



THE MYTH OF
WELLNESS AND
HOW WE CAN
TRULY HEAL

AMERICAN DETOX

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FOREWORD BY

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CHAPTER 1

Ground Zero

Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.

KHALIL GIBRAN

Before

Early morning was always my favorite time in New York. An overture before the curtain goes up, when the city starts buzzing with potential. I felt a real part of the city during this time, like a stagehand privy to the behind-the-scenes show. I loved waking up to the sounds of delivery trucks and traffic, to store owners opening their doors, to coffee brewing and eggs frying in bodegas.

As I blazed down Madison Avenue, I would join the stream of commuters as they flowed toward their workplaces. New Yorkers know how to move—weaving between blocks and buildings, dodging cars, and racing traffic lights. It is deliberate. There is no idle in Manhattan, a city as driven as its inhabitants. We were a mighty river of people flowing between concrete banks toward purpose and productivity.

This particular day in September was no exception. But it was even more brilliant than usual—one of those stubborn summer days pushing up against fall with all of its strength. I noticed how the sun bounced off the buildings, creating a prism effect that lit up the street and made shadows dance across the pavement. I appreciated this beauty, but I was not stalled by it. After all, productivity was our currency here; it's what defined us, how we proved our existence and our worth. And I was all in.

First to the office, I settled into a desk nestled among others just like it. There was no privacy, just enough office dividers to optimize isolation and output. Straight off of a vacation, I felt refreshed and determined to take advantage of this surge of energy. I was early in my career in media/advertising and driven. I knew this ladder and I was climbing it fast and furiously. A relentless overachiever since childhood, I was made for corporate America and I planned on ruling it.

I didn't even notice as people trickled in. It wasn't until someone knocked on my door that I lifted my head out of my zone.

"Have you heard?"

"What?" I responded, slightly annoyed at the disruption.

"A plane hit the World Trade Center."

"Holy shit. What happened?"

"I don't know."

I turned the radio on, put my head down, and got back to work. A few minutes later, I heard screaming and chaos coming from the radio. A second plane had hit the second tower. This was no accident.

I called my mom.

"Do you see what's happening?"

"Yeah," she said. "I haven't talked to Joe yet."

"What do you mean? Isn't he home?"

"Kerri, he's working."

I hung up the phone and everything slowed down. Joe was my stepdad and a lieutenant at Ladder 15 in South Street Seaport. I pictured the firehouse tucked in the shadow of the towers a few short blocks away. I imagined him there giving orders and taking care of his men. He was always

there when you needed him. It was exactly how he'd showed up for my mom and me twenty years earlier. The hairs stuck up on the back of my neck. And even as my thoughts started to race, there were places I wouldn't let my mind go. Everything was going to be fine. I just needed to keep it together.

By this time people were starting to huddle in the office and trade information. There was no more talk of work. We were being attacked. New York. The city of the invincible, attacked.

"My brother works down there."

"My wife said she saw papers all over the ground in Battery Park."

"I just talked to my cousin who said people are jumping from the buildings."

Information moves at the speed of light in New York. From coworker to cousin to deli owner to doorman, it's always an intricate human web of information and gossip. But today information was like oxygen—desperately needed and life-giving.

We gathered in my director's office around a TV. All of us, crammed in, watching buildings burn and sharing this strange and horrifying experience as it played out before our very eyes. There was a silence beneath the words.

Then, the unimaginable happened. At first we couldn't believe our eyes. The tower didn't fall like one would imagine. It didn't lean or tip on its side or break off. It just . . . fell . . . into itself. It took me a minute to realize what I was witnessing. People were yelling, I think. I can't be sure. The sound was sucked out of the room, and something broke inside of me. It was like I was witnessing myself split into two. One part of me was clinging to an almost irrational hope. Joe was probably not in the building. He was a lieutenant now. He would hang back and give orders from mission control.

But there was this other part of me—a deeper part of me—that had this felt sense. He was there. Of course he was. He'd do the thing he'd always done. He would run directly into that building and step into the fire.

Later we would recover the radio transmissions detailing his final moments in the tower. He was last heard calling out to his men at 9:57 a.m.,

just two minutes before the second tower came down. He was trapped in a stairwell on the floor of impact, and the walls were caving in. His final words: "I'll be right to you."

I don't need to tell you the rest of the story. It all just ends there, in that moment, at 9:59 a.m. on September 11, 2001. Buried in the rubble of those buildings is my former life. I can never go back. None of us can. I was forever changed.

When Things Fall Apart

The immediate aftermath of 9/11 was a thing to behold. Two of the tallest buildings in the world, and a symbol of prosperity and power, reduced to rubble. A toxic cloud of pulverized architecture and debris cloaked Manhattan. The smell of smoke, burning debris, and death hung in the air, and people streamed in all directions. They were covered in dust, clinging to one other. First responders frantically clawed the pile for survivors, for bodies, for hope.

What New Yorkers witnessed that day defied our imagination. It was as if we were transported to another time and place entirely. All remnants of "before" destroyed. This was the new reality, piled upon the old reality that lay buried deep beneath the surface. One could only imagine what else was down there, old histories and truths never to be recovered. The pile seemed insurmountable, and we, the survivors, were stripped bare, razed to the bone, defenseless.

In the immediate aftermath, questions were the only thing we had: What will happen next? What should we do? Who's right? Who's wrong? Who's to blame? We waded in a never-ending sea of uncertainty. And yet that moment was also a great revealer. Everything that had been hidden in the shadows, buried beneath the surface, came into view. We Americans were not invincible, not untouchable, no different from those who suffer around the globe. We were defenseless. We were human. And we were exposed.

After 9/11 my sense of meaning and belonging broke down. I was left with a world that no longer made sense. The life that I had built according

to the all-American blueprint—the good job in Corporate America, the apartment on the Upper East Side, the fancy vacations and nice things, the skinny and fit body—all of a sudden felt . . . wrong. I didn't know how to get up in the morning any more, much less be well.

As I moved from “he is missing” to “he is gone,” from “we must find his body” to “we must find who is responsible,” it wasn't anything I was prepared for. My family, my life, was broken in pieces and scattered across lower Manhattan. And I knew we would never be the same again. There was no instruction manual for how to survive that moment. But beneath the chaos and rubble, there was truth. Not the kind that was taught to me in school or church, but the real kind. The kind that can only come from within. A story that emerged from the cracks like a desperate gasp of air. It was as if the veil had been lifted and, for a brief moment, those of us who had lived in the shadow of the towers saw the truth about humanity, a humanity that is vulnerable and defenseless. And we saw each other and the preciousness of human life in this shared experience. A people inextricably tied in living and dying, in pain and suffering.

But as fast as those towers fell down, our walls flew up—shields of fear and hatred, distrust and division.

Shock and Awe

First there was shock and awe. “Shock and awe” was the term used by then President Bush to describe the US military campaign against Iraq in 2003, but it also adequately described our state of mind as a country on 9/11. Awe was the breath held, the mind suspended in shock, the rift in ordinary time. What happened that day was beyond our wildest imagination.

Next came desperation. An attempt to do anything to salvage what remained, to alleviate the despair, to save ourselves. Families of survivors plastered missing persons posters all over New York. First responders flooded down to Ground Zero from all corners of the globe. People gave blood, gave casseroles, gave kindness. Doing something, anything, gave us momentary respite from the pain, hope (however fleeting) that we would not be destroyed by this. Our first instinct was to reach out and help. There

were even glimpses of joy amid the horror. In between the grief and uncertainty, I remember sweet moments of fellowship and generosity that I hadn't experienced before. For a brief time, we became the best version of ourselves. 9/11 gave us meaning—a feeling that there was something left of community, that there might be a purpose to all this destruction.

And then there was fear. Here's how fear works: something happens that scares you—a loud sound, a creepy crawler, a threatening stranger—and then the body prepares to protect itself. But when fear isn't realized or resolved, it gets imprinted in the body and normalized, shaping our beliefs and behaviors, and even our bodies. And with overexposure to triggering images in culture and media, we become predisposed to fear. Fear plays tricks with our minds, altering our perception of reality. It impacts our bodies, short-circuiting our rational response pathways, creating levels of stress, and manifesting as disease and dis-ease. We learn to live with our fear—even collude with it. To cope, we avoid, we numb, we get busy, we seek to control everything. Before we know it, fear becomes how we move in the world.

Fear is a powerful motivator. In evolutionary terms, fear is necessary to survive. But it also drives a dangerous us-vs.-them narrative that underlies some of the most horrific events of American history and everyday realities of American life. When we are afraid, we pull away from each other and give in to a culture of suspicion and distrust. Fear makes us strangers. And nearly two decades after 9/11, it is not the actual threat but the story of the threat that keeps our fear alive. In a 2020 Pew survey, Americans still ranked “defending the nation from terrorist attacks” as a top priority for the president and Congress,¹ even though jihadist terrorists have only killed about six people each year in the United States since 9/11—far more have been killed by hate crimes and homegrown extremists.² And yet, many in this country still remain afraid and have bought into false narratives of Arab, Muslim, and violent immigrant “others” that keep people tethered to a politics of fear, obedient to a militarized state, and beholden to authoritarian leaders.*

* To learn more about the aftermath of 9/11 from the perspective of Muslim, Sikh, and Arab people, read Deepa Kumar's *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*.

The dissonance between a real threat and irrational fear is important. Irrational fear is harder to eradicate and easily manipulated. The irony is that the fear, more than the terrorism, is what has done the most damage to this nation. Americans' desperate efforts to protect ourselves have increased our suffering and made us divided and distrustful. Fear has fueled policies of insecurity and inequality and enabled the dismantling of much-needed public services. It justified an enormous investment in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement—institutions fundamentally premised on compromising human rights and civil liberties in the name of mass surveillance, state violence, racist policing, incarceration, and deportation.* And it has conditioned us for war—a predisposition to conflict and conquest that goes back to the beginning of the American story and has enabled a military-industrial complex whose budget exceeds that of the next seven countries in military spending combined.

But at the end of the day, our fear doesn't make us safe. It only ends up serving the many industries and people that benefit from it. In her book *The Shock Doctrine* Naomi Klein describes the phenomenon of “disaster capitalism”—how institutions and corporations exploit the public's vulnerability and disorientation following a collective shock or trauma (e.g., wars, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, market crashes) to centralize control and push through pro-corporate, profit-driven initiatives.³ Trump's “shock doctrine” took it a step further by manufacturing an “invasion” on our borders and using that to fuel anti-immigrant white populism, justify the travel ban against select Muslim-majority countries, build a wall, and separate children from their families. It is the worst kind of opportunism, exploiting the suffering of our most vulnerable moments for financial and political gain. This is modern-day America—a post-9/11 apocalypse fueling policies of fear and pulling us further apart from one another and from reality itself.

But this sort of deception is not new. It is woven into the fabric of our origin. The promise of American freedom for white European immigrants was only made possible on the backs of Indigenous Peoples and enslaved

* For more on the racist roots of the surveillance state, read *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* by Simone Browne.

Africans. The American Dream that emerged—the idea that equality and opportunity are available to any and all Americans—was more like an American lie. I bought into that lie. I was brainwashed to trust history books and idolize American icons of success and fame. I was groomed to strive—rewarded for getting good grades, being a tough competitor, and winning at all costs. Before I knew it, I was on an express train to some predetermined destination measured in achievement, money, and material goods. And for whatever reason, I never questioned it. I was trained to chase a dream that was never meant for me.

America was built on a false promise. All men were never “created equal” in the eyes of the founding fathers. The rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness certainly did not equally apply to Indigenous Peoples, enslaved people, women, and many others who did not fit into the founders’ idea of the American ideal. This is the fault line in the foundation upon which the idea of America was built. It can no longer be ignored. It’s why freedom has been so fraught over the last 400 years. To understand why we are here requires understanding how we got here and where we came from. The American experiment is yet to be realized, and to realize it, we must go back to the beginning.

Stolen Land

New York City is not just a place, it’s an identity—a way of being in the world that is derived from hard work and tough love. Fast, boisterous, crowded, and adaptable, the City is a marvel, especially to those like me who get to call it home. New York, New York—the city of dreams—was built by immigrants. My ancestors were among them—Italian carpenters, Irish truck drivers, Jewish factory workers—all hustling to make it in America. I wore New York like a badge of honor—proof of my strength and resilience and all that I inherited from those who came before me. But despite our sweat and tears, New York never really belonged to us.

Before Ground Zero, before New York, before New Amsterdam, there was Lenapehoking. The land now known as Manhattan (as well as Westchester, Long Island, New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, and parts of Delaware) was

stewarded by the Lenape people for 3,000 years before Europeans arrived. They were people who always understood that we are the land and the land is us. But explorers brought with them a different relationship with the land, one of domination and ownership. The first “land claim” came from Henry Hudson, representing the Dutch East India Company, who entered New York Bay on none other than September 11, 1609.⁴

For thousands of years before Columbus got lost at sea and accidentally found himself on the shores of a “new” world, generations of Indigenous Peoples lived and thrived on these lands. Of course, this is not the story I and many others learned in school. It was not a friendly Thanksgiving but a violent takeover with ideological roots that can be traced as far back as the fourth century, when Saint Augustine declared that war and killing are justified if they are in service to God.⁵ A thousand years later, this Doctrine of Discovery would unleash a culture of domination and acquisition that became the bedrock upon which America was built. What followed was the legal and systemic dispossession and oppression of entire peoples, through broken treaties, forced relocations, outlawing Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices, hunting Indigenous food sources such as the buffalo to extinction, forced separation and Anglicization of children through the residential school system, and more. Colonizers are estimated to have killed tens of millions of people in the years following the European invasion.⁶ Known to many as the “first wound,” it was a physical, cultural, economic, and ecological genocide that haunts us to this day.*

The “New World” wasn’t new at all. And yet Europe’s “expansion” is not remembered as conquest but rather as exploration and discovery, its leaders hailed as heroes despite their horrific acts of violence and genocide. In the words of Dakota/Lakota Sioux writer and tribal attorney Ruth Hopkins, “It was crucial for European colonialists to paint Natives as aggressors to justify their own violence against the original inhabitants of this land. While Natives fought against settlers, these battles were waged primarily

* It is essential to learn the real history of the United States. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has written many books on the history of Turtle Island from an Indigenous perspective, including *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* and *Not a Nation of Immigrants*.

in self-defense. America invented the ‘savage Indian’ to subjugate Natives, abrogate Tribes’ sovereign rights, and so they could freely initiate war against them for any reason whatsoever.”⁷

The myth of separation, the justification of lies, and the assertion of violence to control, accumulate, and hoard wealth and power have been the underlying strategy of American expansion and progress. This tale of separation and superiority lives on today through militarism and economic domination.* The so-called war on terror that followed 9/11 was declared based on lies to advance a \$21 trillion military operation that took nearly one million lives in the name of self-interest (not self-defense).⁸ The last two decades have seen a growing culture of hypernationalistic state violence that is unprecedented. Democrats and Republicans alike have projected America’s righteous cause of “expanding freedom and protecting human rights” as justification for a \$725 billion defense budget to fund failed torture tactics, expansive drone killings, and an ever-growing carceral system.† The legacy of colonization continues today through economic and cultural imperialism that reaches across the globe, extending power over other countries and wreaking havoc on all of us. Meanwhile, our nation’s leaders have neglected so much of what we really need. Militarism has only made climate instability worse and has not protected us from a pandemic that has killed an unfathomable amount in the US and around the world—that at its worst killed the same number of people as died on 9/11 every single day.

The goal of understanding where we come from and how we got here is not to get stuck in the realities of the past but to reckon with the consequences in our modern day. The paradigm of domination and conquest has been used throughout history to give governments and corporations unlimited access to natural land and resources, as well as dominion over people’s bodies. It lives on not only through US foreign policy but in our

* Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of militarism as one of the “three evils” in his speech “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence.”

† Check out Margaret Mead’s essay “Warfare Is Only an Invention—Not a Biological Necessity.” <http://users.metu.edu.tr/utuba/Mead.pdf>.

hearts and minds. And, thousands of years after its inception, on a sunny September day, that chaos came home.

Colonizer Virus

I am only now beginning to understand the colonizer within me. When I woke up to the real history of America, a rush of adrenaline rose up in me. I was moved, compelled to act, to channel energy toward fixing the past. I wanted to believe that colonization was a thing that other people did in some other time. I wanted to be angry and righteous about the bad things that bad people did. I wanted to prove that I was better. I wanted to be innocent, to be clean. Because the alternative was that I was complicit, that I was part of the problem. But it was my resistance to the truth that kept me stuck.

Colonization isn't just an event that happened in the past, it is a mind-set that takes over the bodies, minds, and souls of its people. In *Decolonizing Wealth*, Indigenous activist and author Edgar Villanueva calls it the “colonizer virus”—referring to the infection that permeates every aspect of our culture and society and justifies domination and dehumanization. The virus enters the mind through the belief that one is separate from and supreme to everyone and everything around oneself. That belief allows the infection to thrive and grow until it has spread the disease throughout the whole system. From there the virus gets passed down through generations and “leads to ongoing acts of control and exploitation.” Villanueva likened it to a “zombie invasion.”⁹

Far from being a historical artifact, colonization continues on this land through the erasure of Indigenous history and present lived realities, treaties that continue to be broken and ignored, the theft of land by private corporations for drilling and mining, and the denial of democratic rights to US territories. American imperialism continues to build on the legacy of colonization abroad by assuming that the US is duty bound to share (force) our “advanced” society with (upon) others (through military might and economic coercion). US foreign policy—rooted in greed, power, and oil—has decimated nations, killed countless civilians, and left people more vulnerable than before. All of this stems from the idea that human beings are separate and superior to the

environment we live in and depend on. It is a worldview that enables us to exploit natural resources and force species into extinction, to draw imaginary borders of belonging and call them nation-states, and to assume supremacy and domination over other human beings. Breaking from this mindset is critical to our survival.

Cultural appropriation and violence are offspring of colonization—an inherited attitude of entitlement that enables the stealing, glamorizing, and sterilizing of marginalized cultures. According to Susanna Barkat-aki, author of *Embrace Yoga's Roots*, it happens when a “dominant group in a position of privilege and power politically, economically or socially adopts, benefits from, shares and even exploits the customs, practices, ideas or social and spiritual knowledge of another, usually target or subordinate, society or people.”¹⁰ And, as I would soon learn, the wellness world is rife with it. Cultural appropriation is the commercialization of palo santo and sage to burn off bad energy, making these sacred plants less accessible to the people for whom they are cultural medicine. It is the overharvesting of quinoa to meet the ever-increasing demand for “superfoods” among foodies, making this staple unaffordable for the Andean people of Bolivia and Peru who have been living off the local grain for centuries. And it is the Westernization of yoga that is evangelized by white skinny devotees who neglect to honor and appreciate the people and cultures from which these practices originate, while profiting from its proliferation. The dehumanization of people, the corruption of spiritual tradition and practices, and the looting of Indigenous culture are the foundation that modern wellness is built upon. And until we confront these truths, we won't ever be well.

Many Indigenous worldviews teach that all life is interrelated and interdependent—that we coexist with all humans, nonhumans, and the planet. Colonization has attempted to eradicate this wisdom and convince us that we are separate. The myth of separation is at the heart of the lies we've been told and wounds we've incurred. It is the root of all suffering. Healing calls us to pick up the pieces, to recover the lost fragments of ourselves and our history, and to reclaim the whole truth of who we've always been, so that we can move toward an America that has never been (and is still possible).

Recovery



Nothing ever goes away until it teaches us what we need to know.

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

Nine days after 9/11 we piled into my living room—family, friends, neighbors—and leaned into the TV as President Bush addressed the nation. Our house had become mission control since the attacks—overcrowded with people, activated by the search, and stuffy with uncertainty and grief. We were yearning for answers: *How did this happen? What will make it right?* But when the president boldly declared retaliation—when he said “this will be a war like no other”—I flinched.¹¹ At the time, over 10,000 were still unaccounted for (including my stepdad). Hadn’t we lost enough? Why would we put ourselves in a position of losing more? Of risking more lives? Of destroying more families? And in that moment, I had a punch to the gut—a knowing so deep it was undeniable—that meeting violence with more violence was not the answer. As I sat there feeling the sting of his words, the dread of what was to come, I knew that my life as I had known it was forever changed.

The heartbreak of what I lost on 9/11 was brutal. But equally painful was the realization that I had been living a lie. My all-American dream was to live in a safe community with good schools, to build a successful career and make lots of money, to have nice things. Everything I had come to know about what it meant to be well came crashing down with those towers. My perfectly curated “before” life was shattered, and the illusion that I was somehow insulated and sheltered from the rest of the world was destroyed. And despite society’s attempts to deny us the truth, to numb our pain, to distract us, and to keep us separate and desperate, I was forever altered. Waking up to the truth of who we were as Americans, of who I was as an ignorant and complicit bystander, was excruciating and disorienting. And yet, seeing the lie of separation meant that I was

seeing the truth of our connection, and there was no way in hell I was going back.

This kind of personal growth is not glamorous. It was a messy unraveling of everything I thought I knew, a constant questioning of the status quo and a relentless pursuit of the truth, so that I could birth a new way of being in the world. It is the detox and dismantling that are required for us to heal and emerge from the rubble. This kind of change doesn't happen all at once; it is a process. Sikh activist Valarie Kaur likens it to birth, asking, "What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country still waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor?"¹²

9/11 was a symptom of a much larger disease that has been embedded in the fabric of this country. No longer can we cling to fantasy and protect our innocence; we must own up to our personal and collective responsibility. That means remembering the history of how we got here and speaking truthfully about the state of the world and the injustices that continue to pervade our culture. That means those of us who have inherited the colonizer virus doing our part to decolonize our minds from what we have internalized from our history and dismantle the systems that continue to uphold the culture of dominance. It means unhooking ourselves from our addiction to safety and control and embracing the vulnerability that is inherent in life. And it means engaging in a practice of truth and reconciliation that invites us to heal and repair the collective wounds of the past, so that we can allow for the possibility of the future.

Colonization and its modern offspring have led us to the brink of an apocalypse. Our survival depends on our willingness to do the opposite—to listen, learn, and follow the lead of Indigenous people.

Detoxing the Myth of Separation

In the days that followed 9/11, I found purpose in the desperate search for Joe. I scrambled for answers, plastered his face all over the city, bossed around anyone who would listen, as if I could manifest his rescue by sheer force. Taking charge was my drug, an adrenaline rush into an alternate

reality that allowed me to escape the present moment and remain in the delusion that I could actually change things. I was unwavering in my effort. Until I was seated in the funeral home with my mom, trying to determine how to bury a body that wasn't there. And I lost my shit. It was as if my entire being was shouting, "No, I will not give up. I will not concede defeat and bury the possibility of his survival. I will not accept his death. I will not grieve the 2,973 people who are lost and waiting to be found. I will fix this." But there was no fixing 9/11. As I stormed out of the funeral home in a fury, something in me let go. As if holding it all together was my only way of holding onto hope.

Sometimes life pulls the rug out from under us. When that happens, our instinct is to cling, to find ground, to reach for something we can rely on. We scramble, we run, we do anything to escape the vulnerability and discomfort of what is. For me, it was the lie of separation and security that kept me fending for myself and minding my business. I curated my life in a safe and small bubble, insulated from everything and everyone around me. I thought I could control every outcome, defend every move, anticipate every next step. But it only left me more alone and isolated. Pema Chödrön says that "all addictions stem from this moment when we meet our edge and we just can't stand it."¹³

But difficult moments are also an invitation to courage. They are often the times when you realize that you can choose to do something different. Instead of conquering your fears, you move into relationship with them. When we learn to get comfortable with the uncomfortable, we are released from its grip. What might appear on the surface as chaos is actually freedom—freedom from the struggle against the fundamental ambiguity of simply being human. The one truth—the thing we know beyond a doubt—is that nothing is fixed and to be human is a dynamic experience that is ever changing. Permanence is a myth we buy into because we fear its opposite. The only way to get free is to let go.

What's left when we let go is vulnerability. Vulnerability calls us to connection. It acknowledges that we are not invincible. We are exposed. The practice of vulnerability is not neat and tidy, and yet it is powerful and profound. Cynthia Ocelli reminds us that the process of growth often looks

like destruction. “The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes.”¹⁴ That was me. I was forced to disarm—to drop the protective shields I had built up around me, so that I could soften into the truth of what was happening and the grief of what was lost. For the first time in my life, I was exposed and undefended. Vulnerability demanded that I look pain squarely in the face and feel it.

No longer could I hide behind the veneer of strength and security. I had to reckon with my humanness—with how I was impacted and how I impacted others. I wasn’t just a victim of a horrific event. I was both the wounded and the wounder. Coming to terms with my complicity in the culture and systems that led up to that moment was painful. I was ashamed that I had been unable to notice what was right in front of me or, worse, that I had chosen to look away. Grappling with my part and participation in America’s racist colonial history not only implicated me in the dynamic system of oppression, but it also affirmed my belonging to the world—that I was part of something bigger than me, that I had a responsibility to the bigger “we,” and that I could be a part of its healing. Learning to hold this paradox is how I was able to come back to the truth of our wholeness and interdependence.

When we feel separate, we experience the world through the lens of fear. Everyone and everything is suspect. We believe ourselves to be alone, solely responsible for our survival. We try to compensate for our lost sense of self by conquering and controlling our circumstances. The more we own, the more we control, the more secure we feel. We hoard, we compete, we judge, we oppress, we harm . . . all in the name of self-preservation. Recovering from the myth of separation requires that we embrace a vulnerability that speaks truth to power and moves toward healing and transformation. It invites us to go beyond personal responsibility and self-interest toward the messy, complex, and intersectional reality of who we really are in America and how we came to be here.

Every year on September 11 we are told to never forget. Society sponsors rituals and ceremonies to commemorate the memory of the almost 3,000 people who were lost on that day in 2001. We gather at firehouses, mourn in churches, and pay our respects at gravestones. But rarely are we asked to remember the millions of Indigenous lives sacrificed for the colonizer’s

cause. There is no holiday to acknowledge and grieve the millions of people in the Middle East killed in the so-called war on terror. The politics of memory is constructed and contrived. It is the story told by the people who benefit from it. But is that really remembering?

The opposite of remembering is *dismembering*, which means “to cut off or disjoin the limbs, members, or parts of.”¹⁵ Dismembering not only abandons whole truths about our past but also discards whole peoples in the process. It is not only the history of dispossession and genocide of Indigenous Peoples, it is the colonizer virus that continues to live on in our hearts and minds. It is the collective wound of separation that remains unhealed to this day—a wound that has been passed down through generations, from body to body, reenacting the old story of separation and domination. According to movement strategist and ecosystem designer Taj James, what keeps us stuck “is a fear born of forgetting.”¹⁶ Colonialism attempts to make us forget who we are and who we are to all living things. But not everyone has forgotten. Indigenous people carry with them the truth of their generational struggle and survival and the wisdom of our intrinsic relationship to all of life.*

Recognizing how we’ve been complicit in the myth of separation is essential to breaking from it. In moments of waking up, our temptation is to become so overwhelmed by guilt and shame that we withdraw and shut down. But that is exactly what the system of separation wants: for us to disengage and stay stuck and compliant. Compliance looks like going along to get along, conscious or unconscious negligence, avoiding conflict, and maintaining the status quo. But compliance doesn’t, in fact, keep us safe and well. I spent most of my life on stolen land, occupying and extracting that which was not mine. But that wound would come back to haunt me on 9/11 when the ground was ripped out from under me. Leaning into the discomfort of who we are and how we got here is an invitation to become more enlivened by the awareness of interdependence. Fractured and separated is who we have become, but whole is who we have always been.

* For more on the work of decolonizing our hearts and minds, check out *Sacred Instructions* by Sherri Mitchell and *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

If we don't acknowledge and account for the harms of the past, we will only reproduce them in the future. New, repackaged forms of domination and control are keeping us trapped in the past, unable to solve the problems of the present and create the future we all deserve. And if we build upon the pile of lies we've accumulated over the last 500 years, we will effectively seal our fate. Instead, we must break ground and excavate the truth so that we can work from a healthy foundation. Only when we face the hidden wounds and reclaim what has been lost can we move toward the personal and collective healing that we so desperately need.

Healing this moment requires first telling the truth about how we got here. History is a self-serving narrative shaped by people who are invested in it. It has been deliberately lost and rewritten by those in power who seek to control our understanding of reality and uphold systems of separation and hierarchy. Growing up, I was taught that Christopher Columbus was a hero who discovered America, when in actuality he was a greedy, genocidal man who was found lost at sea. I was encouraged to worship the Constitution as the sacred law of the land, despite the fact that it was written explicitly to exclude me and many others from its privileges. I learned that slavery ended with emancipation, when in fact it lives on today through the criminal system. Our refusal to face the truth of our collective traumas dooms us to perpetually reenact them. Penobscot activist and Indigenous rights attorney Sherri Mitchell writes that "a wound cannot be healed by pretending that it doesn't exist. It must be examined, cleansed, and tended. In order to create a healthy path forward, we must deal with the spiritual illness that plagues our past and present reality."¹⁷

I am the descendant of thirteen generations of colonizers. My paternal ancestor Edward Ketcham came over from Manchester, England, in 1635 as an indentured servant during the Puritan migration. He was designated a "freeman" a few years later, which gave him the right to vote and own land, and went on to live a prosperous life in New England that laid the groundwork for generations to come. I benefit from that legacy to this day. While I may feel far removed from my colonizer ancestors, their beliefs live on in me. They show up in how I occupy land and take up space without consideration for who else belongs there. In how I automatically assume control,

ownership, or leadership in whatever work I am doing. In how I have taken other people's cultures and traditions without ever questioning whether I have a right to them. But knowing who I come from, regardless of the implications, is an essential part of detoxification. The wound of colonization has not just cut us off from each other but cut us off from parts of ourselves—the people and places we come from. Reclaiming our ancestry is rewriting the history of who we are in America and how we came to be here.

And we don't just come from people. We come from food and music, folklore and medicine. We come from land. We come from wisdom. But so much of that has been violently severed from its source, whether through colonization or the transatlantic slave trade. Indigenous Peoples and Black Americans have struggled to preserve the knowledge and wisdom that colonizers either stole or erased over time. My own immigrant ancestors gave in to the myth of the American Dream—trading in parts of themselves, their culture, and their religion in an attempt to fit in and belong to America. I've spent the last decade recovering my lineage, getting to know my ancestors, and reclaiming the medicine of the people I come from. Repairing our timelines is essential to disrupting the cycle of harm and healing the wound of colonization. By repairing the past we can build the future.

PERSONAL INQUIRY

I have learned to “sit with” myself in the mornings—sometimes on the mat, sometimes with a coffee, sometimes on the trail. Instead of jumping out of bed, I let myself unravel and unwind the night as I feel myself into a new day. I pay attention to what is waking inside of me, what wants to stretch open, what is tugging on my attention. And then I listen: What is stirring inside of me? What part of me is yearning to be felt? What is needed for healing? Where do I begin? I breathe into the questions not for answers but for witness. Acknowledging the pain, the tension,

and the longing that lives in me and all around me is where I begin. From this place I can lean into and make space for essential questions.

- Who are the people that you come from?
- What have you inherited from colonization?
- What truths need to be recovered for personal and collective healing?
- What wounds need to be exposed and grieved?
- What is the medicine/ritual that you come from that will aid in healing the collective?
- What can you choose to do to disrupt the cycle of colonization?

Repairing the Past and Decolonizing the Present

It would have been easy for my story to end there. Girl wakes up, girl gets educated, girl heals her history, the end. But that just plays into the trap of the myth of separation. Reckoning with who we are and where we come from is not just a personal journey. It is a collective one. The truth of our interdependence demands that we not just decolonize our minds, but that we challenge the ideology of separation and the systems and structures that stem from it. The shared wound is one that cannot be addressed in isolation. Rather, it demands that we restore our relationship to each other and all things. And it affirms that we are all first responders on the front lines of healing.

Detoxing ourselves from the lies of separation, supremacy, and scarcity allows us to create new thought patterns and practices. For those of us who are not Native, it allows us to listen and appreciate Indigenous culture without romanticizing or appropriating its wisdom and ideas. It allows us

to follow Indigenous activists and not assume leadership or control of the work. It urges us to respect that the land we occupy is not ours and honor its Native stewards. And it compels us to acknowledge our complicity and do what is necessary to repair the harms of the past. For people like myself, who are descended from white colonizers and continue to benefit from their legacy, our work is to become aware of the history that we come from and the land that we live on and reckon with the psychology of superiority that lives in us to this day. But it is also how we take action toward decolonization.

Decolonization is the rematriation of Indigenous land and resources. *Rematriation* means “returning the sacred to the Mother,” in the words of the Indigenous-led *Rematriation* magazine.¹⁸ It is not a denial of who we are and where we come from but rather a reckoning that invites us to tell the truth, repair past harms, and choose to do something different. Of course, we cannot simply “undo” the past and completely correct the taking of Indigenous lives and land. What we can do is take responsibility for our part. Decolonization is an everyday practice of changing our minds and taking action, actively rooting out and rejecting the colonized aspects of our institutions and culture. It means listening, learning and being accountable to Indigenous leaders advocating for Native sovereignty, self-determination, and rights, and redistributing power and resources to Indigenous communities on their terms.* And it means investing in truth, reconciliation, and reparations.

We repeat what we don’t repair. It’s a big reason we are still feeling the repercussions of colonialism in America, because we have not done the work of healing our collective wounds and repairing the harm done. We cannot simply leapfrog forward into positive social change and erase the past. We must invest in repair, restore our relationships, and make the changes necessary to transform our future. We can’t truly know healing and reconciliation within ourselves until we face the wounds we have inherited, wounds we are a part of. Otherwise, we are doomed to

* Essential to our work is understanding what decolonization is (and isn’t). The article “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor” by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang is a good source to help navigate this discourse: <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.

perpetually reenact them. The truth and reconciliation process understands that reckoning with the past is necessary to transform experiences of conflict and harm into peace and connectedness. The “truth” part acknowledges that the United States was founded on genocide and slavery and seeks to create space for the voices of those most impacted, so that we can understand and address the needs of survivors. The “reconciliation” part imagines and designs new pathways of repair and reconstruction based on mutual respect and responsibility. Reconciliation is an ongoing and collective process.*

Healing the wound of separation is reclaiming all that is inherent to our wholeness, that has been lost and forgotten. Sherri Mitchell reminds us “we all carry the imprint of that wound in our souls.”¹⁹ And while our grief may be different based on how we’ve been impacted, it affirms the interconnected wound that binds us to each other and to the earth. I think that’s why grief feels so overwhelming. Because collective grief cannot be separate from the collective. I cannot grieve 9/11 without grieving the first wound of colonization, just as I cannot grieve for the first responders without also grieving for all the people whose lives were taken in the war that followed. Grief is proof that we belong to each other. When we reach out to one another in times of grief, we are saying, “I can’t do this alone, because I am not alone.” By allowing ourselves to be seen in our whole truth and humanity and to receive love and support from others, we strengthen the ties that bind us and build more resilient possibilities for healing and community.

Grief also reminds us that we carry our ancestors with us, all those who came before and made it possible for us to be who we are today. Knowing who and where we come from allows us to both heal our timelines and bring forth the legacy of wisdom and learning that is essential to reconciling the past, meeting this moment, and creating a new future. We walk into a future of uncertainty with our ancestors at our backs and our hearts

* Fania Davis is a leading voice for truth and reconciliation and restorative justice in the US. Check out her book *The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice: Black Lives, Healing, and US Social Transformation*.

broken open. Activist and writer Malkia Devich-Cyril shows us what's possible: "As we strip away the chains of nation-state to become true patriots to the nation that has not yet been born—the one beyond national borders and prison bars, the one forged in the fire of a deep, abiding love with an economy steeped in dignity and rights—we can come to know a richly resilient grief rather than a desperate, starving one."²⁰

The myth of separation has brought us to the brink of extinction. Humans have made a mess of the world, and Mother Nature is unleashing her wrath upon us. We can no longer ignore the suffering that is all around us or deny the cost of extraction and exploitation on our planet. We must tell the truth and own up to our part. The collective wounds of the past have festered long enough. In remembering, we reclaim the lost parts of ourselves so that we can heal the whole. We call in the wisdom of our ancestors and ask them to walk with us on this path. We acknowledge that we come from great pain and suffering, and we come from great resilience and survival. And we actively engage in decolonizing ourselves and the systems we are a part of. Only then can we begin to recover what has been lost and move toward the wholeness and healing we are so desperately seeking.

COLLECTIVE PRACTICE: PROTECT THE SACRED

The myth of discovery that is taught in US schools and culture doesn't tell the whole story of the land currently called the United States. When colonizers happened upon the "New World," it wasn't new at all but home to thousands of years of history and advanced civilizations that rivaled the rest of the world's. For those of us who aren't Indigenous, learning whose land we reside on and the people who have stewarded the land for generations honors the truth of who we are and aims to correct the stories and practices that erase Indigenous Peoples, history, and culture.

Learn about the land and its people: Learn whose land you live on. Then go deeper: More than just the names of the original peoples of the land, what do you know of their lives and culture? What is the history of this land? How was the land used? And what do you know of the history that has shaped the land and its people and the challenges Indigenous people face today because of it?* Kanyon Sayers-Roods, a Mutsun Ohlone activist in Northern California, says, “The acknowledgement process is about asking, What does it mean to live in a post-colonial world? What did it take for us to get here? And how can we be accountable to our part in history?”²¹

Listen to the land stewards: The process of repatriation invites us to find out what local Indigenous organizers are calling for and following their lead.[†] For example, Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, an urban Indigenous land trust, invites non-Native locals on Ohlone land in the San Francisco Bay Area to reimagine their relationship to the land and help return Indigenous land to Indigenous Peoples by building “many paths of radical reciprocity that are a part of repatriation and land return.”²² They also invite non-Native residents to pay a land tax out of respect for the sovereignty of Native people on their ancestral lands.[‡] What are

* “Questions about ‘Home’” from the Catalyst Project is an exercise for non-Native people to learn and reflect on the history and current struggles of Indigenous people and to reflect on the role of non-Native people in colonization and decolonization: <https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Indigenous-Resistance-Homework.pdf>.

[†] To learn more and support projects of repatriation and land return, check out the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust: www.sogoreate-landtrust.org/rematriate-the-land-fund/.

[‡] Honor tax is a way of paying reparations to the Indigenous nations who are stewards of the land that you reside on. Find out more from the Honor Tax Project at www.honortax.org.

Indigenous people in your community calling for? How can you answer the call from your particular social location?²³

Protect the sacred: If you have access to land, wealth, and resources, consider your place in the lineage of theft and colonization and how you might contribute to repair and healing. Listen and learn from Indigenous Peoples' stories and knowledge. Recognize their leadership at the forefront and on the front line of climate change. And follow their lead as we work together to protect the sacred, repair the past, and engage in ecological restoration.*

* For Indigenous communities, the conservation of the environment is deeply intertwined with cultural preservation, land and water rights, tribal sovereignty, and the stewardship of ancestral homelands. Follow Indigenous-led organizations who are on the forefront of climate resilience, including Seeding Sovereignty, Indigenous Climate Action, Honor the Earth, and Indigenous Environmental Network.