lightning explode through the sky. With the wind whipping my hair, I would stand with my arms up to the heavens. It seemed to me that some kind of secret gateway opened, and I could hear the voices of the Thunder Beings.

Thunderstorms are not the only time that gateways open; there are many sacred entryways waiting for us to step through them to receive our spirit messages. We just don't always know how to find them. Ancient native people knew how to discover these portals. They knew how to hear messages from every tree, flower, bird, animal, and cloud. In this chapter, you'll learn how to travel through these gateways to hear the whispers of the universe. You'll discover how embedded in each message is the understanding that we're a part of the web of life; we're not separate from the whole. You'll learn ways to listen to the secret messages around you, as well as how to

understand what specific animal, plant, and mineral spirits are aligned with you and how to make use of their potent spirit power.

Your Spirit Animals

You have a specific animal energy that is aligned with you. These kinds of animal energies are sometimes called *totem animals*, *power animals*, *spirit animals*, *animal guides*, or *animal allies*. Connecting to your spirit animal can activate certain qualities within you, and it can also act as your protector.

As I mentioned earlier, before the Aboriginal elder Nundjan Djiridjarkan could begin teaching me, he needed to make sure that we were from the same clan. When he came to pick me up one day, he was in an old truck that noisily announced its arrival. I wrenched open the rusty door and climbed over the kangaroo skins layered on the torn seat. Their odor was pungent in the morning heat as we bounced along the dusty road. When we arrived at the tribal bushland, the air was stifling, and the sunbaked earth radiated the climbing temperature.

“The spirits are very strong. Only Aborigines can be here without harm. But we have come to find your clan, so we’re going to fool them into thinking you’re Aborigine.

“First, we have to disguise your odor. White fellas stink, and the spirits can smell ’em. The first time I smelled a white fella, I thought it was the worst thing I ever smelled,” he confessed.

I thought of the ripe odors of the kangaroo skins in the cab of his dilapidated truck and smiled to myself. What smells good and bad to us is often culturally inspired. He then unceremoniously reached under his arms and cupped his sweat into his hands for me to spread over my clothes and on my face and hair. It was strong and musky.

To further my disguise for the spirits, the elder told me to rub red and yellow ochre dust over my skin. He reached into the earth and gave me a handful of the red dust. Then he gave me yellow dust,

and I completely covered myself with it. He looked at me. My hair, face, arms, feet, and clothes were coated in yellow and red dust. He then sniffed all around me to make sure I didn't smell "white" and announced that it was safe for me to venture farther into the land; the spirits wouldn't hurt me. I'm sure I didn't look Aboriginal, but somehow he seemed to think that my "disguise" was good enough.

"I'm going to hide in some bushes, and you go to that tree over there," he said as he pointed to a large eucalyptus a distance away. "Sit with your back against it and wait to see what animal approaches you. The spirits will decide which clan you are and will send a representative to approach you."

I leaned up against the eucalyptus tree, as instructed, and waited. I was aware of my own sweat rolling down over my ochre-covered body and making long, thin streams on my skin. I hoped that I wouldn't perspire so much that the spirits would recognize that I wasn't an Aborigine. Flies dive-bombed my head, but I tried hard not to move, as I'd been instructed.

Nundjan Djiridjarkan didn't tell me what his clan was, so I didn't even know what kind of animal or bird I was waiting for. Hours passed. Periodically his black face would appear from behind the bushes, as he looked from side to side to see if any animals were approaching me. I was tired and hot, and getting nervous that nothing would come, when a large crow came hopping toward me. I sat still so as to not disturb him. He hopped closer and closer—seemingly unaware of me—until I could have reached out and touched him.

Suddenly the elder jumped up in delight and ran over to me, as the bird noisily flapped away.

"That's it! You're crow clan! I'm also crow clan. I can now teach you."

From that point forward, crows began to play a significant role in my life. For example, if I hear a crow, I look to see which direction the caw is coming from. Each direction has meaning (refer back to [Chapter 1](#) for the list), and I know the crow's caw contains a message for me. If the crow is flying from the east, then I know that it's time to start something anew.

On a later trip to Australia, the elders stressed to me the importance of finding one's Australian individual spirit animal, as well one's clan animal. In indigenous cultures the use of animal allies is a well-documented and long-standing tradition throughout the world. For example, in the Native American tradition (as in Aborigine tradition), the people in one village might all belong to the Bear Clan. However, each person might have a different spirit animal, such as a deer, badger, or fox.

Your individual animal ally can provide you with guidance and protection, just as your angels, spirit guides, clan animal, and ancestors do. You may have an animal totem that stays with you for a lifetime, or you may have one for a while, and then another for a different period in your life. It's also possible to have more than one. Sometimes one ally helps with one aspect of your life, such as your relationships, and another might be a protector, or another may be with you for creativity. Though you can have more than one totem animal, usually there will be one that is predominant at any given time.

To discover my individual Aboriginal animal ally, clan members took me deep into a cave that went straight down into the earth. While in the bright Australian sunshine, I'd been excited by the prospect of discovering my spirit animal . . . but as I started my climb down into the darkness, my pulse quickened. It was difficult to maneuver through the narrow crevices, and I was afraid of falling as the rocks crumbled beneath my feet. As I descended the steep cliff into even darker blackness, the air became cold, damp, and musty.

Once I reached the flat bottom of the cave, I was given a belt of tightly braided Aboriginal hair of my clan members to wear around my waist for protection. (Their tradition dictates that whenever one travels to the inner realms, it's prudent to wear some kind of talisman to protect against the other forces that may enter the body during the journey.) I was then instructed to get down on the ground and stretch my body out on a flat rock.

As I lay on my back on the cold stone slab, I began to shiver. I could make out the faint glow of light from the opening high overhead, but down in the bowels of the cave, it was so dark that it was difficult to see anything or anyone around me.

Without my sense of sight to give me perspective, I had a heightened awareness of the haunting sounds coming from the didgeridoo that the elders began to play. Its eerie music echoed through the icy air around me. At first the sound seemed to linger lightly on my skin, but then it began to steadily penetrate inside of me, the way water seeps through sand. This hypnotic resonance made me sleepier and sleepier . . . at some point I dozed off and drifted into a dream state.

I found myself on a sunny rock where everything was bright green, and I didn't know where I was. I felt much smaller than usual, yet it didn't seem abnormal that I wasn't my usual size; in fact, none of what surrounded me seemed unfamiliar. As I looked up at a large leaf above me, I realized that the sunlight shining through it was bathing everything underneath—including my tiny body—in a greenish light. I then peered down at my feet and observed that they'd transformed into claws; when I examined my arms, they appeared to be full of scales. Yet none of this seemed strange to me. I pushed up and down a few times on my forelegs, feeling alert and focused. Cocking my head from side to side, I surveyed my surroundings and enjoyed the feeling of warmth radiating from the rock below me.

In a remote part of my mind, I remember thinking, *Wow! Cool—I'm a lizard!* It all seemed so real. As a lizard, I experienced the world from a different mind-set; altering my shape had shifted my perspective. I saw things in terms of heat and cold and felt very happy simply because I was soaking up the sun on a warm rock.

I don't know how long I was "dreaming." When the didgeridoo unexpectedly ceased, I opened my eyes and returned to my own body. I was lying on the ground and felt even colder than before I'd "fallen asleep"—in fact, my body was shaking uncontrollably from the chill. The sun's position above must have changed slightly while I was traveling in my mind's eye because a ray of sun had encroached upon the darkness, creating an amber glow on the ceiling of the upper cave. I could barely make out faint shapes as I sat up and looked around, and I felt dizzy and unwell.

The elders surrounded me and asked what animal I became. I shakily answered, "I was some kind of lizard." They asked questions

about the color and shape of the lizard until they could determine exactly what kind I'd become. (I later found out that a lizard spirit is the keeper of the dreamtime.) Although the lizard is my totem in Australia, when I returned to North American, the totem animal that I normally work with reemerged. You can have more than one animal ally, and sometimes different ones will come in various locations, such as when I was in Australia.

Animal totems (this includes birds, fish, reptiles, and even insects) play a significant role in all indigenous cultures. Each spirit animal brings its own "medicine" (or healing power) and will often appear in dreams as one goes through transitions in life.

Anyone from any culture can benefit from accessing his or her totem animal. A great benefit of working with an animal ally is that it will help you be aware of what's really occurring around you. Most animals are highly instinctive, and when you access your animal allies, you'll find that your instincts and intuition intensify. Even if you're not consciously aware of the energy undercurrents in people, places, and situations, your instincts about them will be good, and you'll find yourself more and more often in the right place at the right time.

FINDING YOUR ANIMAL ALLY

In many native traditions, finding one's animal ally often involved a vision quest in nature. However, as we don't always have the opportunity to go on a quest, there are a number of other ways that you can find your spirit animal:

- *Think about what animal you are drawn to:* You may find your power animal by noticing the animals to which you feel irresistibly drawn. It could be your favorite animal since childhood. Perhaps you've loved stories about cats and have always felt aligned with them—this might indicate that some kind of cat is your ally.

- *Watch your dreams:* A totem may also appear repeatedly in a dream. Before you go to sleep, ask that your spirit animal appear in your dreams. Consider keeping a journal next to your bed so that you can record your dreams as soon as you awake.
- *Pay attention to the signs:* Ask the Creator to give you a sign in regard to your totem. If an animal appears a number of times, especially in unusual ways, this most likely is one of your allies. For example, you receive a card with a horse on it in the mail. Then you begin seeing horses on posters and billboards. There's a song playing on the radio about a horse, as you're driving by a field full of horses. If everywhere you turn, you see horses, there's a good chance that the horse is your totem.
- *Take the inward journey:* One of the most powerful ways to find your spirit animal is to go on an inner journey (meditation). Imagine yourself in a mist, and picture yourself reaching into the mist to touch your spirit animal. Imagine the mist thinning and "see" what animal has appeared. You can even communicate with the animal to understand why it has come forward as your totem.
- *Spend time in nature:* The traditional way to discover your totem is to spend time in solitude in nature and then notice the animals that show up. You can also watch the images in the clouds and even discern the patterns in the bark on the trees to get clues as to your totem.

DISCOVERING THE QUALITIES OF YOUR ANIMAL ALLY

Different cultures assign varying meanings to totems. Trust your intuition to find the significance of yours. There are many books that list power animals and what they represent. Although these can be very useful, it's important to remember that this is only one person's

or one culture's interpretation. Read the definition of your animal ally in the book and see if it *feels* right to you. Your own sense of what a particular spirit animal means is unique and is more valid than anyone else's opinion.

The owl is a good example of these varying definitions. When I was in Western Australia discussing totems with Aboriginal elders, I was told that men feared the owl, for it was a woman's totem and represented the darkness and the unknown. They said that as men were afraid of the power of women, they also feared the owl. In New Zealand, I discussed animal allies with members of the Maori and asked about the owl. I was told that it was a sacred bird to the Maoris. It was so sacred that its name was never spoken. In my own Native American culture, some tribes revere the owl, saying that it represents deep wisdom, yet other tribes consider it the harbinger of death and darkness. The meaning for each ally can vary dramatically; *therefore, it's crucial that you find the meaning of your ally for yourself.*

Another way to discover what your totem represents is to read wildlife books, nature magazines, and encyclopedias. Research the habits and habitat of the animals with which you feel a special kinship. For example, if you feel that the wolf is your ally, by researching their habits in the wild, you'll discover that they have a strong sense of family. Thus, having a wolf for your ally may increase your connection to your family.

Here is a brief list of animal totems and just some of the many meanings with which they're sometimes associated:



Alligator—formidable strength, power
Ape—primitive power, intelligence
Bat—ancient wisdom, perception, direction
Bear—mother earth, healing
Beaver—hard work, prosperity through your own efforts
Buffalo—abundance, harvest, and plenty
Bull—great strength, force, power
Camel—endurance, getting through adversity
Canary—harmony
Cat—intuition, feminine essence
Chameleon—adaptability, flexibility
Cobra—life-force energy
Deer—fertility, grace, joy
Dog—faithfulness, loyalty, friendship
Dolphin—playfulness, spontaneity, intelligence
Dove—peace, freedom
Eagle—spirituality, farsightedness
Elephant—power, mindfulness
Elk—power, beauty, dignity
Fish—emotional flow, feminine energy
Fox—intelligence, physical attraction
Frog—abundance, prosperity
Horse—freedom, movement, beauty
Leopard—prowess, sensuality
Lion—majesty, power, bravery, leadership
Otter—capriciousness, playfulness
Owl—wisdom, feminine power, transformation
Panther—ancient mysteries, silent power
Peacock—confidence, celebration, pride in oneself
Polar bear—healing, strength
Rabbit—prosperity, abundance, fertility
Ram—masculine strength, pioneering spirit
Raven—wisdom from unseen realms
Rhinoceros—male sexuality, courage
Robin—harbinger of good tidings, new beginnings
Salmon—being in the flow, moving ahead against all odds
Seal—grace, emotional balance, curiosity

Snake—healing, spiritual awakening
Swan—beauty, strength, gliding to new heights
Tiger—prowess, power, strength
Turtle—security, abundance
Vulture—ancient goddess, purification
Whale—emotional perception, intuition, power
Wolf—community, social connection, family support

ANIMAL MESSENGERS

In addition to receiving messages from your spirit animal ally, you can also gain wisdom from animals in nature. I am fortunate to live in the country, in an area with abundant wildlife. When I take the time to be still and listen, I can hear the messages from the animals. For example, last spring coyotes were constantly playing in the meadow. In the early morning and late evening, we would see coyote families tumbling and prancing, and we could hear them howling late into the evening. When I listened to what the spirit of the coyote had to tell me, I “heard” the message that I needed to play more and have more fun. This was a message that I took to heart, and I began to be less serious and more playful.

Recently, a very large bobcat has come close and sits as still as Buddha on the green hills right behind our home. He just looks down at me. It’s quite amazing to see him so close and seemingly so serene. It has been a busy time in my life, and I haven’t really stopped much to rest and unwind. Every day as I look at the bobcat—whom I call Bob—he seems to say, “Denise, be still. Slow down.” So I’m taking his advice and taking time to relax.

Plant Messages and Plant Allies

The plant kingdom also offers us remarkable messages. It’s simply a matter of listening. Just as you have an animal ally, you also have

a spirit plant, tree, herb, and flower. Usually these plant allies don't get as much respect and credence as animal allies because they don't share our locomotion abilities, emotions, or consciousness. To most people, plants seem inert and almost mundane by comparison, yet they also have consciousness, they communicate with each other . . . and from a native view they are *alive*.

THE SOULS OF TREES

When I was young my uncle told me a story about the Cherokee Trail of Tears. (This was a forced removal of the Cherokees off their tribal land that began in 1835 on the East Coast of the United States to barren land in Oklahoma. The entire trek was over 2,000 miles. Out of 17,000 men, women, and children, more than 4,000 died from hunger, exposure, and disease during the long walk.) He said that the trees were sacred to our people. He called the trees "The Standing People" and said they were our brothers and sisters. He told me that before the removal, many of our ancestors went into the woods to sadly say good-bye to the trees they loved. I haven't seen this in any Cherokee lore, so maybe my uncle was sharing his own idea to his young niece, but somehow the story has always stuck with me.

My uncle's words deepened my love of trees. As a youngster, I treasured trees and spent many hours climbing them, making tree houses, and sitting in their branches. I had a difficult childhood, and at times it seemed that my only friends were the trees. I felt safe nestled in their embrace. When my parents would have a raging argument, I took sanctuary in a tree. When my brother got rushed to the hospital and almost died from a diabetic coma, I was so frightened that I curled up in the large branches of a tree and sobbed. It felt like long tendrils of energy reached out from the tree and comforted me, much the way you would stroke a cat.

In high school, when my dreams were shattered by the guidance counselor who told me I shouldn't even consider going to college—I should find a husband instead—I took refuge in a tree with a large

branch that hung over the languid Maumee River. I could almost “hear” the voice of the tree talking, telling me that I might go through a rough patch, but that everything would be all right. (I did go through a rough patch, and everything was all right in the end, just as the tree had predicted.) Some of my best childhood memories were high up in a tree. So, I can understand the grief of my ancestors about saying good-bye to their beloved tree family.

Trees have souls. All you need to do is to step into an old-growth forest to feel that there is a kind of sacredness afoot. Many earth-based cultures considered trees to be holy. They call them “tree people.” Reverence for trees is not unique to indigenous people: Buddha found enlightenment sitting beneath the Bodhi Tree; the Vikings had Yggdrasil, the tree of life; and the druids communed with the spirit of the trees. However, it’s the natives who lived in harmony with the cycles of the earth that have engendered the most thoughtful reverence for them. In worldwide shamanic traditions, trees are also considered mystic passageways for earth-dwellers to enter into other realms. While in a trance state, it’s believed that a shaman can travel down through the root system of a tree to gain insight and wisdom from the underworld.

When I was in Africa, I was told that the spirit of each tree has a voice, which must be maintained if the wood is to be used for a purpose, such as for a drum frame or for a boat shell. This “voice” is thought to allow the drum to carry a magical sound into the world, and it will also keep people in the boat safe from storms and tumultuous waves. However, the voice will only stay alive if the person cutting the tree takes time to honor and thank the spirit of the tree.

In many tribes in Africa, it’s believed that big trees have a commanding spirit, and some trees are felt to be home to many spirits. It’s also thought that all the trees together in a forest can have a powerful collective spirit that can be felt when you enter their domain. Moreover, there’s the belief that trees that aren’t honored can become cranky and can trip people with their roots or catch them on their branches. However, if they are honored, they can be faithful friends and protectors.

THE LIVING FOREST

Not only do individual trees have souls, but also entire forests can have a collective soul. Many years ago when I was living in Hawaii, I got an early morning phone call. It was still dark outside. I had been up late the night before and wasn't quite awake. It was Mornah. She said, "Come quickly and pick me up. We are going to get some herbs to make medicine." My tiredness vanished; I was so excited to be asked. Usually when I went with Mornah to gather herbs, I was told to stay at the edge of the forest and wait for her while she would talk to dead ancestors or chat with the *menehunes*. So I was eager to go with her this time. She told me that she had a client who had tuberculosis and that she wanted to teach me how to make special plant medicine for her. Mornah explained that we needed to approach the plants slowly and then sit quietly near them. We needed to then wait until the plants "spoke" to us. We sat for a long time before Mornah began to speak to the plant. She must have been speaking in Hawaiian because I didn't understand what she was saying. She told me that she had explained to the plant about her client and asked permission to take some leaves and branches to make a potion, and the plant had agreed. She told me that if she didn't commune with the plant, the medicine wouldn't work very well.

With a sharp knife, Mornah carefully cut some small branches. And then she lightly touched the plant and whispered a prayer of gratitude. I wasn't sure if it was my imagination, but the plant seemed to glow after Mornah had done this. As we went deeper into the forest, Mornah didn't take as long with each plant as she did with the first one. She said there was a network of communication through the forest, and that the first plant "told" the others she was coming.

PLANTS CAN COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER

This idea that plants communicate with each other is similar to what I heard about the mopani trees when I was in Africa. When the impala or the elephants eat the leaves on one tree, before the animals get to the next tree the neighboring mopani tree's leaves turn bitter, so the animals won't want to eat them. The natives in Africa say that the mopani trees tell the other trees, "Watch out! The impalas are coming!"

The idea that indigenous people have about plants talking to each other has a basis in science. Communication between trees is not uncommon in Africa. For example, acacia trees send out an alarm to other trees to let them know that the antelope and giraffe are munching on their leaves. As their leaves are being eaten, the acacia tree also begins to produce leaf tannins that are potentially toxic to the animals to hopefully slow them down. The trees begin to emit ethylene into the air, which has been shown to "warn" other trees of danger. Within five to ten minutes, the trees in the area also begin to increase their own leaf tannins. Nearby acacia trees spontaneously produce leaf tannins in quantities that can actually be lethal. However, the antelope are onto this, so they only eat a few leaves from each tree and hurry to stay upwind. Science has a reason, but to native people, the trees are communicating with each other.

At the time when Mornah told me this about the plants "talking" to each other, it was thought to be just a superstition. Even today most people think of plants as unconscious things that just sit there—mostly inert—but nothing more. They don't realize that plants actively engage with their environment. Although plants don't have brains like we do, there's mounting evidence that suggests that native people are accurate when they say that plants can communicate and even cooperate with each other. Plants do move and they also search for food, just in a different way than animals. They also respond to pain and being attacked, often by putting out a "chemical SOS" in a way similar to an animal, such as a howler monkey that puts out a call of danger to warn the other monkeys. Sometimes a plant will take action when under attack. For example, some plants—when they're being eaten by a particular insect—can put out a scent that will attract a predator of the attacking insect.

They can even discern which specific kind of insect is attacking them and adjust their SOS signal to attract different kinds of specialized insect mercenary troops. This is a kind of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” plant strategy.



THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF PLANTS

Modern science is now acknowledging what those in native cultures have always known about the living consciousness in plants. For example, the idea of communication between plants was suggested after a rigorous research study was done on how cutting the leaves of one group of plants would affect other non-cut plants in the area. In the study, sagebrush plants growing out of doors were clipped. (This might potentially simulate insects eating a plant.) The researchers found that when this occurred, the sage plant changed its chemistry as a way to repel the attack (if it were by insects). And then wild tobacco plants growing in nearby fields responded by increasing their levels of the defensive oxidative enzyme, polyphenol oxidase, which repels insects. The group of control tobacco plants (with unclipped sagebrush neighbors) showed no increase. Hence, over a three-year period, tobacco plants growing near the cut

sagebrush experienced much less leaf damage by grasshoppers and cutworms, compared to the unclipped controls. From a native perspective, the sagebrush was saying, “Hey, guys, there’s some monster chomping on me! Be careful.” And the tobacco neighbors responded by saying, “Okay, dude, we’re on it. We’re going to gear up our defenses. Thanks!”

Darwin talked about survival of the fittest, but it turns out that there’s often cooperation among plants to help each other survive. Beneath the surface of the earth, where as much as 80 percent of a plant lives, there’s an amazing, intertwined network of intricate communication that spans the forest. There’s a kind of secret social life, as the roots move, twist and turn, and shift their biochemistry. Far from being unresponsive, there are complex ways in which plants exchange information with each other through their root system. Researchers have discovered that this highly complex underground network is facilitated by a type of fungi called *mycorrhiza*, which attach to the roots of plants, sending out threadlike filaments to the roots of other plants and thus forming an underground communication web.

The mycelium (which is the outer mantle of the mycorrhiza) sometimes spreads beneath a forest floor as one gargantuan organism, such as in Oregon where a 2,400-acre contiguous growth has been recorded as the largest organism in the world. On this organism, nutrients can be transmitted and even shared via a complex network, similar to sharing information on the Internet. Vital health information travels throughout the ecosystem. For example, if a tree at the far end of the forest becomes ill, this information is sent to the other trees via the mycelium so that they can boost up their immune systems.

Right now there’s an explosion of research that supports the native belief in the consciousness of plants. Research is currently coming forth that has found that plant roots also make subtle sounds, and even ultrasonic sounds, that are detectable by other plants. The rhizosphere is literally surging with plant messages, as plants carry on clandestine relationships giving each other vital information about the other plants in the vicinity. Plants can even

communicate with each other before germination to determine how fast they need to grow.

Research done with *Mimosa pudica*, whose leaves respond to touch by closing, has shown that some plants actually have a form of memory. Scientists rigged an apparatus that dripped water drops onto the plant; to their surprise they found that once the plant “learned” that the water drops weren’t dangerous, it would stop responding . . . and amazingly a plant could remember this for several weeks. Research in another area has shown the influential effect that sounds and music can have on plants. For example, playing specific birdsongs to an orange-tree grove was shown to increase the vitamin C content of the oranges by 121 percent, and they also tasted sweeter. Crop yield of potatoes and corn in Pakistan increased 15 percent and 85 percent respectively, simply using methods developed in conjunction with the playing of birdsongs over the fields. In some mysterious way, there’s an intimate bond between plant growth and birdsongs. There is, indeed, a secret life of plants.

HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE WITH THE TREE REALM?

Native people knew that not only do trees and plants communicate with each other, but also they can communicate with *us*. This last holiday I had an experience with a Christmas tree that had a powerful impact on me. Since I was a child, my family had the annual tradition of going to a lot to pick out a Christmas tree. This tradition carried forward into my adult life; every year, my husband, my daughter, and I would go to a lot to choose our tree. This year we got a small noble tree, which we brought into the house and put into the tree stand to decorate the next day. But that evening as I was about to go to bed, I walked by the tree and I “heard” the tree say in a soft, tentative voice, “Hello?” She had the sweetest, almost shy, voice.

How was this possible? How could she talk to me? I thought that when a plant or tree was cut, the spirit stayed in the soil with the roots. I had no idea that the spirit could remain with the tree, even

after being chopped down. She talked to me of her life in the forest and of the snow she'd experienced. She didn't blame me, or anyone, for cutting her down, but I was racked with guilt. I couldn't stop crying.

How could I have been so unconscious? Then, almost as if to prove that she was alive, every day she drank five gallons of water for almost a month. Usually Christmas trees will absorb water for a few days, but then they taper off. How was it possible for a small tree to take in so much water? I named her Krista, and we chatted every day. Then one day, she simply stopped talking and stopped absorbing water. She was gone. In the future winter holidays, we'll have a live tree to plant in the forest afterward, or maybe even an artificial tree, but I don't think I want to have another cut tree. I'm so grateful to this sweet, unassuming tree spirit for allowing me to see the world in a different way. Of course, people will always cut down trees for Christmas; it's a tradition. But it's my dream that they will thank the tree for its giveaway with the understanding of the tree's great gift of life.

Here are a few activities you can do to deepen your ability to connect with tree energy:

— *Meditate with a tree*: On our land we have a 300-year-old oak tree that I've named Geronimo. Although he is scarred and twisted, he continues to stand tall and strong, like the famous Apache warrior. I lean against him, with my back against his rough bark, and imagine that I'm talking to him. I feel comforted by his steady advice and support. As a suggestion, find a tree (or a plant) with whom you feel a kind of connection. Sit quietly next to it. (Even if you live in a home that doesn't have trees, you can adopt one in a local park, or visit your ally tree in nature in your meditations.) Begin by using your imagination and get a feeling for what the plant/tree might be telling you.

In my 20s I lived in a Zen monastery for over two years. One night I decided to meditate (it was called *sitting*) outdoors instead of in the monastery (*zendo*). I sat in some grass under the stars on a warm, still night. There was not even the slightest breeze. A few feet from me was a small tree. As I meditated in the quiet darkness for a

number of hours, a branch slowly began to bend in my direction until one of its fingers lay across my shoulder. I could feel the sparkling love flowing from the tree into my heart. Amazingly, even 40 years later, this brings tears to my eyes. I could feel the spirit of the tree connecting with me in such a caring way.



— *Adopt a tree:* To adopt a tree, find one with whom you feel a kinship. It can be in a park or in the woods, if it's not in your backyard or garden. If you want to know about the soul of a tree, you need to touch it. Imagine that you're merging deep inside. Then it's simply a matter of asking and, if permission is given, you can "adopt" your tree. Over time your tree will send you energy and healing, in direct relation to the respect and care that you send it, even if you're miles away.

— *Receive energy from a tree:* If you're physically or emotionally in pain, sit against or very near a tree. Often you'll find that the pain subsides. (Make sure to leave offerings in gratitude. It can be a bit of your hair, cornmeal, or fruit. Some native traditions even leave money.) Another way to receive energy from a tree is to stand where the light is filtering through the leaves and allow that green-tinged sunlight to bathe you. This is excellent for healing and for purification, especially if done in the early morning hours.

YOUR PERSONAL SPIRIT TREE: YOUR TREE ALLY

Not only are trees bringing you messages, but they can also be your personal allies. Just as you have a particular animal as your spirit animal, you also have a tree species as your tree totem. It can be one particular tree, or it can be a category of trees. Your ally can offer you protection, blessings, support, and guidance. Once you know your spirit tree, it's said that you carry its *medicine*. For example, if your ally is the willow tree, then you carry *Willow Medicine* in your energy field. There are several ways to discover your tree ally; here are a few:

- *Spend time in the woods:* You can walk in forests and notice the trees that seem to “speak” to you, call out to you, or pull you to them. Your tree ally may seem to even glow.
- *Take an inner journey:* Often our allies will come to us when we meditate or take inner journeys. Visualize being in a beautiful place in nature and the spirit of your tree coming forward. This is a kind of shamanic journey that can help you attune to your tree.
- *Watch for signs:* It's not uncommon for your tree ally to come to you through signs. Pay attention if you get a similar sign three times in a short period of time. For example, Sally, one of my students, was trying to figure out what her tree ally was when she looked up at the sky, and it seemed as though the clouds had formed into an oak tree. Then later that day, she received a large flyer in the mail about saving the oaks. On the next day, her neighbor dropped by and said he was digging up an oak tree sapling and wanted to know if she'd like to plant it in her yard. Sally laughed and said, “Okay, the oak is my tree ally!”

(For more in-depth information on how to find your individual tree, plant, or flower ally and what each one means, please visit my website: DeniseLinn.com.)

PURIFYING AND BLESSING WITH PLANT SPIRITS

For thousands of years, native people around the world have burned special plants (a practice called *smudging*) to use the smoke to clear stagnant energies and invite positive energy into a space. Smudging calls upon the spirit of the plant to restore harmony. Additionally, prayers rise on the smoke up to the Creator and blessings travel down on the smoke to the petitioners.

In North American tribes, various kinds of sage, sweetgrass, pine needles, pinion, and cedar continue to be used before ceremonies. Traditionally the smoke should cover everyone in attendance, thus symbolically clearing each person of what's not needed. It also cleanses the area, which helps to leave behind troubles and start a new cycle. In addition, the elders believe it's important to use smoke to clear a home in which a person has been sick or has died. And smudging in the place where a new baby is to be born is considered a vital part of preparing for the new arrival.

The ancient native tradition of smudging is one that you can employ in your life to clear the energy in your home; cleanse your personal energy field; honor life transitions; or symbolically leave old relationships, situations, or experiences behind. You can also smudge for protection and calling spiritual beings into your life. Although the herb or plant you choose will depend on your location and on your own personal preference, here's information about what is most often used in the United States:

SAGE

Sage is the most common herb in smudging ceremonies in North America. It's interesting to note that the genus *Salvia* comes from the Latin root *salvare*, which means "to heal." There are many different

kinds of sage (with over 800 varieties), and many of them can be used in smudging. However, culinary sage usually isn't intended for clearing ceremonies. There are also other varieties of sage that work well for smudging, which are in the *Artemisia* family. Sage is known for clearing out old energy and keeping positive energy flowing into an area. If you're going to do a lot of smudging, it's helpful to grow your own sage. The energy will be enhanced, and you'll help prevent deforestation of native sagebrush.

CEDAR

The second-most-common plant used for smudging is cedar—both the wood and the needles. Much like sage, cedar dispels and purifies, but it also blesses. Some Cherokee traditions believe that cedar invites protective spirits, so often a tiny bit of the wood is added to a medicine bag; also it would be placed above the entrance of the home to protect it. The *Hočągara* (Ho-Chunk Tribe) consider cedar to be a sacred link between earth and the Creator, and they use it above all else for purifying their living spaces.

SWEETGRASS

The Plains Indians use a wild grass called sweetgrass (*Hierochloa odorata*), also called seneca grass, holy grass, and vanilla grass. It's thought to be the sacred hair of Grandmother Earth and is often plaited into long braids. It has a sweet, earthy aroma. When the dried braids are lit and begin producing smoke, it's said that the smoke calls in blessings and good spirits . . . after the sage or cedar has cleared out the stagnant energies. The slow-growing sweetgrass is rare today because of overharvesting, cattle grazing, and agriculture. The best way to obtain sweetgrass is to purchase it from authentic Native American retail shops. Don't buy it if you are not sure of the source. This supports native people who are working to keep the land from being depleted.

CREATING YOUR OWN SMUDGE STICK

1. *Gather the Herbs:* The great thing about most smudging herbs is that they're fairly easy to gather or grow, depending on where you are in the world. Here are some instructions for gathering sage; however, if you don't have sage growing wild near you, rosemary is often easy to obtain and was traditionally used in ancient times in Europe and Britain.

- **Timing:** The best time to gather herbs is in the morning right after the sun has peeked over the horizon. When the plants feel the coming of a new day, their energy expands.
- **Ask permission:** Whenever you wildcraft herbs for any sacred purposes, you must first ask the plant's permission. To do this, simply place two fingers gently on a sage branch, and mentally "ask" for permission. If you feel a "yes," then carefully take only a small part of the bush. Never kill the entire plant or take a large amount, as this creates stress for the plant. Your sage will carry that stress and won't provide very good smudging.
- **Cutting:** It's better to cut with a sharp knife, clippers, or scissors than to rip the plant (unless it breaks off easily). You'll need pieces about 8 to 12 inches long. Hold the place where you're going to cut for a short moment to prepare the plant. Then make a very clean cut. This creates less trauma for the plant, and you'll get the best energy in your sage.
- **Leave a gift:** When you're finished, it's important to leave a gift. It can be cornmeal, a pinch of chemical-free tobacco, coins, hair, water (if the plant needs water), or even some saliva so that you're leaving a part of yourself.

2. *Dry the Herbs:* Either hang them up or lay them flat, but don't bunch them together if they're still moist—otherwise, they may mold or never dry completely, which makes it difficult to stay lit. However, if they are too dry, they will crumble when you wrap them.

3. *Wrap the Herbs:* Put the stems together and take embroidery thread (or cotton cording) and wrap from the stems upward. Several colors can be used together. Do not use anything synthetic, wool, or leather since the cording will burn when the sage burns. A crisscross design helps keep the sage stable. The bundle should be firmly bound, but not so tight that air can't get in, and the thread should go at least two-thirds of the way up the stick.



HOW TO SMUDGE

1. *Prepare a fireproof container or bowl:* Take your smudge bundle (or loose leaves) and place it into a fireproof container or bowl. Often you'll see abalone shells advertised as authentic for smudging with sage. Although they look beautiful, they're not traditionally used for burning sage. Sage doesn't grow in the same

areas where abalone shells are gathered. Additionally, it's not uncommon for tiny bits of burning herbs to fall through the hole in the abalone shells. This can burn your carpet or floor. Elders in the Pacific Northwest say that abalone represents Grandmother Ocean, so it should be used for water ceremonies. If you wish to smudge with abalone shells, consider using silicone to fill the holes and put sand in the shell to avoid having any part of it overheat and so the embers (fire) don't touch the shell. A deep metal or pottery bowl with a large amount of sand is usually better because, as the mixture can burn quite hot, the vessel won't crack or become too hot to hold. Also, the depth of your vessel will keep embers from falling onto the floor.

2. *Light the herbs:* The instant the flame touches the herbs is a hallowed moment. Be focused with your intent. Hold the thought that your prayers go up on the smoke to the Creator and that blessings flow down through the smoke. As a suggestion, use a lit candle rather than a match, as it's easier to hold the smudge bundle while you light it.
3. *Make an offering:* Offer the smoke to the four directions, as well as to the above, below, and within, with gratitude and prayers. Ask for guidance and support from the Creator.



4. *Cleanse yourself with smoke:* You can use your hands or a feather or a feather fan to circulate the smoke. As the cloud of smoke rises, you can symbolically “wash” yourself in it, cupping it up to your face, over the top of your head, and down over your body.
5. *Cleanse the space:* With an open heart, you can move the smoke throughout a room for clearing or around a space that will be used for a ceremony. This can be with your hands, with a feather, or by slowly spiraling the bowl as you walk. (I talk more about feathers and their use in [Chapter 3](#).)
6. *Give thanks:* As with all ceremonies, respectful attention must be given to every aspect of it. You’ve entered into a relationship with the plant spirit, and it’s important to give thanks to the sage spirits and to all those nontemporal beings in attendance.
7. *Completion:* Make sure that the smudge stick is completely out. It’s all right to run the end of it under water to douse the flame. (It will dry out for later use.) You can also push it deep into the sand in your bowl so that it’s deprived of oxygen and the fire goes out.

SACRED TOBACCO

Tobacco—like sage, cedar, and sweetgrass—is considered a sacred plant in many native cultures. The Amazonian and Peruvian shamans employ it in their spiritual practices, as do many of the natives of North America. The use of tobacco as a recreational drug has only occurred since the colonization of the Americas. Traditionally, it was believed to be a blessing from the Creator, and was only used for sacred purposes.

Tobacco was also a way of showing a depth of appreciation; so when an animal was killed, a tree was felled, berries were picked, or rocks were taken for a sweat lodge, tobacco was left in gratitude to the spirit of the animal, tree, bush, or stone. It's a sign of respect to leave tobacco, for life should not be taken for granted. Likewise, if there was a disagreement between individuals, clans, or tribes, it was not uncommon to smoke tobacco together; the tobacco smoke was thought to unite people and diminish hostilities.

A request of an elder to share tribal wisdom was often accompanied by a gift of tobacco; if someone was ill, or had passed to the spirit world, tobacco was offered. The most basic offering is a loose pinch given to Grandmother Earth and the Creator as you pray. Before setting off on a journey, tobacco was typically offered for a safe journey. Before religious ceremonies, tobacco was offered to the spirits. When storms approached, tobacco was placed on a nearby rock or stump for protection. It was used and continues to be used in many ways, but there is always an understanding of the deep respect that accompanies it.

— *Tobacco Prayer Ties*: In native cultures throughout the world, there are many different kinds of special carriers of prayers. They have various names, but ultimately their function is to serve as a focus point and a holding place for prayers. To the Native American, tobacco ties are one way of doing this.

Once tobacco ties are created in a soulful manner, they can be carried on your person, made as an offering to another, left in special places in nature with prayers and gratitude, given as a sign of friendship, or used in ceremonies. You can tie them on a branch of a tree, or place them on your altar, or anywhere that feels sacred to you. They must always be placed with respect for the plant and with

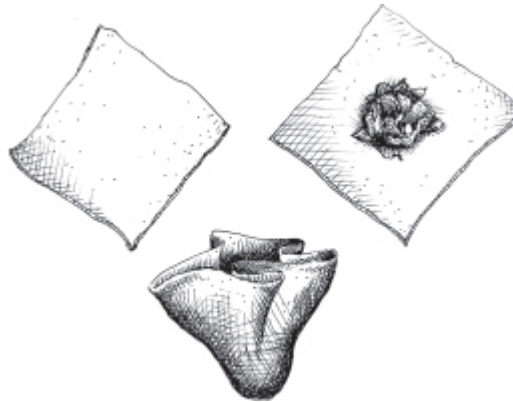
blessings. They are sometimes hung inside a sweat lodge or around a medicine wheel. You can also wear them during a spiritual ceremony. They can even be placed in a fire in order for your prayers to go up in smoke. (Tobacco ties should never be put in the trash; either burn them when you are complete or place them outdoors, such as hung in a tree or a bush.)

HOW TO MAKE A TOBACCO TIE

1. Gather and prepare your materials. Once you begin making your tobacco tie, you don't want to stop in the middle of it, so it's best to have all your materials ready beforehand. (Tobacco ties should never be purchased. You can make them or have them gifted to you. The power is infused in the creation.) Here's what you need to get started:

- Cotton fabric—preferably 100 percent cotton; red is most common, but other colors can be used for various purposes
- Scissors
- String/embroidery thread/cording/cotton sinew
- Smudging yourself and all your supplies

2. Cut the fabric into small squares. They should be no larger than four inches. You can make two- to four-inch strips by ripping the fabric lengthwise. And then layer a couple of the strips and cut them into squares. (The number varies according to tradition. Even one tobacco tie has power if it is created with focused prayers.)



3. Place a pinch of tobacco in the center of each square. Do this with prayers and good intentions. You can say silently or out loud what blessings are being put into each tie. You can have different blessings for each tie—for example, one for blessings for your mother, another for blessings for the dolphins, and so on.
4. Place the corners together. Say a silent prayer as you do this.
5. Tightly wrap the string around the bundle so that it looks like a small pouch, and you have now created a tobacco tie. (See [illustrations](#).)

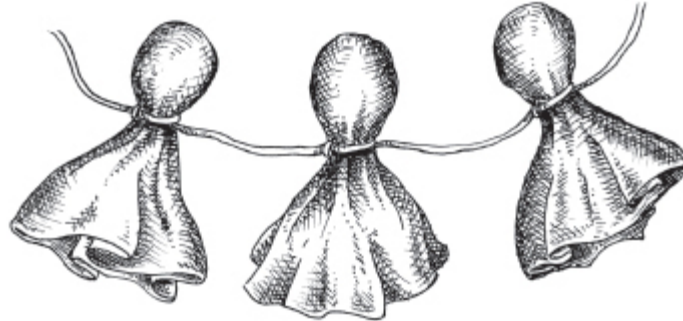


6. For doing more than one: You can leave string hanging from the first one to tie the subsequent ones onto. The other tobacco ties can be about three to four inches apart, but use the same string for tying so that it is continuous, representing the continuous flow of life. (If you're making a long length of prayer ties, you will need something to wrap them on so they don't become tangled after you've completed them. You can tape one

end and wrap them around a rolled-up newspaper, a rolled-up towel, or a long cardboard tube.)

7. When you are finished, smudge your tie or your entire string of prayer ties and say your prayer either out loud or silently. Here is an example: *Creator, I offer you my string of ties in gratitude for your bounty and humbly ask for your blessings for my children. I ask this with deep respect and love.*

Note: If you use tobacco for sacred purposes, please obtain certified-organic tobacco from a good source. Organic tobacco purchased from artisan growers rather than big business is best for ceremonies. Please do diligent research. Tobacco is sacred, and when it's not used in a sacred way, it becomes destructive and harmful. Consider growing your own tobacco. Yes, it's legal to do so. There are many varieties of tobacco, and if you can, use heirloom seeds.



Mineral Messages and Stone Allies

Ancient medicine men and women understood the power of stones and often used them in ceremonies and rituals because they believed they contained living spirits with healing properties. Though rocks seem inanimate, they were thought to be no less alive than a

wild rose opening to the morning sun or a deer grazing in a mountain meadow.

Sometimes stones were laid out in particular formations as a way to invite energy into a space. The practice of placing stones or rocks in a pattern to invite Spirit is not unique; it's something that has been practiced throughout the native world. For example, the Native American medicine-wheel stone circle was a reminder of the great circle of life and an invitation to Spirit. Aborigines in various locations around Australia also created patterns of stones, some as large as 50 feet across. Many of the Aboriginal stone circles and patterns are similar in motif and shape to ancient stone circles in Britain. Although there is no way at this time to date them, it's been suggested that some of these Aboriginal stone layouts could be 25,000 years old. It's thought that these stone circles created the framework for initiations and ceremonies. To kindle the native spirit in you, consider creating and/or meditating in a stone circle.

CREATING SACRED SPACE WITH STONES

Whether you're creating a medicine-wheel circle or a design of your creation, you can use stones or rocks to establish your sacred space. Of course you can use any kind of stone; I prefer using stones that I've found in nature—stones that have been blessed by the sun on a riverbank or smoothed by waves of an ocean shore.

1. *Setting Your Intention:* Get clear on why you want to create your stone layout. In other words, what results do you desire? Are you creating it as a place of meditation or as a focus point for sending energy into the land? Decide what shape it will be and where it will be. If it's a medicine-wheel layout, you should plan on aligning it with the compass.

2. *Gathering Your Stones:* Gather your "stone people" in a respectful way. Do not take rocks from sacred areas. For example, many people have traveled to the interior of Australia to visit the sacred Aboriginal site Ayers Rock—called Uluru by the Aborigines—

and have taken rocks back home with them. The Pitjantjatjara people feel that these rocks belong to Uluru, which is a sacred “dreaming” site, and have requested that any stones taken be returned home. (It’s not uncommon to hear that “bad luck” follows those who remove stones from sacred sites.)

As strange as it might sound, when you find your stones, just as when picking herbs, it’s important to first ask their permission. There’s a subtle yet powerful balance of energy on our planet, and the mineral realm plays an important role in that balance. Even changing the location of one stone can affect the pattern of energy flow throughout the land. Some stones need to stay where they are, so it’s vital to ask permission. Hold your stone, tap into your intuition, and imagine that you’re carrying on a dialogue with the stone. Seeking permission can be as simple as closing your eyes and asking, “May I take you for my medicine wheel?” When the response comes, honor it. Most stones accept the invitation.

In addition, it’s important when you take a stone for your sacred circle to leave an offering such as tobacco, cornmeal, or some token of thanks. If you have nothing tangible to leave, offer thoughts or words of thanks and gratitude.

3. *Connecting with the Stone People:* To understand and feel the strength and energy of your stones, spend time with them before laying them in your circle. Entering into the awareness of animate and inanimate objects is one of the secrets of the shaman. To experience the living spirit within a stone, hold it in front of you. Observe the mountains and valleys of its surface. Close your eyes and explore every crevice of the stone with your fingers. Breathe deeply, and imagine that you’re entering into the center of the stone. Be aware of the story that dwells within it. Every rock has a different energy and will allow a different experience. Now imagine that you’re actually becoming the stone and observe how it feels.

4. *Constructing Your Stone Circle:* The ceremony of creating your stone circle or your rock layout brings power and clarity into your life. If you’re making a medicine wheel, start by taking the stone that symbolizes the east and ask the Spirit of the East to fill your sacred

circle. Place this stone in the easternmost spot of the perimeter of your circle. Step back and imagine that energy filling your circle. Continue by placing the South Stone, followed by the West Stone and the North Stone. With each step, be aware that not only are you creating a physical circle, but also you're creating a circle of power.



Once you have the four cardinal directions, then you can complete the rest of the circle. Allow equal space between each of the four major stones. In between these major stones, position your other stones, using as many as feel best.

(Not everyone has the opportunity or inclination to create a stone layout in nature; therefore, you can create a stone circle indoors. Additionally, you can create a small stone circle on your home altar. You can also assemble and reassemble your circle, if needed.)

5. *Offering Prayers:* Take as much time as you need when setting up your wheel. This is a sacred place, so treat the circle with respect. When your circle is complete, stand back from it and see if it feels right. If it doesn't, take time to make whatever adjustments are needed. When you've finished, thank the earth for providing a place for your stone layout. Thank the surrounding vegetation and trees for giving loving support, and offer prayers to the Creator.

6. *Entering Your Circle:* Prior to entering your medicine wheel, purify and consecrate yourself by smudging. Take the smoke in your hands, and "wash" it over your hair and head (to think only pure thoughts), eyes (to see the truth), ears (to hear the truth), throat (to

speak with clarity and truth), and heart (to give and receive love freely). Be very careful to avoid fire danger. (Important: In an area of high fire risk, don't use burning herbs. A symbolic smudging can be as potent as an actual one, if done with love.)

7. Tapping Into the Power of the Sacred Circle: It's an act of power to create a stone circle; it helps remind us how to live in a respectful way. While you are in your circle, allow your heart to guide you. Whether you use your circle for meditation or for ceremony with others, the hallowed circle can help remind you of who you are and why you're here. And when you leave, give thanks for all that was given to you.

MESSAGES FROM MINERALS

In addition to the natural rocks that are found at the base of a tree, in a canyon floor, by the sea, or in a riverbed, smaller stones that have been shaped, sanded, or polished have been used for sacred purposes throughout time. Although the meanings change, there's a universal reverence for the power of the mineral realms, and many different kinds of stones and gems have been used in native cultures worldwide. However, perhaps the most revered is the quartz crystal.

MYSTICAL CRYSTALS

Once I was shown a historical, timeworn Cherokee medicine bag. I felt two equally strong emotions. On one hand, I felt dismay; a medicine bag is an intimate object. It seemed sacrilegious to be able to see its contents. On the other hand, I felt profound fascination; for amidst the bones, seeds, and teeth was a clear quartz crystal. Even with the extreme age of the medicine bag, the crystal seemed fierce and proud. I could see why that particular crystal had been chosen.

It's been said that no other culture used crystals with the focused determination that the Cherokees did. My ancestors have always

cherished crystals, which they used for various purposes. They were placed in the home to catch the morning light and were also used for divination. The use of crystals wasn't just reserved for the medicine men—most of the people in the tribe carried one—however, only the chief's crystal was in plain view. His crystal was so important that if he fell or was captured in battle, a tribesman would run into the forest and bury the crystal at the base of a living tree, so the enemy would not be able to gain the power of the crystal.

Although it's difficult to substantiate the exact use of crystals for the Cherokee in ancient times, Thomas Mails, in his book *The Cherokee People: The Story of the Cherokees from Earliest Origins to Contemporary Times*, chronicles their use of crystals. He states that the Cherokee divination crystals were so powerful that death could occur for anyone who hadn't been initiated and who touched one of these hallowed stones. They were usually worn around the neck, but hidden from view beneath clothing (or they were hidden and wrapped in deerskins). Crystals were used to foretell the outcome of wars and hunts, and whether illness would occur. They were also used to help find lost objects.

I met an Apache man who told me that during the years that Geronimo—the prominent leader of the Apache—was being pursued, he would drum to gain visions of where to hide and when it would be safe to travel. While drumming, Geronimo would hold a crystal at the back of his drum, to deepen his visions. (Apaches are also known for their reverence and use of quartz crystals for mystical purposes.) I can't verify this story so I don't know if it is true, but when I hold a crystal while drumming I can feel that the energy is greatly magnified. As a suggestion, tie a crystal to the underside of the strings of your drum to intensify your prayers and see if you notice a difference.

Many years ago, I was at an evening tribal gathering. A man began to shake a rattle, and amazingly, the rattle glowed with flashes of light. It felt mystical and holy. The Uncompahgre Ute from central Colorado are one of the first documented people in the world known to utilize the effect of *triboluminescence* through the use of quartz crystals. The Ute constructed special ceremonial rattles made from buffalo rawhide, which were filled with small clear quartz crystals

collected from the mountains. When the rattles were shaken at night during ceremonies, the friction and mechanical stress of the quartz crystals hitting each other produced flashes of light. The glow can be seen through the translucent buffalo hide. These rattles were believed to call spirits and were considered extremely sacred objects.

Crystals are used by many indigenous cultures. The *Altomesayoks* (mountain shamans) in Peru use crystals in their *mesa* (altar layout on sacred cloth). Crystals are believed to extract energy in healing, and the crystal is sometimes used as a representative of the east direction in certain mesa traditions. The shamans lay out the crystals in a dark room and the crystals are said to have the ability to materialize or call the *apus* (Mountain Spirits or Star Spirits). The Diné (Navajo) also have an ancient tradition of using crystals for healing. Herman Chee, a Diné elder and medicine man, who lives on tribal land in Monument Valley, is a crystal gazer. When someone comes to him with an ailment, he goes into the mountains to gather herbs and plants to make medicine for his healing work. (His belief, which is held by the people of most native traditions, is that herbs for healing shouldn't be purchased, but rather gathered in nature.) He then brings them back home, makes a fire, and invites the different gods into his *hogan* (dome-shaped Navajo home) for the healing. He takes his healing clear quartz crystal and moves it over the body, using it like a scanning device, to locate the problem areas. As he does this, the different gods talk to him and give advice on how to treat his patient.



As you kindle your native spirit, you may want to work with the mineral realm and with crystals. If you do, remember it's not the size or shape of the crystal that matters, but it's the love that you have for it. Also decide ahead of time what the purpose of your crystal is. Is it for healing, prophecy, connecting with the Creator, or something else? The best crystals and stones are those that emerge naturally without extreme damage done to the land to obtain them. They are hard to find, but well worth it.

USING CRYSTALS

Here are some steps to help you find your crystal and begin working with it:

1. *Find or purchase a stone that feels right to you:*
Remember that how it feels is more important than how it looks.
2. *Cleanse your crystal:* You can do this by running cold water over it; putting it out in sunlight for at least five hours; or leaving it out all night, especially in the light of

a full moon. Because of their luminous nature, crystals should be cleansed often.

3. *Dedicate your crystal:* Hold it to your heart and declare your intention for its purpose. You might consider naming your crystal. Objects of power are often named in native traditions.
4. *Give thanks to Grandmother Earth for your crystal:* Many native people believe that crystals are a direct gift from the earth to her people.
5. *Use your crystal:* Sit in meditation with it. If it's faceted, you may want to use it as a wand to direct healing energy.
6. *Store your crystal:* Consider keeping it wrapped in natural fabric or placed lovingly on your altar.

FINDING YOUR MINERAL ALLIES

In addition to crystals and stones being used for healing and ceremonies, they can be your allies. Just as there are particular animals, trees, and plants that are in alignment with your individual energy, there are also specific stones and minerals that are your personal helpers. Simply holding or having your particular mineral ally can have a profound effect on you. It can protect and strengthen your energy field. When you wear or hold a mineral that's your ally, or place it in your home, you'll feel stronger and more vital. If it's not your ally, when you hold or wear it, most likely you'll either feel nothing, or possibly even feel weaker. (For additional information about your personal mineral ally, please visit my website.)

THE GREATEST ALLY

There are a number of ways to discover your allies. In addition to watching your dreams, looking for signs, and seeing what seems to “speak” to you, you can go on a visualization journey and imagine yourself calling your allies to you and notice what emerges. You can also let your allies find you. Be still and open your heart. They’ll find you. You are not alone. Be ready to receive. Once you have discovered your allies, take time to listen to their advice; you’ll find a wellspring of insight available to you.

For many, the greatest spiritual ally is the Goddess/God/Great Mystery/Creator, all different names for the divinity within all things. Having spirit allies does not dissociate you from God; in fact, allies are all aspects of the Divine. Simply being grateful and speaking in a personal way to Great Spirit can create miracles. Saying, “Creator, thank you for this day. Help me to love and appreciate myself and others even more,” helps you access the greatest ally of all.

Messages from Beyond

The way that the Creator (and our allies) connects with us is through signs. In the past, the destiny of a clan or tribe often depended on signs. To indigenous people, the art of reading signs is a respected talent, and much time is spent developing this ability. They believe that signs create a bridge between the realm of spirit and the realm of form. *Signs are a focal point through which messages from the Creator filter into our physical reality.* Ancient people knew that signs could serve as messengers of important information about present circumstances and even about the future. They could also act as reflections of where we are in life, and where we are going.

In every native culture I’ve spent time in, there was always an understanding of the power of signs. For example, when I was with the Maoris in New Zealand, the tohunga told me, “We listen to the wind’s sounds and this can tell us of sickness, death, changes with the seasons, or of people coming to visit us.”

When talking about water, he said, “The rivers, streams, and lakes can tell us many things when we observe the way they flow. The mood of the water, the color, and the flow—these are all sacred to the people.”

Speaking of signs, the Zulu *sangoma* Credo Mutwa said, “We live by omens, and we die by omens.” He spoke of many ways that the Zulu watch for signs, especially through the movements and kinds of birds. Signs are, of course, unique to the area in which they occur. For example, Credo said that if a rhino crosses your path, life is going against you. But if a rhino is going the same way as you, your journey is blessed.

My teacher Nundjan Djiridjarkan told me that signs govern Aboriginal life. He said that though signs come in many forms, one universal sign is the willy wagtail bird (*djitti djitti*). Tribal elders watch the bird’s actions to see what the gods are telling them. He further explained that the Aboriginal people use signs to communicate with one another because they often live such great distances apart. He said it’s important to stop whatever one is doing to hear the message of the sign. Examples of this kind of message might be, “I’m sick. Please come to me,” or “Uncle is speared and needs help.”

Although the exact signs vary from culture to culture, almost all native people throughout the world have gained messages by listening to the wind, watching the clouds, or observing flowing waters. Some are based on practicality; for example, if you see a shark, get out of the water. Some are unique to the area (such as rhino crossings). Though signs vary and the same sign can mean different things in different places, the importance given to signs is the same worldwide. Hence, to activate your native soul, it’s valuable to watch for the signs. They can show you the way! When you do so, you are more often in the right place at the right time; this is going to be essential in the years ahead.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF IT’S A SIGN?

Signs are usually something *out of the ordinary*. For example, if you see deer every day in your backyard, seeing a deer wouldn't be a sign, but if you almost never see them and one stands on your pathway looking at you, this is most likely a sign. Signs stand out . . . because they are different than life as usual. Also, signs can be a feeling. Maybe what is occurring isn't unusual, but the feeling or emotion you have about it is. If you're standing outdoors and a sudden gust arises, and you feel an overwhelming wave of sadness, it might be that the wind carries the message that someone you're close to is sad. In other words, it's not just the gust, but it is the onslaught of emotion that it brings that makes it a sign.

A sign can be something seemingly ordinary, but it keeps coming up again and again. For example, my friend Dan saw a three-legged dog, and then later he saw another three-legged dog, and not long after he saw someone struggling with crutches. He realized this could be some kind of a sign, because it came up three times. (Usually if it comes up at least three times, it's a message to you.) After thinking about it, Dan thought that it was a sign that in regard to his current relationship, he "didn't have a leg to stand on." So he decided to end his relationship. In retrospect, he was so very glad that he did; he felt so much more relaxed and stable in his life as a result.

WHAT FORMS DO SIGNS TAKE?

Signs can appear to you through the natural world around you, similar to the way they appeared to your native ancestors. They can come through the movement of animals and insects, or even the movement of the wind. You can also watch the images that form in the clouds. Native people watched the way in which smoke rose from the campfires for meaning. They also looked deep into the evening fires for messages in the movement of the flames. Additionally, they used the energy of the directions to discern signs. For example, birds flying from the north might indicate a time of ending or a time to look within. In modern times, signs can be in the

words that you overhear at the grocery store, or hear on the radio, or see on billboards. They can come in dreams, too.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF YOUR SIGN?

When a sign appears to you, the meaning may be immediately obvious. However, if you are not clear about the meaning of your sign, there are many methods that you can use for interpretation. The manner in which you interpret a sign is less important than the meaning you derive from it. You may also look at your signs as separate revelations, or you may view your signs over time as a collective whole or pattern.

Here are a few methods to discern the meaning of your sign:

1. LOOK INSIDE YOURSELF

A simple question you can ask yourself is, *If I knew what this sign meant, what might it be?* This sounds so simple, and yet this often reveals remarkable insights. And if you start thinking, *Gee, I really don't know*, then a second question might be, *I know that I don't know, but if I did know, what would the meaning be?* This method seems too easy to be effective, yet it appears to really work!

Ed, one of my students, told me that he was amazed when he went into his office one day and found a long line of ants making their way over his computer. He'd never seen ants in his office before. When he asked himself what it might mean, the thought popped up that ants were industrious. He then realized that he'd been procrastinating on a project. He took seeing the ants as a message to jump in and get the project done. He told me later that it was really good that he did because another bid came in right after his, and had it come in first, he would have lost the job. He was grateful for the sign.

2. WHAT'S THE FEELING?

Finding the emotion that you associate with a sign can often be a valuable clue. When you discern the emotion, the second step is perusing your past and trying to remember the last time you had that same feeling. For example, a hummingbird came to my friend JoAnn's window right next to where she was sitting and kept zipping back and forth rapidly. She watched it and was filled with anxiety. When JoAnn scanned her past, she realized that the last time she'd had this *same* kind of anxiety was in college when her exams were due, and she wasn't finished. As she thought about her current life, she realized that she was late in her assignments at work and this was creating inner stress. For JoAnn, the hummingbird was a sign reflecting her subconscious anxiety.

3. WHAT DO YOU ASSOCIATE WITH IT?

This method is to just free-associate what words come into your mind when you're thinking about a sign. An example would be that your sign is a tulip. A free association might be: "*Tulip, two lips, too much lip*—hey, my kids are giving me too much lip! I'm feeling taken advantage of. I need to make some changes." Or another example might be that you see a badger on the side of the road and recognize it as a sign. A free association might be "*Badger, honey badger, honey badgers are fearless*—I need to overcome my fear about getting a new job and take charge of my life."

4. RESEARCH YOUR HERITAGE

Within your heritage are signs that were used by your native ancestors. Even if you aren't consciously aware of what those signs are, they're still genetically encoded in your memory. For example, in the ancient Egyptian culture, the crow represented faithful love because of its monogamous nature. To the Celts of antiquity, crows and ravens were associated with the goddess of war. Depending on the Native American tribe, a crow might represent death, the trickster, a hero, or a messenger between the worlds. If you know your far heritage, then, as a suggestion, find out the meaning of

various signs to your ancestors. This can often be helpful to understand the meaning of the sign that you received.

5. DESIGNATING SIGNS

An effective method of working with signs is to designate them. To do this, you assign meaning to something and designate this as your sign. For example, in my childhood I fell in love with red-winged blackbirds. I don't know why, but I decided that whenever I saw these signs they were good luck for me. Whatever is expected tends to be realized, so whenever I see a red-winged blackbird, I always seem to have great things happen to me. It could also be that whenever something great is around the corner, the universe conspires for me to see a red-winged blackbird. Either way, these birds continue to be a powerful sign for me. You might consider creating a journal to list all of your designated signs.




My neighbor, Jacob, knew that his mom loved dragonflies, so right after her death he decided that dragonflies would be a designated sign of a message from his mom. Jacob was struggling after her death, and during a particularly hard time, he heard a knock at the door. When he opened the door, there was no one there but hovering in front of him was a dragonfly. He broke down sobbing. He knew it was his mom sending a message that she was all right. This is an example of a designated sign. Jacob chose the dragonfly as his

sign, and then waited until the universe presented him with his designated sign.



EXERCISE: CALLING FOR A SIGN

When you're at a crossroads in life, or if you need an affirmation about the way you're heading, you can call for a sign. To do this, simply say, "Creator, please give me a sign about which direction to go in my life." Or you can use a designated sign. For example, if ladybugs are your designated sign, you can say, "Creator, if I'm meant to move to a new city, please send me a ladybug to indicate that this is the right path." Or you can simply open your heart and ask that a sign to appear to show you the way. (For more information about signs, see my book *The Secret Language of Signs*.)



The mystic gateways are all around you. It's simply a matter of taking a moment to step through those sacred portals to hear whispers of the universe and the messages from your spirit helpers and allies. As you watch for signs and connect with your animal, plant, and mineral allies, you increase your ability to be, more and more, at the right time and place. The deeper you go on this journey, the more meaningful the insights that you will garner. In the next chapter, "The Deepening," you will learn how to sojourn further down that path to commune with the Creator and claim your power.



CHAPTER THREE



THE DEEPENING: COMMUNING WITH SPIRIT

I took a break from writing and walked to the top of the hill here at Summerhill Ranch, on the Central Coast of California where we live. Long shadows stretched out across the distant oak savanna to the east. The heat of the day that clung thickly to the earth and hung heavy on my skin was starting to be cooled by a breeze flowing over the nearby Santa Lucia Mountains from the sea. As I inhaled the sweet, refreshing air, I thought about our journey together as you and I kindle the native spirit. So far we've traversed the four directions; explored the elements; put out the call for our animal, plant, and mineral allies; and watched for signs; but now our sojourn takes us deeper. In this deepening, you'll discover your spirit name, learn how to drum and rattle, find out how to use a feather for clearings, and learn about sacred vessels and tribal dancing as the ember of your native soul ignites into flame—shimmering, bright, and bold.

Your Spirit Name: Claiming Your Power

Many years ago, on a dusty summer afternoon in the Cascade Mountains, I headed into the woods to find my spirit name. It was peaceful and quiet under the canopy of large trees. Long rays of sunlight filtered through the pine boughs. I stopped under an old, weatherworn tree and closed my eyes. In that moment, it was so still that even the usual birdsong and drone of insects seemed to be caught in the web of silence.

With my eyes closed and my heart open, I offered a prayer and asked that my true spirit name be revealed.

During my travels, I'd received names from many of the tribes with whom I'd spent time. To the Zulu I am *Nogukini*. To the New Zealand Maoris, I'm called *Whetu-Marama-Ote-Rangi*. And over 45 years ago, when I studied ancient Hawaiian traditions with Mornnah Simeona, she called me *Maileonahunalani*. Although I cherished these names, I yearned to have a name that came straight from my soul and from the earth on which I stood.

When I opened my eyes, a few feet in front of me was a great horned owl perched on a branch. He must have landed when I closed my eyes! He was so close that if I'd reached out, I could have touched him. He looked straight at me with his enormous eyes. It seemed like such a long time passed. Then, with a blink, he lifted his massive wings and silently glided away.

In that moment, the usual hum of the forest returned. The trees began to creak, a breeze whispered through them, and the birds and insects resumed their song. When I looked at the branch where the owl had been, I noticed that three small, downy feathers had been left behind. I picked them up and held them in my hand. They were so soft and white.

Suddenly, I heard an inner voice say, *Put the feathers in your medicine bag*. The words puzzled me. I had a beautiful medicine bag, but it wasn't with me. Again I heard the voice: *You are your own medicine bag*.

The invitation seemed clear: I was being asked to take the feathers into my body. Without further thought, I put the feathers into my mouth and swallowed them. (I don't recommend this. Feathers are *very* hard to swallow and not sanitary, but this didn't occur to me at the time.) The inner voice continued: *As you have taken owl*

feathers into your body, the spirit of the owl has permeated your being and shall always be with you.

Gradually, I came back to the reality of the woods around me, with a feeling of serenity and strength. This experience precipitated the awareness that my spirit name was White Feather. (My husband, David, who still can't believe that I actually ate the feathers, jokes that my name should instead be Eating Feather.)

Once I acquired my spirit name, I felt like I'd come home. Every time I say, "I am White Feather," a sense of peace washes over me. There is power in a name that's in alignment with your essence. Every time you're called by that name, or you think of yourself in that way, it reinforces who you are at your core and kindles the native spirit within you. Once you're aware of your spirit name, it can even feel as though your destiny has been shifted.

YOUR NAME IS MORE THAN WHAT PEOPLE CALL YOU

In native traditions, a name is much more than the label that people call you; it's your unique energy vibration. Sometimes it's a sound rather than a word with a specific meaning, but most often it's a name from nature. Some tribes believe that names carry the essence of the person, while others believe that this is how the spirits recognize us. Other traditions believe that a spirit name can help evoke specific qualities within a person. For example, the name Eagle Eye might bring excellent sight, but also clarity and the ability to see the bigger picture in life.

When you were born, you received your civil name that you use on documents and for school records. It might make your heart sing, or it might not feel like a perfect match. From a native perspective, since each name can carry a different energy and vibration, it's important to find a name that matches your essence, even if it's not the one you use every day. "Edith," for instance, has a different feeling from "Bunny." One name elicits images of someone who is responsible and practical, while the other suggests a woman who is fun, gregarious, and lighthearted. This doesn't mean that someone

named Edith isn't playful, or someone named Bunny isn't serious and pragmatic. However, research has shown that people relate to you differently as a result of your name. More important, you'll feel differently about yourself. One name isn't better than another; they just possess different energies.

In many native traditions, names are often given at a time of transition, such as after one's first hunt or after a vision quest. Many cultures believe that a name can tell a story and can even dictate the destiny of an individual. The tradition of changing names at times of transition is not just found in native cultures. In some cases monks and nuns are given a new name when they're consecrated. The Pope receives a new name when he's installed, and in many monarchical traditions, a ruler assumes a new name when he or she ascends the throne.

CHANGING YOUR NAME CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE


At a vision quest I was leading a number of years ago, a woman decided to change her name to Rosemary. While pondering her life, she realized that her given name no longer suited her. She'd always loved the name Rosemary, as it reminded her of the fragrant herb in her garden. Once she made this decision, she said she began to feel powerful transformations brewing. Although friends and family thought she was crazy, she took a sabbatical from her teaching position at Oxford University, bought a camper van, and embarked on a soulful journey to different Native American sacred sites. To the outside world, she had a prestigious job and a privileged life, but she said deep inside she never felt fulfilled until she spent those years connecting with herself and the land. She credits changing her name with catapulting her into the next phase of her life.

THE MEANING OF YOUR NAME

The following is an exercise to help you become aware of how you feel about your own name. There are no right answers to this exercise; its aim is to help you better understand your relationship with your given name. On a spiritual level, the name you were given at birth is not an accident. Your name has a vibration that was necessary for you at the time you were born. It may have provided you with an opportunity to grow, or perhaps it formed a significant energy connection with the person for whom you were named. Even if you feel that it doesn't suit you, there is value in finding the meaning and the reason behind your name, which is important to address before attempting to find your spirit name.



EXERCISE: EXAMINING YOUR NAME

- Do you like your name? Why or why not?
 - What does your name mean to you? Be specific.
 - What associations do you have with your name?
 - Are you named after anyone? If so, how do you feel about that person?
 - Do other people think that your name suits you?
 - If your name doesn't fit you now, will it fit you in the future? In what ways?
 - What's the meaning or origin of your name?
 - Is there a correlation between the meaning of your name and your life? Explain in detail.
- 

HOW TO DISCOVER YOUR SPIRIT NAME

There are many ways to uncover a spirit name that reflects who you are now and also strengthens the path of who you are to become in the future. Your spiritual name may come from observing nature and the environment around you, or it may come to you in a dream, on a vision quest, or perhaps even in the shape of a cloud. In addition, it could be given to you by a spiritual teacher or in a naming ceremony by an elder.

Although nature names are common, your name may come in the form of words that don't have meaning in English yet have a profound feeling associated with them. No matter what the name or the sound, what's important is that you feel a warm surge of energy flow through you every time you think of it.

Sometimes, in tribal traditions, a name was to be kept secret, for the name was thought to carry one's power, and other times the name was shared with tribal members. When you discover your true name, you may choose to keep it secret or reveal it only to those close to you, or you may decide to use your name publicly. Either way, your spirit name can contribute to your personal power.

Not everyone needs to seek a spirit name, as sometimes it's the one you already have. My daughter, Meadow, came back from a vision quest she did as a teen and said, "Mom, I found my nature name. It's the one that you gave me when I was born." If your name represents who you are and who you are striving to be, then it's perfect just as it is. If your name doesn't feel like a good fit for your soul, then you may want to acquire a spirit name.



EXERCISE: DISCOVERING YOUR SPIRIT NAME

There are a number of ways you can discover your spirit name. Here are some suggestions:

- Relax and breathe deeply and fully. Open your heart and ask the Creator to send you a name that reflects your spirit. Be open to whatever form your name takes. Spend time in nature, lie down upon the earth, and ask Mother Earth for your true name.
- Ask for a sign.
- Watch for signs in your everyday life.
- Take out a pen and paper, and free-flow lots of names; notice how you feel as you say each name aloud.
- Before going to sleep, ask that your true name appear in your dreams. Every morning write about your dreams in a journal as soon as you wake up.
- Once you've narrowed down a name, try it out for a day or two to see how it feels. To do this, keep repeating your new name aloud over and over again. Notice how the sound makes you feel. If it's the right name for you, you should feel stronger just by saying it.



Spirit Sticks: Communing with the Creator

Spirit sticks are ornamented power objects created with blessings to give tangible form to your intentions. Traditionally, they were used for healing, petitioning, hunting rituals, honoring ancestors, cleansings, delineating one's life, garnering respect in council, and protection during battle. They are most often made from a branch and then carefully decorated. They can be painted; carved; or even

wrapped in leather, yarn, or ribbon. Sometimes the sticks are adorned with plants, moss, bark, feathers, or shells. Beads, semiprecious stones, and tobacco pouches are also frequently added.

In many earth-based cultures, spirit sticks were thought to play an essential role in connecting with Great Spirit when praying for rain, a good harvest, a successful hunt, or the health of a loved one. Although traditional ones were made in specific ways for each purpose, they have evolved over the years and are now created and used in myriad ways.

The creation of a spirit stick can give clarity to your past, help you understand your present, and provide clear direction to your future. Your intention and your prayers are what give it power. Spirit sticks are as varied as the people who make them and can be used for many different purposes. Here are just a few of the many diverse intentions you may choose for your own spirit stick:



ANCESTOR STICK

An ancestor stick is traditional in many native cultures. When I was with the Maoris, I was gifted a long, straight wooden cane about 4½ feet high with intricate carvings of faces embedded with paua shells.

Receiving this gift was a very special honor. The faces carved into the stick represented tribal ancestors. I was told that whoever held the stick could call upon these ancestors for support.

Creating an ancestor stick not only opens the door even wider for support and healing from your ancestors, but also it can be a way to honor your lineage. It's not necessary, however, to carve their faces into the stick. You can instead choose specific items, colors, or shapes to represent those who have gone before you. For example, perhaps you had a grandmother who fiercely protected those she loved. To symbolize her fiery nature, you might use red yarn with red beads and tiny dangling bells.

FAMILY STICK

A family spirit stick can be created to empower and protect your family members. The family as a whole can create it, or one family member can birth it, making sure that every family member is represented. At one of my retreats, Gregory, a businessman from New Zealand, decided to dedicate his to improving his relationship with his wife and daughters. He chose a black bead to represent himself, a red bead for his wife, and two yellow beads for his girls. When he had finished, he looked at it and saw that he had placed his black bead a substantial distance from the beads of his family. He decided to remove the decorations and reweave the stick, but this time with the beads closer. But, it still didn't feel right. All afternoon and into the evening he worked on his spirit stick until he finally felt a sense of union with his family.

Curiously, at that very time, back home, his wife and daughters were discussing the family relationships and concluded by feeling a great deal of understanding for Gregory. He said that when he returned home, it was as if a miracle had occurred—instead of strife and discord, there was a wonderful sense of love and community in his family. Gregory felt that he had literally changed his life through the creation of his spirit stick.

PRAYER STICK

Although all spirit sticks carry your prayers, a prayer stick is specifically created with a particular intention in order to magnify your hopes, dreams, and wishes. You can infuse the stick with prayers for yourself, your family, or a world situation. In many of the native traditions that use prayer sticks, feathers are placed at one end and then the entire stick is “planted” in the ground for at least 24 hours. It’s believed that the wind carries the prayers from the feathers to the Creator. Whether you include feathers or not, it’s recommended that you put your finished prayer stick outside overnight. It’s said that when the first morning light touches your stick, your prayers fly to the heavens.

If you choose to make a prayer stick to send prayers to another person or a world situation, pray only for the highest good and don’t infringe on others. In other words, as an example, rather than praying that everyone in your office stops smoking, pray that you breathe only fresh, clean air. (You never know—you might get a promotion into an office in which no one smokes.) As you decorate your stick, imagine you’re weaving a spirit of love into the world around you.

PRAYER ARROW

The prayer arrow is different from a prayer stick in that it is smaller and has a specific directed prayer attached to it. The Huichol native people of Mexico have embraced the prayer arrow (called *uru*) perhaps more than any other tribe. Every aspect of the Huichol prayer arrow is filled with significance. As anthropologist Carl Lumholtz observed, “There is no symbolic object in more common use, either by the private individual and the family or by the community. . . . No feast can be imagined without the presence of arrows. Whenever an Indian [Huichol] wants to pray, his first impulse is to make an arrow.”

In the Huichol religion, every petition to the gods is sent via an *uru*. Each feather, piece of yarn, bead, or decoration that adorns the arrow has a specific meaning and collectively creates a particular prayer. According to the Huichol people, the prayer itself is focused in the tip of the arrow.

To create your own kind of prayer arrow, write your intention on a piece of paper and wrap it around an arrow-sized stick. (You can sharpen one end of the stick for the “arrowhead,” and you can place feathers sticking out of the end to be your symbolic arrow.) Then wrap yarn around the entire stick so that you can’t see the paper (this also secures the feathers to your stick). If desired, you can hang additional feathers or herbs off your arrow.

TALKING STICK

A talking stick is a decorated stick that is passed around when people are gathered in community to discuss important matters. The person holding the stick is given the respect of everyone at the gathering. No one is allowed to interrupt the person holding the stick. A talking stick can be as plain or as ornate as you choose to make it. What’s important is the energy with which you create it.

When making your own talking stick, fill it with wishes for harmony, peace, and equality. Hold the intent that all gathered will honor each other and hear what each has to say. This is excellent to do with children; the simple exercise of allowing little ones to be truly heard and at the same time teaching them how to listen is a powerful practice that will reap benefits in their future.

BLESSING STICK

A blessing stick is filled with objects that carry your blessings and love. It can be used for yourself or for another. It can be a gift for a baby shower, a wedding, a housewarming, or a birthday present. You can create them for your children, a spouse, relatives, friends, or

any time when you want to gift your blessings to another. It's very important when you give birth to a blessing stick that you feel joy and peace while you create it. Don't make a blessing stick if you are unhappy, sad, or angry.

A blessing stick can also be created (or co-created) to honor a rite of passage. For example, a stick infused with blessings can be a meaningful gift for a newborn baby. Each person in the child's life can choose a bead, piece of yarn, or natural object to be woven around the stick to serve as a visual reminder of the support he or she will always have. The objects can represent the important people in the child's life or they can represent qualities that he or she will have. For instance, a small stone might be used for strength and a swath of red yarn for love. Alternatively, if a teen is going off to college, the family can create a small stick—one that fits in a suitcase—that has something from every family member to remind him that he is loved. If a daughter is serving in the armed forces, blessings of protection, strength, and courage can be woven into her stick.

Similar to a blessing stick is a gratitude stick, in which you weave your gratitude for the bounty and blessings in your life.

LIFE STICK

Creating a spirit stick that symbolically chronicles your life can be a powerful activity. To do this, designate one end of the stick as the beginning of your life by putting an item on that spot that represents your birth. Then, as you work up the stick, mark the major events in your life with different objects.

Once you have completed the stick, spend some time looking at it. Notice the feelings, thoughts, and emotions that arise. Does the stick feel like an accurate symbolic representation of your life? If not, rework it until you feel that it conveys your life. If there's anything in your life that you are unhappy about, try reweaving and reworking that aspect of your life where it appears on your stick. You can also weave prayers and dreams for your future into this particular kind of

spirit stick. (For more information and step-by-step instructions on making spirit sticks, go to my website.)

Drumming: Rhythm of the Heart

Sitting in the dirt in a hut made of straw and mud with my teacher Credo Mutwa in Bophuthatswana, I felt as though I'd been transported in time. His skin glistened in the reflected light from the fire in the center of the hut. Through the opening above the flames, I could see stars. It seemed that some of the small embers were floating up to join those sparkling pinpoints of light.

Next to Credo was a large, well-used drum. The sonorous beat of his drum filled me—as if it were penetrating into the core of my being. I felt as though the drum was calling the spirit of the earth and the spirit of the ancestors into our space. Nothing existed, except for the beat. If it's true that the universe is made up of a rhythmic, ever-changing, ever-flowing stream of energy, the drumbeat pushed me off the shore into the flow of that ancient and primordial sound. . . . I was being called home.

I'm a drum-maker. My husband and I have been making drums for decades. We also drum together. We drum to connect with the cycles of life, to celebrate our lives, to release pent-up emotions, and especially to grow closer to the Creator. I also teach drumming and lead drumming circles. The drum is one of my allies, and it carries me to the center of my soul.

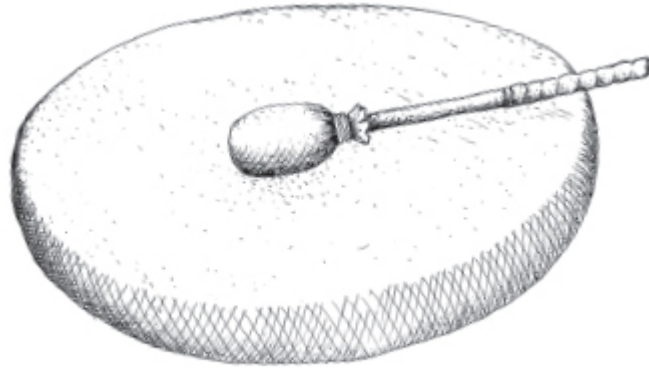
From ancient times, native people around the world have been drawn to the sound of percussion, from beating on a hollow log, to hitting two sticks together, to crafting an instrument from animal hides. The beat of the drum has been used for a variety of purposes, from rousing warriors to accomplish remarkable feats to healing, dancing, and connecting to Spirit.

It's been estimated that for over 20,000 years drumming has been used for various forms of healing. Although we often associate

animal-skin frame drums with the Native Americans, since the beginning of human history, shamans in Siberia and Northern China and the Inuit, as well as indigenous people throughout the world, have used the drumbeat to connect with Spirit. Drumming also plays an integral role in many African communities. Perhaps the reason why the drum has been used in so many different cultures is because it has the ability to alter consciousness. Research has shown that the shamanic beat used around the world, which is about 210 to 220 beats per minute, can catapult your brain waves into a low alpha and theta range. This type of brain activity is associated with heightened senses, creativity, and vivid imagery. When one is in this altered state, it's easier to travel from the physical world into spiritual realms. For this reason, Native Americans call the drum the "canoe" or the "horse."

As far back as I can remember, I've been fascinated by the power of drumming. As a young girl, I'd take the cylindrical oatmeal box my mom stored in the cupboard and beat on it. The sound enthralled me, but it was the vibration that coursed through my body and has never let me go. When I was a bit older, I discovered, much to my parents' chagrin, that pots and pans thumped with wooden spoons had amazing resonance. There was something primal and exhilarating about drumming and dancing to its beat. As I listened to the rhythm, worries and concerns dissolved, time seemed to stand still, and I was transported out of my normal awareness.

I believe the sound of drumming is part of our genetic code. Those early childhood forays into the realm of drumming were perhaps my way of tapping into ancestral memories of our collective tribal life around the fire. The round shape of many native drums is believed to represent the universe. And its rhythmic beat is the pulse, the heartbeat, of the universe. In the shamanic traditions of Siberia, it's believed that drumming creates a bridge so that you can go from one world to another. When you stop playing the drum, the bridge disappears.



Since drums have the power to connect us with the Divine and many cultures believe that their beat represents the heartbeat of the earth, drums are revered and treated with great respect. When I was with Credo Mutwa, I asked him about the importance of drums in his culture. He told me that drums are venerated in Africa, as it's believed that they are alive. In some regions a special hut in the center of the village is reserved for the drums, and every morning, milk (and sometimes food) is placed in the drum hut, so the drums can absorb the energy of the daily offerings. Credo told me that in some places there was a "wife of the drum" who was a woman who tended the fire in the drum hut when it was cold because the drum spirits liked to be warm. This practice and similar practices throughout Africa, he said, underline the deep reverence that Africans have for their drums.

In many native cultures no one is allowed to touch a shaman's drums, and the penalty can be severe. Credo said that in times of antiquity for the Zulu, someone could be killed for touching the *sangoma's* (medicine man) drum. But they don't do that these days. He said that now if someone touches the drum, they are levied a hefty fee, which poses a large financial burden. This gives credence to the immense value that native cultures place on their drums, and it's a reminder of how important it is to respect your drum, which in turn will bless you with years of healing, mystical journeys, and divine connection. In the following sections, you'll learn more about the power of drumming and how to use it for space clearing and other forms of healing.

CONNECTING WITH THE SOUL OF YOUR DRUM

Since the beginning of human time, shamans have been using the cadence of the drum to journey to other realms; however, you too can use the heartbeat of the drum to alter your consciousness, explore the inner recesses of your being, and connect with the Divine. You can also drum to express your emotions and deepen your meditations. Or you can do it simply because it's fun! As you pick up the drumstick and begin to bounce it off the surface of your drum, in no small way, you'll be kindling the native spirit within you.

Whether you purchase a drum or make it yourself, before using it consider having a ceremony to align your energy with it. This will forge a deep connection to your drum. If you already have a drum that you've been playing for years, there can still be great value in following the steps laid out here to deepen your connection:

1. Select a time when you will be undisturbed. You may even wish to find a place in nature in which you can conduct this ceremony.
2. Cleanse yourself. Then dress in clothes that enhance a feeling of ceremony and intention. Remove rings and bracelets, as they can interfere with your ability to sense energy.
3. Sit in meditation while holding your drum. Give thanks with deep respect to the specific animal and tree from which the hide and ring came. *This is essential.*
4. When your meditation is complete, cleanse your drum. It's traditional to use sage (or tobacco), but incense can also be used. Light a sage stick or loose sage in a fireproof bowl or shell, and pass your drum through the smoke. Then extinguish the sage completely.
5. Sit with your drum held close to your heart and breathe deeply. Imagine you are breathing life into the drum.

Infuse your consciousness into it. Visualize the spirit of your drum coming forward and merging with your spirit. Then take your hand and slowly, respectfully rub around the drum in a circular manner to greet and welcome it into your life.

6. If you haven't already named your drum, ask for a name to come forward. Often I see (or hear) a drum's name in my mind's eye. For instance, one time as I looked into the soul of a drum, I "saw" an image of a full moon reflected on a mountain lake. A gentle breeze rippled the reflection, making the moon dance; thus, this drum became "Dancing Moon." In the Ojibwa Tribe, drums are called the generic name of "Grandfather" as a sign of respect. If a name is not revealed to you, you might wish to call your drum "Grandmother" or "Grandfather."

7. With your eyes closed, continue to hold the drum to your heart to feel or "hear" its unique role in the world. Alternatively, you can ask your drum to reveal its destiny to you in images or in words. In my experience, drums are each birthed with their own purpose. In the early '80s, my husband and I began making frame drums. These are a kind of drum in which the width of the drumhead is greater than the depth. They're made by shaping wood into a hoop, which is then covered with rawhide attached to its sides. These are the earliest types of drum known to have existed and are one of the most ancient musical instruments. (Eventually, we taught drum making in various countries and even had a showing of our painted drums in a gallery in Covent Garden in London.)

As my husband and I gave birth to each drum, I began to notice that some seemed to be destined for healing or breakthroughs or activating joy, while others connected one more deeply to the earth, fostered a sense of community, or brought people together for

dancing and celebration. While focusing on a new drum, not only could I “see” its name, but also it would often “tell” me its purpose.

8. Sit with your drum for as long as you feel it is necessary to build your connection.

Once you have connected with your drum, it is a part of your soul and bonded to you. Conclude by thanking it for coming into your life. You are now ready to drum!

CARING FOR YOUR DRUM

Drumming can be a sacred act. Hold your drum with reverence, and treat it with respect. Never put it upside down on the earth, and don't put anything on it. Don't use it for a coffee table or a side table. Store it in a place of honor. (In other words, don't shove it under the bed or toss it in a box in the garage.) Hang it on the wall or store it in a place where it feels revered. If you cherish your drum, it will bless you. (Don't touch the drums of others without permission, since sometimes a drum can be part of their power.)

DRUMMING YOUR PRAYERS

Before you begin, consider smudging yourself, your drum, and the space in which you'll be drumming. Then begin drumming softly to “wake up” your drum. (Think of this as waking up slowly, rather than someone shouting at you when you are in a deep sleep.) Keep your drumstick hand very loose and pliant. Your limber wrist will allow the movement to come from your wrist and not your arm. Using just your arm to drum for long periods of time can be tiring. Don't try to sound good. Just let the beat emerge. Let your drum tell *you* what beat it wants. (If your drum sounds tinny, it's too tight. Dry environments can make a drumhead tight. You can sprinkle a small amount of water on

it to loosen. If it thuds when you drum, it's too loose—this occurs in damp environments—and you may need to heat it with your hands or even carefully with a blow-dryer.)

An excellent drumbeat to start with is a two-beat rhythm: *DUB-dub*. This is the most primal sound known to human beings, as it's the sound of the mother's heartbeat while we are in the womb. As you drum the two-beat, allow your breathing to deepen, and relax your body. At some point it will seem as if the drum has its own mind, and the rhythm just seems to flow. No matter how you try to control it, the beat may seem to take off in its own direction. This is good; this means that your soul is taking over. The best drumming comes when you get out of the way and allow the drum's rhythm to flow into and through you. The less you think about the "right" drumbeat, the more the rhythmic outpourings from the universe can move within you. You'll give your prayers wings in this way!

SACRED DRUMMING TO CLEAR AND BLESS A HOME

In areas as varied as Tibet, Africa, China, Siberia, Lapland, Brazil, Indonesia, and India, shamans have used drumming to cleanse homes of stagnant energies and to call in positive energies. In fact, it's rare to find a native culture that didn't use drums for this purpose. The drum is an excellent instrument to use if the room energy is very dense or congested. Drumbeats can break up thick energy very quickly. Drumming is especially useful in clearing emotions. If there has been anger, an argument, or sadness, the drum can be your most powerful ally to clear out that energy and bring in sparkling energy.



EXERCISE: USING YOUR DRUM FOR SPACE CLEARING

1. Stand at the entrance to the home or the room.
Hold your drum close to your chest and allow your

awareness to fill the interior of the drum. Call for Spirit's assistance for your clearing. Rub your hand in a circle around the outer area of the drum to connect more deeply with it. Begin drumming with a double beat. After feeling this sound resonate inside you, then use whatever beat feels best to you, simply allowing a natural rhythm to evolve.

2. Continue your steady beat, and walk in a clockwise direction (counterclockwise in the Southern Hemisphere) as you circle the periphery of the room. Notice any differences in the sound of the drum. If there are places where the drum sounds dull, keep drumming in that area until it sounds clearer. You'll intuitively find the exact rhythms that are needed for each area of the room. When the drumbeat sounds crisp, this indicates the energy is clear.
3. Continue to drum until the entire room rings clear. Your intuition will tell you when you are done.
4. When complete, you should be in the same corner or area where you started. To seal the circle of energy, make a figure eight with your drum.
5. To clear an entire home, continue to drum in each room. Hold the clear intention of the results you desire. Drumming breaks up any stagnant energy, gets the energy moving, and calls for Spirit's support. But you must hold the intent for this to happen.
6. When you have completed your space clearing, hold your drum to your heart and ask for blessings for the home and all who dwell there. (For more information about space clearing, see my book *Sacred Space*.)

EXERCISE: ENERGY DRUM BATH

Since ancient times, shamans have used drumming not only to clear the energy in dwellings, but also to clear the energy of people. To do this, lightly drum up and down the body of your friend, being careful not to drum loudly near his or her ears. As you work, listen carefully to the sound of the drum. Just as in drumming in a room, there may be parts of the body where the sound is muffled or feels stuck. If you find one of these areas, continue to drum until that energy feels clean and clear. When you feel the energy shift, move on. When the clearing is over, make sure your friend drinks plenty of water.

(To learn more about drums and drumming, visit my website. Also, drums are available for sale through my website.)

DRUMMING WITH CLICK STICKS

For very little time and money, you can make your own “click sticks,” such as the Aborigines of Australia use. Although the sound and feeling is different from that of a drum, they make a wonderful percussion instrument and can be used in all the ways described in this chapter. To make click sticks, saw off two identical lengths of wood from a fat dowel, broom handle, or wooden curtain rod. They should be about a foot long, short enough that you have control when using them, but long enough that there’s room to hold the ends and click them together without hitting your hands. Sand and decorate the sticks, and you will have your own drumming tool.

Rattles: Calling Spirit

Not all tribes used drums, but the use of ceremonial rattles is nearly ubiquitous. I love working with rattles. For me personally, it's often easier to call Spirit with a rattle than with a drum. Somehow the softer sound seems to lull me into an expanded awareness of the world around me. In present day, rattles are used to soothe babies. This custom has its roots in native cultures where rattles were used to ward off negative sprits, so using a rattle with a child was thought to keep the child safe and protected.

Rattles were also used in dancing to enhance the tempo of celebrations as well as in healing ceremonies. Native rattles were made from a variety of materials, such as gourds, turtle shells, pottery, rawhide, and even carved wood, and were decorated in a symbolic manner, with every part of the decor having a deeper meaning. Dyes from roots and berries were commonly used to decorate Native American rawhide rattles.

Just as drums were considered sacred because their rhythm created a bridge from the physical world to the spiritual world, the cadence of native rattles also had the ability to alter consciousness and transport one to other realms. The frequency of most shamanic rattling measures in the theta/alpha range, which many say is roughly the same as the earth's natural frequency.

When you shake a rattle, no matter whether it's a plastic one you purchase or a rawhide one you make, you'll activate genetic memories of dancing around the fire, and its sound can kindle the native spirit within you.

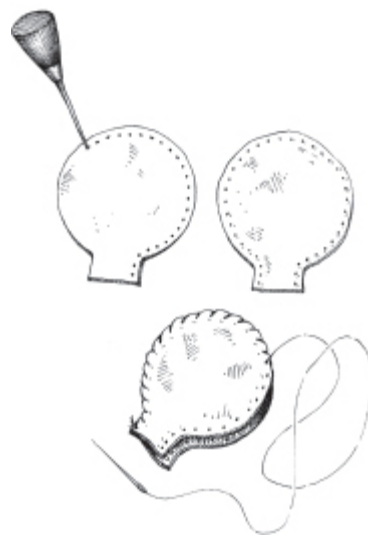
MAKING A RATTLE

There are many materials that can be used to make a rattle, from simple to complex. For instance, the plastic eggs that are seen everywhere during Eastertime can make a wonderfully easy, yet satisfying, rattle. When I make them, I place seed beads inside the

plastic egg. It's generally a good idea to put tape around the seam so the beads don't accidentally fly out. If you want to take it a step further, you can cover the plastic egg in papier-mâché and then varnish the outside and cover in whatever decoration you choose. It makes a lovely and simple rattle. I've also known people to make them out of aluminum cans or packing tubes. What's most important is the sound and the love that you put into it.

There are many ways to create a traditional native rattle from using rawhide or by hollowing out a gourd, letting it dry, and then attaching a handle to it. Here are instructions for making a rawhide rattle:

1. Soak the rawhide overnight. While it's soaking, this is a perfect opportunity to honor and thank the animal from which the hide came. This is very important. (There are many sources available online to purchase rawhide. You can even use the large rawhide pieces sold in pet stores as dog chews.)
2. Even after the rawhide is softened, it will still likely be tough to cut, so you may need a box cutter or a strong pair of scissors. For the rounded part, you can use a turned-over bowl or circular plastic lid to cut around. Remember to leave one part longer (see [illustration](#)).



3. You can use an ice pick or a leather punch with a hammer to make the holes.
4. Lace the two sides together tightly with a tapestry needle and some waxed cotton sinew (or even dental floss). (See [illustration](#).)



5. Fill the rattle head with sand and pack it tightly to make it into the shape you desire, and let it dry for a few days. Put it in the driest location in your home, but not too near to a heat source.



6. Remove the sand. The rawhide should be dry and hard to the touch.
7. Place the ends of the rattle head into water. This allows it to soften so that it can eventually be attached to your stick (see [illustration](#)).



8. Fill the interior of your rattle with small stones, seed beads, or larger beads. In some native customs, it was common to use the small, smooth stones that ants carry out of their nest called “anthill stones.” These tend to be very uniform in size and make a soft, gentle sound in a rattle. Some people use corn, beans, or seeds, but these tend to break down over time and thus can affect the sound of your rattle.
9. Insert a wooden handle. (You can use a dowel or a strong stick from nature.) Wrap the handle with the wet rawhide. You can secure it with thin strips of soaked rawhide. When the leather strip dries, it will shrink and cinch down on itself to secure the rattle handle in place. You can also use glue to secure it.

FINDING YOUR RHYTHM

Drumming and rattling can help you find your own rhythm and connect to the greater rhythms and cycles of the world. It's great if you have your own drum or rattle, but you don't need a drum to start

—two wooden spoons from your kitchen will do. You can even turn over a cooking pot and drum on it. As you drum, you may notice emotions or memories coming to the surface. This is a healing process, so just keep drumming and let them wash over you. If you feel that nothing is happening, just keep drumming. Whenever you drum, whether you are aware of it or not, something powerful is happening. There is a vibration and rhythm associated with every gland and organ in your body, as well as with every chakra (energy center). When you drum, every part of your body absorbs the rhythm that it needs to stay in balance and harmony. Forget about trying to sound good—just keep drumming.

COMMUNITY DRUM CIRCLES

Drum circles touch us on a soul level; they have always been traditional in tribal cultures. Simply put, a drum circle is a group of people, either standing or sitting, who drum together on percussion-type instruments (rattles are also often used). The drumming is done in a circle, which connotes that there's no leader—we're all on equal footing together. This speaks of being in rhythm with each other. It's a powerful way of bringing people together as well as encouraging them to find their own internal rhythm.

To get started, someone initiates a rhythmic beat with a drum or by striking spoons together or by hitting sticks on cans or kitchen pots. Practically anything that can be banged can be used. Everyone follows this “grandmother” rhythm until the cadence begins to evolve on its own. Have fun. There will be a point when everyone becomes fluid with the rhythm of the moment. You should leave feeling refreshed and cleansed by this rousing power of rhythm.

Ceremonial drumming circles are currently mushrooming throughout the U.S. People are gathering their forces, drumming together, and allowing the echo of the drumbeat to project that holy energy outward into the world. The unity of the drumbeats creates a primal core—raw and wild as the Earth Mother herself—which can flow outward into the universe. The drumbeat carries each person

across the boundaries of time and space into long-forgotten memories of ancient rites. When jamming, drum your passion, drum your power, and please, my dear fellow soul travelers, drum for peace.

When your drum circle is complete, celebrate with a meal. Share your community and your food, knowing that you have reenacted an ancient archetypal journey to the center of the soul.

Spirit Songs: Voices in the Wind

In cultures with an oral history, there's a long tradition of spirit songs. These kinds of songs were used to give thanksgiving to the earth, unite with the forces of nature, call Spirit, and activate healing. In a number of cultures there are spirit songs that tell the story of specific people or events. For example, the shamans of Siberia each have their own song to remind them of their identity. The songs tell of their birthplace, ancestors, and special experiences. A shaman's spirit song is a way to announce himself to the spirits. Generally, the song stays the same through life with events added in as they occur, and typically the song is accompanied by drumming.

It's been suggested that drumming, rattling, singing, and chanting were used as forms of prayer because the sound resonated inside of one's body, and then served as a kind of dance between inner and outer realms. Sometimes songs were made up of sounds that had a particular feeling rather than actual words; other times, animal sounds were incorporated into the songs; and sometimes, meaningful words were woven into the songs. Just like a spirit name, spirit songs often come during a vision quest, in a dream, or as a result of being in a semi-altered trance state.

FINDING YOUR SPIRIT SONG

You don't need to be a good singer to find your spirit song. It's the feeling and the energy that's most important. And you don't need to have just one song. You can have different songs at different times in your life. As a suggestion, go out into nature and find a place to be completely still, away from any distraction. Choose a place where you feel comfortable using your voice. When you feel present in your environment, begin by making sounds. Don't think about making good sounds or harmonious sounds. Just allow sounds to flow through you. If you have a drum, rattle, or click sticks, you might consider accompanying your sounds with a rhythmic beat.

In the beginning, it's often better to use sounds rather than words because the energy can flow more freely. Continue to breathe and sing until a kind of rhythm begins to build. You will know when you've found your song because your body will feel strong when you sing it.

Feathers: Flying to the Heavens

When I spent time with the Zulu, Credo Mutwa gifted me a special feather headdress. A Native American (from a Southwest tribe in the United States) had given it to Credo when he had visited South Africa a number of years prior. Credo told me that the feathers longed to travel with me and be returned to their homeland. I was moved by this gift and took it with me on my journeys through Africa before heading home.

During the day, when I was out of my hotel, I would prop the headdress up on a nightstand to not damage it. Evidently people cleaning the rooms, however, would see the headdress and assume that I was a *sangoma* (medicine woman) because offerings from the cleaning staffs started appearing in my hotel rooms. Sometimes I'd answer a knock on the door to find a hotel employee with a friend or family member who wanted to be healed. One woman wanted her husband to be faithful and wanted me to do a spell on him. This was happening because they recognized the feathers as a sign of a healer. The headdress was creating so much commotion at every

hotel I stayed in that eventually I started covering it with scarves. This experience showed me the depth and power of feathers among the native people of Africa. I was familiar with the importance of feathers in Native American customs; however, it was powerful to see firsthand how feathers were revered in a different culture.



Since the beginning of human history, feathers have been used by native people in ceremonies and rituals. In many tribal traditions, birds are thought to be the messengers between the spirit and physical realms, and thus their feathers are venerated as the conduit between these two worlds. Since the quill of the feather is an open tube, many cultures believe that it serves as a channel for prayers and energy. It's considered to be a pathway of communication with spirit messengers or supernatural beings.

In indigenous cultures, feathers are used for a variety of purposes. For example, there are feathers for healing, dancing, success in hunting and fishing, clearing and protecting a home, and bringing rain, among many others. There are friendship and honoring

feathers (to gift to your mentors, friends, or those whom you respect), answering feathers (to hold to receive an answer to your questions), and smudging feathers used for space clearing.

In many traditions feathers are also bestowed in recognition of a brave act or a worthy accomplishment. To receive a gift of a feather can be a great honor. For example, when I was invited to spend time with the Maoris, during my honorary adoption ceremony into the tribe, I was gifted with a special feather. I was told that it was a privilege to receive this feather and that only a high-ranking Maori could wear that particular decorated feather. (I have never worn this feather as I am not, nor do I consider myself, a high-ranking Maori by any means. I share this with you to give credence to the value that's placed on feathers in native cultures.)

FEATHERS AS A CHANNEL FOR THE CREATOR

My grandmother used to wear a single turkey feather in her hair. She also had a headdress that she would wear on special occasions. This was unusual, as normally only men wore such regalia. However, Cherokees have a tradition of strong female leaders and even female chiefs, so perhaps it wasn't that unheard of for a woman to wear a feathered headdress. There was something special about visiting my grandmother on my grandparents' ranch in Oklahoma and seeing her carefully place that one feather in her hair.

Although you don't typically see people walking around in Western culture with feathers in their hair, in native cultures around the world, feathers frequently adorn the head. From the Maoris, to the Aboriginal people of Australia and South America, to tribes in Africa, to tribal Chinese, to the Mayans and Aztecs, to Native Americans, and the First Nations of Canada, the use of feathers in the hair is nearly a universal practice. From a single feather to a colorful array, the feather worn on the head was thought to connect the human being with the spiritual realm. The prayers of humans rise up through the hollow shaft of the feather, and then the spirit of the bird carries

the prayers to the Creator. Blessings then flow back down through the feather and through the top of the head into the human.

You probably wouldn't want to go to the mall with a feather sticking out of your head, but it can be powerful to sit in meditation with a feather in your hair pointed up to the heavens. (You can put a band around your head to stick the feather into.) This can be a focal point for you to imagine that your prayers are soaring to the realms above, and blessings are cascading down into you through the feather.

FEATHERS AS MESSENGERS

The very last words my teacher Dancing Feather spoke to me right before he died were, "Wherever you are, wherever you go, I will be there." After his death, his words became reality. Feathers began to appear in the most unusual ways. With each feather, I could feel his presence more deeply. Whenever I needed support or whenever I couldn't decide what direction to go in life, a feather would appear . . . sometimes in seemingly miraculous ways.

One night I was sitting in front of the fireplace in my living room, trying to relax because I was worried about a talk I was giving the next day. I got up to make some tea and when I returned, there was a large feather on the chair. I was shocked. I have absolutely no idea how that feather could have appeared. But it was as if I could hear Dancing Feather's voice saying, *Don't worry, all will be well*. And it was. There was a vibrant radiance that infused every moment of that seminar.

Then, remarkably, people with whom I shared this story also started receiving feathers as messages, sometimes in the most amazing ways. Judy, a single mother, was studying for a test to get a job, which would mean that she would be able to provide for her children. She sat with the book in her lap, feeling nervous about the upcoming test. Suddenly a feather floated down and landed on her book. She said, "Denise, I was indoors. I have no idea how that was possible, yet as I looked at the feather, I knew it was a sign that all

was well.” She relaxed, passed the test the next day, and secured the job to help her family.

FEATHERS BRING YOU BLESSINGS

There is a good chance that feathers will begin to appear for you after you read this. You might see them on walks in nature or on jaunts in the city. Pay particular attention to feathers that you see in unusual places, such as a feather that appears in your home whose presence you can't account for. They can also arrive in surprising ways, such as a friend unexpectedly gifting you feather earrings. No matter how they come, each one will carry a message for you from Spirit.

Anytime you see a feather, stop and take a moment to be still. Simply looking at the feather or holding it will often bring an abundance of information and wisdom. Even if you aren't consciously aware of what the message is, there is usually a kind of downloading beneath conscious awareness that occurs. Pay particular attention to any feathers that you see floating down from above. There are usually “big” messages that accompany these.

FEATHERS FOR SPACE CLEARING

Earlier we learned about using a drum to clear a room of old energy and fill it with joyful energy. Feathers can also be a useful tool for this type of work. They can be used either by themselves or in conjunction with smoke. Their energy is both powerful and gentle, and is therefore a great addition to any house clearing. Before using a feather, or any other tool for energy work, you'll want to spend some time carefully choosing it, cleansing it, connecting with it, and honoring it. This will deepen your connection and make your intentions that much stronger.



CHOOSING YOUR FEATHER

The best feathers are the ones that choose you. These are the ones that appear seemingly out of nowhere. Additionally, a feather that is gifted to you from a person who honors the medicine way also has great potency. Of course, you can purchase your feather. Usually stores that supply fly-tying equipment for fishermen or craft stores have a supply of feathers. Also, vendors at powwows often carry feathers and feather fans for sale. However, don't just grab one and say, "This will do." To find the best feather for you at a shop or booth, become very relaxed and let your eyelids lower slightly; then put out the call or "ask" that your feather appear to you. Often you'll see a feather that seems more radiant than the other ones. This is a sign that it's meant for you.

ATTUNING TO YOUR FEATHER

When you use a feather for sacred purposes, such as space clearing, you'll want to attune to it. Just picking a feather up and wafting it through the air will do very little to shift energy. It's only when you attune the feather and cherish it that it becomes an object of power. Here are directions for attuning to your feather:

1. Cleanse your feather by running it through sage smoke or the smoke of incense. Hold it to the center of your chest (your heart center), breathe deeply, and imagine that you are merging with it as you fill it with the love that streams from your heart.
2. Travel in your imagination to find the spirit of the specific bird from which your feather came. It's all right if the bird is in the spirit world, because their spirit still exists. Give heartfelt thanks to this bird for its feather, and let the bird know that you will honor its gift. When you do this, the energy of the feather dramatically increases. And every time you use the feather, the spirit of the bird will be there to support you and bring more energy forward.
3. Imagine that you are becoming that species of bird. For example, if you have a raven feather, imagine that you have shape-shifted into a raven. Be aware of the "raven spirit" awakening within you. Then visualize yourself soaring high above the land, your arms becoming wings. Imagine the rush of air beneath your wings. This deepens the attunement to your feather and the species that it came from.
4. Visualize yourself in the future using the feather and "see" streams of shimmering healing energy in the wake every time that you waft it through the air. "See" the space and the individual that you have cleared and blessed sparkling with life-force energy.

5. Hold your feather high up to the heavens and ask that the Creator bless your feather. Say the words out loud with a sincere heart, and Spirit will abide.

DECORATING YOUR FEATHER

A feather without decoration can be a powerful ally, but you might consider decorating your feather. For a simple decoration, wrap the lower part of the quill with embroidery thread, yarn, cording, leather, or cotton sinew. You can include a few smaller feathers in the wrapping, or you can hang cording off the quill, which you decorate with beads or other feathers.



CLEARING A ROOM WITH A FEATHER

A feather that's excellent for ceremonies and for space clearing is the turkey feather. Native Americans call the turkey the "giveaway" bird, because it's believed that the turkey embodies the spirit of being of service to others. However, when trying to decide if a particular feather is right for you, tune in to its energy. Let your intuition guide you. As a note, any feather that you love will be an object of power, even if it's simple.

Know that a simple, single feather can transform the energy of a room. (Of course, a feather fan or wing can also be used, but it is not the size of the feathers, but the depth of your love that makes a difference.) Here are directions to clear a room with your cherished feather:

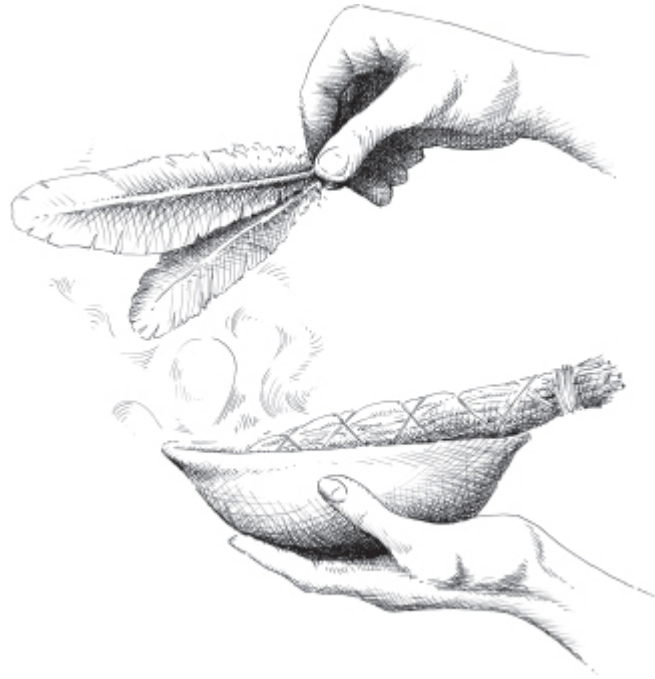
1. Take time to connect with the energy of the feather and visualize the room being filled with sparkling energy.
2. Use your feather to flick the air. Use quick, short strokes to break up the stagnant energy. Start at the entrance into the room and ask for blessings, and then circle the room, especially spending time on the corners. In native cultures around the world, it's said that evil dwells in the corners. From my perspective, it's not evil energy, but stagnant energy that gets caught in the corners, so give extra smoke to these areas. The corners are usually where dust and debris collect, and this is also true for energy.
3. Circle the room. Wherever you sense a pooling of stagnant energy, chop into it with the feather to break it up. Go clockwise if you're in the Northern Hemisphere, and counterclockwise in the Southern, but trust your intuition for what's right for the individual space.
4. Then circle the room again, making longer, slower, more fluid motions with the feather to create a healthy, balanced, and calm flow of energy throughout the room.

5. When you've completed your circles of the room and you've cleared away the stagnant energy and filled it with a feeling of harmony, go to the center of the room and offer a simple prayer of gratitude and ask for a blessing for the home.

CLEARING A ROOM USING A FEATHER AND SMOKE

A highly effective way to clear a room and restore balance is to combine the movements of the feather with the use of smoke. These two elements—air and fire—create a powerful alchemy. The natural channeling powers of the feather, combined with the purifying and spiritual properties of the burning incense or herbs, can create a sense of deeply sacred space.

1. Hold a bowl containing sand and the smoking herbs/incense/sage bundle in your nondominant hand. An abalone shell can also be used, but a deep bowl is a practical and safer alternative that can be easier to manage. Make sure that the bowl or shell is deep enough to prevent any sparks or burning leaves from flying out of it into the room. You will also want to be sure that the bowl contains enough sand, salt, or earth to insulate it from the heat of the burning herbs so that it doesn't burn your hand.



2. Use the feather in your dominant hand to move the smoke through the room you're clearing. Use small, flicking motions followed by long, sweeping ones.

Please note that governments often have very specific legal restrictions regulating the possession of bird feathers. These laws are intended to protect species that might otherwise go extinct. Penalties can be severe simply for owning a restricted feather. In the United States, please go to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website to see the list of birds on the restricted list. Out of respect for these animals and our environment, it's essential that you first find out what regulations relate to possession and use of feathers in your area.

(For even more details on how to attune your feather and clear a room, house, or the energy of an individual, please visit my website.)

Medicine Bag/Sacred Bundle: Home of Spirit

Ed McGaa (Eagle Man), an Oglala Sioux, was a Marine Corps fighter pilot major during the Vietnam War. He survived 110 combat missions, received eight air medals and two Crosses of Gallantry, and was recommended for a Distinguished Flying Cross. For protection, he wore a *wotai* stone (sacred stone) in a small medicine bag around his neck. Prior to Ed's Vietnam departure, a Sioux medicine man, Chief Fools Crow, held a ceremony for him. He predicted that Ed would see the enemy over a hundred times and the bullets would bounce from his plane, which was exactly what seemed to happen. It could have been a coincidence, but in native cultures it's believed that one's medicine bag can offer protection, and Ed certainly seemed to be protected.

A medicine bag (or a sacred bundle) is a pouch or bundle used in native cultures in which objects of power are placed. It is thought to be a home of Spirit. Shamans use them for items that they believe will expand their spiritual powers and deepen their connection to Spirit. The use of medicine bags is indigenous to the human spirit and part of our collective psyche. The first chronicled use of a medicine bag goes back more than 5,000 years. An example is the Frozen Man, estimated to have lived around 3,300 B.C.E., who was found in the Alps in 1991, almost perfectly preserved. Next to him, frozen in the ice, was a medicine bag that contained an assortment of medicinal plants.

Although medicine bags were in the domain of the tribal healers, it wasn't uncommon for them to also be carried by other tribal members. The objects in the bag often served as focal points for protection and healing, and helped activate intuition. Many believed it contained your power.

A medicine bag isn't something you purchase already full; instead, you put items in it that are meaningful to you. Since they are so personal, typically, it's something you keep to yourself and don't share with others. In traditional cultures, medicine bags are so revered that they are buried with a person when he or she dies. The contents of a bag are as varied as the people who held them: beads, arrowheads, bones, rocks, herbs, tobacco, leaves, bark, hair, and claws are known to have been commonly placed in these sacred sacks. And color has meaning, too, with red often being the most

auspicious. In present days, objects such as small photos, keys, coins, and small carvings or statuettes are often found in medicine bags. As an individual goes through various life experiences, mementoes are added. Often the medicine bag is worn around the neck, but they're also commonly found attached at the waist or kept in an honored location.



Although we most often think of medicine bags as Native American, in fact, in many tribal traditions, it's a common practice to carry a bag of power objects. In some African communities the shaman carries a *gree* (also spelled *gri gri*). In Afro-American traditions, this has been called a *mojo bag*. In the Caribbean, the bag is called the *oanga bag*.

A sacred bundle is a kind of medicine bag, but in a different form. Whereas the medicine bag is often worn, the bundle, which is usually made of animal skin folded over several times with the sacred objects inside of it, is placed in an elevated location in the home. The bundle might be allocated to a clan leader, and the

objects inside of it were thought to have benefit for the entire clan or tribe. Bundles were rarely opened, except for religious purposes. The size could be about 12 inches long but was sometimes larger. The contents were considered sacred and would never touch the ground.

THE POWER OF YOUR MEDICINE BAG

It's not necessarily the objects in the bag that have power, but rather it's the meaning you assign to them. The objects allow you to focus your intent from the deepest crevices of yourself and out into the world. For this reason there's value in creating a medicine bag. It becomes a concentrated focus for all areas of your life. For example, if you desire more abundance in your life, you might consider adding kernels of corn (traditionally these represent abundance) and a quartz crystal (it acts as a magnifier) to your bag. When you're in a relaxed state, remove these two items from your bag, place them in your hand, and hold the intent for a more prosperous life. Then put them back. Additionally, the items in your bag can serve to ground you. For example, if you feel connected to oak trees, then an acorn in your bag can strengthen and ground you.

You may choose to wear your medicine bag around your neck to draw on its power throughout the day; however, if that's not feasible, consider placing it in a pocket or putting it next to your bed. It can be a potent ally when you're going through a challenging situation. You can also have more than one medicine bag, each one dedicated to a different domain. One might be used as a healing medicine bag and another might be for protection, for example. Or, you could have one for your personal life and one for your blessings and wishes for your children. Usually, no one should touch your medicine bag or observe the contents, unless it feels all right with you. If you choose to wear it, it's best to keep it under your shirt rather than visibly on display, unless it is for ceremonial purposes.

A medicine bag can deepen your spirituality, but it also can help to clear negativity. You can lay your bag on any part of your body that's

out of sorts to realign your energy centers. It can even be used in the healing of others by placing the bag on that person's body. Remember to smudge it afterward to reset the energy.

CREATING YOUR OWN MEDICINE BAG

You can use any material you desire to make your medicine bag. Traditionally, they're made from animal skins; however, fabric can make an excellent medicine bag. (I made a beautiful one out of purple velvet for my daughter, Meadow, when she was a baby. She still has it, and it's meaningful for her.) Usually medicine bags range from two square inches to twelve square inches (without the fringe), and they can be decorated in any way you choose. Make sure that every design has significance to you and is not haphazard.

There's not one right way to create a medicine bag. A bag that you've made yourself will carry more energy than one that is purchased. It doesn't need to be elaborate; sometimes humble is best. These instructions are for one kind of bag—though use your creativity to create a bag that speaks to your heart. There are many different possible patterns and shapes available.

METHOD ONE:

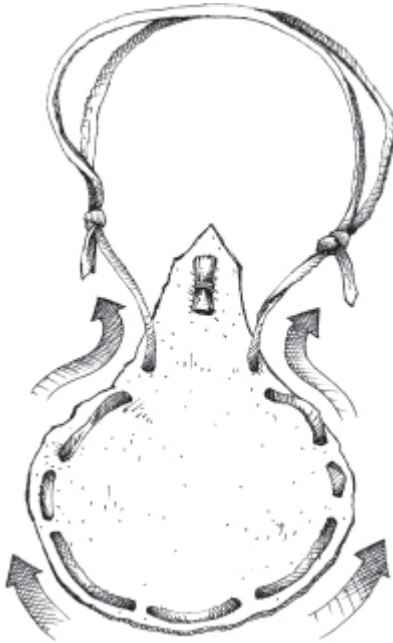
1. *Material:* Your bag can be made of lightweight leather, felt, cotton, linen, velvet, silk, or wool. Every fabric and every color has a different kind of energy, so choose the one that feels best for you.
2. *Size:* A small bag can be just as potent as a large bag, so think about how you are going to use it and where you are going to keep it to help you decide the correct size. For example, if you are going to wear it around your neck, you might want a smaller one than if you're going to keep it next to your bed.

3. *Cut*: Cut two pieces of fabric/leather into rectangles with exactly the same width, but one piece needs to have a longer length by two-thirds. This extra length folds over the top. If the leather is thick, you will need leather-working tools.
4. *Stitch*: Face the front side of both pieces of leather/fabric together and sew all the edges, except the top where the opening is. With thin leather you can use a sewing needle or a sturdy sewing machine. Turn inside out, and you have created a simple medicine bag. You can place a button and create a buttonhole on the flap to hold the contents in the medicine bag.
5. *Strap*: You can add a strap for a fabric pouch with cording or strong ribbon. For a leather bag, consider braiding thin strips of leather together. Make two holes on either side of the flap, put the strap through the holes, and tie knots in the strap to hold the strap firmly in place. Alternatively, you can sew the strap into either side of the bag at the opening.
6. *Decorate*: You can use beads, shells, paint, or whatever feels “right” to adorn your medicine bag. However, whatever you use, it should have meaning.

METHOD TWO:

1. Take a piece of leather, felt, or fabric and cut it into the desired shape (see [illustration](#)).
2. Cut or tap holes into the leather or fabric.
3. Take leather strip or cording, and weave it through the holes.
4. Pull on the cording to create a sack.

5. Add decorative elements on the flap of the bag and tuck it into the cording.



WHAT DO YOU PUT IN YOUR MEDICINE BAG?

As mentioned, there's no rule about what you should or shouldn't put into your medicine bag. Include whatever items are meaningful to you. And know that it's not necessary to fill your bag right away—add things to it slowly over time. You might also consider gathering items that represent various aspects of nature. Here are some suggestions (these apply to a medicine bundle, too):



- *Mother Earth:* You might place a stone you found in a mountain stream. Or include a crystal or a polished stone such as agate, bloodstone, citrine, or moonstone that has special significance to you.
- *Plant People:* Place some kernels of corn, naturally grown tobacco, or bark from a tree in your bag. Some people like to put the “Three Sisters” of corn, bean, and squash seeds together to represent bounty. Cornmeal tied up in a small bundle can also signify abundance in all areas of life. Even dried petals of flowers, herbs, or plants that have meaning for you can be added.
- *Animal Kingdom:* Put feathers, bones, or fur of an animal into your bag. (For example, if you have a beloved dog, the next time you brush him, you could take some of his fur and tie it in a small bundle.) Carved stones that resemble an animal that is sacred to you are also a great way to honor the animal kingdom.
- *Air, Water, Fire, and Earth:* You can include objects that represent the elements or even write the words on small pieces of paper.

- *Creator/Great Spirit/Great Mystery*: You might place a small heart-shaped stone, a small metal Buddha, or a tumbled opal . . . anything that symbolizes the Creator to you will bring potency to your bag.
- *Special and Meaningful Objects*: Perhaps your grandfather gave you a special coin when you were five years old. This might bring the energy of wisdom of the elders into your bag. If it seems untraditional but feels good to you, include it!

One time in my life I needed extra courage, so I put a tiny plastic Xena Warrior Princess into my bag. It might sound silly, but every time I held my bag, I felt courage course through me, and it helped me navigate through a very difficult situation in my life. If you feel a need for protection, as a suggestion, make a small medicine bag that you can wear around your neck, and place within it whatever represents protection to you. Some people use black tourmaline, juniper berries, or special symbols. (I know a man who keeps the Star of David in his medicine bag for protection.)

SMUDGING THE ITEMS/SMUDGING THE BAG

1. Lay out the objects that are going into your bag.
2. Take each one into your hands and then to your heart, focusing on the meaning of each item.
3. Hold your bag to your heart and give thanks for it.
4. With sage or sweetgrass, or any other clearing method that you choose, clear and bless the objects and the bag.
5. Lovingly place the items in the bag and express thanks to the Creator. Ask that spiritual energy and power fill

your bag.

6. At least for one night, sleep with your medicine bag near you. You can also place it under your pillow to deepen your energy connection with it.

Since you'll be adding items over time, it's generally a good idea to smudge each new object before putting it in your medicine bag.

YOU ARE YOUR OWN MEDICINE BAG

In many ways you are your own medicine bag. As I wrote earlier, on the day that the Creator gifted me my spirit name, I heard the words: *You are your own medicine bag*. In that moment I realized that in an even deeper way, a medicine bag isn't just a gathering of objects that represent qualities, abilities, or values. It's energy, and we can access that energy within ourselves. When you remember that all you need is within you and know that there is a divine, sacred energy available to you at any moment, then you know that, indeed, you are your own medicine bag.

Dream Catcher: Mystic Gateway

Although not traditional in most tribal practices, dream catchers are thought to have their roots in the Ojibwa (Chippewa) Tribe. (This was documented by a scholar named Frances Densmore in 1929.) An Ojibwa dream catcher had strands of sinew woven around a round or teardrop-shaped object (often made from small willow branches) into a kind of web thought to be similar to the webbing used for their snowshoes. It was placed near sleeping children to protect them from nightmares. The hole in the center was a kind of mystic gateway to let *bawedjigewin*, or good dreams, through, and the webbing around the hole was to catch the *bawedjige*, bad

dreams. It was believed that the bad dreams caught in the webbing would disappear at first light.

The tradition caught on in the 1960s and early 1970s, and now almost every Native American reservation has people who make and sell them. They come in assorted sizes and all manner of decoration. Some people use them in a more expanded way than just for dreams; they place them somewhere where they can catch the sunlight and say that they help prevent negative thoughts from entering while at the same time ushering in positive thoughts. Here are instructions for making your own dream catcher:

MATERIALS:

- *Hoop:* You can use dried willow or grapevine. Every plant carries different energy. For example, if you use grapevines, think of the sturdy vine with roots that go deep and that survive often in the harshest soils and climates. If you use willow, think of its flexibility. Alternatively, a wood or metal hoop can be used. Be creative. You can even use a shower ring or a circular bracelet. Somewhere between three inches and nine inches in diameter is a good rule of thumb.
- *Lacing:* You can use suede lacing to wrap the circle; you can also use cotton sinew, cording, twine, or ribbon. The length should be at least eight times the diameter. For example, if the diameter is 6 inches, then your wrapping should be at least 48 inches long. The lacing should be no wider than a shoelace.
- *Decorations:* Any kind of decoration can be used. You might want to hang feathers from your dream catcher or add beads to the weaving.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Shape your hoop. If you have dried willow or grapevine, soak it in warm water for 30 minutes, or until it is supple and can bend without breaking. If the material is fresh, potentially you can make the circle without soaking it.

If you have thin grapevines, then you can wrap them a few times and then tie in several places with twine or strong thread so it will dry in a circle. Place this under a stack of books or something heavy to make sure it dries flat.

2. Wrap the hoop. If you're using grapevine, willow, or other natural branches, it's not necessary to wrap it with leather or ribbon. However, if you're using something not natural, then you might consider wrapping it. You may need a few drops of glue to secure the ribbon or suede to your hoop. Make sure each wrap is tight and try not to overlap too much. If you are using sinew or cording, you likely won't need any glue.

When you've completed the circle, take the end of the suede and tuck it under the second-to-last loop to secure in place ([illustration 1](#)). When you're finished, you can also make a loop for hanging your dream catcher with the last bit of the cording, ribbon, sinew, or suede.



illustration 1

3. Choose the string to create the webbing. Make sure that it's thin but very strong. Cotton sinew and thin cording that doesn't stretch both work quite well.
4. Decide what decorative objects you will use. Pay particular attention to the meaning (for you) of each item. For example, feathers on a dream catcher can represent flight, soaring to greater heights, and the Spirit of Air. Beads made of natural stones each carry the energy of that stone. Amethyst beads, for instance, may represent relaxation and spiritual attunement. Colored glass or plastic beads can carry the energy of their color: red beads activate physical life-force energy and represent passion and grounding.



illustration 2



illustration 3

5. Weave the first row (see [illustration 2](#)). As a guide to the number of loops, if your hoop is three inches in diameter, then eight loops will give you the best shape. (There is no required number—do what works for you.) Don't pull the string too taut as it will be pulled tight while you continue to weave. Make sure that the loops are equal distance.
6. Continue to weave (see [illustration 3](#)). You can put beads in between every hitch knot if you desire.
7. Continue around the circle. As the circle gets smaller, pull the thread tighter (see [illustrations 4](#) and [5](#)). A

bead is often included somewhere close to the center to symbolize the good dreams being caught.

8. When you're finished, make a double hitch knot and cut the string. If you choose, add something to hang your dream catcher on, and you can also incorporate feathers or beads as decorations (see [illustration 6](#)). Often one feather is hung from the center, but do whatever that feels right to you.



illustration 4

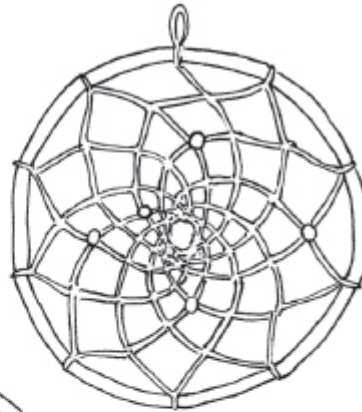


illustration 5

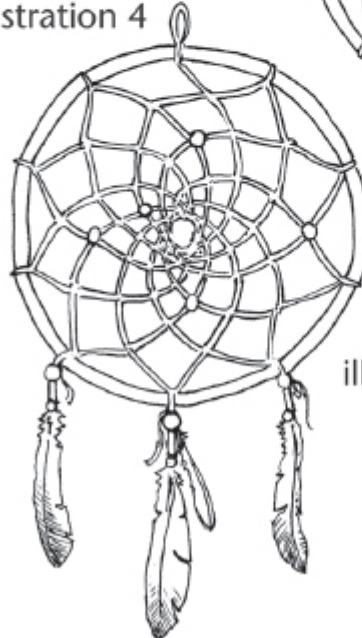


illustration 6

Sacred Vessels: Holding Spirit

My husband and daughter and I were visiting an unpopulated, wild stretch of coast on the Yucatán peninsula a few years ago. As I walked along the water's edge and dodged the waves, something caught my eye. I picked up a shard of very old pottery that seemed to be of Mayan origin. As I continued to comb the isolated beach and the shallow waters, I found many pieces of pottery. Some looked like they'd been fired in the flames, and others had geometric designs that were still evident. Many pieces had barnacles on them from their time in the sea.

As I held a large piece in my hands, my mind traveled back in time to the individual who crafted this pot. I wondered what his or her life was like and what feelings and intention they were putting into the pot as they crafted it. A similar feeling fills me as I look at photos of pottery created hundreds of years ago by my Cherokee forebears (who have one of the longest continual traditions of pottery making in America). Their relationship to their pottery was a kind of connection to creation as a whole.

In the center of our coffee table, which is in the center of our living room, there's a large pot. It's handmade and was fired in an open-air flame, and has burn marks up its side. It's been in that exact spot for the 14 years that we've lived in our current home. Every night, as we retreat into the living room, my husband sits on one side of the pot, and I sit on the other. Although we don't talk about the pot or even usually think about it, it feels as though it's central to our lives. Its presence brings a kind of alchemy to our conversations every evening. Perhaps the pot subliminally evokes a kind of ancestral memory when pots and baskets were essential to sustaining life and used in sacred ceremonies.

Inside that large pot, I've placed many objects from native cultures throughout the world. There are beaded necklaces from my time in Africa, pod necklaces from my travels to Brazil, a Native American gourd rattle, eucalyptus pods from the Aborigines of Australia, several small antlers found in the woods, a number of river stones, small lidded baskets filled with resins from the Middle East, and much more . . . all nestled in a bed of juniper needles. Next to it on the coffee table is another handmade pot that is filled with red sand

from various places in the world, such as the Australian Outback, Monument Valley in Utah, the South of France, and Sedona in Arizona. The red sand symbolizes the blood of Mother Earth and carries a strong life force. This pot was handmade by an Australian artisan. She explained that the carved lizard encircling the top was symbolic of the lizard that was keeper of the dreamtime, and the bowl of the pot represented the dreamtime. This is the pot that I use for burning sage, resins, and incense. (It's especially meaningful to me because of the experience that I had with the Aborigines in which I shape-shifted into a lizard.) These pots hold spirit, and pots in your home can do the same.

POTS AND BASKETS: SPIRIT AND FUNCTION

Spirit and function are deeply interwoven in native traditions. A functional object, such as a pot or basket, can also serve as a sacred object. In addition to carrying things, these can also be receptacles for "medicine" and revered objects. In native traditions there is the belief that everything has a living spirit and pottery and baskets (especially those that were decorated with special symbols) were thought to carry a hallowed energy.



Pots and baskets are not just functional objects; symbols of the natural world are frequently depicted on them. For example, to the Zulu, a basket with whorls or circles means good news and plentiful rains. Interestingly, some designs are born out of a weaver's or potter's dreams. In many cultures, dream-inspired baskets are held in the highest regard. Some baskets are even thought to represent the universe and Great Mystery. In some cultures, baskets were thought to be living things because they were made from "plant people" and thus carried the living spirit of the plants from which they were made. Consider placing a pot or basket in your home with the intent of calling Spirit into your dwelling, and blessings will radiate out in all directions.

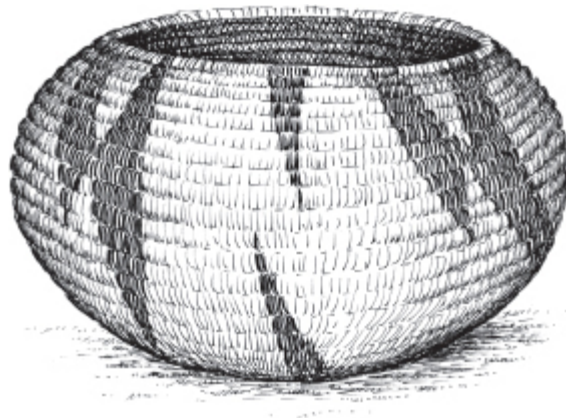
A WEDDING POT OR BASKET

Over the years, I've had the privilege of officiating at a number of weddings. During these ceremonies, I often gift a pot or basket to the couple. As part of the service, we invite each person in attendance to

place their blessings—in either written or symbolic form—into the sacred vessel. As the couple moves forward into their life, they'll carry all of these blessings with them in their pot.

My present-day practice is an echo of many native practices. The wedding basket is an ancient tradition that's still used in some cultures today. As so many cultures have wedding baskets as a central part of a marriage ceremony, perhaps the weaving of the basket represents the weaving together of lives.

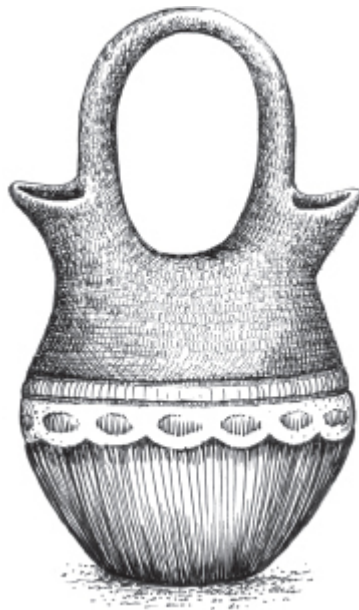
To the Navajo, the center-most point of the wedding basket represents the beginning of the world. This is believed to be where the spirit of the basket lives. The center is always the place of beginnings—it is where all things are birthed and where the couple's life together commences. Every color and design on the basket represents a different aspect of their life as they grow together. In these baskets, there's always a singular pathway from the outer section to the center. This gateway is said to remind the couple that no matter what darkness they may encounter in life, there is always a pathway to the light.



A bride in Zambia, in the Upper Zambezi River region, receives a wedding basket from her mother-in-law, which she, in turn, will pass down to her daughter-in-law. It's not uncommon for these baskets to be passed down for generations. These baskets take about two months of continued labor to create—from cutting the roots of the makenge bush, boiling them to soften them, and then coloring the fiber with natural plant dyes. It's a long journey from its conception to

its birth. In that part of the world, baskets are often one of a woman's most valued possessions.

In Hopi tradition, the bride brings a basket to her mother-in-law's home, piled high with cornmeal. The last loop of the basket is left unfinished to symbolize a long life for her new husband. When the husband dies, the basket is buried with him. In Indonesia, the family of the groom carries red baskets to the bride's family, each one filled with a different gift. The Iban, a tribe in Borneo, use elaborately decorated baskets as a part of a woman's dowry when she marries.



In many traditional Native American weddings, a wedding pot is gifted to the couple. The vessel has two spouts: one spout represents the husband and the other the wife. In turn, symbolically, the husband's and wife's lives mingle in the bowl of the vessel. In a traditional ceremony, the couple drinks a special mixture out of the vessel, which symbolizes the blending of their lives.

CREATING A BLESSING (OR WEDDING) POT OR BASKET

1. Create (or obtain) a pot or basket. Cleanse it by letting it sit in the sun for at least three hours.

2. Decorate your pot or basket using decorations and symbols that are meaningful to you.
3. Hold the vessel in your hands. Then imagine that you are filling it with your love, blessings, and prayers.
4. Place objects into it that represent blessings for yourself, your family, and your home. For example, you can place tumbled river stones into the pot or basket on which you have written the name of each family member. As you place the stone into the vessel say, “[Name of person], may you be blessed,” or whatever feels right. You can also write words that are meaningful to you on each stone, or simply take each stone and place it in the basket with a verbal prayer or blessing.

Anything that is meaningful to you can go into the vessel. You can also cut small pieces of paper and write on each one the blessings you desire (as if they were already received). For example, you could write *Peace and prosperity fill this home*. Then roll each blessing up and tie it with a ribbon or cording to look like a small scroll.

5. The center of the vessel is the most important and this is the birthing place, so if there is anything that you desire to give birth to, an object that represents this should be placed in that spot.
6. Place this blessing pot or basket in an area where the blessings can continue to radiate throughout your home and into your life.

Although there is a learning curve, a special way to create a blessing pot or basket is to learn how to weave a basket or throw a pot on a pottery wheel. Anything that is created with a soulful heart will contain sacred energy within its core.

Tribal Dance: Dancing Your Prayers

When I was in the outback of Australia, I went to a *corroboree* (tribal gathering) not far from Ayers Rock. This is an Aboriginal gathering with songs and symbolic dances. The corroboree lasted for several days. I was there at the invitation of a friend who worked for the Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal Women's Council. For each dance, the dancer or dancers would emerge from behind a kind of screen or branches, their bodies decorated in the traditional designs of that particular dance. At one point I was called up to join a woman's dance. (Men and women danced separately.) Behind the screen I was told to take off my top, as the women's dances were done with a bare chest. I felt exposed, but I took off my top anyway. An old Aborigine woman with very dark skin and very white teeth smiled as she took traditional paint made from ochre and clay and decorated my breasts.

When the music started, my friend from the council, the old woman who adorned me, and I emerged from behind the branches that had been screening us from the others. As an observer, the dances had seemed simplistic, but as I struggled to emulate the dance, I realized that the steps weren't easy at all. However, when I let go of needing to get it right and just listened to the rhythmic chanting, the sound of the didgeridoo, and the cadence of the click sticks, the rhythm carried me away. I felt at once connected to the vast sky overhead and the red earth beneath my feet. In that moment I felt connected to all native dancers, for it was through the dance that we were all connecting with the heartbeat of Mother Earth.

I had a similar experience during my time with the Zulu in Africa. The women felt it was important that I dance with them. They said dancing would bind us together. We put rattles—made from soda-pop tops—around our ankles. The men drummed while the women danced and although I felt awkward trying to match their steps, the sound of the drums took over, and it felt like I dissolved into the land. It felt familiar and even comforting, as if a forgotten memory had

arisen, and I had always danced on the red earth with my Zulu sisters.

Tribal dancing is done for myriad purposes, from the mundane to the mystical. One might dance to celebrate, express daily life, or bring people together. There are also love dances, warrior dances, rites of passage dances, and welcoming dances. Dances to call Spirit can be some of the most meaningful. They might be performed to summon the spirit of plants, ancestors, deities, or even the Creator. Every native culture throughout the world has had a form of tribal dance, and you too can create your own form of tribal dance. It's a way to share feelings and passion, but in a deeper sense, it's a way to connect with the greater forces of the world. Spiritual dancing can also be used for worship and healing. For when you dance to the beat of the drum or click sticks or even recorded rhythmic music, part of your individual identity can seem to disappear as you enter a wider and vaster universe.



TRANCE DANCING

When people hear the word *trance*, there is often a negative connotation. However, trance dancing is simply getting into a kind of meditative state in which you dissolve out of your limited experience of yourself. Using rhythm and body movements, your mind stops and your heart opens. This kind of dance has been integral to ceremony and gatherings in many earth-based cultures for thousands of years. While dancing one might encounter a spirit being or shape-shift into the moon, the stars, an animal, or a plant. One might step into the next realm or have a transformative experience. This form of dancing can be a visible demonstration of reverence.

The San people (Aboriginal Bushmen from Southern Africa) believe that their trance dancing invites supernatural potency into their lives by inviting the Creator to come forward. The women sit around a fire and clap and sing particular rhythms while shamans dance. As the rhythmic sound intensifies, it's believed that their energy begins to "boil" and then expand out of the top of their heads at which time they enter into the spirit world and can summon rain, help hunters find food, and heal those who are ailing.

HOW TO TRANCE DANCE: DANCE THE EARTH/DANCE THE SKY/DANCE YOUR SOUL

Although there are many forms, both modern and ancient, you can create a trance dance for yourself in this way:

1. Put on some rhythmic music. It can be any of the music from native cultures worldwide. You can also play music that is more modern but has a rhythmic, continuous beat. Some modern-day musicians create music specifically for trance dancing.
2. Close your eyes (you can even put on a blindfold if you wish), and allow the music to flow over you. Without

moving, notice the images, memories, and emotions that begin to emerge. Don't encourage them or deny them . . . just watch them flow by and through you.

3. Scan your body and notice where you can feel the vibration or the beat, and then allow that part of your body to respond. Allow that movement to expand until your entire body is responding to the beat.
4. Let go. Don't think about it. Allow the movement to become you. You may choose to dance for a few minutes or a few hours. Do what feels right to you.
5. When you're finished, let yourself gently collapse onto the floor or into a chair. The dancing can serve to open a mystic portal for you to step into other realms and for those in other realms to contact you. With your eyes still closed, observe what messages, images, feelings, and memories arise.
6. Journal your experience and keep it for future reference.

Blankets: Spirit of the Robe

When I was a child, we had some Pendleton wool blankets that I loved. (Pendleton is a blanket company that started in 1863. Early in their history, they traded blankets with Native Americans, and they often use traditional native designs on their wool blankets.) Each blanket we owned had Native American designs on it. Every symbol had a meaning—for example, an arrow meant protection and crossed arrows represented friendship. One time my mother took me aside to tell me about the meaning of blankets to a native woman. She said, "Denise, blankets are a native woman's wealth. If you have blankets, you're a wealthy woman."

As a young adult, I took her words to heart and after my initial vision quest, I purchased my first Pendleton blanket. Then after every major life change, even when I didn't have much money, I bought (or was gifted) another blanket. My blankets chronicle my life. When I wrap myself in one on a frosty morning to meditate, or curl up under one on a cold night, I feel abundant beyond measure.

Every night I sleep on a Pendleton blanket (with a sheet over it). Although it might sound strange, I feel as though my husband and I are protected and embraced by the energy of that blanket. (Anything that you have in your sleeping space affects your energy. A blanket that is respected, and that has been energized, can help you sleep better and help you feel more refreshed when you awake.) I plan on having my blankets for the rest of my life and would like to be wrapped in one when my time on earth is completed. This is how important they are to me.

The gifting and cherishing of blankets and robes is woven deep into the native spirit. To receive a blanket as a gift is a meaningful acknowledgment of respect, friendship, or gratitude. Births, marriages, deaths, and major accomplishments are often commemorated with the gift of a blanket. There is also sometimes a mystical component of the blanket (which would be worn oftentimes as a robe). In North American native tradition, some trade blankets, with specific designs, were also known as "wearing blankets." When a blanket is wrapped around the shoulders (with the two sides joined in front) the artwork on it comes together to create a uniform design. This also completes a circle. Symbolically the wearer is placed at the center of the sacred circle of life.

These kinds of blankets sometimes seem to come to life when they are worn in a ceremonial way. Rain Parrish, a Navajo (or Diné), shared this perception of the mystical aspect of blankets:

As the light from the fire illuminated the moving bodies and blankets [they had wrapped around them], the swirling shapes, lines, patterns and colors sprang to life. I no longer saw blankets, but rather the familiar designs of the Holy People coming to life from the sand paintings. I saw moving clouds, glowing sunsets, and varicolored streaks of lightning, rainbow goddesses, sacred mountains, horned toads and images like desert mirages—all dancing

before my eyes [*Language of the Robes*, by Robert W. Kapoun and Charles J. Lohrmann].

White settlers initially created the blankets—which we now know as Native American blankets—in the 1800s. However, the native people almost immediately embraced the colorful blankets. They used these blankets as trade blankets (trading goods for the blankets and trading blankets for goods), but it didn't take long before they were worn as ceremonial robes. And, of course, they were used to stave off the cold. Long before these blankets arrived with the settlers, there was a tradition of handmade and ceremonial blankets: the buffalo robe in the Plains, the hand-loomed blankets created by the Navajo and Pueblo weavers, and the cedar bark and mohair blankets of the Pacific Northwest. In every instance the blankets and robes were cherished possessions.

Blankets can also hold memories and family stories and can even take on a personality. Older blankets in Native American homes can tell a story. They tell of births, lovemaking, hard times, and joyous times. Sometimes blankets are even named. If you decide to obtain a blanket to use for sacred purposes, over the years it will collect memories and eventually become a kind of record keeper for your life.

INVITING THE SPIRIT OF THE SACRED BLANKET INTO YOUR HOME

1. Obtain a blanket, preferably a new one made from natural fibers. It doesn't have to be a blanket with native designs, but you do need to love it.
2. Cleanse and clear your blanket. You can do this by hanging it outside in the sunshine for at least three hours or by smudging it with sage.
3. You may also choose to sew a tiny fabric compartment into a corner of it to place sacred items, such as a

small tumbled crystal, that you've dedicated to your dreams. Likewise, you can place affirmations written on a tiny scroll to affirm the blessings you desire to absorb during your resting hours.

4. While in meditation, bring your blanket to your heart and hold the intention for wonderful energy to fill your blanket.
5. To gift a blanket to someone (or gift to a couple for their wedding), wrap the blanket around the individual (the couple) and say, "You are embraced in the sacred circle of life. May balance, love, and support fill your life," or any other words that feel right.

Language of Hair: Cascading Power

In Western culture, we love to cut and style our hair. A good cut can make us feel good about ourselves, and it can make us feel confident in the way we present ourselves to the world. I've had both long hair and short hair, and I don't know that I am any stronger, or any more intuitive, when I've had long hair. However, in the varying tribal traditions that I've encountered, hair is given special importance.

When I spent time with the Aborigines in the Australian bushlands, I was gifted a small article of clothing, which was made entirely of human hair. It was an apron-shaped belt. My teacher Nundjan Djiridjarkan told me that the hair in the "apron" contained the energy of the clan members, and it connected me more closely with the people of his tribe. It was gifted as a special and sacred object, and I was told to wear it around my middle whenever I felt I needed protection. There are other Australian Aboriginal tribes that believe your hair carries your spirit, so they don't share hairbrushes or leave any hair behind when cleaning their brushes, lest they leave behind a part of themselves.

Similarly, some native tribes in North America also believed that their hair was connected to their spirit. For this reason, they were careful not to let their hair fall into enemy hands. According to Dr. Anton Treuer, executive director of the American Indian Resource Center, Leonard Moose, an Ojibwa elder, said that hair was like a kind of medicine. If someone's hair were cut, his or her medicine would leak out. Moose said that when he was a child, if someone had a haircut, the parents would use a hot rock to cauterize the "wound" on the child's hair to prevent the medicine from draining away. The cultural belief that there was an innate connection between one's hair and his or her personal strength was shared by many tribal traditions. Even to this day, Hawaiian hula dancers, both men and women, don't cut their hair very often because there is a belief that the hair helps retain *huna* (life-force) energy.

HAIR AS AN OFFERING

During my training with Dancing Feather, he told me that any time I took something from nature to use in a "medicine way," such as herbs or sage, I needed to leave an offering of gratitude to the plant. He said one of the most sacred offerings was to leave a bit of my hair at the base of the plant from which I was picking. One time, gathering sage in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, my scalp got sore from plucking out so much hair to leave as offerings. I've since learned that one or two strands are sufficient.

CUTTING HAIR TO HONOR ONE WHO HAS PASSED OVER

In many native traditions around the world, hair is cut (or grown) as part of tribal mourning customs. Cutting the hair is a way of honoring the loss, and as the hair grows back, it symbolizes the person starting anew from that point forward. In tribes in Nigeria, for example, hair is cut as a sign of respect to the departed.

Shkotay Maingun (“Light of the Wolf”), a Cherokee/Ojibwa from Manitoba, Canada, had her braid cut at her father’s funeral to honor his memory. Her father was a Midewewin Ojibwa holy man. When recounting her experience, she told me,

The Fire Keep [fire keeper] cut my braid at the fire with his knife. It felt good and right. He loved my father, too. Then he placed my braid into the sacred fire that was kept burning for four days and nights. As my hair burned, I offered it to Great Spirit, my father, and all my ancestors to take all the suffering in my heart and enhance our connection for the 13 moons that I would mourn the death of my father. I felt lighter as my hair burned. I felt my father’s joy. For four days, many hundreds of other pipe carriers gathered while the fire was tended at all times. We stayed together with his body. When it was all over, I felt my father’s total peace and freedom.

How we take care of our hair says a lot about us as a human being. It’s not a vanity thing . . . it’s a deep thing. Cutting my braid helped me cope, accept, and move forward. I was no less strong, because I did it with spiritual intention, love of life, and love of my dad. I was raised that how we take care of our hair is very connected to how well our spiritual strength is. It speaks of a person’s energy. It is said that the Power of Life is stored in our hair. It must be kept clean and smudged and blown clean regularly by the wind.

(Note: A pipe carrier conducts traditional Native American/ First Nation ceremonies. During a pipe ceremony, people gather to pray and smoke a combination of herbs and natural tobacco in a sacred pipe. The pipe carrier is held in hallowed esteem by his or her tribe. The pipe and the ceremonies are often passed down through the generations in a Native American family. Years are spent in preparation to be a pipe carrier, until the elder of the tribe passes on the tradition.)

HAIR AS AN ANTENNA

Many native people share the belief that our hair senses the energies around us. This is not a unique belief, as a young Sikh man once told me that one of the reasons that Sikh men have long hair is because it's believed that it gives them more awareness in battle. Some yogis from India declare that since hair grows out of the head, which is the location of our crown chakra, the seat of intuition and cosmic awareness, it makes sense that that part of our body would also help abilities associated with perception.

It might seem impossible that hair could have anything to do with heightened awareness or intuition because science tells us that hair is dead, and the only way that hair can sense is by movements of hair shafts that are detected by nerve receptors within the skin by hair follicle receptors. But, as so many tribes carry the same belief, perhaps our hair does carry deeper meaning.

SACRED HAIRCUT

While many native peoples grow their hair long for spiritual reasons, monks around the world shave their heads as part of their journey to spiritual awareness. There are many different ways to connect with the Divine; whether you choose to shave your head, grow your hair long, or do something in between, the most important thing is that you feel strong, confident, and in touch with your "inner voice." It can, however, be valuable to understand that (potentially) cutting your hair can affect your energy field, even if it's in a very subtle way. So, as a suggestion, when getting your hair cut:

- Choose times when your energy field is good, preferably in the day rather than at night, and potentially not when you are on your moon cycle (menses).
- Try some experiments with cuts to see if you notice a difference. If you feel better, for example, by not cutting your hair during your menses, then consider finding the time of day and month when your energy is strongest to

have your hair cut in the future. And if you don't notice a difference, then do whatever feels best to you.

- Affirm, with every haircut: *I release the past and embrace my future.*
- Whenever you brush your hair, get the sense of clearing your thoughts and aligning your energy.



Whether you discover your spirit name, play a drum, weave a dream catcher, bless a blanket, honor a basket, cherish your hair, or dance with abandon to the beat of the drum, in no small way you are deepening your journey into your native spirit. Additionally, this deepening prepares you and paves the way for understanding the Great Mystery and connecting to invisible but powerful spiritual forces on our planet.



CHAPTER FOUR



GREAT MYSTERY: TOUCHING THE SOUL

It was the middle of the night . . . and someone was in our motel room. My husband was asleep next to me so I knew it wasn't him. And whoever the intruder was, he wasn't making any effort to be quiet. I was afraid and tried to breathe as quietly as I could so he wouldn't know I was awake.

A few hours before, my husband, David, and I had been traveling through Northern California, on our way to Oregon. However, a torrential rainstorm had torn open the night skies and cold rain pounded the road. The rain sounded like a hail of bullets battering the roof of our car. It was dangerous to drive in such a downpour in the dark, so we decided to find lodging for the night. The closest town was called Lakeport, which is in a rather remote area in Northern California. We finally managed to find a small motel that advertised lakefront cottages. As we pulled up, in the rain-spattered light of our headlights, the yellow cottages with white trim looked like they were straight out of the 1950s. In the cozy lobby I expected to peek through a curtain and see a family gathered around a television with rabbit ears, watching *Leave It to Beaver*. We were fortunate that there was a vacancy, and when we finally got into our cottage, we

flopped into bed and quickly fell asleep. It was startling to be awakened so abruptly by the intruder.

I held my breath, as there were more crashing sounds in the room. I didn't know if it was better to wake up David or just pray that the intruder would leave. Mostly I was just scared. Then I heard a voice. "I'm angry! I'm *really* angry! My tules are gone. They took my tules!"

Had a crazy man broken into our room? What was he talking about? *Tules*?

For a long time the raging about the tules continued. David continued to sleep. Why didn't the noise wake him up? It was loud. I was sure someone was in the room, but slowly it occurred to me that what I was hearing wasn't a human being, but some kind of spirit. When I reached out to connect with him with my mind, the spirit began shouting louder saying that he was the Spirit of the Lake and that his tules were being destroyed. He also ranted that in ancient times, the native people of the area used to honor him with offerings and blessings, but now those days were gone and people were taking his tules. (Tules are the tall reeds that grow at the edge of lakes and ponds.)

I didn't understand what he meant about the tules (I barely knew what a "tule" was)—and I had assumed that all Lake Spirits were female—so I was really confused on two counts. But I slowly said, "I'm so sorry to hear this. Tomorrow I will honor you." He was gone instantly. I couldn't sleep after this; it was so real and yet so otherworldly at the same time. I'd never experienced anything like it.

The next morning, to keep my word with the Lake Spirit, I took a cup of water, placed my hand over it, and sent blessings into the water. I then walked out in the rain down to the lakeshore. Offering a prayer, I poured the water into the lake. It was forecast to rain hard all day, but almost as if by magic, the skies opened and a rainbow appeared. It was stunningly beautiful, and strangely, the end of the rainbow seemed to be centered on an area of red earth on the nearby mountain.

To make a long story short, we learned that the land with the red earth was for sale. We made an offer, and thus began the journey to build a new home and eventually move north to what we call Red

Earth Ranch . . . all because a spirit woke me up in the middle of the night.

I knew nothing about that particular lake or about tules, so when I got home I did some research about both to find out what the Lake Spirit was so angry about. I discovered that tules are important in the biogeocycling of nutrients, carbon dioxide and oxygen, and water in a lake. They act as a filtering system for pollutants, and they also act as nurseries for organisms that are the energy basis for an entire lake ecosystem. They provide food and habitat for songbirds, small mammals, and waterfowl. Additionally, they are a buffer against shoreline erosion. I discovered that over the years the tules around that lake has been uprooted. As a result, its ecology has been disrupted and even more algae is growing. In other words, the lake isn't as vital as it can be. Because of the profound nature of my experience, I made a commitment to the Spirit of the Lake that once we moved there I would make offerings to him, and do what I could to help restore the ecosystem.

Curiously the night after we signed the papers to purchase the land, I had a dream in which I saw Native Americans dancing in celebration by a lakeshore with the Lake Spirit . . . and they were all dressed in what looked like reed clothing. After I woke up, I researched it and found that in past times the native people in that area wore ceremonial clothing . . . made out of the tules! They also used tules for medicine, food, clothing, baskets, bedding, hats, and more. No wonder they made offerings to the Lake Spirit who provided the tules. This dream gave me the feeling that the native ancestors of the area were happy that we were relocating there.

My spirit encounter changed the course of our lives, and the adventure of our new home awaits us. When you connect with the mysteries of Great Spirit, it can have a positive effect on your life. In this chapter, we'll be delving into some of the mystical aspects of activating the native spirit. You'll discover how to connect with the spirits of the land, the little people (fairies), and the ancestors; you'll also learn about the profound experiences that can happen when you embark on a vision quest or explore your dreams.

Spirit Beings

Stand facing a mountain such as snowcapped Mount Rainier in Washington State or the renowned Mount Fuji in Japan, and you cannot help but sense the living spirit of the mountain. It feels alive. To an indigenous person, every part of creation is alive, and it's essential to honor and communicate with the individual spirits of nature. There are Wind Spirits; Sea Spirits; Lake Spirits; River Spirits; Forest Spirits; Bird and Animal Spirits; Tree Spirits; Thunder and Lightning Spirits; Rock and Mountain Spirits; Storm, Rain, and Cloud Spirits; and more. They are sometimes given names. For example, to the Maori, *Rōamoko* is the spirit of earthquakes and volcanoes. To the ancient Oyo people of West Africa, *Shango* is the spirit of storms and thunder and lightning. (Honoring him, when thunder is heard, is thought to empower your drumming and your dancing.) To the Shona people of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, after the harvest of millet, the ancestors and the Spirits of the Land must be honored before any of the millet can be eaten.

There is great value in taking the time to honor the nature spirits. If they're around your home, they'll help keep you and your family safe and protected. A home surrounded by strong land spirits feels very different from one in which the nature spirits have receded. There will be fewer break-ins, more goodwill, less anger and upset, and fewer nightmares and illnesses.

Simply taking the time to offer a small blessing, as is done in tribal cultures worldwide, will invite the nature spirits to shower you in turn with blessings. When you honor and respect each of the elements in nature, the place inside of you where they dwell is also blessed.

BLESSING OUR PLANET'S WATERS

Blessing water sources is traditional in almost all indigenous cultures. One of the most moving ceremonies in which I have participated occurred in Thailand, less than two months after the

devastating tsunami in 2004. In Thailand, thanks are given to the waterways and rivers, with floating flower offerings, once a year in November during the full moon. But this was a special blessing ceremony in February because of the tsunami. Standing on the bank of a stream, high in the mountains, a Thai holy man offered prayers to the Water Spirits for blessings for the waters of the world. He humbly asked that the Spirit of the Stream (which would eventually flow to the sea) bring soothing, healing energy to all the shores that it touched. We then took candlelit offerings to float in the stream with the intention that our offerings would bring healing to the areas touched by the tsunami.

It's not uncommon to gift offerings to the Water Spirits. In India it's a regular custom to offer food, fruit, and clothes to all lakes and wells once a year to honor the Water Spirits. In some cultures a small amount of water is placed in a hollow gourd or pottery vessel, and the water is blessed with prayers or by singing into the water. Then, ceremoniously, the water is poured into the lake, stream, river, well, or sea.

Wherever you are, taking a moment to honor the spirits of nature can enrich your life. Here is an exercise to help you learn how to do so:



EXERCISE: HONORING THE SPIRITS OF NATURE

1. *Believe*: The first step to honor nature spirits is to believe that they exist.
2. *Greet the Spirits in Nature*: The second step is to go out into a place that is wild and uncultivated. Be still. In your mind (or aloud) greet the spirit of the mountain, valley, lake, creek, trees, or wind. Your words don't need to be ceremonial. It can be as simple as saying, "Hello. I'm honored to be here." (If you're in the city, under all the concrete is the

earth, so you can still connect and communicate with the Earth Spirit beneath you.)

3. *Make Offerings:* Since we share the planet with the spirits of nature, we need to be in the right relationship with them, especially as we take so much. When we continue to take from the earth without giving something back, it becomes depleted.

The offering is a way of giving thanks for the spirits who maintain the energy of the land upon which we depend. If you're unsure what kind of offering to leave, use the rule of "similar." For example, if you want to honor a mountain, then the gift of a stone or pebble is good. If you're honoring a tree, then a gift of a seed or an acorn is great. If you're honoring a volcano, "firewater" (alcohol) is often used as an offering. Of course, you can leave any kind of offering, such as fruit, berries, wine, alcohol, bread, stones, tobacco, cornmeal, a bit of hair, or even money for any of the spirits. As long as it is done with an open and loving heart, it will be gratefully received.

The "Little People"

When we think of fairies and wee folk, it's not uncommon to think of the misty green hills of Ireland, the windswept Highlands of Scotland, or a countryside garden in England. However, most native cultures recount true stories about fairies or what they usually called the "little people," and there are many similarities between the fairies of Western cultures and those found in native traditions. In fact, the

uniformity that exists among cultures is remarkable. Sometimes the little people are feared and sometimes they're revered for the assistance they give, but in all native cultures, they're respected. Also, in a similar fashion to Western fairies, native fairies can run the gamut from beneficent to malevolent. Another similarity is that they're usually invisible and make themselves visible to very few. Here are some examples of little people in different tribal cultures.

HAWAIIAN LITTLE PEOPLE

When I was a young woman, during my training with the Hawaiian kahuna Morrnah Simeona, I used to accompany her into the forests so she could take offerings of fruit and flowers to the *menehune* king. (Menehunes are akin to elves.) I was never allowed to enter into their realm, so I would stand just at the edge and wait while she conversed with the king. She always came back with her offering platter empty because the menehunes liked the food she brought. Morrnah described them as having long, straight hair growing almost to their knees and being very fond of singing and dancing. Most of their activities were done at night. (This is similar to the way Native American little people are described.) She said that they were the original inhabitants of the island, before the Polynesians came.

MAORI LITTLE PEOPLE

Later in my life, I had a profound experience with nature spirits alone in the bush of the North Island of New Zealand. On a lazy summer day, as I was lying on my back on the mossy bottom of the forest floor, gazing at the soft rays of light filtering down through the trees overhead, I became drowsy and fell asleep. When I awoke, I sat up and was surrounded by what looked like hundreds of very pale, small, white beings. They all looked so sad. They seemed to be aware of me. There was something almost ghostly about them, but I wasn't frightened, only saddened to see them. Then they simply

vanished, like mist dissolving on a sunny morning. I was surprised; it all seemed so real.

The next time I saw the *tohunga* (Maori medicine man), I asked him what they could have been. He told me that they were the *patupaiarehe*—the little people who were also called “the children of the mists.” The *tohunga* said they had pale skin and they used to live in the deep forest, but now they were sad because of the multitude of trees that had been chopped down, so they wandered the landscape hopelessly looking for a home. (Prior to the arrival of the settlers, New Zealand was almost entirely forested. By the end of the 20th century, half of the forestland was gone.) He said that you could sometimes hear a soft kind of music or singing, and then you would know they were near. It was easier to sense them in the mists, he said. Hence, they were called children of the mists, because of their diminutive size. The *tohunga* told me that they must have felt very safe to show themselves to me, because they were rarely seen.

I was surprised to hear of white little people, but sometimes they do appear in different colors. When I was with the Zulu in Africa, my teacher Credo Mutwa talked about the little people that he saw. He said that some were blue in color, and they used to teach him things when he was a small boy. Interestingly, in many earth-based cultures, little people are described as having a lighter hue to their skin, but also looking indigenous with their dress in the prevailing native attire.

AFRICAN LITTLE PEOPLE

In West Africa, the belief in little people is rampant. Natives describe fairy-like beings, bush sprites, and little people that are called the *aziza*. They are thought to live in anthills and silk-cotton trees and are timid and shy, but are also beneficial. They are thought to help hunters, and it's considered very good luck to see one.

In Zulu tradition, the *abatwa* are very tiny fairies who are also reclusive and shy. They are so small that they can ride on the backs of ants. They can only be seen by children, pregnant women, and

sangomas (native healers). They're believed to be powerful warriors and carry poisonous darts with them.

Most adults in the Wolof of Gambia have a story or two about the little people and share these stories with relish. They describe the little people as about two feet tall and dwarflike in appearance. If you see one, it's thought to be very good fortune.

NATIVE AMERICAN LITTLE PEOPLE

Cherokee myths are replete with numerous stories of the little people. They probably have more written material about them than any other tribe. Most of the stories talk of them in beneficent terms, with occasional stories of mischievous or vengeful beings. The Cherokees had three different kinds of little people (*Yunwi Tsunsi*) called the Laurels, the Rocks, and the Dogwood. They believed that fairies, for the most part, lived in rock caves on the side of mountains or in grassy patches on hillsides. The Rock People powerfully defend their land and don't like any intruders. The Laurel People are curious and friendly but very mischievous; for example, if you were making a basket, they might cause you to make a mistake and have to redo your work. And the Dogwood People like humans and try to help whenever they can.

Reporting in his book *Myths of the Cherokee*, James Mooney says that the little people are described as barely reaching a man's knees but are "well shaped and handsome, with long hair falling almost to the ground." The Cherokees also have a fairy called "Little Tsă wa'si" who is said to help hunters with stealth so they can hunt silently and be unseen by their prey.

The Umatilla Tribe of Oregon called the little people "stick people." The Choctaw believed the fairies (*kwanokasha*) helped determine the destiny of a child. And, the Shoshone Tribe called their little people *nimerigar*, and they gave them wide clearance because they felt that these fairies were protective of their lands. They believed that the *nimerigar* would shoot arrows at them if they got too close.

The Iroquois had the *jogah*, who are described as knee-high, usually friendly, but dangerous to anyone who disrespects their homeland.

To the Algonquin the *pukwudgies* (which means “person of the wildness”) are the little people of the forest. They’re described as knee-high or smaller and divided into different types: beneficial, mischievous, and very dangerous (if not respected). The Crow Tribe calls their little people the *nirumbee*. They believe that their tribe was saved once because of a vision the *nirumbee* gave the renowned Crow chief Plenty Coups. To this day offerings are left for the little people in remembrance of their aid to the Crow Nation.

The Mi’kmaq First Nation People of Canada have many legends of little people living in the hills called the *wiklatmu’j*. (They’re also called the Stone People.) Similar to most tribal traditions, they dress and speak like Mi’kmaqs. They’re thought to be incredibly fast and strong. Encounters with them are recounted even into present times. Also, Eskimo Netsilik Inuit report little people in their legends.

Mayans and the Olmecs talked about fairies in a similar way, but theirs dwell under the surface of the land and are cruder than typical fairies. Perhaps a better equivalent would be the dwarves of European lore. Yucatec storytellers share tales about fairies helping to build temples by making the work easier and helping the stones fall into place more easily. In Central America, the Yaqui talk of an ancient race of little people called the *surem* who are described as very gentle and who do not like any kind of conflict or noise.

Interestingly, there are even early stories of white settlers in the Americas encountering the little people. For example, in 1804 the Lewis and Clark Expedition stayed for a time with a band of Sioux on the Vermillion River in what is now called South Dakota. On August 25, Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and ten other men traveled north of the river’s junction with the Missouri River to see the “mountain of the Little People.” Lewis wrote in his journal that the little people were “deavals” (devils) with very large heads, about 18 inches high, and very alert to any intrusions into their territory.

SIMILARITIES OF LITTLE PEOPLE IN NATIVE CULTURES

Although there are differences in descriptions and attributes of little people that vary from culture to culture, the fact that there are so many similarities about little people in native traditions around the world makes it difficult to deny their existence.

Here are some of the similarities:

- *They're shy and difficult to see:* Sometimes only the pure of heart see them; sometimes they appear when someone is in need; sometimes they appear in the twilight or mist. Other times they'll appear when they're irritated about something a human is doing.
- *They live in wild and natural places:* It's an unusual occurrence for fairies to live in a populated area. However, there are rare occasions where fairies can be found in parks or even in gardens, if there's a wild area or if the people tending the area are sensitive to the fey realms.
- *They're usually under two feet tall:* There are some cases when they're taller, and sometimes—but rarely—they can be as tiny as an insect, but most cultures recount little people between a foot and two feet tall.
- *They're very protective of their land:* Throughout the world indigenous people report that most little people are beneficent; however, harm can come to those who don't respect their sacred places.

I personally had an experience of fairy folk being highly protective of their land. Late last autumn I was in Vermont with my husband, David, taking photos of the fall foliage. As we drove down an isolated country road, I saw a glimpse of a pond behind a thick growth of trees. I asked David to stop the car, then jumped out and pushed my way through the trees and brush to get a photograph of the pond. It was a beautiful, almost magical little pond. But as soon as I reached the pond's edge, I heard the words, "Get out!"

I didn't hear it aloud, but as a very distinctive voice in my head. I decided to pretend that I didn't hear it because I really wanted to get a photo. As I snapped a shot, I heard the voice again, this time it was much louder: "GET OUT!" As I maneuvered to get another photo, there was a kind of an invisible push, and I started to slip down the bank. As I started to fall, I snagged my hair in a branch and twisted my ankle. Deciding I'd better leave immediately, I ran back to the car.

I know I should have left as soon as I heard the warning, but I'm glad I stayed to get the photograph. Just looking at it, I can feel the magic of that place. I imagine if I would have entered the area in a slow, conscientious way—rather than just plunging forward without care—my welcome might have been very different. To the little people, my hurried approach must have felt abrasive and disrespectful.



EXERCISE: HOW TO SENSE THE LITTLE PEOPLE

1. Spend time in quietude in a wild place in nature. You can recognize fairy places because there's often something luminous about them.
2. Approach the area slowly, then stand at the edge of the area and "ask" for permission to enter. Do not enter if you get any kind of "no" answer. If you get a "yes," you can slowly approach and sit down.
3. If there's something in the area that's edible (and not poisonous), put a tiny bit of it in your mouth and gently suck on it—for example, a blackberry leaf. This will help attune your energy to the place.
4. Sitting quietly, slowly take out your offering. (Fruit is excellent.) Speak softly, saying that you have brought an offering for them.

5. Allow your eyes to almost close. It's often easier to see them this way. Perhaps you'll see a slight movement or feel as if someone has just walked by you. Sometimes you'll know fairies by a feeling. Trust the feeling. It's as valid as what you see with your eyes.
6. Before you leave, be sure to thank the fairies for the visit.
7. To invite fairies into your garden, make sure that you leave one area wild and never use pesticides, especially in that area. You might even consider creating a fairy house using natural materials. It's not that they live in the house, but they appreciate the effort and will feel welcomed.

Usually I *feel* the presence of fairies rather than see them; in fact, it's rare that I see them. But, just as I completed this section about little people, I looked out my home-office window and curiously, on top of the telephone pole, there was a very thin yet robust little person, about a foot and a half tall. He was aware of me and was doing things seemingly to make me laugh. He would act like he was going to fall and would totter back and forth, and then he'd instantly upright himself and do a kind of jig as if to say, "Ha! Ha! I fooled you!" Amazingly while he was doing this, a large number of birds gathered on the lines on either side of him—and nowhere else. It was as if they were also enjoying his antics. I'm not quite sure why he appeared, but to me it seemed to be a kind of blessing about what I wrote here.

Angels in Native Cultures

Although it seems that every native culture is replete with myths and stories about fairies and little people, there are a scant few instances of what are called angels in Western traditions. However, in the Cherokee lore there is the *nunnehi*, a race of immortal spirit people. In the Cherokee language, the word *nunnehi* means “The People Who Live Anywhere,” but it has also been translated as “The People Who Live Forever.” The *nunnehi* look just like people, but they can appear and disappear at will. When they made themselves visible, they looked and acted just like other Cherokees.

The *nunnehi* were said to be very helpful to the Cherokee and would guide those who had lost their way in the forest, especially during the winter. The *nunnehi* would shelter lost individuals in their warm dwelling until the person was ready to return home. The *nunnehi* were also said to have warned the Cherokee of danger and protected them in times of need. One of the most well-known stories tells how they helped the people just before the Trail of Tears in 1838, when the Cherokee were forced by President Jackson to leave their homeland and walk to Oklahoma, which was 2,200 miles in land and water routes. (The total walk, over nine states, was almost 1,200 miles.)

According to the legend, the *nunnehi* arrived at a Cherokee village before the “removal” and told the people to be prepared to leave in seven days. They said something catastrophic was about to occur for the Cherokee Nation; it was worse than anything that they could imagine. So, it would be best if the people went to live with the *nunnehi*. Seven days later, the *nunnehi* returned for the people and led them to a large stone against a mountain. With ease, the *nunnehi* rolled the stone away, revealing an entrance. As they peered into the passageway through the mountainside, the Cherokee saw an incredibly radiant, lush place. Some people rushed through the mountain passage, without ever looking back. Some were afraid and turned away. The people who remained outside were later forced to leave their homes and go on the long trek to Oklahoma. It’s believed by many that the people who stayed with the *nunnehi* were protected from the United States soldiers finding them, and it’s from this group of Cherokee that some of the present-day Eastern Band of Cherokee who still live on their native land have descended. It’s difficult to tell if

this is a myth; however, Cherokee lore is replete with numerous stories of encounters with the nunnehi.

Although there are some stories in native cultures, such as that of the nunnehi, which seem to mirror the Western view of angels, for the most part, rather than gaining inspiration and solace from the angels associated with the soaring cathedrals of Europe, indigenous people are more likely to find their guidance from connecting to their ancestors, totem allies, nature spirits, or Grandmother Earth and Grandfather Sky.

The Wisdom of Your Ancestors

In many native cultures, the role of ancestors takes the place of angels. Ancestors are thought to be messengers between the earth and the heavens, and can act as a conduit to the Creator, in a similar way to the Christian view of angels. Since ancestors once lived on the earth, it's thought that they can intercede more easily on behalf of the living. They know what it's like to live on the earth, and they understand human challenges and human frailties. Establishing your connection to your ancestors helps instill a sense of continuum that gives you a greater understanding of who you are and where you've come from.

Westerners often think that native people are worshiping their ancestors, but this isn't accurate. *Worship* implies an adoration of a deity or divine being. In earth-based cultures, it's more of a veneration or gratitude for those who have gone before because of the sacrifices they made in their life so that our lives may be better.

In tribal traditions in Africa, the belief in the importance of the goodwill of ancestors cannot be overstated. Some Africans believe that it was Nelson Mandela's ancestors who helped him maintain peace in South Africa. It's said that when Mandela was released from prison in 1990, he went back to his ancestral home in the Transkei to tell the ancestors he was on a mission to liberate the country. It was believed that because he'd paid homage to his

ancestors they were helping him, and this was the reason things went so well for him and that his “power” increased.

Another culture that deeply reveres ancestors is the Maori. When I visited New Zealand, it wasn't uncommon for members of the *marae* to stand up and repeat their lineage. There was pride in being able to trace one's bloodline back in history. However, when I was called to stand up and repeat my lineage, I realized I didn't know much about my far ancestors. I could recount some about my parents and grandparents and a bit about the Cherokee Tribe, but that was about it. I come from a dysfunctional family background, so at first I couldn't understand honoring deceased family members. I wanted to put as much distance as I could between my predecessors and myself. This is not an uncommon sentiment. Anyone who has suffered a dysfunctional childhood can understand how important it can be to separate oneself from family relationships in order to heal.

However, as I saw how important ancestors were to the Maoris, I began to slowly explore what it meant to connect with my ancestors and how it could benefit my life. I came to realize our ancestors don't only dwell in the past; they also live inside of us in every cell in our bodies. Whether we're aware of it or not, our lineage is continually influencing us, and our life destiny is often determined by the things that we aren't consciously aware of. When I honor my ancestors, I also respect that place inside of me where they dwell. And as I explore my ancestry and revere those who went before me, I notice that my sense of self-worth expands.

FORGIVING ANCESTRAL PAST

A woman once told me that her ancestors did some cruel things. She said, “How can I honor them when what they did was so horrific?” To honor your ancestors, you must first forgive them. If you can't forgive the deed (for some acts are unforgivable), then try to forgive the individual. Forgiving your ancestors helps you release negative legacies you may be carrying within you . . . and can keep negative family patterns from being passed down to the next

generation. So even if your ancestors were less than stellar, you can still revere them. (For more information on the ancestor syndrome, see my book *Four Acts of Personal Power*.)

In native traditions, it's not uncommon to believe that once a being enters into ancestral status, he or she becomes wiser and more benevolent. When my Cherokee grandmother was alive, she was stoic and stern. She wasn't the warm and comforting grandma I would have liked. However, after her death, I could feel her presence; it seemed that she was changed. She was gentler and kinder. It's a common belief, particularly in cultures that revere their ancestors, that the forebears fundamentally become their best selves once they've passed on.

CALLING ON YOUR ANCESTORS FOR HELP AND GUIDANCE

Calling on ancestors isn't unique to just native cultures, as people in many Asian cultures light incense at the site of the ancestral altar and then ask for help from their forebears. This is something that anyone can do. An exercise that can be of great comfort is to communicate directly with the spirit of an ancestor whom you admire and ask for his or her guidance. This is a very traditional practice in many cultures. Do not be concerned if you're adopted or don't know your ancestry. There's a subconscious place within you that knows. (In addition, adoptive parents and their lineage can be as much your ancestors as your blood relatives.) Before giving a seminar, I often call on my Cherokee grandmother and ask for her assistance. After I've done so, I'm always filled with a sense of calm and confidence. I've gained as much spiritual guidance calling upon my ancestors as I have from my angels and guides, if not more.

Your ancestors are a largely untapped resource of blessings and support. Even if you don't know your specific ancestors, you can put out a general call. When you're calling on your ancestors for assistance, you can tell them about whatever challenge or problem

you're facing. Your ancestors love to be asked for help . . . call upon them!



EXERCISES: METHODS TO CALL UPON YOUR ANCESTORS

Ancestor Altar: The ancestor altar is a time-honored tradition. The creation of altars is so endemic within our subconscious that even some of the earliest cave dwellers formed altars on the cave ledges with bear bones. Human beings have always made altars as a way of communing with the Divine and honoring what's important to them, which included their ancestors. In present days, the gathering of photos on the piano is a kind of subliminal ancestor altar, but there's power in a consciously created ancestor altar. Simply designate one small part of your dwelling to your ancestors; it can be a shelf, a ledge, or a coffee table. The kind of items on an ancestor altar varies from culture to culture; the best items to use are things that give you a loving feeling when you see them. You can use photos, fruit, flowers, incense, candles, alcohol, or mementos—anything that makes your heart sing. Your ancestors will feel your love.

Ancestor Circle: Embark on a meditation journey and imagine that you're in a beautiful grove of trees. In the grove is an ancient stone circle. This is the sacred circle of the ancestors. It's a place of power and wisdom. You can hear a soft hum that seems to emanate from the earth. A mist forms that heralds the arrival of your ancestors. One by one they appear in a circle around you. Each brings blessings and advice. Even if you can't see them, imagine their presence.

Calling Your Ancestors: Simply say this: "Ancestors, wide and far, I ask you for your blessings, wisdom, and grace. I give thanks for all that is received." They will come. The lessons they

learned in life are absorbed into the collective soul of your ancestors and by accessing one, you access all their wisdom. The blessings of your ancestors may come in your dreams, in the signs around you, or simply in an insight that emerges.

Many people seem to have lost the realization that we're all part of a hallowed legacy, a sacred continuum. We are both the descendants of our own ancestors and, in turn, the ancestors of those who will follow us. As you honor your ancestors and listen to their call, you honor yourself . . . for the ancestral soul dwells within you.

Vision Quest

One ancestral tradition is the vision quest. Most native cultures embrace some sort of sojourn in the wilderness as a way to gain clarity and insight. It's one of the most universal means to gain spiritual guidance, understand one's purpose in life, and gain clarity about one's future direction. Chief Crazy Horse said in 1850, "A very good vision is needed for life, and the man who has it must follow it—as the eagle seeks the deepest blue of the sky."

There's a realm beyond the physical senses. It's an infinite and eternal dimension that transcends form and goes beyond time and space. The search for this domain has gripped the hearts of human beings throughout history. From the early biblical prophets who walked alone into the desert to fast and pray for divine revelation to tribal people setting out into the wilderness to search for a vision, the pursuit of an inner world, beyond everyday physical reality, is one of humankind's oldest traditions.

In indigenous cultures, quests have been used as doorways to enter spiritual realms. Most typically, a quest would be a time of solitude in nature. Through these extraordinary inner journeys,

sacred visions revealed personal direction and life purpose. For those who lived in earth-based societies, a quest was an extension of a religious experience that was based on the earth they walked on, the sky above them, and the beauty of nature that permeated every waking moment. And even though life was seen as one long, mystical sojourn in which the Creator spoke to them through every sunrise and every evening breeze, taking the time alone in nature allowed them to hear these messages in a deeper way. People in native cultures knew messages and signs from the spiritual realms constantly surrounded them, and the vision quest allowed them profound access to the mystery and wonder that existed at the core of life.

I led quests for ten years. The experiences I had with the people who came on those retreats were some of the most rewarding of my life. (I wrote a book with my daughter, Meadow, called *Quest: A Guide for Creating Your Own Vision Quest* to help others create those experiences for themselves.) Going on a quest is a powerful way to reinvent yourself and reclaim a sense of wonder and connection to the earth. When participants arrived, I would hear the same heartfelt concerns: “Who am I?”; “What is my purpose?”; “How can I live a life that matters?”; “What can I do to heal my relationships?”; “How can I get closer to Spirit?”; “How can I be happy?” Each person came wanting to find a sacred space within that was real, honest, and true. As the quest seekers retreated into nature in solitude, shifts of consciousness began to occur. Old memories came to the surface to be resolved. Fear was confronted. A sense of purpose emerged. A heightened state of awareness occurred. The unexplained and mysterious occurred. Understanding of self deepened, and remarkable transformations often took place. For many, the vision quest was the single most significant thing that they did in their life.

Traditionally, Western culture has had no equivalent rite of passage. Our culture does not have spiritual systems in place that allow us to take time to examine our lives, gain clarity about our future, provide a fresh start, or understand the deeper meaning of life.

In Native American tradition, a vision seeker usually climbed a mountain or went to a special place in nature. Sometimes their sacred site, or “dreaming place,” was a pit dug into the side of a hill. Usually the seeker sat in the center of a special circle of stones (a medicine wheel) that created a safe and holy place. Often, the family had used this place for vision seeking for generations. The length of the vision quest varied from tribe to tribe; however, the seeker usually stayed for four days and nights without food (and in some traditions without water). A man named John Lamé Deer, who later became a medicine man, describes his quest near the turn of the century when he was a boy named Johnny Fire:

Here I was, crouched in my vision pit, left alone by myself for the first time in my life. I was 16 then, still had my boy’s name, and let me tell you, I was scared. I was shivering and not only from the cold. The nearest human being was many miles away and four days and nights is a long, long time. Of course when it was all over I would no longer be a boy, but a man. . . .

Blackness was wrapped around me like a velvet cloth. It seemed to cut me off from the outside world, even from my own body. It made me listen to the voices within me. I thought of my forefathers who had crouched on this hill before me . . . I thought that I could sense their presence. . . . Sounds came to me through the darkness: the cries of the wind, the whisper of the trees . . . I felt feathers or a wing touching my back and head . . . I heard a voice that was human. . . . A voice said, “You are sacrificing yourself here to become a medicine man. In time you will be one.” Slowly my fear left me . . . I felt power surge through me like a flood. . . . When old man Chest [his uncle] came for me, he told me I was no longer a boy. I was a man now. I was Lamé Deer [*Lamé Deer, Seeker of Visions*, by John (Fire) Lamé Deer and Richard Erdoes].

A vision quest can change your life forever, by allowing you to discover who you really are. The first thing you need is a willingness and commitment to change. This is imperative. The next step is to take time away from your normal routines and habits. Your retreat can be as simple as renting a cabin in the woods for a weekend alone to examine your life. It can also be creating a retreat in your own home, or going on a quest in nature.

A quest of any kind is a heroic journey. It can be a rite of passage that carries you to an inner place of stillness; it can encourage you to live life more genuinely. Over a period of time I did many different

kinds of quests, and with every one, the essence of who I am and why I am here began to emerge; these solitary sojourns made all the difference.

There are many ways to embark on a quest in present times. One form of quest requires sitting in nature for three to four days and calling for a vision that gives guidance about your life. However, a quest can also be as simple as taking an afternoon to sit in stillness in a forest or experiencing solitude indoors in a specially prepared room.

HOW DO I EMBARK ON A QUEST?

Visions can come in many ways, and calling for a vision can be a lifelong process. However, there's power in setting aside time in your life for it. In the stillness of a quest you can examine your life's recurring cycles and discover where you fit into the great weaving of life.

Your personal quest should consist of eight parts:

1. *Finding Purpose*: What's your reason for going on a quest? Is there an area of your life that needs healing? As you define the purpose of your quest, the universe will propel you in the direction of your intention.
2. *Preparing Properly*: What kind of quest are you going to do? How long will it be? What location have you chosen? Are you prepared? All these questions should be addressed before you go.
3. *Leaving the World Behind*: On a quest you leave the comfort of your environment. When you're always in familiar surroundings, decisions and experiences are often based on repetitive, preconditioned responses to life. When you take the risk of stepping out of the normal routine of your everyday experiences, a fresh, new way of seeing your life can unfold.

Ideally, quests are done in nature; however, spending a day in solitude in your home can create a simple retreat. Taking a quiet day at home to be still, nurture yourself, and listen to your inner messages can have enormous benefits. Make sure that there are no external distractions, such as the phone, Internet, or visitors, so that you can truly “leave the world behind.” It’s good to prepare your home retreat area by cleaning it and clearing any clutter.

4. *Creating a Sacred Circle:* One method for the quest entails creating a circle out of stones, pinecones, branches, or twigs within which you sit during your retreat in nature (or your home quest). Create the circle in a thoughtful way. As you dwell within this space, imagine that you are participating in an ancient ceremony that spans generations and cultures.
5. *Calling Spirit:* As you sit in stillness, call your spirit allies. Call ancestors, angels, guides, spirit guardians, totem animals and plants, land spirits, and the Creator. Open yourself to receive support and healing from your spiritual mentors.
6. *Evaluating Life:* A quest is a powerful time to do some self-examination. Often in modern life we’re going too fast to take time to explore our purpose in life. Here are some questions to ask yourself: *Who am I? What am I? What really gives meaning to my life? What are my priorities? Am I satisfied with my career and my relationships? Am I happy with the way my life is going?* During this part of the quest, you can evaluate your personal history and face fears head-on.
7. *Being Open for a Vision:* The next step is to let go and be completely open to Spirit. Quiet your mind. In the stillness, visions can come in the form of signs or in seemingly random but persistent thoughts. Be open.

8. *Returning Home*: Endings are as important as beginnings. Give yourself time to reenter your life slowly and to integrate your experiences. When you cross the threshold back into the ordinary world, you may feel reluctant to return. Take time to discover what you can bring back into your normal life. Maybe it's something as simple as taking time to relax every day.

Going on a vision quest can be the singular most important event in your life!

Sweat Lodge

Sometimes, after (or before) a vision quest, seekers would go through a sweat-lodge ceremony to gain even greater clarity about their visions. A sweat lodge (or sweat house) is a small enclosure in which hot rocks are brought into the center and participants sit around the rocks as water is poured on them to create steam. The ceremony, along with the heat and darkness, often ignites visions.

The sweat lodge is thought of as a womb, and the hot stones—called “Stone People”—are the coming of life. Heating them in the fire is thought to awaken them and rouse the deep wisdom within them. It takes them to their source, and it's a reminder of being born in fire. I've been in many sweat lodges, and each time the power of the Stone People touches my heart. All stones have innate power, but for me, it's in the sweat lodge that the power of the stones comes alive.



There are traditions of varying kinds of sweat lodges in many native cultures, including Native American, Norse, African, and Mongolian. Some believe that the true origin was essentially for hygienic purposes, especially in the cold of winter when it would be difficult to bathe because lakes and rivers were frozen. A sweat lodge was a way of staying clean and also staying warm. Perhaps, however, there's a deep association with physical cleanliness and spiritual cleanliness because in varying cultures, there's often a spiritual component to these ceremonial bathing experiences. The sweat lodge is said to be Mother Earth's holy womb. It's a place to be reborn.

When I was in Finland, I met a man who was a traditional Lapland healer. He talked to me about the sacred power of their sauna (which in many ways is equivalent to our Native American sweat lodge). He said the sauna was a place to connect with God. While I was there I was gifted a traditional *saunatonttu* (sauna god/sauna spirit) stone statue to place in my sauna and call upon the sacred energies. The Finnish word for the steam created in the sauna is *höyry*; the original meaning of this word was "spirit, breath, soul." The ancient tradition of the sauna continues in Finland and Scandinavia, though for the

most part, it's about cleanliness and communal family time. There are, however, still some who honor the old ways in which the sauna was an opportunity to connect with Spirit. To this day, there's a Finnish expression about sitting as devoutly in the sauna as in church.

Native Americans traditionally constructed their sweat lodges out of bent willow, aspen saplings, or supple branches and constructed the hut in a circular manner—tying together the branches with rawhide or long grasses in such a way that when it's complete it looks like an upside-down bowl. In ancient times the structure was covered in skins and hides, birch or cedar bark, woven reed mats, or other natural materials, depending on the tribe and the area. My tribe, the Cherokees, made their sweat houses from logs, which were covered with mud, clay, and plant material to create a kind of a mound-like structure. However, today, often blankets, rugs, and tarps are used in most sweat lodges.

Even though it's not a traditional Maori tradition, some of the elders with whom I spent time in New Zealand had adopted the Native American sweat lodge and found that there was great spiritual value in it. At least one Maori-based community social-service program (specializing in addiction and mental-health treatment interventions for youth) uses a sweat lodge as part of their rehabilitation program. Another type of sweat lodge was created by the pre-Hispanic indigenous people in Mesoamerica and was called a *temazcal*. It was used for warriors to cleanse the trauma of the battlefield. It was also used for healing and spiritual purposes. Their sweat lodges were permanent rather than the mobile ones created by their North American neighbors. The *temazcal* was made out of volcanic rock and natural cement and was usually formed into a dome.

Traditionally, once a lodge is created, a large fire is built in the open, into which stones are placed to heat. Most sweat lodges face the entrance to the east, the place of the rising sun and the rising moon. The door also faces the fire pit. A “firekeeper” keeps watch on the fire. Usually after smudging, people enter ceremonially into the small dome-like structure and sit in a circle. Once everyone is seated, prayers are said and the lodge leader calls for the firekeeper

to bring the Stone People into the lodge. A “doorkeeper” opens the flap of the lodge door to allow the firekeeper to bring in hot stones. Water is then ceremoniously poured over the hot stones by the lodge leader, which creates a volume of steam. Prayers are said, and songs are sung. Then three more rounds of stones are brought in, each in dedication to the four directions.

You can tell when Spirit is present. It’s palpable. During sweat-lodge experiences, I’ve seen people enter into the “womb” of the lodge and exit transformed. Many miracles occur. A “sweat” (as they’re often called) can be one of the most profound experiences of a person’s life. I know of very few things that can garner the same kind of results as a sweat lodge. If you decide to embark on this tradition, *you must be very conscious about who is leading the sweat.* This is of great importance. Although the rewards can be great, there are many inherent dangers, such as exploding rocks, falling onto hot rocks, severe dehydration, damage from smoke inhalation, and even death. Choose very wisely. Also if you do go into a sweat lodge, know your own limits and be willing to leave if it’s too hot or uncomfortable. There’s just as much power and value (if not more) in taking a stand for yourself, rather than trying to tough it out to please others.



EXERCISE: CEREMONIAL SAUNA

Not everyone has access to a qualified sweat-lodge leader or, for health reasons, is not able to go through such an experience, so one way to garner a few of the benefits of the sweat lodge is to create what is called a “ceremonial sauna.” This can occur in a sauna or even a steam room. If you have access to a sauna, cleanse yourself beforehand (shower or bathe). You may also want to ceremonially smudge yourself. As you step into the steam room or sauna, sit in the darkness. Be still. Call Spirit. Call your ancestors. Give thanks to the four winds. Say prayers for the people. Open yourself for blessings from the Creator. You can do this by yourself or with friends and family.



Dreams

Not everyone can take time (or has the inclination) to go on a quest or take part in a sweat lodge, but in no small way, every night you embark upon a kind of quest as you explore the dream landscape of your subconscious. In Western cultures, dreams are considered relics of the human mind. However, native people used dreams to predict the future, manage psychological problems, and cure ailments. Additionally dreams revealed times and places for hunting and planting, connected one with ancestors and the Creator, and helped determine names. Moreover, creative dances and songs often came during dreams. Sometimes decorative patterns on blankets, paintings, jewelry, and clothing were also dream conceived. These designs were revered above all others because they originated in a dream.

Indigenous people believed that only a thin line existed between the dream and wakeful states, and during the night one could access the Creator, ancestors, totem animals, land spirits, and inner guidance. As a result, they gave great credence to the messages received in dreams.

Each tribe had very specific techniques for obtaining and understanding dreams. However, as our societies have moved further away from nature, we've forgotten our ability to access our dreams as directly and easily as our native ancestors; yet, this ability dwells in our ancestral soul. The study of the use of dreams among native cultures is a very complex one, and this section touches only briefly on a few key aspects.

The ancient Aborigines of Australia believed in the power of dreams. Their rich and profound dream world encompassed much more than the dreams at night and still remains a mystery to the Western world. However, nighttime dreams were considered very

important, and the sharing of dreams and their interpretations often regulated daily activities. Some Aboriginal tribes believed that everything was a dream before the coming of white men. In African tribal traditions, the dreams in which ancestors appear are especially revered. Some say these kinds of dreams are different because they seem more vivid and more real. It's through dreams that their ancestors' advice and guidance could be heard. (For more information about dreams and their meaning, see my book *The Hidden Power of Dreams*.)

COMMON TRAITS OF DREAMS IN NATIVE CULTURES

The following traits are evident in most native cultures that possess a high regard for dreams:

- Dreams are considered vital to success in life. This attitude made it easier to recall and interpret dreams.
- Supernatural figures appear in dreams, granting special powers or giving important information.
- Shamans (medicine women and men) are expected to use their dreams to acquire knowledge.
- Dreams are induced by techniques such as sleeping alone in a power spot or a sacred place, or by fasting.

HOW TO REMEMBER YOUR DREAMS

1. *Motivation*: The important element in remembering dreams is motivation. To acquire that motivation, you must first perceive your dreams as worthwhile.
2. *Record*: Dreams are forgotten very easily, so it's important to record them as soon as you can.

Research has revealed that dreaming is accompanied by rapid eye movement (REM). Sleepers awakened during REM sleep were in the middle of a dream; sleepers awakened immediately following REM sleep recounted completed dreams; and five minutes after REM sleep, sleepers remembered only fragments of dreams. *Ten minutes after REM sleep, the sleepers had virtually no recall.* Thus, it's literally within the first few seconds of awakening that a dream is still vivid in its entirety. Consequently, it's imperative that you write down your dream while it remains fresh in your memory. Keeping a journal and pen next to your bed make it easier to capture your dreams.

Astral Travel

In addition to dream journeys, almost all native cultures have traditions of astral travel, which is sometimes referred to as an out-of-body experience. Astral travel is when your spirit is literally separated from your physical body, and it usually occurs during sleep. It's different from dreaming, as it's thought to be a tangible experience and not simply an image emerging in your mind during REM sleep. In addition to a sense of separation from the physical body, there's a self-awareness that's extremely vivid that accompanies astral travel. Some recount a kind of silver-colored cord attaching the physical body to the astral body during nocturnal sojourns.

The astral body has various names in different cultures: The Hebrews call it *ruach*. In Egypt, it's known as *ka*. The Greeks knew it as *eidolon*, and the Romans called it *larva*. In Tibet, it's referred to as the *bardo body*. The ancient Hindus called it *pranamayakosha*. Buddhists referred to it as the *rupa*. In Germany, it is *Jüdel*, *Doppelgänger*, or *fylgja*. Ancient Britons gave it various terms: *fetch*, *waft*, *tisk*, or *fye*. In ancient China, it was *thankhi*. The *thankhi* left the

body during sleep, and records from that time indicate that others could see the astral body. Many of these ancient Chinese teachings were discovered on 17th century wooden tablets describing the phenomenon of these out-of-body experiences.

Some in the scientific community explain astral travel as an ancestral memory from the days when—according to Darwin’s theory—our predecessors were either aquatic or airborne creatures. Psychologists refer to astral dreams as a type of depersonalization, or a means of avoiding being grounded in normal reality. However, anthropologists have found that astral travel is a common event, deeply rooted in indigenous cultures. The beliefs of the astral traveler determine the pattern of his or her experience. For example, in Eastern Peru, the shaman imagines he’s leaving his body in the form of a bird. Whereas some Asian tribesmen view the silver cord as a ribbon, thread, or a rainbow. Africans perceive it as a rope, the natives of Borneo, as a ladder. Regardless of how the phenomenon is defined, it appears common among astral travelers that a type of cord is viewed as a connection between the astral and physical body.

THOUGH THE BODY IS IMPRISONED, THE SPIRIT IS FREE

Astral travel isn’t uncommon in Westernized countries. We often have out-of-body experiences yet fail to recall them. (In fact, during sleep, the sensation of a quick jerk may be indicative of a rapid astral reentry into your body.) However, native tribes take out-of-body experiences for granted.

I mentioned in the Introduction about meeting a revered Aborigine elder, after I gave a lecture about dreams and astral travel in Australia. When I first saw him, he was wearing traditional kangaroo-skin clothing. Part of his upper body was exposed, showing long, deep scars across his chest made during the ceremony that marked a young boy’s transition to manhood. (Ash had been rubbed in the scars as they were healing to make the scars more pronounced.)

“I heard there was a white woman here from the States talking about dreams and astral travel. I wanted to hear what she had to say,” he said.

“Well, what did you think?” I asked, curious about his opinion.

He replied, “Everything you said was accurate, especially what you said about astral travel. All the old fellas travel in this way; it’s how we stay in touch with each other over the long distances that we live. In fact, we can tell who visited us in the night because we each leave a dusting of the earth from our area. Every area has a different type of soil, so it’s easy to tell where the dust came from. But the young folks have forgotten the old ways.”

He went on to explain that as the senior elder of his tribe, he visited young Aboriginal men in prison and taught them astral traveling. “I teach them how to travel, so even though their bodies are imprisoned, their spirits are free,” he said.

Australian Aboriginal elders, Native American shamans, African sangomas, and many healers in native cultures throughout the world practice astral traveling. Numerous esoteric religions and philosophies are based on this experience.

TRAVELING BY THE CLOUDS

When I was chatting with Shkotay Maingun (Light of the Wolf), a Cherokee/Ojibwa from Manitoba, Canada, she said that if a traditional healer was not able to physically travel to someone who was in need of healing, he would “travel by clouds.” She said the journey was often arduous and even exhausting to the medicine person, and they needed substantial training to be skilled at this ability. The pipe carrier would travel in a ceremonial way and enter via the sacred spirit tree in the center of the home. They could not get into the home if they didn’t enter through the tree. (Every home is said to have an invisible, yet very real spirit tree at its center.) Also, the patient needed to prepare for the visit by sleeping with tobacco under their pillow for four days. Additionally, tobacco and feast food

must be laid out as a gift to the spirits who accompany the healer. Shkotay explained that powerful healings could occur in this manner.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM ASTRAL TRAVELING?

Here are some ways to tell if you have been astral traveling:

- *Flight:* Often astral travel dreams have an aspect of flight in them. Flying dreams, with your arms outspread, or floating over a terrain can be an astral dream. Dreams of flying or of being in an airplane frequently accompany out-of-body experiences.
- *It feels real:* Astral traveling feels more real than ordinary dreams.
- *Believing you could fly as a child:* Research indicates that people, who as children, believed they could fly, or liked to jump off trees or roofs, have a tendency to report astral dreams more often than others.
- *Power lines:* The astral body seems to be affected by electromagnetic flows. A very unusual kind of “dream,” which is usually an astral dream, is when you find yourself floating above or below power lines, especially when you can’t seem to get above or below them.
- *Vibration:* You’re aware of a kind of vibration, hum, or tingling feeling, especially just as you are falling asleep.

There appears to be no research indicating that damage results from consciously leaving your body. In truth, it’s a very natural occurrence. It’s interesting to note that when you’re having an out-of-body experience, you don’t experience time or space as you generally do. You may find yourself slightly ahead or behind of temporal space.

Another unique phenomenon you may notice—when you first leave your body—is that you seem to remain very much in your present physical form. However, the longer you're separated from your physical body, the less delineated the boundaries of the body become, and your “being” appears to transcend into a cloud-like vapor or some other amorphous substance.

FACING THE FEAR OF AN OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCE

One of the biggest blockages to astral travel is fear. Even the most intrepid of us will discover, upon deeper examination, that at some time we've come face-to-face with the wall of fear regarding separating from our body. First and foremost is the fear of death—the frightening notion that if we're separated from our physical body, perhaps we'll die. Our automatic reaction may be to get back within the physical body quickly because this is where our life is, in the physical. We tend to have this reaction in spite of our emotional attitudes and intellectual thought processes. Only after repeating the experience many times can we hope to release the fear of death. It's much like beginning to swim and eventually realizing that your body will float—that you won't drown.

Another common fear is “Will I be able to get back into my body?” or “Will something occupy my body while I'm traveling?” I can say with absolute certainty that you will return to your body. There's abundant evidence that those who experience astral travel are always able to return safely. Also, if you are concerned about entities and your body (which are almost never a problem), imagine an egg-like shield surrounding your body before you go to sleep. This simple visualization makes sure that all is well.

HOW TO ASTRAL TRAVEL

1. *Relax*: As you're falling asleep, relax and enter the space between wakeful and sleep consciousness. This

is a very delicate balance. It's where you're not yet asleep but are no longer awake.

2. *Focus*: As you're in this very relaxed place, with your eyes closed, focus your awareness outside your body. Imagine that you're outside your body touching a far wall. If you experience a tingling sensation or hear a vibration, simply allow the vibrations to increase in frequency. This will occur until the frequency is so high that you'll be almost unable to perceive it. Don't be concerned if you don't sense a vibration, not everyone does.
3. *Imagine*: Imagine gently pushing against the wall. Then begin to increase the pressure until it feels as if your hand or arm is actually going through the wall. Then allow yourself to slip off to sleep.
4. *Explore*: Once you've learned to leave your body while you're sleeping, you're free to explore and examine anything and any place you desire. Simply direct your consciousness to an area or a person and you may find yourself there. When you wish to return to your body, simply imagine moving either your fingers or your toes in your physical body. This will immediately bring your spirit back into your body.
5. *Be gentle with yourself*: Sometimes after long periods of practice without attaining any results, in that moment when you least expect it, you'll experience your first conscious out-of-body journey.

Being Invisible

Teiorahkwathe Rob Lahache, a Mohawk wilderness outfitter, describes what it means to become invisible:

It is not so much that we become invisible; rather, it is more like becoming a part of the landscape. We accept our place and our part in the surroundings so much so that we no longer look out of place. As one blade of grass blends with the others, or flowers merge with the grass, the stones, and the trees. A deer does not look out of place on this canvas, nor should man. All things can hide or be seen by their choosing once we learn the lessons of harmony with our surroundings.

In life there are times to be seen and shine brightly in your own light, and there are also times when there's value in not being seen. If, for example, you want to truly experience the consciousness of the forest or "see" the elements, or glimpse the little people and spirits of the land, it's valuable to know how to become invisible. The ability to be invisible has been a part of indigenous practices for thousands of years. All hunting cultures practiced forms of invisibility; they needed not to be seen by their prey so they could sneak up on them. It was more than just being silent—it was a kind of dissolving into the environment.

There are records of invisibility skill in such diverse groups as the Rosicrucian of 15th century Europe and shamans, Aborigines, and the indigenous peoples of North and South America. Additionally, the Hindu Upanishads taught the art of invisibility. And, the Vodoun cultures of West Africa also practiced invisibility. In some cultures, it's a survival skill. A woman once told me that she'd met a young man from rural Ghana who said he could make himself invisible. When she asked him how this happened, he said it was very simple. "Suppose a large elephant is charging toward you. You need to become invisible. So—*poof!*—you're invisible." She said that he stated this with complete sincerity, and she believed him.

Being invisible doesn't mean that you're not there; it means that you aren't seen. Imagine being in a room or a shop with a lot of objects. How much do you actually see? What is, more or less, invisible to you? It's not that some objects aren't there; you just don't see it all. So in the case of the charging elephant, the man from Ghana was physically there, but the elephant simply didn't see him.

EXERCISE: HOW TO BE INVISIBLE


Method 1: *Project your energy and your awareness forward.* It's like you're anchoring your energy elsewhere. For example, perhaps there is a house near you that has a dog in the yard that barks whenever anyone walks by. You can practice becoming invisible by projecting your energy a block ahead, perhaps to a tree. Imagine that you are touching the tree and intimately looking at it. "Feel" that you are next to the tree. Doing this you should be able to walk by the dog unseen. (Hint: if you stop for a moment and congratulate yourself for how well you're doing, the dog will probably see you.) Have you ever heard someone who was in an accident say, "But I didn't see them!" This is very common because sometimes when people are driving, they're thinking about where they're going or their mind is somewhere else, and because of this, they seem invisible.

Method 2: *Become your environment.* Be still. Breathe slowly. Become whatever is around you, and meld into your environment. Let your individual personality dissolve. Connect with the greater whole. For example, become the clouds, trees, or the squirrel teetering on a branch. Expand your awareness so that you're not limited to your body. Blend in so much that you don't stand out, wherever you are, even if you're in an environment with people or in a crowd. If you want to become "visible" again, hit your heel rather hard on the floor or the ground, and this should bring you back.

Method 3: *Walk in a slower, softer, more considered way.* Match your movements to the cadence of the forest. This technique is especially valuable if you want to go into nature and encounter wildlife or little people. In life we usually have a particular fast, clipped kind of gait to get from place to place. The challenge is when we take that same gait into the forest, the

animals and plants of the wild often find this kind of movement jarring and intrusive.

One of the very few things that my mother taught me about the Cherokee traditions was a special kind of walking to move stealthily in the woods. (I imagine that kind of walking is used in all tribes, not just Cherokee.) She said that I should take shorter footsteps, and walk toe to heel (rather than go heel to toe as we do in Western culture). She asserted that my weight should roll on the outer edge of my foot as I walked. She told me that this kind of walk would get me into the rhythm of the natural world around me. Also, you can “see” more because you’re going more slowly.



When I told some people I was doing a section in this book on invisibility, they were dismayed because in their own lives they’re trying hard to be more visible and become noticed, especially for a few that were entering into their elder years. They felt that people disregarded them or just didn’t see them. My suggestion is this: if you want to be more visible in your life, stand tall and imagine that your energy field is expanding in all directions. Imagine that your feet are strong roots planted in the earth, and your majestic branches are reaching high . . . and that you are a *big* energy. This usually works well. However, even if you want to be more visible in life, there’s value in developing the mystic ability to become invisible. It’s a skill that teaches you how to moderate your energy field, which in turn allows you to more easily traverse between this reality and the next, as the shamans of ancient times did.

Shape-Shifting

“Shape-shifting” is a tradition that exists in most native cultures. It’s the metamorphosis of a person into an animal or other form. In

many traditional cultures, it's still practiced today, and there's value in learning to do this for yourself.

One warm autumn afternoon, I sat by a river that flowed through the mountains of New Mexico with my friend and teacher, Dancing Feather. As we watched the meandering waters, he casually mentioned that sometimes he became a fox. He said his father and his grandfather could do it, too. Although I have Cherokee blood, being raised in a Western culture made me a bit skeptical, so I asked, "Dancing Feather, do you mean that you go into a trance and then *imagine* you're a fox?"

He looked at me and was quiet for a long time. Finally, he replied, "No, I actually become a fox."

I was taken aback. I knew that Dancing Feather always told the truth, yet my Western upbringing made me uncertain that one could actually turn into a fox. So many questions filled me. What actually happens during a shape-shifting experience? Why have so many people from the earliest times believed that a person could change shape? And what is the value of such a metamorphosis?

There are many theories about shape-shifting. Some scientists believe that there's a neurological basis for it in the mammalian brain that sits at the top of the spine. (We share this primitive core with other species, such as the ape and the prairie dog.) Some believe that this part of the brain conceals primal powers that our ancestors knew how to tap into, but we've long forgotten. Carl Jung postulated that there was a collective unconscious shared by all humans, a repository of all wisdom contained in archetypal images that also could explain shape-shifting.

I've met elders in native cultures who attest to the fact that shape-shifting is not just an exercise in creative visualization—it's an actual metamorphosis. There's reason to believe that they're right. In Western thinking, we believe that the reality we normally experience is the only reality. However, there are a multitude of equally real, equally viable realities surrounding us. The fact that we don't see them doesn't mean that they're not real. Here's an example that might help explain this: Imagine that you lived in an isolated area and had a radio that was locked onto one station, maybe only classical, country and western, or jazz. If that's all you ever heard,

you would tend to think that that was the only radio station there was. All the other stations are in the room; it's just that your radio is locked onto only one station. However, if you were able to turn the dial one way or another, you'd be privy to a vast number of stations. It's a rough example, but it can help you understand about different dimensions.

There is everyday value in employing these techniques, whether they are journeys in your imagination or you indeed enter into other realms. Every shape-shifting experience will bring richness to your life's experiences. When you imagine that you're an animal (or plant or stone), you can begin to experience your life from a different perspective. Seeing the world through the eyes of a sparrow or even through the experience of a pebble will expand your boundaries, and this in turn allows you a wider worldview. When humans become myopic and can only see the world through the limited perspective of their own experience, they fall prey to prejudices and judgments, which can be damaging to them as well as to the universe around them.



EXERCISE: HOW TO SHAPE-SHIFT

1. Close your eyes and allow yourself to become deeply relaxed. As a suggestion, have a friend drum a very steady, continuous beat. (This is a traditional method to shape-shift.) Or play music designed for relaxation, which can help you enter into an altered state of consciousness.
2. Imagine that your body is metamorphosing into another form. It can be anything you choose. Take time to experience fully how that other being feels.
3. With your eyes closed, allow your body to move subtly, almost imperceptibly, while feeling yourself changing into another shape.

4. Really imagine that you've become that animal, plant, mineral, or even another person. Involve all your senses. Imagine what you would smell, taste, hear, and feel. For example, if you become a wolf, imagine having an acute ability to smell. If you become an eagle, imagine your eyesight to be very sharp and farseeing.
5. Afterward, while it's still fresh in your memory, make notes about your experience.

When you can see the world through the experience of something else, it deepens your compassion profoundly. For example, if you've had a terrible argument with your spouse and you shape-shift to view things through his or her eyes, you might find that your anger subsides. Or if you're depressed because you were passed over for a job promotion, you might shape-shift to experience life through the eyes of a robin and ultimately realize that the universe is much more vast and wondrous than the arena of your job. Your depression pales in comparison to the joy of flight and the exhilaration of bursting into song.

Sometimes I imagine myself seeing through the eyes of another person. When I can see the world through his or her eyes, it allows me to have greater compassion and understanding. I've found this particularly helpful when I've been having a challenging time with others. When I view the world through their eyes, I'm usually less critical of them.



Activating the native spirit within you means that you recognize that we live in a mysterious, splendid universe. You know that Creation is filled with spirit beings, land spirits, little people, angels, and ancestors; and you know there are ways to travel into these

realms through vision quests, storytelling, dreams, astral traveling, and shape-shifting. Once you step into a native perception of reality, the universe becomes much richer and fuller. In a very practical way, this allows you to see the truth in life. Instead of believing what you hear and see, more often you believe and trust what you feel and know in your heart. You'll find yourself being aware of the deeper truths in life and making decisions accordingly. This can positively transform your life.



CHAPTER FIVE



RIGHT RELATION: LIVING IN SACRED BALANCE

“I think one of those ‘End of the World’ people came onto our porch last night and left us a message,” said my husband, David, as he came into the house a bit amused and plopped down the morning’s newspaper on the kitchen table.

“What? You’re kidding!” I replied, as I poured coffee for our ritual of reading the newspaper and drinking coffee together to start our day.

“It’s the strangest thing,” he said. “There’s a large cardboard box on the porch that has writing all over it—something about earth changes, the end of times, and fiery devastation. You know, it’s the stuff that ‘The End Is Coming’ people always write about. But it’s strange that they left us a cardboard box instead of a pamphlet.”

I suddenly froze, coffeepot in midair.

“Um . . .” I gulped. “Actually, I think it was me. I think I wrote all over the cardboard box in the middle of the night . . . and then completely forgot about it.”

“What are you talking about?” David said, sounding confused.

I suddenly remembered what had happened. In the middle of the night, I’d had a powerful dream. It was so real . . . and it came with a commanding and seemingly prophetic message. I was acutely

disturbed by the dream and had stumbled in the dark onto the front porch to get some fresh air.

There was a cardboard box next to the front door that I'd left there the day before on its way to the recycle bin, and curiously there was also a pen that had been left on the porch. In the dim light of the street lamp, sitting on the porch in my pajamas, I grabbed the pen to write down the dream. I furiously filled all sides of the cardboard box. I wanted to capture all of it, as it seemed of great importance.

After I had scribbled the dream on the box, I went into the house, got back into bed, and fell asleep. When I awoke in the morning, I had no memory of the dream or of having written it down. However, I was grateful for my scrawling on the cardboard box to remind me of my nocturnal message, which continues to be one of the most profound dreams that I've ever had in my life.

My dream took place in the future. I was floating high above the earth, and as I looked down at our planet, something terrible seemed to have happened. I didn't know what it was, but there was heat and fire . . . and so much suffering. As I floated closer to the earth, I could see through the ceiling of a house with two children in it. They seemed to be aware of me, and they both looked up pleadingly, as if to say, *Please do something*. There was more to the dream, but the overall sense was of despair and urgency. The dream felt like a plea to do whatever we could to avert this possible future.

I was also aware, in my dream, that what I saw was a strong possibility for our collective future, *but it wasn't carved in stone*. I knew that our planet's potential destiny could change, but it would take a shift in consciousness. It would take living in "right relation." And I knew that each of us could make that difference.



Here's what I know: At this moment, we stand at the advent of the most exciting time in the history of our planet. We hold in our hands the opportunity to shape planetary destiny through our actions, our thoughts, and our dreams. The potential for momentous change has never been greater, yet the accompanying responsibility can feel overwhelming. It's easy to feel hopeless in the onslaught of

discouraging facts and slide into fear, apathy, and inaction. But these attitudes, although understandable, are a luxury we can no longer afford.

In the 24 hours since this time yesterday, over 200,000 acres of rain forest have been destroyed in our world. Thirteen million tons of toxic chemicals have been released into our environment. More than 21,000 people have died from starvation, most of them children. And 150 to 200 plant and animal species have been driven to extinction by the actions of humans; this is 1,000 times the natural rate, say biologists. *And all of this since yesterday.*

The ecological disintegration that is occurring in the environments around us is echoed in the inner landscape of the soul. Many of us sense that our inner life has become impoverished. We hunger to once again feel connected to the forces of nature and the sacredness of life. We yearn for a viable connection to the mountains, the trees, and the sky. In the deepest crevice of our being, the soul is searching for this connection, listening for it, and sending out tentative tendrils of energy to find it.

In spite of our apparent disconnection, however, there still exists a link intimately connecting our soul to the natural world. But this umbilical cord connecting us to the lifeblood of the earth is stretched so thin that it's in danger of severing. It's now more urgent than ever that we strengthen this cord so that vital energy can once again surge through it from the earth to us and back again.

Most people in Western cultures see the world as containing separate and unrelated things. They don't view themselves as a part of nature; rather, they view themselves as something greater than it. Hence, as a culture, we don't usually consider the ecological impacts of our actions. We don't realize that every action has a filament that connects it to the rest of the world. There's no doubt that the challenges facing us are real. The problems that threaten the well-being of our species and our entire planet are large and immediate.

The news media daily presents us with information that's both frightening and true. Pollution, wars, environmental destruction, global warming, nuclear fallout, oil fracking, pandemic flu, Frankenfoods, invasion of privacy, overpopulation, GMOs, the decimation of endangered lands and animals . . . we're constantly

confronted with evidence of current and impending crises. However, less frequently are we reminded of the inspiring efforts that are being made to turn the tide. It's important to honor these successes because they encourage faith and belief in the future, *and our beliefs will be a powerful force in determining whether we move forward into a bright future or one filled with global devastation.*

The inner beliefs that we hold individually (and as a culture) dramatically affect our lives. Our current Western view of the world is laying waste to the environment as well as to the relationships that we have with each other and with the land. *But beliefs can change.* Kindling the native spirit within you means that you live in right relationship with the forces of nature as well as with other human beings. It's not always easy in a world that is increasingly separating us from the organic and natural flow of the universe, but it's worth the effort; even one person can make a difference. It only takes one lighthouse to safely guide ships to shore, and just one candle to illuminate a dark space. *You can be that light for others.*

Charlie Soap, who is a Cherokee advocate, producer of the film *The Cherokee Word for Water*, and husband of former Principal Chief Wilma Mankiller, said this about his tribe's way of living:

Long before the United States existed, the Cherokee people had a society based on democratic principles. They were guided by the spirit of balance between self and community, elders and youth, and men and woman.

Living in balance and in "right relation" is about being in a respectful relationship and being in balance with all dimensions of life, from people, to plants and animals, to the entire planet and beyond—and you'll learn ways to practice this in this final chapter. You'll also discover ways to step into your role as a sacred Earthkeeper, as well as understand the potency of ceremonies and rituals for living in balance. In the deepest sense, you know how to live in right relationship with all aspects of your life. The idea of living in right relation is endemic to the entire native way of life. At its core, living in right relation is about a profound shift of identity . . . it's about merging and melding with the natural world, rather than feeling separate from it.

When you kindle the native spirit within you, you'll begin to see the universe as it truly is . . . spiraling, interwoven patterns of energy. Beneath a staid appearance of separateness lies a vibrant, unified field of energies that coalesce in and out of solidity and form. You understand that Earth, in all her facets, is alive. This is not just a romantic notion. Earth has a consciousness and awareness. We are her kinsfolk. In speaking about the traditional Lakota right relationship with the land and animals, the respected Chief Luther Standing Bear said this in 1933:

Kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky and water was a real and active principle. For the animal and bird world there existed a brotherly feeling that kept the Lakotas safe among them, and so close did some of the Lakotas come to their feathered and furred friends, that in true brotherhood they spoke a common tongue.

The old Lakota was wise. He knew that man's heart away from nature becomes hard; he knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans, too. . . . In the Indian, the spirit of the land is vested; it will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm [*Land of the Spotted Eagle*. Boston and New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1933].

Becoming an Earthkeeper

Stepping into your role as an Earthkeeper means that you begin to live in "right relation" with the world around you. You walk in harmony with the natural world, and you literally feel the pulse of the earth within you. And as a result, the spirit of the planet blossoms in your soul. The rivers are your blood; the wind is your breath. You'll begin to sense the world around you in a different way. Your awakening as an Earthkeeper will be palpable. In unseen yet tangible ways, you'll sense the profound effect you have on others and the planet as a whole.

One small shift can change everything. As John Muir said, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." One single shift can have far-reaching results, whether it's in the physical or spiritual realms. When one stone is

added or subtracted from a stream, it can forever alter its course. A similar thing also occurs in consciousness. If even one person shifts their consciousness and activates their inner native spirit, the world changes. In the Aboriginal worldview, everything leaves a record in the land. Every meaningful life event and every activity creates a kind of vibrational echo that can be felt far into the future. Your consciousness counts. As you plant seeds of compassion, love, and support, they will blossom for future generations.

Here's an example from the natural world of the impact that one shift can make. By 1926 all the wolves in Yellowstone National Park had been killed. As a result, elk and deer proliferated without their natural predators. Since one thing had been removed from the ecosystem, the entire ecology changed. Then, between 1995 and 1997, 41 wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone. Although this was a small number of wolves for such a large area of over 3,000 square miles, something remarkable began to happen. An amazing explosion of biodiversity occurred as a result. Wolves are predators and they take life, but they also give life to an environment. When there were no wolves, there were too many deer and elk and they overgrazed the valleys. As soon as the wolves arrived, elk avoided valleys, where they would have been easy prey; so bushes, flowers, plants, and trees grew. Aspen and willow groves sprung up where there had been almost barren land.

The landscape was dramatically altered in just a few years. The new trees provided cover for large numbers of birds, and the berries on the trees provided additional food for the bears. The rivers no longer had their banks trampled down by the elk, so pools formed, and the rivers became more fixed in their course, and the water became clearer. Beaver then increased their dams; and more otters, muskrats, and ducks moved in. The wolves also hunted some of the coyotes, which meant more mice survived the appetites of the coyotes, which meant more bald eagles and hawks that eat the mice. And the dwindling population of foxes increased, because there were fewer coyotes to hunt them. One small shift made a *huge* difference.

In native tradition, there's a continued awareness of the effect of our actions on the generations ahead. For example, one should

never make a major decision without considering the effect on the seventh generation to follow. How very different our world would be if we all adhered to this way of thinking. We would still have lush rain forests, clean water, and clear air. These are physical things, but the native consciousness and awareness that we cultivate within ourselves is also a part of our mystical lineage. As an Earthkeeper, the clarity, strength, focus, and passion that you ignite within yourself is not a small force. It can indeed be your bequest to the future.

INVITING NATURAL FORCES INTO YOUR LIFE

When you become an Earthkeeper, the rhythmic language of the natural world begins to sing within you. Every part of nature—every flower, bird, and tree—has a unique language and its own cadence. If you take a moment to become very still, you can feel these rhythms inside of you, because you are a part of the cycles of nature.

I once spent the night in the outback with some Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal people in Australia, sleeping in a dry riverbed. When I awoke, I opened my eyes just in time to see the last star dissolve into the gray sky of early morning. It was so quiet. Then, as the first ray of light rolled across the land like a great wave, a hum began to rise as one kind of insect and then another joined together in a song of awakening. When birds started singing, it was like a grand orchestra where one by one the instruments join in, building to a crescendo. I could feel the earth's rhythm in my bones; I could inhale her rhythm into my body. It was like an immense heartbeat surging inside me, around me. And along with this rhythm I could feel a yearning growing within me. It was a deep longing for something I couldn't quite remember, but knew that I had lost.

As nature is disappearing around us, we're losing vast tracts of the wilderness inside ourselves as well. It's as if the fertile soil of the soul is being gradually depleted. Every day as we lose part of our natural

outer heritage, our inner heritage diminishes as well. Ancestral memories of life in the deep forest are being replaced by images of afternoon traffic and the sounds of pneumatic drills. Sirens drown out the songs of the birds. Something within us is dying as the chasm between humans and the natural world widens.

In the previous chapters, we've learned many different ways to kindle our native spirit, but in order to do this in totality, we must also activate the natural forces in our daily lives. Here are six ways to do it:

1. Shape-shift into the earth.
2. Spend time in wild or natural regions.
3. Be barefoot on the earth.
4. Embark on inner journeys into nature.
5. Bring nature into your home.
6. Cultivate gratitude.

1. SHAPE-SHIFT INTO THE EARTH

When you begin to think about the planet as a living, conscious organism, it can shift the way you perceive your relationship to the earth. This in turn can affect the way you live your life so that your life reflects the nature of this relationship. One excellent way to ignite this connection is to go on an inner meditative journey and imagine that you're shape-shifting into the earth. Much like shape-shifting into a fox or a tree, as we discussed in [Chapter 4](#), becoming one with Earth is an ancient and time-honored shamanistic tradition.



EXERCISE: BECOMING THE EARTH

Close your eyes. Enter into a meditative space and imagine that your body is beginning to expand . . . becoming bigger and bigger . . . so big, in fact, that you can feel yourself as the earth. Feel the deep heat in your core. Let the coolness of your oceans refresh you. Feel yourself revolving around the powerful force of the sun. Day turns to night and night to day again. Sense the warmth and light of the sun on half of you, while the other side reposes in darkness. You are always in a balance. When the warmth of summer is on one half, the coolness of winter encompasses the other. You're spinning in a vast and infinite cosmos.

2. SPEND TIME IN WILD OR NATURAL REGIONS

From a scientific point of view, nature and everything around you is composed of atoms, which are the basic building blocks of the universe. Yet, when an atom is examined, you discover that it's nearly all empty space. Most of it is vast emptiness, dotted with small amounts of matter, not unlike the void of outer space that's dotted with planets and stars. However, this emptiness is not barren, cold, and lifeless. It contains potential energy waiting to be born. It's an invisible force that holds the world together.

Native people intuitively knew about this infinite space of the universe, but what scientists call emptiness . . . they called Spirit. Throughout history, earth-based people have always understood the earth to be a living being. If you want to honor and activate the hidden forces within your life, one of the most powerful ways to do this is to spend time in nature. However, do this without jogging and without a cell phone, a musical device, a watch, or a laptop. Simply be present in nature. Inhale it. Stretch out in tall grasses and feel the earth's cadence ripple through your body. Dig your hands into soil or sand. Stand with your back to a tree. Take an afternoon stroll through a park. Dangle your feet in a creek. See, hear, feel, and smell it all in silence.

3. BE BAREFOOT ON THE EARTH

Throughout history, native peoples almost always spent time barefoot, sitting and sleeping on the earth. Through direct contact (or through sweat-moistened animal skins used as footwear or sleeping mats, which acted as electric conductors) some of the electrons that exist on the surface of the earth transferred into their body. Being in close contact with the earth is called “earthing” and has been found scientifically to have great health benefits.

Mounting evidence suggests that the oscillation of the earth’s electrical circuitry helps create a positive environment for the normal functioning of our bodies’ systems. In other words, direct contact with the earth allows the electrical flow of the planet to stabilize the bioelectrical environment in our organs, tissues, and cells. Moreover, these oscillations may be important for setting the biological clocks regulating diurnal body rhythms, such as cortisol secretion. Research also suggests that direct contact with the earth can reduce acute and chronic inflammation. Emerging research points to clinically significant positive changes in sleep patterns, including sleep apnea and insomnia, pain reduction, reduction in respiratory conditions, better nerve health, and a blood thinning effect. Reduction of primary indicators of osteoporosis, improvement of glucose regulation, and a strengthened immune response are also linked to spending time with your feet on the earth.

A more recent, but yet to be definitively proven, theory that has sound science behind it is the idea that earthing can have a positive effect on the water structure in our cells—especially blood flow and cardiac rhythm. The water in our cells achieves its structured balance from the natural electromagnetic field of the earth, and it becomes disrupted when we are not in contact with the earth, which in turn can contribute to health problems, including strokes.

Our bodies are genetically programmed to be in contact with the earth. (It’s only been in the last 50 years or so that we’ve been wearing insulating rubber or plastic soles on our shoes that separate us from the electrical flows of the earth.) Nobel Prize winner Richard Feynman—in his lectures on electromagnetism—states that when the body is “earthed,” it becomes an extension of the earth’s gigantic

electric system, and when this occurs, our bodies move into a natural harmony.

Some effective surfaces to ground yourself are grass, sand, moss, stones, bare soil, and unpainted/unsealed concrete and brick. You can also remain partially grounded, even if you're not barefoot, by wearing shoes with no plastic or rubber in them when walking across these surfaces. Staying grounded in a modern dwelling is more difficult. It's challenging to be earthed by going barefoot inside your home, as many common flooring materials are poor conductors.

In one double-blind study, 28 subjects were divided into two groups: one was grounded and one was not. Ten exercises were then repeated five times over a one-hour period. Blood was taken before and after each exercise and analyzed for blood viscosity using a scanning capillary viscometer. The results concluded that those who were earthed significantly reduced their systolic blood viscosity and diastolic blood viscosity (which means their blood was thinner, which is good). Less viscous blood allows more oxygen flow into the body and decreases the chance of a stroke.

Studies also show that earthing the human body creates significant effects on electrophysiological properties of the brain and musculature. Even a few minutes a day being in close contact with the earth can make a difference. Although substantial further research needs to be done, these preliminary studies give credence to the notion that it's good to be outdoors and in contact with the earth.

4. EMBARK ON INNER JOURNEYS INTO NATURE

In addition to spending time outside, you can also connect deeply to nature through visualization exercises. This is amazing but true. It works because there's a place in the brain that believes what you visualize is real and *responds physiologically*. For example, research done at Manchester Metropolitan University has proved that muscle strength can be improved by 16 percent just by *visualizing* exercising a muscle. In a study conducted by sports psychologist David Smith, the muscle strength in the small finger was first measured in a test

group. Participants were then divided into three groups. One group performed strengthening exercises; the second group only *imagined* exercising the little finger; and the third group did nothing at all. The exercisers increased their muscle strength by 33 percent. There was no improvement in the group that neither exercised nor visualized, but the group that only visualized exercising the finger showed *an improvement of 16 percent in muscle strength*.

Imagining yourself in nature can have a similar effect on your body as *actually being in nature*. For example, when people are actually in nature, their blood pressure and pulse decrease. Similarly, when people *visualize* being in nature, their pulse and blood pressure are reduced. The brain often responds physically to the things we visualize, as if they were actually occurring. Even just a few moments of visualization can deepen your connection to nature! Here's an easy exercise that you can do:

EXERCISE: SUN-DRENCHED SEASHORE VISUALIZATION

Imagine that you are at the seashore stretched out on the sand. You feel totally at ease as the warmth of the sand radiates up through your body. The sound of the waves crashing against the shore brings wave after wave of relaxing energy flowing through your body. A lone seagull circles lazily overhead in a vivid blue sky, and you know that all is well.

5. BRING NATURE INTO YOUR HOME

You and your body are a part of nature. Your body is the result of an evolutionary process of nature over millions of years. As humans we've had thousands of years to adapt to natural environments, yet only a few generations to adapt to urban spaces. Our bodies have a hereditarily programmed need to spend time outside; they've

adapted to nature, just as every animal and plant has done. When an animal is removed from its natural habitat, its energy usually wanes. It's encoded to interact with its particular environment. Our bodies have been taken out of our natural ancestral environments, and most certainly this is causing great difficulties for us. If we don't include the forces of nature in our environments, not only do we rob ourselves of a rich source of aesthetic and spiritual satisfaction, but also we place our health at risk. *Our salvation lies in bringing nature back into our environments.*

Nature can be found in the four elements—Air, Water, Fire, and Earth—that comprise the natural world around us. Each element, as we saw in [Chapter 1](#), has a unique rhythm that's essential to the balance of life. By simulating the natural cycles of each element, you can bring even more harmony into your home and into your life. For example, when you open your windows to allow sunshine to flood in, you're connecting to the Spirit of Fire. If you have a home fountain, the natural sound of the water on the stones can connect you to the movement and rhythm of the Spirit of Water. Put some pinecones in an earthen pot or diffuse essential oils to invite the Spirit of Earth. Playing a recording of songbirds, even if you live in a city, invites the Spirit of Air. Recent research has found that listening to nature sounds at work has a restorative effect on cognitive abilities. While listening to natural sounds such as songbirds, rain, or ocean waves, workers not only performed better at their tasks, but they also reported feeling more positive about their environment. When you bring the rhythms of the elements into your space, you'll feel even more deeply connected to all life on Earth.

When you invite the feeling of nature into your home, it isn't just for psychological reasons—there are solid physiological reasons as well. Research has shown, for instance, that heart-surgery patients in intensive care units who viewed landscape scenes (via paintings or photos) reported less anxiety and stress and needed less pain medication than a control group that was not exposed to the pictures. People recovering from appendicitis surgery needed less time to recover if they were either in a room with a window out to nature or had a room with realistic artwork of nature. (Curiously, but not surprisingly, those with the window to nature and the artwork of

nature had similar recovery times. Those with no window or nature artwork had slower recovery times. And, those with abstract or modern art had longer recovery times.) Additionally, anything that gives the illusion of nature, such as fireplaces, wildlife videos, or aquariums can have a beneficial effect on the viewer. This gives credence to the idea that the more you can create aspects of nature in your home, the more you will benefit.


6. CULTIVATE GRATITUDE

Living in right relation and being an Earthkeeper especially means being grateful to all of Creation. The native view of prayer is different than the Western one. Often in Western religions, we pray for things. We might pray for a new job or pray for the healing of an ailment. And we, as a culture, assign one day a week for our devotions. But in native cultures, prayers are constant and daily, in simple, deep, and profound appreciation for the blessings received. Instead of asking for something, the prayers are of appreciation and gratitude. Gratitude infuses life with vibrancy. Here is an example of a prayer of thankfulness:



EXERCISE: A PRAYER OF GRATITUDE

I thank you, Creator, for this remarkable day. Thank you for the grass beneath my feet and the clouds in the sky above me. Thank you for the wondrous ability to see, hear, smell, and feel the vast and infinite universe in its glory, and for the sun, moon, trees, mountains, streams, rivers, and seas. I am so grateful to you for your blessings, guidance, and love. Thank you, thank you, for this day!



Ceremonies and Rites of Passage

Another way to be in right relation is to create ceremonies for your life. In native cultures, rituals and rites of passage have always been a part of life; they were a way of honoring the natural cycles of the planet, deepening the connection with the Creator, and creating stronger bonds within the community. They marked the important moments that punctuated the milestones of an individual's passage through life, such as of birth, transitioning into adulthood, and marriage. There were also ceremonies for the change of the seasons, for healing, and for rituals to prepare warriors for battle and to welcome them home. These traditions emphasized the fact that an individual was not alone, but rather an integral part of a larger community that extended both backward and forward in time.

All of our native ancestors used ceremony in every aspect of their lives. There were purification ceremonies to be performed when taboos were broken. There were planting rituals, ceremonies to bring rain, thanksgiving rituals for the harvest, hunting rituals, and even eating rituals. Ceremonies were performed to celebrate personal events, such as recovery from a serious illness, moving into a new house, or completing a dangerous journey. Performing these rituals offered a way of showing honor and respect for the divine aspects that are present in ordinary life. They gave people a way of marking their triumphs as well as their defeats, and of filling life passages—both large and small—with their proper significance and greater meaning.

Ceremonies allow us to enter into the great mystery of the universe and the flow of the natural world, as well as help us step beyond the normal parameters of life. They can also help us mend many emotional wounds, ranging from the loss of a loved one to the wound of raw anger in response to grievance. Sometimes emotions can be too intense to be controlled through an act of will. Uncontrolled, they may escalate into aggressive behavior or violence (as did my mother's anger regarding the way her people were treated). It may be that some of the discontent and disconnect in today's world is the result of the absence of ceremony in our lives, as

rituals can provide a safe means of releasing these intense emotions. Being an Earthkeeper means that you have an understanding of the power of ceremonies.

CREATING NEW RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

I've heard some say, "How can anyone who's not a blood quantum or enrolled member of a tribe perform ceremonies?" This, to me, is a strange concept because ceremonies are about inviting the Creator into your midst, and the Creator is here for everyone, not just for someone who is of a certain bloodline. I love remembering what my revered teacher Nundjan Djiridjarkan said to me: "Being native isn't what's in your blood, it's what's in your soul." A ceremony that's done with a loving heart generates more kindness, support, and compassion in the world . . . and this is a good thing. *It's okay to create your own ceremony.* Search your heart. Follow your inner lineage and the ceremony will emerge, bright, shining, and vibrant. A ceremony that's done in a rote, mundane way serves no one. Some say, "If they're not traditional ceremonies, then they're not authentic." Although many ceremonies of the past were officiated by a medicine man, medicine woman, shaman, or holy person, it's not necessary to always use a mediator between the human and spirit realms. You have within you a place that's holy and sacred, an inner sage, and you can access your inner wisdom and intuition when you create your own rituals.

Some valuable ceremonies to create for yourself or your family members are rite-of-passage ceremonies that mark the end of one phase of life and initiate us into who we're becoming. It's important to honor these events as a way of acknowledging our journey through life, as they pay homage to the cosmic relationship between human beings and the natural world. They also allow us to experience our connection to the rhythms of the universe.

Performing ceremonies in a circle is very powerful because it honors each individual in an equal way and brings people together.

Here's an example of how you can create your own ceremony using the symbolism of the medicine wheel:

MEDICINE-WHEEL BIRTH CEREMONY

To welcome a newborn into his or her extended family, create an indoor or outdoor medicine wheel. Invite friends and family. Smudge or use a feather to cleanse each person as they form a circle around the medicine wheel. Holding the newborn child, one or both parents enter from the east and step into the center of the circle. Face the baby to the east, the place of the rising sun and new beginnings. Call upon the Spirit of the East and ancestors, guides, and spirit guardians to fill the child's life.

Continue around the circle calling the spirit of each of the directions and spirit helpers to come forward. Then hold the child low, level with your lower torso, and ask for the blessings of Grandmother Earth. Hold the baby at shoulder level and call up Grandfather Sky to give blessings. Then hold the child level with your heart and ask for blessings from the Creator. Step out of the center of the circle and walk the circle so that each person in attendance can offer blessings to the child. (One parent can carry the child and the other parent can carry a pot or basket for friends and family members to fill with words or objects that symbolize their blessings.)

A variation of this medicine-wheel ceremony can be created for birthdays, weddings, coming-of-age celebrations, graduations, going to or returning from war, moving, divorce, and death.

Sitting in Sacred Council

Being in right relation also means treating everyone we encounter with respect, no matter his or her age, religion, race, gender, or creed. In many native cultures, a tradition called the "tribal council"

emerged out of that cosmology. Being in council brings people together, builds community spirit, and cultivates right relation . . . and it's a practice that we can incorporate into our own lives.

Here's how it works: Traditionally when a decision was to be made for the tribe, the elders or specific members would sit together in a circle. These meetings were different than most Westernized meetings in that there wasn't a hierarchy with a boss at the top. It's said in native traditions that the best leaders aren't necessarily those who speak their truth for all to hear, but those rare individuals *who are a safe space* for the truth of others to be heard. The sacred council creates those kinds of leaders. Each person's opinion matters equally.

Each person in the circle has a chance to speak; and when someone speaks, all listen. If there is a dispute in life with another (or with others), you take the time to understand their point of view. Remember the adage, "When you walk a mile in my moccasins, you will know my journey." In council usually there's a decorated "talking stick" or "talking feather" (as mentioned in [Chapter 3](#)). Whoever holds the talking stick has a commitment to speak the truth. Only the person holding the stick or feather speaks; others listen with their hearts, rather than trying to think of a good rebuttal. Participants listen with the idea of understanding the perspective of another.


When you speak your truth, you are heard . . . and when others speak their truth, they are heard. It's a powerful process, and this is an activity that we can adopt in our own lives with our families and/or friends. Although someone may be officiating at the council, there's the perception that all voices are heard equally and respectfully. The sacred council has the ability to be a catalyst for transformation for those who participate.



EXERCISE: TRIBAL COUNCIL VISUALIZATION

Imagine that you're around a tribal fire in a special place in nature, or inside a long house, lodge, teepee, hut, or cave. Surrounding the circle is a council of your spirit helpers. They

might be your ancestors, animal allies, or other spiritual guides. Imagine each one, in turn, holding a talking stick and giving you a message or advice. Listen with your heart to each thing shared. (As a suggestion, record in a journal the date of your meditation and the messages received.)



The Ancient Tradition of Storytelling

To live in right relation, share your wisdom. Share your stories. The art of storytelling is ancient in earth-based cultures. It's woven into the fiber of what it means to be native. Traditionally, once individuals had completed their physically productive years, they could then turn their energies inward to the spiritual realm. For this reason, the spiritual legacies—the stories of the tribe—were laid on the shoulders of the elders for preservation for subsequent generations. The function of the elders as the “keepers of the memory” was essential to the survival of the entire society. *It was believed that without these memories, a race has no future.*

A present-day example of this generational wisdom occurred during the December 2004 tsunami that hit Thailand and the surrounding areas. A community of people called the Morgan Sea Gypsies, who lived in isolation for decades on an island off the coast of Thailand, emerged from the tsunami almost unscathed because tribal wisdom had been passed down about what to do when the “wave that eats people” arrived. An entire community was saved because of what the elders remembered that had been passed down to them.

There's great value in sharing generational stories; however, sometimes the most sacred stories are about our lives, for our personal stories are the holy wafer that creates communion between us. Our stories allow each of us to find common ground, for when we share our challenges and our triumphs, we hear, “Yes, I know what

you mean. I've experienced that, too." Hearing the story of another's difficulties can also lessen our struggles. And our triumphs can be magnified through the power of our personal stories, for in each telling, we become richer and fuller.

Our personal stories weave the past, the present, and the future into a tapestry that reminds us that we do not live alone, that we are a part of a long lineage of people who have gone before us and who will continue beyond us. It's important that we recognize that in the retelling of our life experiences, we have become part of a long and continuing chain of oral tradition.

Please tell your stories. Let them be heard. Share them with your children, your friends—and the world. They are your personal myths, mighty and potent. In ways beyond your conscious knowing, your stories bring benefit to the world; they can inspire, heal, teach, and give strength to others.

An elder of the Taranaki Maori shared with me the importance that stories have had in his life. He painted a beautiful picture of what it was like to grow up in a culture that still revered the old ways and in which traditional stories still played a significant part in the training of the young:

In our tradition, we were taught at a young age to know and learn our history; about our family tree; and our songs, chants, legends, and stories. An old one would often call us together to sit under a tree and listen to the teachings. They taught us our spiritual way of life and how to communicate with our ancestors who had passed on.

Our old people were very strict in their teachings. We all had to learn the ceremonies and their importance in our way of life. We learned how to collect food and herbal medicines from the forest, rivers, lakes, streams, and the sea. We also learned the old traditions of storytelling. We gained knowledge of how to do things in a sacred way, and we were taught how to fast in order to receive a vision of the sacred things of our ancestors.

I can remember these days very clearly. There are not many left who can recall these teachings and sacred ways. Many of our people have gone the European way, leaving aside their

Maori way of life. I miss those days with the old people, as so many of my teachers have now passed on.

EXERCISE: WRITE YOUR STORY

Write the story of your life . . . make it long, make it short, but claim it. Examine what you have gained and what you have learned. In the deepest sense, your story is not who you are, but it's your personal myth. Share it. Listen to the stories of others. You might even want to share stories around candlelight or around a fire in honor of the traditions of the far past.

Respecting Our Elders

When we live in right relation, we cherish our elders. In Western culture, we diminish our elders and don't hold them in esteem. In native cultures, the older that one is, the more they are revered. Elders are treated as wise beings, and hence respond in kind. In our present-day culture, our elders are often viewed as second-class citizens, and this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, for if one is treated as useless there's a tendency to feel a lack of worth.

When I've visited native cultures, in which elders are respected, I'm often called "Auntie" or "Grandmother" with fondness, even though I have no blood affiliation. This honoring of the elders is not an uncommon tradition. These terms of endearment are a kind of cleaving of community and a declaration that we are connected. Nundjan Djiridjarkan talked to me about the place of elders in his Aboriginal culture:

In our tradition, the elders were honored because they were the ones who had the knowledge. Before the white man came, there was no written knowledge. We passed on our laws and our knowledge through the oral tradition. And the old people were the keepers of this. They were the ones who had lived longer and experienced more things. They knew what to do if a big storm came or something like that. They were the ones who had the answers. See, it might have been a hundred years since such a big storm or drought had come. And these were the people who had the knowledge in that area. No one else had it. You couldn't just get the information out of a book; you had to get it from one of the old ones. So that's where the respect came in.



It doesn't take a cardboard box with ominous messages written all over it for us to know that things are out of balance and to know that something needs to change. It's self-evident. We intuitively know that the more we connect with our native roots and live in right relation with the world around us, the more our bountiful Earth can care for us all. We know that it is possible. There are many things we can each do. It can be a matter of simply changing our mind-set, and honoring the spirit of the earth in gratitude, or even taking time to sit in council to hear the truths of others with an open heart, or creating ceremonies in honor of a new paradigm for the future. Even something as simple as looking to our elders for wisdom can help to kindle the native spirit and bring balance to our planet.

Perhaps just one person can't turn the tide, but there are many ways that we each can share the sacred responsibility, as Earth-keepers, to carry the wisdom of the past into the present and into the future. And the wonderful thing is that together we can do something; even the smallest thing can make a difference. All of our actions together, all of our hopes and dreams surging into a mighty river of consciousness, can create a better world—one we can look forward to, where our children's children can live and love, right on down to the seventh generation and beyond.

I hold a vision of this future cresting on the horizon. I'd like to believe that together we can ignite the light of the native spirit so that for a thousand years from now it shines bright and bold for future generations. If we don't do it, and do it now . . . who will? You have my love and support on this journey of the heart.



AFTERWORD

OUR LEGACY TO THE FUTURE

Several years ago, I was taking a walk through a verdant woods in Utah. There were some other women on the trail. I didn't know them; we just happened to be taking the same trail at the same time and were walking together. As we crossed over a small creek, we noticed a lot of litter on the ground next to the creek bed.

"Isn't this awful!" said one woman.

"People are so unconscionable!" said another as she looked in disgust at the debris.

"I just don't know why people act this way!" said the third woman with disdain.

I didn't say anything, but since I had a small backpack with me, I just started picking up the empty soda cans, crumpled paper napkins, and cigarette butts and putting them all in my backpack to dispose of later.

The three women stopped, looked aghast, and then hurried on without a word. After I gathered the litter, I sat on a rock next to the creek, watching the sparkling waters flow by, and tried to understand what had occurred. Why did the women seem disturbed by my actions? It didn't seem a big thing to me to stop and pick up the trash. Yet something in my actions seemed disquieting to them as they scurried off.

I wondered if the current notion that we are separate from the earth came into play. For example, if we feel separate from the trees, streams, and forests . . . litter is someone else's problem. It's

certainly nothing that you would put in your backpack to remove. But if we have awakened the native spirit within ourselves, we realize that what's done to the creek is done to us; therefore, litter feels more intimate and more personal. So, of course, we would want to clear it. Right relation means understanding that what we do to others or do to the land, we do to ourselves.

These three women weren't unusual; they were the norm. Most people feel separate from nature—it's something they observe, but they don't identify with. However, most people do identify with their home, yard, and possessions. So if the entrance to their dwelling were covered with debris, they wouldn't think anything about clearing it. When we expand our parameters of self to include the vast, wondrous natural world (as those in native cultures have done), we care for the wild places as we would care for our family, friends, and home. In many ways the ability to expand our parameters of self is the essence of this book; for in doing so, we activate the spirit of the earth, the spirit of our ancestors, and the spirit of this living, pulsating, vibrant universe inside of us.



In this book I have shared my journey—what I have learned and gained through my lifetime—in the hope that it helps rekindle the native spirit within you. I talked about how to answer the call of spirit and step through mystic gateways to claim an intimate connection to the wild places of our living, conscious planet. I recounted how to commune with nature spirits and Great Mystery, and how to call upon the wisdom of native cultures of past times. I wrote about living in right relation and about the power of drumming, finding your spirit name, making prayer sticks, listening to secret messages from spirit, spending time alone in nature, seeing the little people, and so much more that can make a difference in your life. I actually wrote five times more than this book had space for—there was so much I wanted to share with you.

In the end, I remembered the wisdom of my teacher Dancing Feather who—with his dying words—told me to keep it simple. So I followed his advice and cut most of what I wrote. However, some of

the extra information I did put on my website, DeniseLinn.com. If you go to the section called *Kindling the Native Spirit*, you'll find additional reading and instructional videos. You'll also find a link to the *Native Spirit Oracle Cards*, which are a great adjunct to this book. I think that you will enjoy them!

As we are at the completion of this journey together, I'm thinking about our individual and collective legacies. Have you ever asked yourself what you'd like your personal legacy to be? It might be a project you embarked on, such as creating a public trail through a park or cleaning up a creek so kids can safely swim in it. Perhaps you've helped some homeless animals find loving homes. Maybe you created an object of art that gets passed down to your descendants. Perhaps you have chronicled your life so others can learn from your experiences.

There are many ways to leave a legacy for the enrichment of those who follow us. However, sometimes the most profound legacy is our view of the world, and to me one of the most powerful ways to view the world is with a native spirit perspective. Without this, our palpable connection to our roots could be an abstraction or even a distant myth, rather than something that dwells deep in our soul.

When you claim your place in the universe and know that in the deepest sense the universe dwells within you, this radiates out from you in ways that make a difference to many, perhaps in ways that you'll never know. When the native spirit awakens within you, you indeed become like a pebble in a still pool whose ripples reach the farthest shore. You impact the world in ways beyond your conscious knowing. And this is a holy thing.



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I also acknowledge my gracious, wondrous daughter, Meadow. She spent hours poring over this manuscript. Writing is a challenge for me in so many ways. (I'm dyslexic—dyslexia has been the bane of my life.) Usually every third word is misspelled, and it's hard to stay on course. So to have such a nonjudgmental, loving daughter look everything over and correct my multitude of mistakes has been a blessing. Additionally, she has such insightful perceptions; I'm so very grateful to have her in my life.

Of course, always and forever, I'm grateful to my husband, David. In many ways we are so different. I like ambient music, and he likes jazz. I prefer to not talk about politics, and he loves to rant about the latest political blunder. I wake up early, and he wakes up late. But this awesome man loves me until the end of time, and for this, I'm so grateful!

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