



Chapter 1: **Worldviews Are a Portal**

Tutored by the Stars

NIGHTFALL ARRIVES IN TEXTURED INDIGO and sable-black banners as I make my way along a narrow trail to the brim of the headlands and breathe in nontoxic air for the first time in many weeks. Another climate crisis-induced fire season lingers on this Northern California coast, and I have come to stand on the ocean cliffs to embrace an exquisite fresh breeze. The dense smoky haze has finally dispersed after seemingly endless fires and hazardous air quality, which for several days measured the worst in the world.

Breathing in the smoke that blanketed California for those weeks was to be besieged with a visceral experience of devastating sorrow. The smoke and ash were the aching remnants of wondrous pine and oak trees, deer, foxes, squirrels, bobcats, and many other creatures who lost their lives in the fire. The smoke mixed with particulates of destroyed homes and entire towns burned to the ground, toxins from plastics and chemicals—and yes, the airborne remains of family members and beloveds who died trying to escape the unrelenting flames. This is what climate chaos looks like and feels like, up close and personal—in our bodies.

This fire, the Camp Fire of November 2018, marks one of many distinct climate tipping points, a grisly augury of California's intensifying fire seasons. Each year, infernos blaze fast and furious across the state, with valiant firefighters risking their lives to quench the flames, and residents poised to flee at a moment's notice. The Camp Fire killed 85 people and scorched 153,336 acres.¹ Since then, even larger fires have raged in the Amazon, Africa, and Australia. It seems whole continents are ablaze. Errant human activity has created the precise conditions for increased fires—and Nature is responding resolutely, in the language of infernos.²

Standing on the bluffs this clear night, I feel some blessed relief, I breathe deeply, trying to clear my mind, and to assemble some sense-making of

this moment in the human journey. I stand not only at the edge of night and sea but at the edge of a world.

The crises around us are cascading and interlocking—climate chaos, colonization, racism, patriarchy, ecological systems in collapse, an economic system based on endless extractivism. It's clear that we cannot continue as we are. In fact, it is impossibly arrogant to parley with the natural laws of the Earth, and unacceptable that egregious, long-standing human injustices persist. Our age cries out for a multitude of reparations, rememberings, reimaginings, and restorations—both within our personal lives and the public sphere.

As I see it, while one world is burning and unraveling, another world is being called forth by forces stirring deep within the spirit of our collective psyches.

As the full darkness of the night settles around me, my attention falls upward into the vast bejeweled landscape of the starry firmament. I have entered the darkness to listen to the stories and ancestors in the sky. Not to seek transcendence away from Earth—no, not at all—but to seek guidance and perspective from the great wheel of time and from the old ones who peer downward with their glimmering eyes. I ask how humanity, and I personally, can live responsibly and vibrantly in this perilous, uncertain moment. And in this quest, how can we restore all that we can of life-sustaining ecosystems while becoming good ancestors for future generations—here, now, in the liminal time of the Anthropocene.*

Can we undo the doing?

I passionately explore this realm of inquiry as part of my work at the Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN), which I had the honor of founding in 2009. Women in all their diversity are critical to implementing successful solutions to the climate crisis and environmental degradation. Globally, women are responsible for the majority of the world's food production, and in most Global South countries, women

*The Anthropocene is the current geological epoch, defined by the domination of the Earth by human activity, which has affected Mother Earth's natural processes and systems. I note that this term is not quite sufficient on its own because it flattens responsibility across all of humanity, and names that the defining problem is human activity, not particular systems and structures.

produce between 40 and 80 percent of food, and are central stewards of seeds and agricultural biodiversity.³ A detailed study found that a one-unit increase in a country's score on the Women's Political Empowerment Index leads to an 11.51 percent decrease in the country's carbon emissions.⁴

Yet, women are at the same time disproportionately impacted by ecological crises because of global gender inequality.⁵ Women more than men engage in subsistence farming and fuel and water collection. As droughts, floods, and other erratic weather events increase, there is an increased burden on women holding responsibility for their family's food, water, and energy needs.⁶

Globally, women's basic rights continue to be denied in varying forms and intensities, from lack of education opportunities to gender-based violence—and we cannot discuss gender inequality without addressing its inextricable relationship to racism and the additional disproportionate impacts of extractive industries and socio-ecological harms to Indigenous, Black, and Brown women. Because of these interlocking injustices, there's a tacit understanding in our global advocacy networks of the need to stand together, including with many of our brothers in solidarity, as we fight interconnected systems of oppression in the “doings” of these times.

Along with a wide range of topics in the chapters ahead, you will hear from many of the truly remarkable women and feminist leaders across the gender spectrum whom I have had the honor of learning from and working with in regions around the world. Through their stories, advocacy, and campaigns, we can learn a great deal about undoing harms to our communities and the Earth—and, importantly, about forging new ways of thinking, healing, and being.

Collectively, many of us who are working to avert the worst of the climate crisis are endeavoring to protect forests, waterways, land, oceans, biodiversity, and frontline communities, while also creating thriving spaces of decolonized discourse, sites of safe harbor, and lands of liberation. For my part, the simple fact is that I am wildly in love with our beautiful planet, and I will never stop doing all that I can to defend and protect Mother Earth, our communities, and future generations. Through this work, I often find my deepest hope in the efforts of everyday people, civil society, and global movements. We can be found in the streets, in the fields, in the boardrooms, in educational institutions, and in the halls of

power. At critical times, we are putting our bodies on the line, standing up for the last of the clean water, the last of the forests, for what we hold sacred—for the last chance for our climate and a livable future.

To state it plainly, what is happening in our world right now is not only unjust, it is insane—our very home is being defiled. And within this reality, many of us are not willing to sacrifice current and future generations for reasons of misbegotten fears and belief systems, greed, political power, and hubris. Rather, we are willing to use our imaginations, to be alive, to thrive, to be courageous, to be uncomfortable in order to enact positive changes, and to strive for a future that prioritizes social, racial, and economic justice.

In this endeavor, so close to my heart, I have stood with my sisters as we have been criminalized and arrested while protecting the land, water, and air from climate-wrecking oil pipelines in peaceful, nonviolent acts of civil disobedience. With Indigenous, Black, and Brown sisters, we have directly engaged with the largest banks and asset management firms in the world that finance deforestation and fossil fuel companies that drive the climate crisis. We have advocated for financial institutions to divest from harmful projects in marginalized communities and instead invest in community-led solutions and uphold human rights. Alongside many civil society groups, our organization has advocated at the annual United Nations climate conferences for over a decade demanding no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius in global temperature rise, phasing out all fossil fuels, a Just Transition, gender-responsive climate policies, and implementation of Indigenous rights and Rights of Nature.

Standing with sisters in sacrifice zones, we have held each other in outrage and heartbreak as Black and Latina women miscarry babies and experience cancer at alarming rates due to the pollution forced into their communities. Some of my Indigenous sisters have been attacked and even murdered in their fierce dedication to land defense. Patricia Gualinga, who is a Kichwa leader of the Amazonian Women Defenders of the Jungle in Ecuador, and a dear friend, says, “We have been criminalized, we have been persecuted, many times threatened and sometimes murdered. This has to stop because our country and the world needs to be conscious that our fight is not an isolated fight of the environmental defenders or the Indigenous Peoples. It is a fight that allows the world to survive.”⁷

Within these struggles, I also stand in my white privilege and question how I think and act, mistakes I've made, and what I can do in my never-ending quest to be a wiser person and open my heart and mind ever more. It never stops, nor should it—this is how we learn and change. I mention these things not to call attention to myself, as there are colleagues, movement leaders, and dear friends whose credentials and experiences are far more expansive, but rather to describe the ground upon which I stand. These experiences form the lens of my reflections, and they also are an embodied experience of the very stark reality of what is deemed valuable or not in the dominant culture.*

Importantly, my sisters and I have also gathered in moments of significant victories with campaigns and programs that have protected millions of acres of old-growth forests, stopped oil pipelines, changed policies and laws, created food sovereignty networks, replanted forests on clear-cut lands, practiced healthy and mystical relationships with nature, generated serious discourse on care economies and feminist futures, dug deep into complex and uncomfortable conversations on racism and colonization, centered Indigenous, Black, and Brown women's knowledge and leadership, witnessed rivers being acknowledged as living relatives protected under new laws, and more. From these experiences, I know that transformational change is possible—and this kind of deep societal metamorphosis is a central thrust of the book you now hold in your hands.

Under the star-filled sky, I ask who we need to become in the Anthropocene in order to heal ourselves, our communities, and Mother Earth—because clearly the harmful actions of the dominant culture have not stopped.

To address any great dilemma, we must examine how we perceive it and approach it. After decades of working in social and environmental movements, I continually circle back to a core entry point of transformation: the portal of worldviews. We have arrived at a juncture where the

* Throughout, there will be times I use the term "dominant culture" rather than the proverbial "we" that often denotes collective society in general. It is important to acknowledge that Indigenous Peoples, Black and Brown people, and land-based communities have different cultural frames, knowledges, and lived experiences than what falls under the umbrella of Western culture or white mainstream society. Thus, by using the term "dominant culture," there is clarity about the specific part of society I am referencing.

collective efforts of countless people to protect our Earth and all generations are invoking a worldview analysis and approach at the precise moment in which we face a collective catastrophic event in the human experience. Without examining worldviews, we will not conjure and enact the level of imagination, relationships, and ethics now needed. Worldviews express the fundamental nature of a particular culture—how it operates and constructs perceptions and relationships. They provide an all-embracing assemblage of the world around us, including the greater cosmos, and how the world came into being. Worldviews influence who we are, how we behave, our dreams, imaginings, and our relationship to the very web of life. A worldview is a composition of principles, narratives, codes of conduct, and foundational assumptions about reality, which inform our scientific discourse, cultural norms, political and social ideologies, and all aspects of our lived experiences.

Worldviews shape our world and influence the course of history. When threatened by law enforcement at an Indigenous-led peaceful prayer vigil to protect water from the construction of an oil pipeline, a vast differentiation in worldviews was not abstract. Why were we being criminalized for protecting the very source of life? Reality seemed upside-down. We cannot live without precious water, and Indigenous leaders have been at the forefront of voicing this awareness and leading struggles to protect water for decades. Worldviews clashed in that pipeline struggle—one bent on financial profit at any cost, entitlement, and destruction; the other fighting for life, rights, and justice.

We are at a point where we must ask, *How did the dominant culture arrive at this paradoxical moment, when we have healthy and equitable pathways to address our greatest problems, but the central worldview is fixated on cataclysmic exploits?*

Some of the most damaging and pervasive worldviews are human dominion over nature, separation from a living Earth, and structural patriarchy and white supremacy. These worldviews, primarily housed in what we might call Western worldviews, perpetuate deleterious fears, ignorance, personal traumas, avarice, violence, and dangerous cultural norms—all of which have led to a huge deficit in political will and necessary action.

What I have come to learn is that the current dominant social mindsets and systems are incapable of addressing the crises we face or providing

a flourishing way ahead.⁸ Consequently, in this tenuous moment, understanding worldviews is vital to entering new thresholds of living—some worldviews need radical dismantling and reimagining, and others need to be thoroughly bolstered, remembered, or rescued. What I hold to be true is that another world is possible, and the portal exists within this one to build the world we seek.

Networks of change-makers, systems thinkers, activists, writers, and artists from every background have recognized the need for systemic change because we know that while installing solar panels, deploying wind turbines, recycling, and implementing energy efficiency are real solutions and absolutely paramount, these alone cannot address the deep layers of societal evolution that this moment demands. We are striving in our work to transform oppressive systems and processes into radically beneficial and thriving cultural configurations. The emergent societal scaffolding and cultural story we are engaged in seeks to disentangle itself from a violent colonial and patriarchal stronghold, and in that ever-burgeoning effort, there can be no throwaway people, lands, or species. Instead, we are weaving life-enhancing worldviews and new ways of being and thinking into our projects, narratives, and programs. The core focus is to transition from an extractivist paradigm of exploitation, hyper-individualism, and supremacy to a relational Earth-conscious understanding of respect, reciprocity, and restoration.



To approach this prodigious and epic topic of worldviews, I need tangible spaciousness. So, I have come this night to these oceanside cliffs to be tutored by the stars. These ancient celestial lights offer a unique perspective, allowing me to pause and consider, with breathtaking wonder, our very existence in a greater universe—one so unimaginably immense, we can barely comprehend it. I situate myself in the profound reality that I am spinning on a living planet in a boundless continuum of space—and astonishingly, like most of us, I almost never think about it.

In my contemplation, it comes to me that there are stories and navigational maps in the night sky. These are held within the stellar configurations identified by our forebears from many traditions and lands. It is here that I enter the realm of wayfinding with worldviews that intertwine memory,

time, language, history, diverse cultures, different ways of knowing, and relationships with land and each other.

I invite you to join me in a mapping of sorts. Together we will journey from where we are now in the dominant culture, a worldview with detrimental cultural norms in our personal lives and societal experiences, to other possible futures and worldviews that center justice, holistic and other ways of knowing, living landscapes, ancestral remembrances, and thriving Earth communities. This map does not strive to provide tidy answers to wildly complex conditions, but rather to open questions and invitations along the way on a nonlinear course.

This worldview cartography includes a story about the elaborate contours of time. As an example, nocturnal time can influence our perceptions. When the light of our home star, the Sun, ebbs at dusk after shining brightly all the day long, a great darkness appears, exposing a limitless time and space realm, interpreted in barely conceivable light-year measurements and galaxy-forming fractals.

When we peer into the starlit heavens, we look into the past—and witness events from multiple points in history simultaneously. The rays of our Sun, approximately 93 million miles away, travel at the speed of light to arrive on Earth in only eight minutes, but the light from other stars must journey many light-years to reach us through the great expanse of the universe. Even within a particular constellation, what we see is a collection of various points in time. Take Orion, the hunter. The brilliant blue supergiant Alnilam (Arabic for “sapphire”), which forms the center of Orion’s belt, is nearly 2000 light-years away. But Gamma Orionis, forming one of the hunter’s shoulders, is only 244.6 light-years away, and the reddish supergiant Betelgeuse, Orion’s other shoulder, is 548 light-years away from us. To gaze at Orion is to stand at the nexus of multiple timelines, and this remarkable convergence causes me to expand my awareness to multiple ways of experiencing this present moment and a myriad of differing perceptions. This is one way that I enter the portal of worldview transformation.

This constellation of varied timelines presents an aggregate of story threads happening all at once, in which seemingly contradictory realities can overlap: we are witnessing and experiencing the unraveling, grief, and dying of the world as we know it; meanwhile, we are also actively building

spaces of liberating possibilities and the emergence of a healthier world we have been envisioning and summoning for many years.

I know that time is not linear—it dissolves and bends in space—so I sense that its multivalent nature is critical to understanding and coping with this moment and the metamorphosis of our worldviews. The colossal time measurement, imparted by the ancient stars, can remind us of our ancestral lineages, our human arrival in the unfolding universe, and our responsibilities to generations to come. Past, present, and future bend together in overlapping realities that can inform and guide our actions. We can see in the time curvature that the future, in great part, is being chosen in the present. What we do right now will be what our children and all the beings of the Earth will experience for generations. In this most urgent moment, our every course of thought and action matters. We are engaged in intergenerational work, and we must hold future generations as a guiding light.

The gemlike constellations watching us will not only witness this present instant but have already observed eons upon eons of life on Earth, and are reflecting our stories back to us from the ages. We need to learn from these ancient, echoed stories.



Is there time to undo the doing?

As I search time cycles in the night, I remember something I learned from Pandora Thomas, the brilliant African American founder of EARTHseed Permaculture Center and Farm.⁹ Pandora taught me about Sankofa, which is an African concept from the Akan People of Ghana. The symbol of Sankofa is a great mythical bird with her feet firmly planted forward and her head turned backward. And, as I understood from Pandora and further research, Sankofa conveys the wisdom of learning from the past to ensure a strong future. Sankofa is an acknowledgement that critical examination is vital in gathering the knowledge we need, and that remembering the course of the past provides irreplaceable guidance in charting a wise and strategic path ahead. This approach and worldview keenly resonate with me because if we wish to move forward with the skills to shape a healthy and just world, it is vital that we comprehend and speak to the origins and histories of this quite epic choice-point in the human

enterprise. An ahistorical deciphering will lack the thick strata of wisdom and understanding to garner a worldview and perspective that is required for proper reconciliations and restorations, and for creating resilient, thriving communities for all.

The compounded tsunami of societal dysfunction and ecological devastation did not appear suddenly on the global stage—these behaviors and consequences are rooted in a long-standing disrespect for neighbor and nature, fueled by the dominant culture. To add insult to injury, we are often told that we, as a global community, are “all in this together,” but the fact is, we experience these struggles neither together nor equally. Thus, we cannot proceed to effectively repair in a new way and heal without addressing the root causes of these crises and the ongoing inequities and injustices.

As I ponder these struggles in the starlit night, I return to the inquiry and contemplation of time. Humanity is in quite a peculiar relationship with time. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, and subsequent IPCC reports, tell us that we have a frighteningly short window to avert the worst effects of the climate crisis.¹⁰

Simultaneously, we cannot allow the powers that be, including governments, corporations, and financial institutions, to rush to so-called solutions that are born from the same deleterious paradigms and ideologies that produced the problem itself—advancing greenwashed, false, narrow-minded, and unjust solutions under the cover of this harrowing crisis.

It is in the present moment, under intense pressure to act precipitously, that we need to break open fresh space and collectively draw upon the multivalent nature of time. We are in a massive emergency that requires haste, and yet we also need to slow down. But with a special kind of slowness. This slowness notices the well-being of every pollinator relative, like the bees and butterflies that our entire food ecosystems depend upon; it helps us untangle ourselves from the grinding pace of the over-production economy in our daily lives; it helps us grow our own food, patiently and joyously; it helps us delve into the innermost layers of ourselves—our beliefs, fears, and societal constructs—in order to learn, heal, and grow, and bring forth flourishing communities. And yet, we must also

move quickly, like at the speed of light, to meet the demands of the laws of physics and the vital cries of “climate emergency!” from youth leaders globally.

I do not have a definitive answer to this precarious time riddle, but I recognize that it calls for other ways of knowing, mindsets, and approaches to the manner in which we do or undo every action and thought in our lives. Here we can ask not only *what* we are doing but *how* and *why*, and in this way the route we chart might lead us to new perspectives, perceptions, and worldviews concerning the terrain ahead. And while indeed dire conditions are here, we must not abandon hope in the effort. There is real reason not to give up. While scientists are sounding the alarm, as they should, they are also telling us that though serious climate disruptions will continue, we can avert the worst impacts of the climate crisis and re-establish ecosystem stability—but we must mobilize and act now.¹¹



Wrapped in the shawl of night and this choice-point in time, the stars elicit in me the need to contemplate and journey to more expansive coordinates. Here we can draw upon the power of radical imagination that resides within us and recall ancient alchemies—these are primordial coordinates inside of us that remember, as our ancestors did, that we humans are inseparably a part of Nature in an animate cosmology that is ever unfurling.

The shining celestial fires, and their stories, speak to me in mellifluous tones. I recognize and say out loud the names of several constellations, finding great comfort in the familiar groupings. There is something inwardly quieting about this star map that I have viewed all my life from the Northern Hemisphere. The massive skyscape brings human toiling into perspective as it lifts my heart and mind into broader dimensions.

Tonight, I am drawn to Ursa Major, the Great Bear, and find joy in her easy identification. She is widely known as the Big Dipper for her unmistakable ladle-like shape. The star at the lip of the dipper, Dubhe (from the Arabic word for “bear”), works with Merak, just below her, to form a line that guides wayfinders toward Polaris, the not-so-brightly lit but profoundly important North Star, who remains almost completely still above the North Pole, like a maypole around which the other stars revolve, dancing through the nights and seasons.

The North Star is actually a system of three stars, and the trio is the center of a cosmic clock, as the Great Bear revolves around them once per day. All at once, I imagine the celestial lights wheeling around Polaris, the center of the heavens, and envision this North Star as the belly button of the sky, in the way the navel is the center of our bodies. As our belly buttons mark the umbilicus that bound us to our mothers, the North Star fastens the sky to the mother of our solar system, to the mother of the cosmos.

Through my own navel, I know I am wondrously and forever tethered to my mother and to her mother and her mothers, mothers, mothers, through the life-giving umbilicus. No matter how alone we might feel, our navel plainly announces that we are all here by virtue of others, through our ancestral lineages. Our belly buttons are physical memories of other bodies that carried us through generations, in a universal cordage of belonging.

I ask the Polaris-navel, the lodestar at the center of the sky, at the fulcrum of our epoch, how our dysfunctional, distorted, and disconnected dominant culture can ever retrieve the full memory of our umbilicus. Through our umbilicus, we are primordially connected to the greater universe as a consequence of the evolution of our planet because, in fact, we are created from the elements. Our literal ancestral origins are in the sky—most of the elements constituting our bodies, including oxygen, hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus, were forged in the stars over billions of years. The North Star tells me a story, shimmering an often-forsaken message that all of us belong here, we are part and particle of nature, even in our mammoth and dangerous amnesia. This guiding star is teaching me that it is quintessential we regenerate a worldview of ancestral belonging.

Tonight, I feel at home on the familial Earth because the stars beseech me to widen my perceptions. I remember the umbilical points around the planet, marked by many Indigenous and place-based peoples with omphalos stones—*omphalos* being the Greek word for “navel”.¹² These are often human-carved stones marking sacred places of origin and recognizing forces of the natural landscape. To further identify these sites as sources of life and the loci of origin for various peoples, most omphalos stones were formed to resemble eggs, a universal symbol of birth and new life.

According to Greek legend, Zeus’s umbilical cord fell to Earth after his birth and became the island of Crete, where an oft-visited omphalos stone still stands. Many more omphalos stones exist throughout Europe (some

worked by human hands and others not), as different peoples recognized their unique places of origin. The Stone of Divisions, located at the center of Ireland, marks the spot where the archdruid Midhe would light a fire at the beginning of each year. This fire would then be carried from the navel site to light all of the hearth fires of the community. The spiritual center of the Hopi People is not a stone, but an egg-shaped geyser called the Sipapu. Spouting from the bottom of the Grand Canyon in what is now Arizona, the Sipapu is where the Hopi emerged from the last world into this one.

Tragically, precious origin histories like these have been diminished, violated, lost, or consciously eradicated by the dominant culture. Because they help to root us in the living Earth, it is vital that we return these understandings, and other old-time, land-based stories, to our full awareness again. We need to revive these stories and knowledge systems, and then renew them in our current cultural and ecological contexts to heal from the false narrative and lived experience of orphanage from a living Earth. Through this reclaiming, we can regenerate a sense of belonging to place and to an animate landscape that is our living Relative. This shift in worldview to an animate cosmology, in which we are inextricably and wondrously entangled, is an essential transformation and responsibility as we strive to become more human in a frenzied, colonized, modern world—a world that tries relentlessly to separate us from each other, Mother Earth, and the greater cosmos.

The process of shifting our worldviews in mainstream society is likely to be disorienting and challenging as we encounter and invite different concepts and realities. Yet, if we slow down on the trail, we might allow ourselves to see how some of our life experiences are already embroidered with other ways of knowing and seeing—they have only been veiled or devalued by cultural constructs.

In my contemplation of the umbilicus of the sky, I unexpectedly recall a memory of myself as a three-year-old. I was traveling by car across the country with my family to our new home in California. We were returning from Germany, where our family lived for two years due to my father being stationed in Augsburg as a doctor in the US Army. My parents were interested in learning about diverse cultures, and this led us to stop in the American Southwest on our homeward travel. Once there, we participated in a public Indigenous ceremonial dance that was open to outsiders

and tourists. I remember being completely enthralled by the singing and the incredible colors and beauty of the traditional regalia of the dancers and the movement of their bodies. Some part of me was swept up into elliptical rhythms and sensations I had never encountered before.

At one point, a dancer bent on one knee and shot a thunder arrow from his bow into the clouds, accompanied by the sung prayers of the people to bring rain. I distinctly remember “seeing” the arrow flying high, high up to the stars and then coming back to Earth, flying directly into my belly button, and resting there. This experience was exhilarating rather than scary, and when the ceremonial dancing stopped, I recall telling my parents that the arrow was in my stomach and that I wanted to stay with the people in that place and help the rain to come. My parents, perplexed, explained to me there was no arrow released from the bow, that the archer had simulated the action of shooting an arrow as part of the special dance. I remember my frustration with my parents as I insisted that the arrow was in my belly button.

When it was time to leave, I was still trying to explain what had transpired. My parents tried to reason with me, and I simply became silent. Before our departure, a family photo was taken, which I still have; in it, my sister and I, in matching summer outfits, are standing next to our parents, and everyone is smiling except for me. I am not unhappy, but rather staring into the distance, intent on my own world.

Finally, an older man from the community approached me—I’m not sure if my parents had asked him to do so—and bent down and spoke with me. I don’t recall many of his words, except the part where he said that, yes, the arrow was in my belly, and he gave me a big, warm smile. This calmed me, and I left with my parents and sister without further issue, and for years I assumed I had a thunder arrow in my belly button. It seemed perfectly normal to me, though I did not speak of this any further with my family until many years later when I inquired about some of the details from my mother.

As a child, this was a profound experience of a different worldview than that in which I was raised. Though I lacked the words to express myself at the time, I knew that something had shifted at the core of my being, forming an experience that has shaped me.

I do not believe I am alone in this—it seems most everyone has had an experience or moment that enlightens us to the fact that the worldview in which we are operating is not the only way of perceiving reality.

When it happens to us as children in the current dominant culture, our voices are often silenced or shunned when we try to speak of our experience. Because most of our parents, teachers, and other adults in our lives are caught in the worldview of mainstream society, they often unwittingly negate dissenting voices and impulses that do not conform to the accepted societal narratives and norms. Yet, despite the demurring voices, we can maintain an unfeigned interior space that authentically senses and feels other ways of knowing and other spheres of experience. It is through this still-alive voice within us that we can keep listening to and learning from the stories the universe is whispering to us beneath the incessant roar of a culture devoid of a living-Earth cosmology and worldview.

In this time of escalating socio-ecological crises, we need to nurture and kindle this aliveness to trace our way out of the soul-crushing business of destroying our sensitivity to deep remembrances and understandings of the world. In essence, we are on a journey, wayfinding to the center of our spiritual umbilicus and our path home.



Without an honest, decolonized historical narrative dwelling in broader multivalent worldviews, we will be unable to build a life-enhancing and equitable future for all beings. Most of us carry unresolved intergenerational traumas in our minds and bodies, each in unique ways depending on gender, ethnicities, sexual orientation, economic standing, culture, and many other factors.¹³ Thus, our collective past strata must be tenderly surfaced, reconciled, attended to, and mended, or the powers that be will perpetuate ongoing violence to people and the planet.

My endeavor here is to add to a new cartography of healing and justice based on ancient and present-day cultural maps, decolonial perspectives, climate movement analyses, and forgotten or suppressed memories of our Earth-based lineages. While *The Story is in Our Bones* offers coordinates on the map, we are all participants in the wayfinding and learning together, and I am very grateful to many mentors along the way. The collective project is to contextualize ourselves in the bigger narrative that makes up our modern life. This contextualizing is a way of sense-making and orienting to sanity, care, belonging, and effective action in the midst of dangerous mayhem. We need agency to see the arc of the larger narrative

of this time in order to anchor diagnosis and administer relevant, systemic responses. No different from a healer or doctor, we must know the origin and constitution of an illness in order to treat it.

In the course of this mapping, remembering and reciting a panoply of stories and histories is an essential part of the healing journey, and a beginning of the conjuring needed to remake the worldviews of the dominant culture in a healthy manner. The great task I am aiming at is to summon deep memory of who we are in the Earth lineage to bring into being the world we keenly long for, residing ever so close, at the delicate threshold of great peril or great promise.

Here within *The Story is in Our Bones* we can sit under the ancient stars and endeavor to undo the doing and remake our world.

We will learn from the wisdom of diverse peoples globally, while we also look directly into the folly of mainstream society. It will take courage and determination to face and transform the sheer terror and brutality of the dominant culture's history—yet layered within unconscionable abuses, we will also find the chronicles of Earth-honoring peoples who fought (and continue to fight) to preserve the remnants of a sacred, respectful, and reciprocal relationship with the Earth and their human family. The ancestors of the current dominant culture in pre-patriarchal and pre-colonial times held practices of reverence and beauty-making and built hundreds of sacred stone wheels across Old Europe; cultivated healing herbal gardens; practiced Well Dressing by adorning sacred water sources with flowers, fruits, stones, and feathers in prayer for the waters; lit ceremonial fires in the spring to welcome the Sun after the long winter; sang with praise the many names of the Mother Goddesses; held dreaming ceremonies to journey to the other world for healing and to retrieve knowledge; upheld laws that for every tree cut a new tree must be planted; and on and on to celebrate the web of life and maintain a harmonious and mutually enhancing relationship with nature. These ancestral whisperings and remembrances have now reached a crescendo, a thunderous crying out for life. I am inspired in this call to action by the words attributed to Nobel Laureate Ilya Prigogine: “When a system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence have the capacity to shift the entire system.”¹⁴

Now we need to muster our collective strength to regenerate our umbilical cord home to build a world of justice, accountability, love, creativity,

and liberation—thriving Earth communities for all of our kin, including plants, animals, forests, humans, mountains, oceans, deserts, rivers, and all our relatives—and to do so in record time.

Honoring Indigenous Peoples and Learning from Fire

Before proceeding further, I wish to acknowledge and offer respect to the Coast Miwok, the Original Peoples of the beautiful land where I now live. My worldview has changed over past decades, not only from looking into star-filled skies but also from looking directly down and learning to respect and learn from those upon whose stolen lands I stand.

Marin County in Northern California is named after Chief Marin, who was a leader of the Licatiut Tribe, one branch of the Coast Miwok. Chief Marin, like many other powerful Indigenous leaders, resisted the invasion of European colonizers to protect his people and lands.

The Coast Miwok are known as bird people, as described by Tomales Bay Miwok member and cultural carrier Sky Road Webb. Before colonization, they wore clothes woven from grass or bark fibers in summer, and hides and furs in winter, but the Coast Miwok were particularly known to wear elaborate bird feather sets and abalone necklaces. The Miwok practiced the ceremonial catching of particular birds to collect their feathers. The Miwok reverently fed and cared for their winged guests until the bird's feathers had regrown, then released them during a big ceremony and feast. For about three months after release, some birds regularly revisited their specific caretaker, who continued to offer food until the birds would fully rewild.¹⁵

This extraordinary relationship with the birds demonstrates profound respect and reciprocity in human interaction with the animal world. Learning from this exchange is a critical part of undoing the damage inflicted by the dominant society. How can we remember and practice again the appropriate relationship to place, and to the other creatures in our communities, as we take what we need to live? It is part of the human condition to need water, food, shelter, clothing, and tools, but *how* to conduct this exchange with the web of life is a fundamental worldview question.

The Miwok also cared for the landscape and were a central part of its ecological well-being. They fed their communities in a sustainable manner

with seafood, plants, and wild game such as ducks, while ensuring the areas they hunted and gathered were well-tended by their ecologically knowledgeable hands. The Coast Miwok fashioned baskets from seagrass and ornaments from shells, which they often traded with communities who lived farther from the sea.¹⁶

I recognize and honor the Coast Miwok because to acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples of the land where we each reside is not only an expression of gratitude, but also one step toward decolonizing and undoing racist narratives as well as toxic conventions of Indigenous erasure. It reminds us that colonization is not over and that the violent attacks against Indigenous Peoples in their own territories and the assault on their lands are ongoing. This recognition, along with offering tangible support for the struggles and solutions of Indigenous Peoples wherever we live, is one part of a new way of living that is intrinsic to our collective survival and transformation of the worldviews of the dominant culture.

Those of us who are not Indigenous to a place need to recognize that we are on occupied, stolen land. To begin the reconciliation, reparation, and healing process, we must learn whose territory we are in. We have a responsibility to learn from and respect the Original Peoples, including their rights, treaties, calls to action for Land Back, sovereignty, knowledge, and sacred sites.

Another question that might arise as we participate in land acknowledgement and respect Indigenous leaders and their requests is, if we are not indigenous to the place we were born, then where are we indigenous to? This is especially important for those of us who are settlers and thus part of the dominant, colonizing culture in the Americas and other regions. Many Americans today are both beneficiaries of colonization and descendants of displaced and conquered peoples—these are often traumatic and challenging lineages to reconcile. It takes courage, as an example, to trace your family tree and learn that your ancestors stole lands from Indigenous Peoples and took part in egregious violations. From another angle, some of these questions about indigeneity can guide us in exploring our older histories—including long-ago pre-patriarchal histories, ancestral homelands, pre-colonized cultural worldviews, and practices prior to our own colonization in lands far and wide. These inquiries are vital because forsaken and unreconciled past traumas often lead to personal or

societal violence and a warped amnesia that can cause harm as it searches for belonging and home. I will explore these themes in the chapters ahead.



Is it possible to undo the doing?

To reverse some of the destruction the dominant culture has inflicted upon the planet, we must radically change the way we live on the land we inhabit. We can learn much from those who have lived in balance with the natural world for tens of thousands of years and who hold a non-colonial worldview and reciprocal relationship with nature—Indigenous Peoples.

Which brings us back to the 2018 Camp Fire. This inferno, like many others, happened because of extreme and ongoing drought resulting from human-induced climate disruption; however, some of the fires could have been prevented, or their scope significantly reduced, if those in charge had understood and respected Indigenous methodologies and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of forest ecology practices.¹⁷

Tribes across California regularly set controlled fires, which kept the land from cataclysmic wildfires fueled by dense, accumulated undergrowth. These intentional fires also perpetuated beneficial grasslands by clearing shrubs that proliferate in the absence of fire, and these areas were then seeded with desired plants. Fire was also a tool used by Indigenous Peoples to support many species of native plants that require fire for germination.

Due to persistent efforts by Indigenous Peoples, even in the face of colonial land development, these fire practices continue to this day. In my corner of the world, for thousands of years, the Karuk Tribe has applied practices of ancient technologies in what we now call agroforestry, which integrates preferred plants and animals into native forests and grasslands. Prescribed controlled burning is central to this Karuk forest practice, which nurtures and increases the growth of acorns and medicinal herbs as well as plants used in basket-making. This healthy forest ecology in turn supports the proliferation of salmon, deer, elk, and many other forest animals. Indigenous communities worldwide engage in these forest practices, and this knowledge can teach us a great deal about contributing to the living sacred landscape as life-enhancing, beneficial participants in a thriving ecology.



Given the rapidly heating planet and increased conflagrations, I seek to further understand our historical relationship to fire—in the broadest sense of this element from a small flame to the sun’s nuclear fusion and light. I recall again the wisdom of Sankofa in reminding us to look to our past to guide our way forward. For this, I turn to the fire knowledge in stories that have been passed on through the generations, stories that reflect the worldviews and knowledge-sharing practices of Indigenous Peoples and of pre-colonial, pre-patriarchal ancestors of the dominant culture.

Modern humans have been around for some two hundred thousand years, but only in the past two hundred years has a portion of humanity consumed vast amounts of the ancient sunlight stored for millions of years in the form of oil, coal, and natural gas—fossil fuels.¹⁸ I say “a portion of humanity” because, although we all share the same ultimate fate in the unfolding climate crisis, the unjust fact remains that those who have used very little fossil fuels are the communities being impacted first and worst. In less than one hundred years, this huge energy consumption by wealthier, industrialized countries has led to the disastrous climate disruptions we are now experiencing.

During the ongoing California fire seasons, some of the old-time stories about how fire originally came to people have taken on new meaning for me. I have begun to viscerally understand the universal warnings encoded in these fire tales and teachings passed on through generations.

The essence of fire is transformation, a phenomenon that has captivated humans since we have interacted with this element. In the introduction to his book *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes, “If all that changes slowly may be explained by life, all that changes quickly is explained by fire.”¹⁹

Our multifaceted, sacred, and distinctive relationship with fire appears to be fairly universal. When we turn to the many fire origin stories and myths from cultures around the world, we find that often they impart a warning of sorts. Many of them express outright that fire is not freely given—it must be stolen. Significantly, this is not true for the other elements of life: water, air, and earth. In the old mythologies, none of these are purloined. In his book *Myths of the Origin of Fire*, social anthropologist James Frazer

relates how fire-bringers are often legendary cultural figures—animal or human—who steal the original flame and offer it to the people.²⁰

The Andaman Islanders in the Bay of Bengal tell of how Kingfisher stole fire from a magical creature called a Bilik. When Kingfisher was caught in the act of pilfering the flame to deliver to his people, the Bilik threw a fire-brand, hitting Kingfisher on the back of his neck. Bright red feathers on the bird's neck still mark the spot today.

Several Indigenous Peoples from Victoria, Australia, tell of how a Fire-tail Wren or Finch brought the original fire to the people. The small red-tailed bird stole it from the sky or, as is sometimes told, from the Crows.

There are numerous Native American stories in which Coyote cleverly snatches the fire from the Sun or other source, but the thief can also be a trickster in the form of a Turtle, Raven, Frog, or Fox who slyly makes off with the flame.

In South Africa, the native San report that Ostrich held an ember under a wing until Praying Mantis stole it and gave it to the people.

Indigenous Peoples living along the Amazon River basin in Brazil convey a story about a boy rescued by Jaguar. The boy learned how Jaguar cooked food over the fire and then appropriated a hot coal for his people so that they, too, could cook their food.

In Coast Miwok stories, Coyote sent Koo-loo'-pis, the swift and tiny Hummingbird, to steal fire from the Sun and bring it back for humans. Brave Hummingbird returned from a perilous journey with a spark tucked beneath her chin. The ember was then placed in the California buckeye tree by Coyote, where it can be reignited with the spinning of a hand drill.

There is the Greek mythology of Prometheus, the hero who steals fire from the Gods for human use and creativity. Zeus had decided to withhold fire, but Prometheus, in his fondness for humans, stole it and delivered it to them, hidden inside a fennel stalk. The myth goes on to relay that Prometheus, chained to a rock, was to be eternally punished for his deed by an Eagle who eats his liver each day, only for it to regenerate each night; in some accounts, he is eventually freed by Heracles.

It would be impossible and inappropriate for me to interpret the meaning of these stories from the many cultures mentioned, as that should respectfully be left to those who carry this knowledge from their Nations and Peoples. I only wish to point out what we might learn if we reflect on

why the fire is consistently stolen rather than given by nature freely. The stories suggest that our ancestors the world over wished us to be particularly mindful and respectful of this sacred element.

Unlike the life-giving offerings of water, air, and earth, fire most often has to be consciously made. There is choice involved in how and when to use the fire technology. While indeed, fire can be “found” when lightning ignites a tree, this is not an occurrence we can rely on for our daily needs.

That the flame is not freely given can also warn us that fire is a double-edged sword: it allows us many comforts while also giving us the power to harm ourselves, others, and the natural world in which we live. Fire enables us to change the world for good and for ill; the way we wield it has a tremendous impact on the natural environment. And here, again, I mean fire in the broadest sense, including all that comes from this element through energy production and the use of energy. The old stories indicate an unusual relationship—fire has to be stolen because the guardians of the flame are not sure that humans should possess it or can control it. If we are to have it, we need to understand that fire is a hard-won prize, and we need to make an adequate exchange for its use; otherwise, it is a theft with serious consequences. Clearly, the dominant culture has not made the proper offering in return, nor learned how to use fire and its innate energy responsibly.

I am not suggesting that we should not have fire and the energy it generates. We are all the better for fire’s gifts, and our very humanity and evolution as a species in part depend upon our relationship to fire. Rather, the point is that fire is all at once a costly, beneficent, and dangerous gift, and it requires an enormous amount of reciprocity, maturity, and discipline to use it in a sustainable and balanced way.

Since the beginning of human time until the modern era, we have assembled around the hearth fire to tell our stories and to discuss and deliberate community matters. The hearth fire is where humans have gathered to cook food, warm ourselves, and dream as we look into the enchanting embers and the undulating flames. Now we have great need to return to the central fire of our communities and relearn respect not only for this sacred element, but for our place in the greater cosmos. Here at the center fire and under the stars, we have the possibility to renew our stories and transform our worldviews to help chart us through the formidable passage ahead.