

WRITING THROUGH THE CHANGES

As September dawns, we begin Stoking Our Internal Fire in preparation for Vinotok with journaling prompts, readings and meditations offered each week until the Autumn Equinox.

WEEK 1: IT BEGINS IN GRATITUDE ...

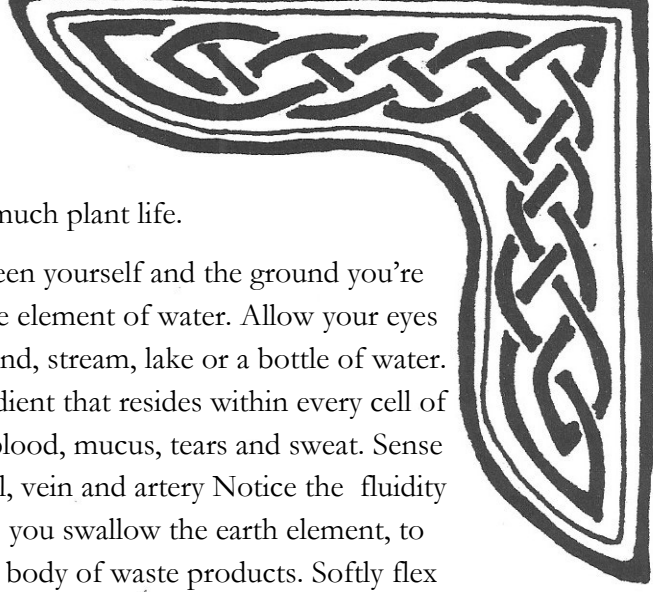
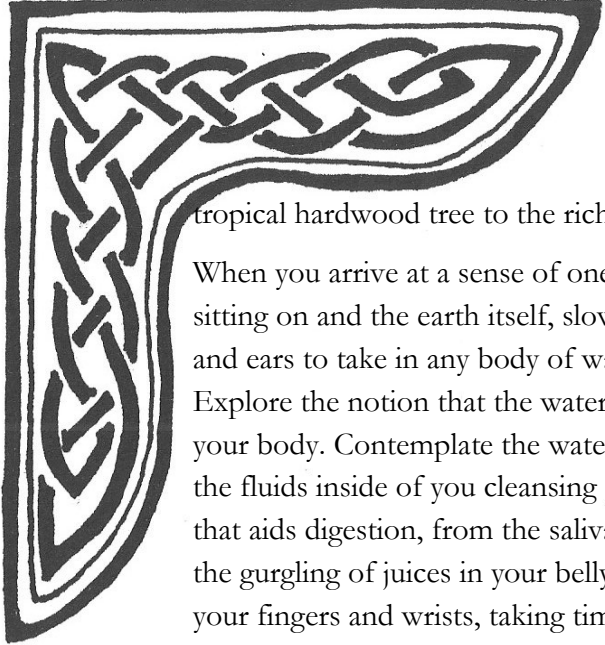
Finding your place: Take this opportunity to unplug from technology. Get a special notebook or journal to write in, and a pen to write with. Leave your cell phone at home. Reserve a chunk of time so you can be contemplative and slow. Walk out to a spot in nature in an easy saunter, as far as you can go in the time you've allotted. Find a tree to lean against, a rock to sit on, a stream to sit by, a meadow to sit in. Take a deep breath, settle in.

Meditation

Contemplating the Four Elements: This meditation contemplates the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water in relation to our own bodies. The suggestion would be to do this meditation in your journaling spot, before beginning your prompts. Sit on the ground cross-legged if you can, or any position that is comfortable. Sit with your back straight, as if a tree, rooting both into the ground with your hips yet reaching into the sky with your head.

First, focus on the air by paying attention to your inhale and exhale. With each inhale, sense how the oxygen you breathe has been exhaled by the trees, bushes, grasses and other plants of your home. With each exhale, sense how the carbon dioxide you expel is absorbed by the plant life all around the world. Feel how the air inside you is the same as the air surrounding you. Breathe the universe in and out over and over again. Contemplate how each breath connects you with the living, breathing world—with every creature burying in the soil, to every bird soaring in the sky, and every person throughout all of time, including future generations.

As time passes and you begin to experience a deeper awareness of your interconnection with the air, slowly shift your focus to contemplating the earth. As you sit, feel the hardness and solidity of the earth beneath you, the density of rock. The earth element pours through us, via the food we eat, transformed into muscles and tissues, replacing all the cells in our body every seven years. We are earth, made from earth, and will go back to earth. Feel the earth elements in the hardness and solidity of your body—your bones, nails and teeth. Feel the weight of your body, your arms and legs—this element is heavy. See if you can sense we are not just on the earth, but a part of the earth that walks, moves, breathes. The earth element in you is part of every living thing, from the granite bedrock to the dense bark of a



tropical hardwood tree to the rich humus that supports so much plant life.

When you arrive at a sense of oneness, or connection between yourself and the ground you're sitting on and the earth itself, slowly shift your focus to the element of water. Allow your eyes and ears to take in any body of water around you, be it a pond, stream, lake or a bottle of water. Explore the notion that the water you see is the same ingredient that resides within every cell of your body. Contemplate the watery nature of your body—blood, mucus, tears and sweat. Sense the fluids inside of you cleansing and moisturizing every cell, vein and artery. Notice the fluidity that aids digestion, from the saliva in your mouth that helps you swallow the earth element, to the gurgling of juices in your belly, to the urine that rids the body of waste products. Softly flex your fingers and wrists, taking time to feel the fluid lubricating your joints and making movement possible. Sense the moisture in your eyes and lips, the damp sweat on your skin. Look at the body of water before you and consider the ways you are part of the vast hydrological cycle—water enters your body, rinses it clean, and exits your body to rejoin the flow through the seas and mountains and sky. The water within has been through endless cycles, has passed

through people living centuries ago, has been swallowed by whales in Antarctic waters, and has been drunk by zebra in the plains of Africa. It has laid in deep alpine lakes, been frozen icebergs in Greenland, fed unnumerable trees, and nourished parched cactus in the Sahara desert.

As your awareness of your flowing, fluid nature deepens, slowly turn your attention to the final element: fire. If it is a sunny day, sit in full exposure to the sun's warm rays, our source of this element that connects us with the fire of the big bang. Reflect on the fact that this brilliance has traversed millions of miles through cold, dark space. Feel the sun's radiant heat on your skin, penetrating deep into you. Realize how sensitive you are to the sun, because you are a warm-blooded animal. Let the animal part of you relish the sun's life-giving warmth. If the sun goes behind clouds or sets behind a mountain, see if this leaves you feeling chilled and contracted. Sense how the sun's energy is sustaining your very life, providing the warmth deep in your belly. We only hold the element of fire for a short while, and we need to regenerate fire constantly through exposure to warmth or via energy from food. The sun provides this element universally: we share this energy with all warm-blooded creatures, and with reptiles who use the life-giving rays to warm themselves in the middle of the day. Feel the sun's energy giving warmth to the air, and life to the plants we metabolize.

To end this meditation, let your awareness expand to include all of your experience, and see if you can perceive each arising phenomenon through the lens of the four elements. If you experience physical sensations of density, hardness, weight, pressure or dullness, note this indicates the presence of earth element. When you are attentive to your breath, focus on the air element itself more than the physical sensations of breathing, and understand movement—such as the movement of your body through space—as a manifestation of the air element. Thoughts might be understood as an expression of the air element, since they are so light and ethereal.

When you feel any sense of fluidity in your body, or any sense of wetness, understand it as the presence of the water element. And when you become cool or warm or feel hot and sweaty, experience those sensations as the presence or absence of the fire element. By deepening our awareness of each of the four elements, we can begin to better see the universal nature of our individual mind-body experience.

- Adapted from *Awake in the Wild* by Mark Coleman

Prompts

Finding your voice: *As you respond to the prompts following the meditation, don't worry about grammar, punctuation or writing rules—just let it flow. Write thoughts as they come to you, without any editing or judgement. Take time to stare at the clouds, the water moving by, the leaves in the breeze. Ponder. Consider. Contemplate. For these kinds of prompts, it is best to write until you have no more to say about the matter.*

Expressing Gratitude: Think back from now until the Autumn Equinox of 2019 (alternatively you could go back to the Spring Equinox or the Winter Solstice). Use your calendar, another journal, photos, your memory. Write down all the things you are grateful for, everything you can think of. Write what your gratitude for gifts of the land, your friends, your family, what sustains you. What are you grateful for in yourself?

Identifying Accomplishments: In this same time frame, what do you feel like you accomplished? Certainly this could include professional accomplishments, but think also of things you might have accomplished in your personal life, with your relationships, in regards to your health, and in relation to your environment. Be proud of what you have done. Claim it. Honor it.

Finding Relationship with the Land: What does the wild mean to you? How do you connect to nature – through what kinds of activities? Is it a place of solace? Rejuvenation? Adventure? Inspiration? Challenge? Does nature feed you? In what way(s)? How might we as a human race create a relationship with the land and what impact might this have on both our personal lives and the world? Do you have mythologies that connect you to the land? What are these? What do you love about being alive on this physical Earth?

Practices

1. As you move through this week, notice the natural beauty around you. Perhaps it's a nest, a tree, a view—something that speaks to you. Create a tiny homage to this object using the following guidelines: Use only natural objects; no manmade items; no paper or anything that can litter; flowers from your garden are great, but leave the wildflowers to seed; small bundles of dried flowers, grasses or leaves may be used, but shake out the seed pods so the plant can regenerate; don't collect too much from any one spot; never harvest too many things from one spot, make small bundles and take sparingly.
2. Make a list of people you feel gratitude for—it could be a family member or other loved one, someone who helped you out in a bind, someone who was simply kind to you one day. If in the Gunnison Valley, order a Green Man Gratitude Gift from www.vinotok.org. If elsewhere, find something tiny—a piece of chocolate, a single flower, a bundle of herbs. Secretly leave it on the doorstep of the people on your list, with a note of gratitude—signed, or not ...

Suggested Reading

Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy by Barbara Ehrenreich explores the phenomenon of community celebration, its importance and its positive impacts on a society.

*For more on Vinotok's
Stoking the Internal Fire practices visit
www.vinotok.org*



*For more on author & educator
Molly Murfee visit
www.mollymurfee.com*