

THE
WISDOM
OF THE
HIVE

What Honeybees Can Teach Us
about Collective Wellbeing

Michelle Cassandra Johnson
and Amy Burtaine



Contents

Foreword vii

Introduction: We Are Enchanted 1

- 1 What If the Bees Are Here to Save Us? 13
- 2 Close to the Bees 25
- 3 A Swarm of Bees 37
- 4 The Sting 45
- 5 The Venom 57
- 6 Inflamed 69
- 7 The Darkness 81
- 8 The Void 95
- 9 The Relationship Between Darkness and Light 107
- 10 Attunement 123
- 11 Patterns of Communication 137
- 12 In Alignment and in Integrity 147
- 13 Transmutation 159
- 14 Medicine 171
- 15 Sweetness 183

CONTENTS

16	The Portal	195
17	Psychopomps	209
18	Milk and Honey	223
	Epilogue	237
	Acknowledgments	243
	Notes	247
	About the Authors	253

INTRODUCTION

We Are Enchanted

*We should encourage enchantment to bolt
like a weed. It is, after all, native here.*

—Katherine May, *Enchantment*

Michelle

It was a seasonably warm day in August, and I had ventured out to my backyard because I sensed something was wrong with one of my honeybee hives. The bees had become very agitated while I was doing a hive inspection a week prior. They had seemed unsettled and on edge. I was a new beekeeper and couldn't yet decipher the reason why the hive had been a bit testy. But I knew enough as a person who had sometimes experienced agitation herself as a new beekeeper to know that it often warrants further investigation.

Sting was the name of this hive. They had received this namesake because they were the first hive to sting me. They stung me on my right thigh, during my clumsy and abrupt attempts to inspect their hive. I had most certainly deserved the sting, but an awareness of this fact didn't make the sting hurt any less at the time. It throbbed for a while, and then

a big welt emerged on my thigh. Beyond my awkwardness and inexperience leading to their agitation and subsequently a sting, I didn't yet understand the conditions in a hive that might lead to the level of disquiet that was present in Sting's hive, or any other honeybee hive.

I opened the hive, and within seconds, I understood something was terribly wrong and that the situation was dire. After lifting up the telescoping cover on Sting's hive, what felt like thousands, but more likely hundreds, of bees were suddenly swirling around my head. They formed a circle and whirled around me, buzzing thunderously. Something about their pace, the way they were whizzing around me, and the sound they were making as a collective led me to realize what the issue was. It's not as if they said this to me with words, but I'm grateful the message finally came through: they didn't have a queen.

The truth is they had tried to communicate that something was urgently wrong within the hive on multiple occasions. A few weeks prior to this incident, my husband, Charles, and I had ventured out to see the bees, and as we stood in front of Sting's hive, we watched a drone (a male bee) come out of the hive, do what I would most certainly describe as a shamanic dance on the hive's landing board, and go back inside. It twirled and spun around, but not in the graceful way honeybees usually twirl, shake, and spin when they waggle—the famous dance they use to communicate good sources of nectar, pollen, or water. Instead, this drone spun, twirled around, fell onto its back, and then did something that looked like it was playing dead, lying still for a moment. Then he got up and went back into the hive. Charles and I looked at each other with confusion and mysticism, but we didn't yet understand the dancer's message, which was about the queen's death and the hive being queenless. In addition to this very obvious sign

from the bee dancer, a honeybee came up to my back door and sat on the doorknob. Then, when I opened the door, it made its way into my house and sat on my kitchen table as if to say, “Pay attention to me.” I ushered it back outside.

Sting had tried to tell me about their plight and the loss of their queen in many ways, but my lack of skill as a beekeeper meant I needed them to be very direct and apparently loud with me about the impending collapse they would experience without a queen. A honeybee hive cannot sustain itself without a queen. The female worker bees will try to sustain the hive, even laying eggs themselves, but worker bees are unable to lay fertilized eggs; they can only lay drones. While drones are fuzzy and cute and play a very important role in the hive, they don’t bring in pollen, nectar, or other resources. Instead, they keep the brood (baby bees before they hatch) warm and wander around and eat honey, which is the food source the honeybees need to survive winter. A queenless hive will dwindle down over time and eventually die.

Sting’s cacophonous vibration resonated around and within me as they flew around, ringing an alarm bell with their bodies. Amidst the chaos, I told them I would get a queen for them. The next morning, I ventured out to purchase her, and I placed her in the hive. I felt a collective exhale from Sting as the bees went over to the queen cage (which contained the new queen and a few worker bees), watching as they fanned their wings to alert the rest of the honeybees in the hive that she had arrived.

As I reflect on this experience now and recall what it felt like to be inside a whirlwind of bees, using all of their will to communicate that something was wrong, I also reflect on our collective experience on the planet. Something is wrong. For the hive, it was the awareness that they wouldn’t survive

without a queen. For us, it is that we won't survive unless we remember our interconnectedness to all beings and change our ways—how we care for ourselves, one another, and the planet. The times we are living through right now are unsettling, uncertain, unpredictable, and tumultuous. Just as Sting was facing potential death due to the lack of a queen, we too are experiencing historical, cultural, political, environmental, and energetic conditions that could lead to the collapse of our collective and the planet if we do not change the ways we sustain and maintain our shared humanity.

For the honeybees, being queenless is not the only thing that could lead to the death of a hive. Factors like changing conditions in the ecosystem, rising temperatures, unprecedented heat waves, frigid temperatures, commercial versus natural beekeeping, varroa mites, and other parasites could also lead to the decimation of a bee family. But beyond these aspects that shift how a hive functions and survives, I have come to see that honeybees are animistic—meaning they have their own energies, sensitivities, a resonant vibration, and souls. They, like all living creatures, can feel the tumult and uncertainty in our world, and they are constantly being asked to adapt to the changing conditions present on our planet. We, too, are being asked to adapt. The honeybee hive is a laboratory from which we can better understand our human experience.

The Wisdom of the Hive has brought us, best friends Amy and Michelle, together to share stories, wisdom, and guidance from our experience with honeybees, including principles and nature-based practices based on the life and ways of the honeybee and observations from our own honeybee hives. We buzzed into one another's lives many years ago and knew we would forever be connected. This book emerged from our love for honeybees.

We are enchanted by honeybees.

We are heartbroken for them.

We are students of the honeybee hive.

We are learning about hope and fortitude from them.

We are moved by the magic of honeybees.

The other reason we believe the nonlinear path that we and the honeybees traverse led us to cowrite a book is that we both understand the crisis all living beings are facing right now on our planet.

We are heartbroken for humanity.

We are curious about what humans are doing to each other and the planet.

We are curious about why we have lost our connection with nature.

We are constantly contemplating how to respond to uncertainty and cycles of trauma with unsettled nervous systems.

We are enchanted by the creative ways humans have called attention to what is stopping us from remembering our innate oneness with the honeybees and the rest of nature.

We are in awe of the spells being cast for justice
and liberation.

We are moved by the resiliency modeled to us by the
honeybees and the more-than-human world.

My journey with the bees began unconventionally I awoke at four am from what I believe was a dream about the honeybees, or perhaps it was a call from them. Either way, I found myself staring at a computer screen that displayed a receipt for the purchase of several packages of bees. After realizing what I had done, I immediately panicked. I hadn't ever taken a beekeeping class, and I didn't yet know that I would one day have an extensive and expansive relationship with bees. Yet I was led to them, and something in my bleary-eyed soul that early morning must have heard them buzz me.

At the time, my mother was very ill, and a dear friend (and now bee sister) Karla Michelle Capacetti shared that honeybees are psychopomps. They work between realms, in this case the earthly realm and what I would call the above or heavenly realm. Throughout history and in many cultures, honeybees have been thought to support people as they transition from one realm to another. When Karla shared this wisdom with me, she also shared that the honeybees might indeed be showing up to support my mother in her transition from earth to heaven. This is when I began to understand their mystical power. And when the shipment of bees arrived, I began to realize the very practical magic they embody. I came to experience their alchemy and, since that time, have been on a path to learn everything I can from them about collective care, alchemy, power, medicine, magic, and more.

Amy

My first opportunity to work with bees came in my mid-twenties when I was living in a rural part of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Claus, a German expat and neighbor, was a beekeeper who tended sixteen hives. He invited my partner and me to help him harvest honey one year, which we did, spinning frames long into the night by candlelight in his shed. The experience was ecstatic and mesmerizing. I can still smell the heady sweetness of all the honey and propolis.

A few years later, I was in a really dramatic and exhausting relationship with my then-boyfriend when I had a vivid dream. In the dream, I was in a house with my boyfriend, and we could hear buzzing in the walls, a loud and beautiful humming that was vivid, comforting, and slightly unsettling all at once. What was behind the walls? Were we in danger? Was I? In the dream, my boyfriend punched a hole in the wall, which revealed a large and vibrant hive and cells dripping with honey. The dream was both a warning (about the relationship) and a message (about my call to be with bees)—one I would never forget. The bees have a way like that, where they get into the walls of your system, into *your* cells. The call of the bees became a refrain that played over and over throughout my life every time I had the opportunity to be with or learn about them.

Michelle

What has been shared here about our individual entryways into the world of honeybees is a snippet of what we have to share throughout this book. *The Wisdom of the Hive* uses the honeybee hive as a metaphor and a teacher to help us learn how to respond to the times we are living in and center collective care as a practice. The ecosystem of a hive is the perfect

guide for us because of all that occurs within it—the vibration and sound, the smell of sweet nectar, the honeycomb and propolis, and the higher math the honeybees practice and express—perfect hexagons that contain nectar turned into honey, pollen, larvae, hope, life, and the future.

This book shares how superorganisms such as honeybees work together to sustain their hive, even when we humans create conditions that threaten their sustainability and that of other parts of our ecosystem. *The Wisdom of the Hive* suggests that we, too, can emulate what it is to be a superorganism working similarly to the honeybee, deeply committed to creating conditions not only for our current survival but for the survival of future beings as well. *The Wisdom of the Hive* comes from knowing that we are a collective hive, and from our desire to impart the magic and lessons we have gleaned from the honeybees that can guide us now and in the future to be better stewards of our shared humanity, planet, and the dreams we hold for future generations.

This book flows through the different elements that make up a successful honeybee hive, then discusses how these elements intertwine with the rest of nature, and how humans can achieve more harmony by following their example. As you weave through the different chapters, you will learn more about the life of a honeybee, your own life, and your relationship to the collective as part of an ever-changing ecosystem. You will explore the ways we are surviving and creating conditions to thrive; deepen your understanding of the stings and painful experiences we experience in life and how they serve as an awakening; learn about the ways polarities exist inside you and our collective; consider what it means to attune to other humans and non-humans; and engage the practice of attunement as a healing practice to bring yourself into

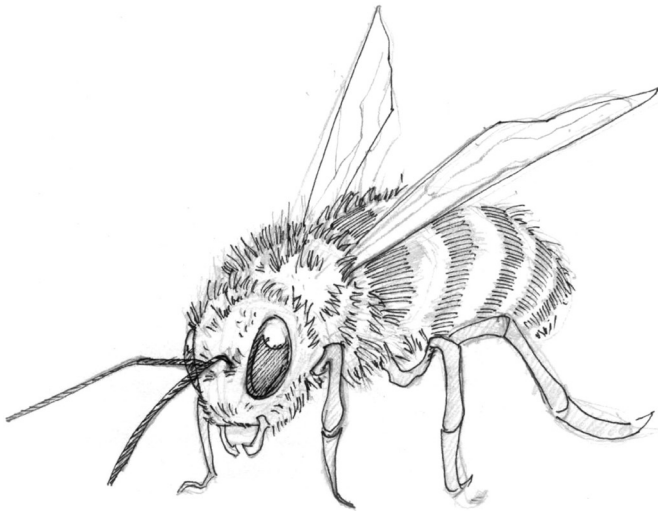
alignment with other beings and the planet. Through the wisdom of honeybee alchemy, you will be equipped to tap into your own alchemy. You will consider what it means to work between this earthly realm and the spiritual realm to aid the collective in healing timelines of the past, present, and future.

Throughout the book, you will be guided through many reflection questions, meditations, illustrations, poems written by Michelle, and practices that include movement, sound, and vibration. *The Wisdom of the Hive* is both a teacher and an invitation to journey toward something better—for ourselves and the honeybees—and to places only the honeybee can guide us.

We offer this book as a love letter and a deeply transformative vibration to the honeybees.

We offer this book in reverence to the honeybee and all beings.

We offer this book as a small contribution to the collective, from the holy honeybee channeling through us to you.



Honeybees are psychopomps, working between
this earthly realm and the heavenly realm

*Holy honeybee, thank you for teaching us.
Thank you for showing us there is a different way of
being toward you, ourselves, and all parts of our
ecosystem.
Thank you for your holy hum, sweet honey, abundant
grace, and gentle spirits.
Thank you for being here with us now.
We offer a deep bow of gratitude and many blessings.
May The Wisdom of the Hive be an ode to you.
May it mirror your constant vibration and deep
connection to the entire world.
May we be as humble as you.
May we be as committed to the collective hive as you.
May we remember how deeply connected we are to you,
holy honeybee.
May we treat you with care.
May we bow at the foot of your hives, willing to receive
your medicine, teachings, song, and love. May your
love move through us with potency so we may love in a
way that preserves our shared humanity and disrupts
the hierarchy of person and planet.
We are not above you; we are sitting alongside you,
studying your ways so we may be better vessels for
transformation and good in this lifetime and beyond.
And so it is.
It is so.*

A Note

As we invite you to learn more about the honeybee throughout *The Wisdom of the Hive*, we want to acknowledge that some of you might be afraid of honeybees. I was and still am