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ROOT




RITUAL

Timeless Ways to Connect to Land,
Lineage, Community, and the Self

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Part One

Land



OUR ANCIENT ANCESTORS were guided by the lands they lived on. They followed the phases of the moon, worked with the ebb and flow of the tides, monitored the animals' behavior with every season, knew how to make medicine from plants, and knew how to nourish themselves using the natural world around them.

I didn't grow up in a wild place, tending to a vast garden of medicinal plants or feeling a deep connection to the natural world. There was no crinkly-eyed grandmother lovingly teaching me her best methods for preserving fruit in the summer. There was no family tradition of watching for the first wild greens to pop up after the winter rains, so we could run out and pick them to make a fresh, wild pesto with chickweed and nettle.

Not at all.

I grew up in a suburban town where, by the time I was ten, I was more interested in going to the mall and watching television than running barefoot in the grass. I was taught, through my modern suburban life, to fear the sting of a bee and the potential poison of a plant, to automatically squash the lone spider who wandered into the bathtub, and to feel dirty when venturing out into undeveloped, natural spaces.

But if I look more deeply into my childhood, it wasn't always that way for me.

If I squint my eyes and time travel back to my earlier days, I can recall the innate wonder I had for the natural world. I loved to climb trees and pretend they were castles that reached to the sky. I marveled at butterflies fluttering from flower to flower, lines of ants marching diligently to their underground dens, and even beehives buzzing busily with bee sisters bringing in pollen for their beloved queen. I would ask a hundred questions about these creatures that my parents couldn't possibly answer.

I would stare at the moon, full and bright in the sky, and get lost in the wonder of it being so far away and yet feeling so close. I would quietly perch myself at the window and watch the deer stroll into our backyard to eat the salad bar of spring weeds and think they were the gentlest, most lovely creatures I ever beheld. I wanted to hold them or ride them or run with them.

So why did everything shift? Why did I lose that connection?

It's hard to name the exact cause, but I suspect it had a lot to do with the influence of the times we are living in now.

I was a kid who was learning who she was in a world of growing privilege and modernity. I clung to television and the beginnings of the Internet and started to navigate the cliquey world of girl friendships. The demands within these fast-moving constructs took me away from the natural world.

My parents certainly tried to keep me engaged by taking me on hiking and camping trips all over the country every summer. But even as I was marveling at the glacier-carved valley of Yosemite or the stark desert of Death Valley or the ten thousand lakes of northern Minnesota, I could feel myself pushing my wonder away to fit into a different kind of system.

There was a span of around fifteen years when my singular focus was on achieving success according to the rubrics of modern society. I wanted to be cool and fashionable and fit in with the right crowd. I was always online, as the growth of social media took the world by storm.

It wasn't until my midtwenties that I realized I had a deep ache in my heart for a sense of true belonging. The constant noise of technology was leaving me anxious and lonely, while many of my friendships

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pushed me into performance rather than intimacy. I didn't have all of the answers, but my body, quietly at first, pulled me in a new direction.

I returned to the land.

I started seeing flowers in a different way. I yearned for farmers markets and fresh teas and getting my hands in the dirt. It didn't take long to begin reaping the harvest of this restored curiosity. I started my first garden at a time when my husband and I were arguing a lot early in our relationship, and I'm convinced our daily weeding and watering and marveling at the growth of our plants healed the wounds we were each battling.

I went to in-person classes in the kitchens of women I barely knew, where we would pass around big vats of honey, bowls of dried rose petals, and bottles of vinegar and collectively make herbal medicine. I was craving the knowledge these women had worked to remember that was being carried in their bones. I watched as their fingers whipped up face creams and salves and tinctures with such ease, my eyes welling with tears. I had spent so long wanting to feel and experience this earth-inspired wisdom, and yet it all felt so familiar. My spirit was “rewilding.”

I was *remembering* what my ancestors knew—*belonging to the land*.

Do you feel that deep ache too? That longing for connection with the land? You can remember and reconnect with the natural world, whether you live in a city or a suburb, no matter your fears or level of understanding. I'll help you get started.

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Tending the Land

WHEN MY FRIEND Sonia purchased a new home, her initial desire was to make a variety of changes to it, both inside and out. She shared with me her plans to cut down certain trees and rip out bushes to curate the look of the property to her liking—a common choice in our society. She urgently wanted to knock down walls and paint the barn to make this home feel more palatable to her. We had a conversation about her values and discovered that there was another option available to her that invited her into deeper alignment: to pause and give herself one year to greet and get to know the land and the house before making decisions about her landscape. Within that year, she got to know the house better,

spoke to the trees, watched the plants change through the seasons, and found herself processing grief around past acts of dominance and ownership in the places she'd lived. By taking this sacred pause, Sonia was able to learn from the land rather than mold it to fit her desires.

The first step to reengaging your relationship with the land is to consciously shift your perspective from one of *ownership* to one of *stewardship*.

The difference between ownership and stewardship of land is in the concept of dominance and the consideration of all that depends on the resources a land provides. To steward is to caretake by keeping the web of life that is sustained by that land intact as best you can. There is no intention of dominance, but rather interdependence. The mindset shifts from thinking you can do whatever you want to the land to considering all who are affected by those decisions (like the insects, animals, waters, and other humans who rely on that land).

We were all born into a system where dominance and ownership had the highest value, so it takes some time to unlearn those old paradigms and reprogram our perspectives to steward land rather than use it. When a land is “used” these days, we often end up with dead soil, polluted waters, and the disappearance or death of the beings who depended on it. We all lose when we focus solely on ownership—which brings me to colonization or colonialism.

So much of the modern world has been deeply impacted by the forced (and often violent) taking of lands. To colonize is to dominate over another and claim their land as your own. It is an unequal exchange

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by its very definition, intended to solely serve the interests of the dominating force.

The effects of colonization still very much exist today, even inside of us. The unconscious ways that we take what we want without thinking about consent or our impacts on others plays out all the time in our day-to-day lives. A sense of entitlement to ownership exists within us all. When I became aware of all the ways that the extractive, colonial mindset still lives in me, I was horrified and convinced I wanted to live another way. Entitlement partnered with a lack of impulse control are the same tendencies that led humans to colonize cultures that were not theirs for the taking. An example is reaching for a flower to pick it without even checking in to see if that is what the flower wants or if it will negatively affect the surrounding ecosystem it is growing in.

Thankfully, I was introduced to the concept of reciprocity—the balanced exchange of give and take.

Simply stated, reciprocity is an exchange where both parties mutually benefit. It is founded in the understanding that we are never alone on earth, and the consideration of nonhuman beings is imperative if we want to understand how to rebalance our relationship with the land.

Without this rebalancing, so much of the land will continue to hurt. Climate change consistently reveals the tragedy that happens when we stop listening to the needs of the land. Where I live in California, we are losing an entire autumn season as wildfires rip and roar through parched trees and grasses, sending grief through the smoke-filled air. The indigenous communities that once watched over these hills and valleys would perform regular and strategic burns as a practice of reciprocity before the land was forcibly taken from them. Now we witness the destruction of habitats and

homes, the displacement of animals and people, and the loss of clean water and safe breathing.

We must acknowledge the severity of humankind's destruction of this earth. We must grieve. And we must bolster indigenous communities and their reverent knowledge as our hope. Listening to those who live in a way of stewardship will help us develop new eyes and new ears so that we may all enter into a deeper appreciation for what the land actually does, wants, and needs.

What can you do to bring more reciprocity to your interaction with the land?

- Offer a song, a kiss, a strand of hair when you pick a flower or pass a flowering tree, leaving it untouched.
- Allow yourself to be moved by a gorgeous view.
- Make donations to preserve or repair local waterways or Superfund sites.
- Take time to sit under a tree and whisper “thank you” over and over until you believe the tree has felt it from you.
- Invite someone to walk a trail with you, sharing gratitude or the medicine of fresh oxygen.
- Pay attention to the way the land changes, both naturally with the seasons and unnaturally with pollution and overdevelopment.

- Learn about your local wildlife, the challenges they face, and how you can help.
- Bring gloves and a bag with you when you venture out so that you can pick up and properly dispose of trash.
- Explore your options for composting, offering your nutrient-rich scraps for the land's nourishment rather than letting it become landfill waste.

There is no gratitude, big or small, that is not appreciated when practicing reciprocity with all of the natural world. And yet for many of us, it can be a challenge to enter that level of relationship with the earth if we are unaware of the stories beneath the soil we are interacting with.

Most of us know very little about our lands because we are not from the place we claim as our home today.

In fact, it is highly likely that our ancestors forcibly took the land away from the people who were here first. And here we are, sitting in our well-warmed, plumbed homes built on earth that holds the bones of the original ancestors of this place.

I remember when I first felt this reality in my heart.

My first honest thought was, "Ouch! I don't want to feel this pain of colonization. Let's try to forget about this, okay?"

My second thought was, "Shoot! I don't know whose tribal lands I currently occupy. I want to find that out."

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