

Flourishing Kin

Indigenous
Wisdom
for Collective
Well-Being

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Contents

| | |
|--|------|
| Yu'un Te Lum K'inale | viii |
| Dedicating | x |
| Petitioning | xi |
| Reverencing | xii |
| Introduction: Watering Flourishing Kin. | I |
| Some Critical Notes | II |
| Part 1: Contemplating | |
| Chapter 1: Ancestors of Earth and Bones | 25 |
| Chapter 2: Contemplation as Truth. | 37 |
| Chapter 3: Flourishing as Connection | 51 |
| Part 2: Reverencing | |
| Chapter 4: Indigenous Peoples and Reverence in Action | 65 |
| Chapter 5: Epistemological Equity by Elevating Indigenous Sciences | 71 |
| Chapter 6: Intergenerational Trauma and Intergenerational Bliss | 85 |
| Part 3: Collecting Well-Being | |
| Chapter 7: Kin Relationality | 105 |
| Chapter 8: Body Seed | 117 |
| Chapter 9: Sensitive | 133 |
| Chapter 10: Heartful Wisdom | 153 |
| Chapter 11: Ecological Belonging | 163 |
| Chapter 12: Reparations Through Right Relationships | 181 |

Reemerging 197
Glossary 202
Notes 205
Recommended Resources by Yuria Celidwen 228
About the Author 233

Yu'un Te Lum K'inale

Wocol awalik yu'un telabai bekón te'jkopé, yu'un te taleshé

Ja kich' ta muk' te lum k'inál
yu'un kuxineletik Nahua, Maya, sok xučyun Ohlone te banti ayone.

Ja kich' ta muk' stalel skuxlejal
te sbabi jme' jtatike sok ja kich' ta muk' skuxinelik
te mach'a kuxinemikixe, te ya'tike,
sok spajel chabeje
te banti ya spastik k'in swenta k'ulejaltike
sok lekil kuxlejaltike.

Yakalotik ta beel ta pojelbajtik
yu'un te jme' tatike
te lok'emik ta nutsel ta slum sk'in alike.
Ya jnatik te maba tik'
a te ya kich'tik biltesel sok naelbajtik.

Yatik ya jletik ya'telinel kuxinel.
Ta swenta te ayik ta uninele.
Ayinel ta k'inál: jlum k'inaltik,
jlum k'inaltik ta jpisiltik,
banti jpisiltik yu'un te lum k'inale.

Translation from Tzeltal

Belonging to Earth

Thank you for your presence and attention to my voice. I strive for it to resound in your heart as a Relative. I bow to the Lands of the Nahua and Maya Peoples of my Ancestors and the Lands of the Xučyun Ohlone Tribes where I write.

I invite you to gather in respect to the traditions of our Elders and Ancestors of water, fire, blood, and bone, living in the spiral of time past, present, and to come, celebrating our cultural richness and legacies.

We continue on the path of reclamation and revitalization of our Indigenous voices. Knowing that it is not enough only to acknowledge us by name, we now seek action:

Action for Belonging
Action for Our Mother Earth
everyone's Mother Earth
because we all come from
return to
and belong to Her

To listen to the author recite this poem in Tzeltal, follow the link yuriacelidwen.com or the QR code that appears on the table of contents.

Dedicating

To our Ancestors, All our Relations, and our stories.
To the Siblings of my heart.
To Mother Earth, Water, Sun, and Skies

To you
I am forever grateful.
Blinded by your light, I learn to walk in the dark
and vow to serve all Sibling souls in our shared path.

I recognize You, Mother Earth, with Your presence and guiding voice
representing all directions in the vastness of our relations
as Our Kin.

I wholeheartedly acknowledge my human and more-than-human Relatives
displaced and dispossessed of territories and identities.

May we all find home.
Honoring the rightful stewards of the Lands
Bowing to the Elders past, present, and still to emerge
Weaving trust with our planetary Relatives
Celebrating Spirit

Petitioning

Asking permission from the source of Life
from our selfless Mother Earth
the very roots of Our Kin
whom we call Our Mother

Asking permission from our Ancestors
returning to the Lands becoming nourishment
to our caretakers, loving partners,
and all others we welcome as Our Kin

Asking permission from our great Spirit
our sacred maize and our cacao
and all our Relatives
embodied and in subtle realms

Asking permission from all beings and phenomena
two-legged, four-legged, finned, winged, myceliated,
rooted, flowing, and still,
in the waking, dream, and cosmic spheres

Present
knowing our challenges are deep
may our shared way onward
be kindness and compassion
collaboration and action
through reverencing, respecting, responding,
reckoning, repairing, rematriating,
restoring, reconciling, and reemerging
for Mother Earth and Spirit
for Love

Reverencing

I bow to Mother Earth and all Her grounds diverse where I find kin.

I am grateful to three of them for offering me the imaginal warmth of a home in belonging. In them, I have grown roots throughout an otherwise nomadic life. While still occupied today, these Lands continue to bring life. Likewise, may the Indigenous Relatives removed from them continue to reemerge as kin inside all hearts.

The seed Land of my birth and early years is Coelhá, the Wonderlands of Flowing Waters, in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. It is the home to the most extensive biodiversity in Mexico. It is also North America's last remnant of cloud forest, now under threat of disappearing by 2050 due to climate emergencies. Coelhá sat in the municipality with the most Maya speakers in Chiapas: the Maya Tzeltal, Tsotsil, Ch'ol, Tojolabal, Zoque, Chuj, Kanjobal, Mam, Jacalteco, Mochó Kakchiquel, and Lacandon.

The island of Manahatta is in the Lenapehoking Lands of the Lenni Lenape Nation, the "Original People" in the Unami language. Most of our Lenape Relatives were forcibly removed from what is now New York to Oklahoma under the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Still, their soil bears their flesh and bones. Today, Queens is the most linguistically diverse borough in the world, where its people speak over 800 languages. Home to the United Nations Headquarters, the island was the home of my professional work defending the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Mother Earth for almost two decades.

The Lands of the Xučyun Confederated Villages of Lisjan is one of the many Ohlone Nations in the East Bay Area, even though the Xučyun still struggle to get federal recognition. Berkeley was

home to the 1964 Free Speech movement and was the first to adopt Indigenous Peoples Day in 1990. These Lands are a new home for my research and praxis of belonging and bridging in service of Indigenous Relatives worldwide through the University of California, Berkeley.

Introduction

Watering Flourishing Kin

WE LIVE IN a time of biocultural crises.¹ The growth of interest in global flourishing and environmental stewardship speaks to our need for collaborative partnerships to find solutions to repair the damage done to Mother Earth, more-than-human Relatives, marginalized groups, each other, and ourselves.

This critical moment impels actions of spiritual urgency. It implores the pursuit of collective well-being and flourishing kin for all living beings and phenomena on our shared home planet.

How would it be to care for Grandfather Fire, for example? Or to listen attentively to Grandmother Water and her chants of rain? Or even, I dare you, to hold the rage of Grandfather Lightning?

Seeking to flourish is a universal tendency in the fabric of all beings and their cultures. In this book, I encourage you to consider that a sense of flourishing *claims* us collectively.

Flourishing is a gradual unfolding of aesthetic arrest, a succession of awe-induced palpitations of stillness of the mind and embodied effervescence. Flourishing brings the realization of belonging and thus manifests reverence for life and the pursuit of creative action for the well-being of the planetary community.

In its many forms, contemplative practice opens these strings of progress as we wander through trails of intentional experience.

Attentive presence unleashes varieties of transformation and spiritual experiences throughout these trails.

While the paths may seem daunting, messy, or overgrown, the practice both grounds and lightens us, and the journey opens us to transcend our limitations of identity. These limitations are the labels about ourselves and others that have become reified, so thick they make us stuck. We have forgotten that we once created these identity stories, and because of

their very nature, they can be retold to set us free. My life's journey and work have centered on this possibility, and I have found both helpful hints and some quicksand hindrances.

The elephant in the room—or blue whale in the shrine—of contemplation is science's focus on serving Western goals of individual well-being (and capital). That is, the modern pursuit of health and happiness has centered on human flourishing.

Contemplative science's most famous iteration, the mindfulness movement, has identified many health benefits, especially stress reduction and cardiovascular health. However, this Western paradigm has overlooked the concept of *collective flourishing*, which is front and center in Indigenous traditions.

Indigenous contemplative insights from traditions worldwide offer approaches that differ from the Western paradigm in significant ways. Indigenous core focus is relationships over individual experience, the sacred and spiritual over the secular, and cultural expressions such as rituals, storytelling, and ceremonies over metrics, transactions, and utilitarianism.

Indigenous contemplative sciences were absent from Western studies on the science of flourishing, happiness, and well-being interventions until my work pushed for this presence about a decade ago, pioneering the introduction of Indigenous forms of contemplation into the field. This first-of-its-kind book begins to fill that gap by drawing upon my scholarship, storytelling, and practices from the world's Indigenous traditions and their millenarian ecological, social, and spiritual knowledge.

I have come to see these values as *principles for collective belonging*. I trust these ways of being are our proven pathways to collective planetary flourishing kin. These principles explore the diverse lifeways of Indigenous traditions around the globe and how moral ethics may bridge Indigenous and Western knowledge systems to address our collective planetary aspiration for health, wellness, justice, and equity for living beings and the environment.

Mindfulness is probably the most common type of contemplative practice known in the West. The mindfulness movement bases its

research and conventions on Western secularized translations (often male) of Eastern traditions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. The benefits of these interpretations have been studied predominantly on WEIRD groups—an acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and of Democratic origin.² Likewise, these mindfulness practices have been made available mainly to White privileged audiences.

When imported from other cultures, contemplative approaches can lose the collectivist motivation and ethical pursuit of source traditions, often developing condescending narratives.³ There is the risk of spiritual bypassing, spiritual consumerism, extractivism, capitalization of traditional practices, and the corporatization of spiritual traditions.⁴ This kind of appropriation perpetuates patterns of cognitive imperialism, racial injustice, and inequality.⁵ Alas, this bias renders Western contemplative science colonial in origin.

Furthermore, the study of contemplative practice has yet to fully explore how we interact and function to benefit the collective; how we develop a sense of community, social ethics and justice, sustainability, and a commitment to ecological restoration; and how it cultivates the experience of the sacred and spirituality. Recent attention to practices focusing on compassion, loving-kindness, and service reflect this growing need.

My activist and academic work aims to contribute to mending this oversight. I have centered my research on the nature-based contemplative practices inspired by Indigenous traditions of the world, in reverence for the planet and as a practice of spirituality. My life experiences urge me to break the patterns of exclusion and uniformity (of traditions, target populations, focus, and benefits) of the current paradigm.

Perhaps you have felt this is an urgent concern, too. Perhaps this is what moved you to pick up this book. Maybe you believe, as I do, that contemplation constitutes a wide variety of ontologies and epistemologies—ways of being and knowing—including practices and experiences that are divergent from each other and vary in characteristics, purposes, and aspirations.

In the past, the infusion of cultural diversity in Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Abrahamic traditions positively shaped our Western

globalized culture. I am confident that revitalizing Indigenous sciences will move us toward a new planetary identity story. We will further enrich the scope and inspiration of constructs and reemerge as an empowered plurality, one of social and environmental transformation toward collective flourishing.

Indigenous traditions are the most diverse repository of wisdom regarding *kin relationality* (the vast web of relationships within a welcoming environment) and *ecological belonging* (our shared responsibility to all beings in our Mother Earth system).⁶ These Indigenous traditions are at the forefront of the movement for planetary health and environmental restoration and conservation. Given the crises of loneliness, the climate emergency, and the imperiling of biocultural diversity, the time could not be better to reorient the contemplative paths from human happiness toward these principles of collective flourishing.

Why Me

As an Indigenous woman born and raised in a marginalized community, who has studied in public and private institutions through scholarships, worked in the private and public sectors, and lived in international settings, I have navigated diverse social groups. I soon realized that othering is much larger than my single story.

Othering is the fruit of well-established and supported systems. We, the othered, suffer from abuses and assaults of all sorts on our souls, minds, and bodies. Spiritual, psychological, emotional, sexual, and physical violence, as well as discrimination, exploitation, and tokenization are our daily bread. We grow thick armor and learn to survive with the othering worms digging underneath our skin.

The magnitude and complexity of these conditions call for spiritual reckoning and responsibility of action.

There is such enormous dissonance between the realities lived by all of us who have been othered and the flow and kinship Mother Earth grants readily.

I was born and raised in what I fondly call my forest in the clouds,

in the highlands of Chiapas, in Mexico. Contemplative living has been my vehicle for making sense of, articulating, and reclaiming my “indigeneity” (my identity as an Indigenous person). It is also what drives my scholarship. These pursuits allow me to integrate ethical and spiritual ideals into everyday life from a perspective that aligns with the rights of living beings and the revitalization of Indigenous wisdom for reverence of Mother Earth. My calling joins with the global collective efforts of the Indigenous movement to reclaim public platforms to promote community care.

It is Mother Earth who calls upon all communities to reclaim the dignity and respect seized from Her hundreds of years ago.

For the past fifteen years, my professional career at the United Nations has supported the defense of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and the rights of Nature, pushing the international community to commit politically to what our Earth community demands. These seeds have bloomed into my thesis on the principles of collective well-being, the exploration of how kin relationality elicits the experience of responsibility for ecological belonging. This inquiry is focused on identity formation, as well as the practice and experience of transcendence, understood broadly as the ability to enter into a direct experience of kin relationality that manifests as prosocial behaviors such as compassion, ethics, and a sense of awe, love, and sacredness for all life. It is the innermost secret of belonging, presence, and flow.

Ultimately, I aim to cultivate a world where flourishing kin emerges as the fresh greenery of life, where every voice has a home and purpose.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for you who are eager for a world of flourishing and kindness for all. Perhaps you are a health-care professional, psychologist, therapist, human-resources professional, or digital mental-health provider looking to create meaning and belonging at home and in the workplace. Or maybe you're a wellness community worker, yoga instructor, life coach,

meditation practitioner, or student engaging in the science of human happiness, mental health, environmental studies, ethnic studies, health and wellness, or mindfulness practices. No matter what has brought you here, you likely share an interest in the ways of happiness, flourishing, environmental restoration, conservation, and sustainability. Perhaps you have started to feel that some of these fields and the actions related to them are not quite meeting your expectations. Perhaps you have even felt disillusioned with how many of these ideals are being carried out or oriented by policy decision-makers. Most likely, you are yearning for change but do not quite know where or how to start or what your role and responsibility are around all of these fields. I can't wait for us all to learn more together.

What's In This Book

Indigenous populations have achieved a sense of well-being for millennia despite acute threats to our cultural and social communities and environmental conditions. *Flourishing Kin* shows how this remarkable adaptive resiliency offers feasible solutions to today's collective challenges: the climate crises and related anxiety, the social and health inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health epidemics of loneliness and hopelessness, and the social and environmental demands for diversity, equity, and justice.

Flourishing Kin draws upon and synthesizes glimpses of the wealth of the world's Indigenous wisdom with Western scientific insights on flourishing. It shows how Indigenous perspectives experience the essential acts of flourishing centered on all beings and the collective WE that is our planet.

This book highlights the distinctiveness of Indigenous contemplative traditions and presents some of their ecological practices critical to sustainable collective well-being. These practices are the seeds of collective well-being and of a spiritual and relational reverence for Nature. *Flourishing Kin* explains how we can use this ethos to address

our widespread ailments, from health and environmental crises to the ongoing harm caused by colonial systems, to create a new story of interdependence, reciprocity, and ecological responsibility.

The contemplative practices in this book are inclusive, diverse, and respectful of the source Indigenous traditions and lineage holders. I have gathered these practices through my innovative translation and distillation approach of epistemological equity that bridges Indigenous and Western sciences. The latest robust and interdisciplinary scholarship supports this book, updating and significantly expanding the cultural, social, biological, and neuroscientific understandings of flourishing.

Flourishing Kin gives voice to my Indigenous lineages. My Indigenous upbringing, lifelong inquiry into my heritage, practice of contemplation, and professional career have given me a unique perspective based on community and Indigenous environmental stewardship. My constellation of life experiences sets this book apart from the crowded bookshelves of the wellness industry. As a result, much of this knowledge may be new and even challenging to you—in its content and in its conveyed nature.

And so, I will guide you along these trails of flourishing by fostering insight, participation, and creation of a place of belonging. At the same time, I believe you will find comfort in how Indigenous forms of contemplation converse with and complement other contemplative traditions.

Moving beyond what you might know about contemplation, mindfulness, stress, happiness, and flourishing, I invite you to journey with me through *Flourishing Kin* with your heart on Mother Earth. To entice you into this journey, I outline how this book will empower your human capacity for connection, belonging to the larger Earth system, and becoming an agent of reemergence.

Part 1: Contemplating

As we commonly do in Indigenous traditions, Mother Earth is the first to welcome you into the collective story. She lets Her voice speak through my home and lineages and the images, metaphors, stories, and wisdom of my background. A few of my core formative experiences illustrate my

lifelong inquiry into inclusion, connection, and belonging. These stories elucidate how life experiences drive our sense of meaning.

I introduce the Indigenous spiral of contemplation, which spurs virtuous motion along its path by a deliberate aspiration toward awareness and ethics. I show how the trail of the spiral path leads us to meaning within the body, heart, mind, and spirit to a merging with the collective and the natural world. Together, we will traverse life's natural cycles and polarities: dynamic yet poised, careful yet bold, challenging yet familiar, grounded in the now and consistently returning home . . . transformed.

Part 2: Reverencing

This section looks at the emerging trends around the beliefs and customs of Indigenous Peoples. It explains why the great diversity of the five thousand Indigenous Peoples of the world of varied places, contexts, habits, traditions, and beliefs cannot be singularly defined nor studied through a single lens. I deliberate on how Indigenous and Western epistemologies differ from and complement each other beyond the usually simplified notion of collectivist vs. individualist. I show how Indigenous knowledge systems break from the current science of human flourishing, which centers on the human being. I explore the Indigenous ethos of flourishing kin, whereby happiness lies within the individual's responsibility to the flourishing of the ecosystem. I invite you to journey with me through my life's work, which synthesizes Indigenous and Western sciences to offer a plural and comprehensive resource for the collective flourishing of all beings and Mother Earth.

The words *Indigenous*, *autochthone*, *aboriginal*, *Amerindian*, *First Nations*, and so on are designations of a political category built on the religious oppression and othering of colonialism. We will explore how the traditions of Indigenous Peoples are, by definition, connected to the political aspect of colonialism and the ongoing detrimental consequences known as coloniality. As a result, jurisprudence derived from those tenets harmfully impacts access to all forms of equity—from self-determination to