

Weaving Nature and Spirit

The natural world has been source and ground for indigenous spiritual practices since humans first stood and began to name the world. For everyone but western, technological peoples, this is because there was no separation: the physical environment was and is the source of sustenance, life, spirit, and mystery.

In contrast, western culture is based on and *assumes* separation and domination: our technologies, religions, and habits are so focused on controlling life that spirit and mystery—those essential components of nonordinary consciousness—have been put aside. Without connections to the physical, experiences of spiritual emergence often go out of control, like balloons floating tetherless into the sky.

This means that those of us who yearn to reclaim our lost parts have to work consciously to make and use our connections with nature. We have access to open space and wild space; stories and myths; cultures and peoples for whom nature and consciousness are not separate; and 25,000 years of ancestor practice and example. Our DNA holds memories that let us find our way back.

Everything in nature is a potential teacher. An old oak tree kept me in balance during a painful separation by reminding me that it had lived twice as long as I would; when I stood under its canopy I was a tiny part of the world and my sadness was a speck on the landscape. Sacred psilocybin taught me to breathe with the earth—long, deep, sonorous breaths that carry the rhythms of the cosmos. A pointed stone helps eject dense energy from my body; I use it to keep my chronically blocked sinuses flowing.

Here's a story of three women whose intention—to deepen their relationship with sacred sites around the San Francisco Bay—opened into a depth of spiritual consciousness they hadn't imagined.

In 1992 the women went to Kirby Cove at the Headlands northwest of the Golden Gate Bridge. Below hills dressed in wind-blown scrub, lupine, and an old stand of cypress, they found a crescent-shaped stretch of sand and caves where sea sounds overtook the wind.

The three women collected shells, seaweed, and stones, and placed them in a circle. They called the four directions and acknowledged the elements as the old ones did, creating a space between the worlds for their work. They drummed and chanted, then sat in silence, breathing in and listening for the spirit of the place.

Out of the silence the group began to create a ceremony. To explore how this cove was used by indigenous cultures—people we know as Miwok and Ohlone—before the Spaniards arrived, the women decided to do a group journey. They would enter into a trance state using drumming, choose a direction to travel, and journey together, speaking what they saw aloud, joining and playing with each other's visions.

We climb in our tule canoe and head south down the bay: fall is coming and it is time to go inland and gather. After spearing salmon and eating, we are drawn to the old Ohlone grandmothers who are sitting around, gambling and laughing. Their pleasure and rootedness is infectious; we forget about gathering and do not want to leave.

We ask the grandmothers how we can remember their rhythmic, simple way of life. The oldest looks around with her eyes and says "Take this with you." She tells us to make a ceremonial cape. Finally, she hands the women a palm-sized abalone for a clasp for that cape.

Another grandmother says, "You carry the light and the life in your eyes. They will always be with you."

The women thank the grandmothers for their gifts of wisdom and intention. They leave feeling full of the great ebb and flow of river-bay and ocean, returning in their boat to Kirby Cove.

Returning to this world, the women spoke excitedly about making a ceremonial cape. They did not know what material to use; while the Ohlones had used fur, that seemed inappropriate in the 1990s.

A few weeks later, at an Ohlone shell mound at the base of San Bruno Mountain, in the coast range on the peninsula south of San Francisco, two of the women asked the grandmothers for more help in making their vision a reality.

Making the cape will take a long time. Be patient and slow. Quiet yourselves within the ceremonial process.

Use woven tule plants for the cape. The shape should be a circle. Use it for a centercloth, a container for ritual objects for your group, a shamanic tool for personal journeys. Decorate it, and use it, with intention.

You will weave this cape/cloth/container with the strands of many people's knowledge. It is an ancestor totem, a gift to remind you of your connections to the first peoples of the Bay, and their connections to you.

This advice gave the women courage to proceed; people in their community helped them learn how. They met with a ranger at the San Francisco Bay Wildlife Refuge to learn the basics of tule weaving. Their daughter's science teacher sent them to the Alviso Slough, at the south end of the Bay, to collect tules (Ohlones had used tules to make boats, sandals, houses, rope, and mats. But our invading peoples had no use for the plants, so they had mostly been removed from around the bay.) Weaver friends helped them with books and ideas. The grandmothers continually gave them heart; they helped each other persevere.

Gathering tules felt holy to the women: tules felt like the essence of life and growth. They were fibrous, strong, tenacious plants, rooted in mud, with narrow, conical, feathery tassels at their ends. They were a soft dusty green in the spring, turning golden brown in the fall; by winter they cracked and disintegrated in dryness. Spongelike, fresh tules soaked up water and floated. The women said:

Working with fibers lets my hands know, lets me feel in my cells what the earth knows. The knowing is in me and comes through me at once.

Weaving the tules connects my present with the grandmother's past, just as she promised. It gives me a growing cellular connection with the richness of the bay.

The tule cape became magic, with a power, radiance, and energy all its own. Its aspects became more clear each time it was used in a community ceremony, becoming visible symbol of the interconnections of earth, body, ancestor, and spirit, a bridge to ancient wisdom.

Establishing a relationship with the natural world is like nurturing one with a human: it takes care, time, intent, and mutual exchange. What are some ways to connect, once you are grounded?

Return to one place over and over. The more you know it, the more you deepen and expand your understanding.

Concentrate on the luminous fibers (known as filaments in the Andes) Castaneda described in his Don Juan books. Envision filaments connecting the places you love, not once, but over and over and over until you see and think them automatically.

Take a stone you like. Carry it. Talk to it. Touch your body with it. Feed it, with water or soil or air or sacred smoke, whatever it seems to need. Foolish as you may feel, you will discover that the stone, too, has energy to give.

Exchange energy with a tree. Stand with your back to it, receiving energy from the tree: it will give you what you need. Still with your back to it, send your energy into the tree; it will take only what it needs.