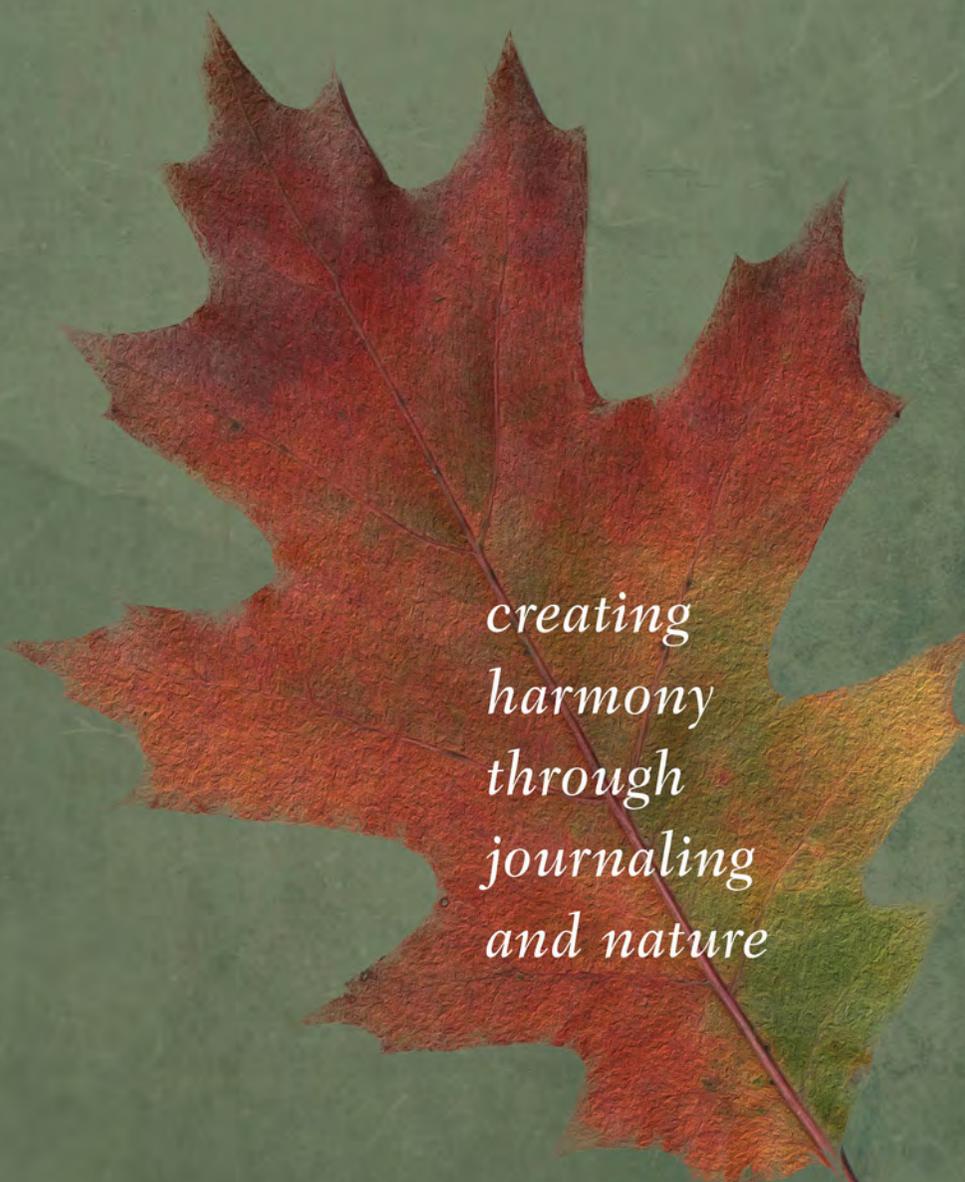


# earthjoywriting



*creating  
harmony  
through  
journaling  
and nature*

CASSIE PREMO STEELE, PH.D.

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journaling & nature*

Cassie Premo Steele, Ph.D.



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# What Is *Earth Joy Writing*?

*Earth Joy Writing* is about finding joy when we align our creative practices with natural principles. It is about living in harmony with our deepest selves and the natural world. It is about committing to a mindfully creative life in collaboration with nature and, in the process, healing both ourselves and the earth.

We live in a world that is very out of balance. Wounded. Traumatized. In pain. Sick. Dying.

And we humans are also experiencing all of this.

Can this one little book—and you, with one small notebook and a pen—really make a difference?

Oh, yes. With a heart smiling wide, I say to you, “Yes. Yes. Yes.”



For the past twenty years, I have been writing poems and novels and nonfiction books and teaching within schools and communities about how our bodies and spirits are wounded, and how writing and creative practices in the natural world can help us heal from these traumatic histories.

As the daughter of a philosopher mother, I began my work, as many people do, in a place that felt like home. In my case, this was an academic setting. In my twenties, I joyfully completed a Ph.D. in comparative literature and women's studies, balancing studying and teaching and researching while writing a few poems, and I thought this would be my path.

But eventually we all leave home. While I was teaching at the university level, I was becoming increasingly frustrated by the competitive, hierarchical, rational, and linear thinking of that world. I began to spend more time writing in my journal. More time in nature.

One day, while walking in the woods behind our house, I was struggling through the briars and brambles and thinking how much easier it would be if I had a path. And then, right there on the ground in front of me, was a beautiful red-tailed hawk feather.

There was my path.

Make your own path. Look down. Then look up. Learn to soar. See with clear vision.



And so I dedicated myself fully to my path as a writer and

writing coach. A decade ago, I opened my own office in a historic home that had been converted to an office building in my southern city's downtown. I held a free informational seminar for teachers and therapists in the area to share with them what I would be doing.

The seminar was well attended. I described my process to them, as I will do for you, and near the end of the meeting, one of the therapists gestured to me that he had a question.

"Yes?" I said.

"Earlier," he said, "you described that during the 'lesson,' as you call it, there comes a point when you give an assignment to the client to write something, and then while the client writes, you write as well. Is that correct?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well." He hesitated. "Doesn't that mean you have to be ... *emotionally involved during the lesson?*"

I smiled. "Yes," I said.



*Earth Joy Writing* is about being emotionally involved. It is about co-creating in a shared emotional space with different parts of yourself, and with different people. And it is about co-creating in a shared environmental space with different parts of the natural world.

We are living at a crucial time. The planet, as even major news networks will tell you, is in peril. Scientists have affirmed what we fear: Many species are dying. Ecosystems

are disappearing. Life as we know it on this planet may not have long to survive.

We have a choice: We can choose to be emotionally involved, or we can numb our feelings, shut down, and distract ourselves with addictions, violence, and mindless repetitive patterns that pretend to provide an escape.

*Earth Joy Writing* will guide you, gently, toward the choice of connection, creativity, healing, and cooperation—toward collaboration, community, and care.

How?

Practice.



Many people want to live creative and balanced lives. Many people want to heal themselves and the earth. But they stop there, at the wanting.

*Earth Joy Writing* will take you beyond wanting into doing.

Studies have shown that it takes ten years of practice to become an expert or a renowned artist in a field. Why ten years? Because this is the length of time it takes for someone to *practice* something enough to become proficient, gifted, and masterful.

How do you get to Carnegie Hall?

Practice, practice, practice!

How do we learn to align our human creative practices

with natural principles?

Practice, practice, practice!

To this end, *Earth Joy Writing* is divided into sections by the seasons and by the months of the year. In this way, you can work in tandem with the cycles of the seasons of our lives and the seasons of the earth. Also, each month of the book provides several suggestions for creative action—indoor exercises, writing prompts, and outdoor activities—that will allow you to feel and experience and understand the lessons of that month for yourself.

In the beginning, we will start each month by practicing *Earth Joy Writing*, and then at the end of the month we will reflect back upon what we learned to deepen our understanding through an examination of the natural principles at work in each month and each season. As the cycle of the seasons turns, however, the practices and principles will become more integrated so that the practice reflects upon the principle, and understanding the principle becomes the practice.

Here is the logic behind this: Much of Western philosophy derives from a principle-based foundation, which means that we start with a concept such as “freedom” or “health” or “equality,” and we attempt to apply this principle universally across vastly different situations and circumstances.

But in many cases, this fails—not because there is something wrong with the principles but because they are applied regardless of the context, the society, and the ecosystem in which humans and the natural world exist.

In other words, *Earth Joy Writing* means aligning our

practices and principles in ways that grow organically from the ground where we live.

So in *Earth Joy Writing*, we will begin with you—with you wherever you are, in whatever season it is, in whatever land you live upon, and within whatever circumstances you live. If you live in the southern hemisphere, for example, and it's winter, you may want to turn to the lessons in the winter section of the book even though your calendar month is June or July.

From the context of this grounding, you will begin to practice *Earth Joy Writing* in your own way, using your own hands, writing your own words, using your own voice and body and stories. And in this grounded way, the natural world will join you and begin to teach you, and talk to you, and share with you how we can indeed heal ourselves and the earth as together we learn to live in creative, balanced, and joyful ways.

Winter



*Germination*

December

## Use Your Hands

Throughout *Earth Joy Writing*, I will ask you to use a journal or notebook for writing. There are many reasons for this.

First, using your hands to write with a pen or pencil on paper takes us back to our earliest selves as humans—those little children we were when someone first guided our hands to make the shapes that would become our names, the word the people who loved us would use to call us to them. And in this way, writing by hand connects us with ourselves throughout our whole human lives.

Second, there is a physical connection that happens between the hand and the belly and the heart and the voice and the mind when we write by hand. It is as if we are creating a circle around all these elements, and this circular motion in itself is healing.

We spend so much time in our heads—and we use our minds to watch and auto-correct ourselves in response to how others are reacting to what we are saying and doing. In *Earth Joy Writing*, I want to teach you how to tap into the wisdom of your whole being—head, heart, belly, voice, and hands. We can do this by writing by hand.

There are a few more reasons why having a notebook and pen will be helpful.

You won't need much else. You won't need a lot of money. You

won't need the latest equipment. You won't need a battery. You won't need an Internet connection.

And you will be free to move. You can go into the woods. You can get into a boat. You can climb a mountain, or get closer to a flower, or lie down on the ground.

And no one can interrupt you. When you are writing in a journal, no one can text you or tweet you or e-mail you or chat with you or call you.

Except you. That still, small voice of wisdom within you. That can call you.

And the earth. The wind. The birds. The water. The trees. They can call you.

So join me in getting your journal and something to write with, and let's use our hands.



 *Let's begin ...*

Take out your journal and write about learning to write. What are your earliest memories of holding a pen or pencil? Did you write in school or on your own? Did you ever write outdoors? Reflect on what memories come up as you write right now.

# Begin with What You Don't Know

W.S. Merwin, who was recently the Poet Laureate of the United States, grew up in New York City. As a child, he had a recurring nightmare of concrete covering all the green areas of the earth. His whole life—and all his poetry and writing—has had the aim of serving to make sure that this doesn't happen.

We humans are an anxious species. Will the earth survive? Will we survive? We can get stuck in endless cycles of worry. Let's begin our *Earth Joy Writing* by getting still and going deeply into the place beyond worry, where we admit how much we don't know.

In an interview with Jack Myers and Michael Simms in their book *Ecopoetry*, W.S. Merwin teaches us that it is exactly this place from which poetry and writing and creating come:

*I think that poetry, and maybe all writing, certainly everything we do to some degree, does not come out of what you know, but out of what you don't know. And one of the great superficialities of positivistic thinking is the assumption that things evolve out of what you know. Nothing evolves out of what you know. You don't move from what you know to something else you know. And it's the unknown that keeps rendering possibilities.*



 *Open yourself to this ...*

Let's begin by writing whatever comes in response to the following four open-ended statements:

I don't know ...

My parents didn't know ...

I can't know ...

I would like to know ...

After writing, take a moment to go outside or just look out your window. Choose something that you feel attracted to, such as a tree or a flower or a cloud or the sunlight. Then write a poem in its voice as you open to listening to what it knows. Begin with the line, "I know ... "

# Open Your Heart

When we open to what we don't know, we also open to the emotions connected to this unknowing. And, as we will encounter again and again throughout the practices and principles in this book, connecting emotionally to an event or situation is essential for coming to healing and balance.

Let's open our hearts through a very gentle, guided meditation. You can do this by simply reading the following slowly and mindfully, occasionally closing your eyes to go within. Or you can listen to me reading the meditation at the *Earth Joy Writing* website at [www.earthjoywriting.com](http://www.earthjoywriting.com).

 *Open your heart to this...*

Take a moment to close your eyes and breathe deeply. Allow your belly to rise on the inhalation and fall on the exhalation. This sends a signal to our parasympathetic nervous system—the heartbeat, blood pressure, and other automatic systems of the body—that it is okay to relax, and slow down, and let go.

Take an event or situation from your life that you are currently worried or concerned or sad about, and let this situation rise up in front of you. You might sense it as a presence in front of you—something outside of you, against you. Be with this feeling.

Then imagine this situation shrinking and becoming smaller. Keep going until it is smaller than your hand. You might feel some resistance; that's okay. It's the same kind of resistance that we might feel when first working with clay, warming and stretching it with our fingers.

As the situation becomes smaller, a tiny crack of compassion for the situation opens in you. You might sense how limited or vulnerable or prone to pain it is.

Next, imagine taking this small thing into your heart. Let your heart shelter it. At this point, you might begin to feel some sorrow. A sense of loss. Tears. You might feel like a child again—you want something and you are not getting it, and it makes you sad. Empty. Stay with this feeling.

Because in this emptiness, in this sadness, there is an opening. You begin to expand your heart to take in all the situations, all the people, all the natural world that has also experienced such loss.

Imagine your heart expanding to take all of this in. It may be scary at first, but breathe through the fear and begin to sense light, and warmth, as your heart connects to a greater source.

It is no longer simply your heart—it is the world's heart—and it holds all of us in it.

We see now how small we humans are, how brief our time on earth is, and how careful we must be with such littleness.

Now allow your attention to rest in your breath. Feel the intake of air and the rising of your belly, and then exhale and feel how, when you let something go, you get closer to the ground.

In your breath, the situation dissolves and becomes part of you; it is no longer something outside of you to fight or resist.

It is you, connected to you, as you are connected to your breath and something greater.

Gently return your attention to your body, in the present time, in the present season. Stretch and look around.

 *Reflect on this ...*

Take some time now to open your journal and record what you learned and experienced during the meditation. What did you see? What did you feel? What did you remember? What did you realize?

# Learn to Speak in a Forgotten Language

One of the reasons that meditation and creative practices are so powerful and fulfilling is that they allow us to go to new, or uncovered, or forgotten places. For many of us, life has become a series of outlines, to-do lists, tasks, goals, and deadlines. *Earth Joy Writing* allows us to let go of all this and return to what we have forgotten: the wild, beautiful world within our hearts and all around us in nature.

## Witness

by W.S. Merwin

I want to tell what the forests  
were like

I will have to speak  
in a forgotten language

In order to begin *Earth Joy Writing*, we ask the questions that will bring us into balance, and the answers may be spoken in a forgotten language. This is the language of trees and poetry, of joy over control, of cooperation over solution, of embracing over winning, and of growing away from what

we think we most want in order to bring about healing and balance.

If you haven't already done so, this is a great time to take this book, along with your journal and something to write with, outside with you. If you cannot do this, perhaps you can look outside a window.

### *Try one of these ...*

Take a moment to look around and settle into your surroundings. Then open your journal and try one of these writing exercises:

1. Write whatever word comes to your mind in response to the following words. There are no wrong answers. Get still. Listen. Watch. And write one word. Listen. Watch. And write another.

nature

open

song

sky

skirt

breath

leaves

wrong

fear

women

glass

happy

ground

past

future

snake

spirit

dream

Now, look at the list of words you have written in your journal. Underline five of them that spark some emotion or have some attraction for you right now.

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through Journaling and Nature*

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If you are a member of the media and would like a review copy, please  
contact Midge Raymond at [midge@ashlandcreekpress.com](mailto:midge@ashlandcreekpress.com).

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