

Lessons of DEER WOMAN

While living in an old growth forest in the Columbia Gorge, a path of creating harmony in the world opened itself up to me. It happened after I had begun my study of Native American and Celtic sacred circles. I had designed a daily ritual of meditating in my small stone circle under two ancient cedar trees. As I forged my practice, my awareness of all things grew exponentially. I learned about the Four Directions and their symbolic meanings and I became more sensitive to the subtle energies of Air, Water, Earth and Fire. In this knowing, I was able to find my own connection to Nature and the Source of all Life. My shamanic path finally revealed itself, filling me with joy and comfort while giving me a deep sense of healing.

As my connection to Nature intensified, I became painfully aware of the suffering human society was imposing on the planet and her creatures. This created fury in my heart, making me want to fight back, vigilant in an effort to save wilderness. This raging energy twisted and burned within me, causing me to suffer physically, mentally and spiritually. Little did I know that thanks to the lessons of Deer Woman, I would soon discover relief by finding balance and practicing kindness to all beings for the sake of the common good.

In the dreary mist of early spring, a doe had settled into some dogwood bushes only a few yards from our farmhouse. Day after day she arrived at the same spot, swollen with pregnancy, calmly waiting for birth. Snowflakes melted on her rough hide and mist soaked her to the skin, yet she laid there patiently in the middle of my dormant flower garden.

I wondered if I should help her in some way; maybe give her carrots or celery. I finally decided to keep my distance so as not to spook her. For ten chilly mornings, my old dog curled up on her favorite landing with her nose resting on the window sill and I sipped my tea as we watched over her. Then

one day, she just disappeared. I worried about the fate that had befallen her; perhaps coyotes, hunters or an irresponsible driver had ended her life. Then one day, we observed twin fawns treading clumsily behind her before fading into a green screen of damp cedar and hemlock trees. The deer family gently reminded me that nature operates at its own pace, with or without our intervention.





Two months later, on a weekly grocery trip, I noticed that a Western Sandpiper had decided to nest on the soft ground of the parking lot berm. She sat there valiantly, surrounded by Buicks, Ford trucks and sports cars. My first thought was compassion for the misguided bird. I assumed that a loss of habitat had compelled her to select such a strange place to raise her brood. She began screeching at me when I tried to check on her, protecting her eggs by digging her claws into the soil and holding her ground.

I was not the only one who had wanted to help the sandpiper. Potted trees had been placed in a circle around her to create a more “natural” habitat. Someone had pushed white garden trim into the ground around the trees while another had strung yellow caution tape between two orange pylons in the parking spots beside her. It was a splendid example of creating respectful and sacred space around wild nature with anonymous action.

Soon after, we moved back into the city to live closer to jobs, grocery stores, family and friends. It was a choice to live more sustainably. Our gas costs and commuting time were cut in half. But there was a price, an inherent disconnection to a wilder aspect of nature. My challenge had evolved to connecting to subtle energies of nature within an urban environment. I no longer drank my morning coffee to the cries of eagles and red tailed hawks, but instead to the din of lawnmowers, hedge trimmers and leaf blowers. Many times I had to remind myself that nature does not live in the boundaries that we do, in tiny squares we can see in a satellite map of our neighborhoods, but within the vast landscape that we have built our homes upon.

We connected with the earth element by building an organic vegetable garden with fresh blueberries for our cereal during the summer and delicious pies and jams to enjoy in the winter. To connect with the air, I designed an orchard mason bee house that was so successful in attracting bees it had only one empty tube by the end of May. We planted more trees for shade. We lowered our water and energy requirements with rain barrels and the use of a high efficiency washer and dryer.

To ease my spirit, I made a point of sitting on a bench under the Ponderosa pines near the back fence when the warm breezes of summer whispered through them. I marveled at the spirals inside my sunflowers in the garden and quietly watched the honeybees work a

bed of wildflowers I had planted just for them. In order to continue my shamanic practice, I built a sacred circle around one of our ancient trees and created a meditation spot facing east in the quietest part of the backyard. Day after day, I kept an eye out for more wildlife in the city.

One afternoon, I heard a strange noise outside my window. When I went out to investigate, I spotted a wild turkey gobbling as it strutted around on the twenty foot patch of grass between me and my neighbor’s house before it wandered away, never to be seen again. A few months later, a red tailed hawk sat on the gate outside my window for ten minutes and then flew off. On one of my daily walks with the dog, we found a salmon in the middle of the road that had been dropped by an eagle flying overhead. And during the first autumn evenings in our new home, I heard the soft hoots of a barred owl in the pine trees.

My experiences hiking in the silent forests of the Cascades or walking through the sage and juniper of the high deserts of Eastern Oregon give me a deeper sense of wisdom and connection to nature than my own backyard. Even so, my shamanic path has also taught me that nature lives wherever I am. As Audrey Shenandoah of the Onondaga Nation states, *“Our ways teach us that we should try in this time on earth not to have any disharmony within our own space. Each person has his own space that he is responsible for. Your responsibility is to keep peace within that space around you, within your own space.”*

So I continue to practice listening to the lessons of Deer Medicine: Maintain a sense of wonder. Keep a respectful distance. Practice patience and kindness. Be grateful for nature’s bounty. Live simply and give back when you can, even when all you’ve got are potted trees, pylons and yellow tape. Nature will take care of the rest. ©



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