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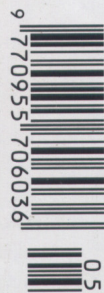


Fairy Paths

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MOON TIME

Living in Natural Time



(USA \$6.95 CANADA \$10.50)



What are Medicine Wheel teachings?
How do they relate to us?
In what ways might we begin to work with them?
Annie Spencer introduces this deep and magical Native wisdom.

The term Medicine Wheel describes an ancient system developed in the Americas that encompasses spirituality, philosophy, ecology, and social and personal development. The term Medicine refers to a state of being in harmony and balance with ourselves, the world and with spirit. Teachings are given out in Wheels or circles. This is a system that understands the cyclic nature of life and honours diversity and difference; one that values equality over hierarchy.

At its core is a constant reminder: it is essential for us to find a lifestyle that allows us to live in harmony and balance with the rest of our world. Were Medicine people to talk about the ecology of the earth they would remind us that we are an integral part of that ecology. Other inhabitants of this earth are all related to us and therefore have an equal right to life. Understanding that plants and animals are as much our relations as other humans, we would care about the millions of species threatened with extinction. We would be aware that our survival depends more upon regaining an ecological balance in nature than on large bank balances and insurance policies.

Medicine people also understand that death is an unavoidable part of life and that all beings struggle with one another for survival. However, as we ruthlessly take the life of another to provide sustenance for ourselves and our families, we should look death in the eye and acknowledge the sacrifice we demand. Ruthlessness and compassion walk hand-in-hand in this tradition.

So what are these Medicine Wheels and are they relevant to modern society? Although they are ancient, the culture they come from is not simple. Until the mid-twentieth century, Europeans held a distorted view of the lives of the inhabitants of the Americas. They depicted the nomadic hunters of

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the Great Plains as noble savages, glorifying what they saw as a people living in a primitive way on an untamed earth. The reality was quite different: 'There was a way of life with immense technical and social sophistication. Far from being simple or primitive, the economic and cultural techniques of hunter-gatherers were hard to see and difficult to assess precisely because they were meeting needs of mobility, decision making and resource harvesting that were both varied and subtle. Here was a triumph of human achievement, a triumph that spoke to how most of the world had lived for most of human history.' *The Other Side of Eden*, Hugh Brodie.

We believe in scientific certainty and look for generalised rules applicable to different situations. The culture that Medicine Wheel teachings have emerged from saw things differently. Hugh Brodie again: 'The knowledge that marks hunter-gatherers' relationship to their territories is an intricate mixture of the real and the supernatural. There are facts about things and facts about spirits. And the wall between these two kinds of entity is not solid. People can cross from the natural into the supernatural; spirits can move into the human domain. Just as this divide between physical and metaphysical is permeable, so also is the divide between humans and animals. In this way, the boundaries around the human world are porous.'

Here are metaphors and magic, and a world where there are no material certainties. 'There is no limit to what the world may contain, or to how the unknown may reveal itself.'

Understanding how many unknowns may affect every situation, there is less generalisation and more specific understanding. The Medicine Wheels teach us to look at a given situation in its

own right. The Four Directions Wheel teaches us to put it into the context of the natural world, the Twenty Count broadens the context to include the physical universe, our past history, future possibilities and spiritual dimensions, so that we can explore possible far-reaching effects of a course of action. The Council Wheel is a marvellous tool for resolving conflict during meetings, ensuring that everyone gets heard, allowing a balanced picture to emerge.

These teachings enable us to understand how we belong in this sometimes mad, bad and crazy world. To remind us of our humanity, holiness and beauty when we are lost or tired or angry or feel betrayed. They start with the present moment and their first task is

spiritual, it is also based on scientific fact. And each teaching is synthetic: the more we learn, the more we discover there is to learn. This Wheel continues around the directions: in the west we learn about the earth, in the south, the plants, and in the north we meet the animals, reminding us of the building blocks of our world.

How do these teachings and these tales of wild animals and hunters and village people relate to the modern world? A world not of feathers or tipi but of Garnier, Nike and Renault Clio. Where the ocean sells Guinness and the great Quetzal is transmuted into a road marking.

Perhaps it is precisely because we are barraged by the fantasies of advertising that we need now more than ever the anchors that remind us of the true

“This sacred body we inhabit is not only clay and bone: it is star and stone.”

Brooke Medicine Eagle

orientation. They take the four points of the compass, which they call the Four Directions, and orient us with qualities that relate to the world as we perceive it. For example, the sun rises in the east so the east is the place to remember the sun and all the qualities it holds. Symbolism mixes with material reality. Thus the sun is our Father/Grandfather, the spark of our origins; the east is the place of spirit, which we might experience as disembodied light. It is also true to say that the sun is our source of life in material reality and it is from the sun that the earth came, that we came. While each teaching may sound esoteric and

realities of our lives. Getting lost in a world of virtual reality, we become addicted to adrenaline, throw ourselves out of balance and then are terrified to discover that one in three of us will contract cancer or need psychiatric help during our lifetimes.

Medicine Wheel teachings are a simple and playful route into understanding the deeper and often scary questions that only plague some of us during a sleepless night. They contain the lifelines that help us withstand failure,

Medicine Wheels

bereavement, betrayal and boredom with equanimity. With their poetic imagery and wild stories they remind us of a longing for whatever lies behind the beauty of a sunset, beyond stars watched on a warm summer night, behind the bubbles glistening on a cup of hot chocolate.

At one time, we too knew we were intimately connected to the earth and all living beings but today we have isolated ourselves in a cultural bubble that is fantastical and unsustainable. Medicine Wheel teachings hold a pathway back to reality. They do not attempt to overturn our culture; rather they help it regain a sense of order and balance.

There is a Native American teaching story about a sick child, who coughs and coughs. Her parents send for the Medicine

What can we make of this story? The fox symbolises family life. Perhaps their family life was out of balance and this made the little girl so sad that her lungs – the place of sadness – got infected, filled up with the phlegm of her unexpressed grief, so she fell ill. The old woman suggested a task that allowed all members of the family to act

“Boundaries around the human world are porous – there are metaphors and magic”

Woman who comes and makes her diagnosis. She says there is a hungry fox out in the snow; the father must go after it, catch it and bring it back unharmed to the home. He does this, spending three or four days out in the snow. The little girl's cough and the fox's claws rattling on the ice mirror one another. Finally the father brings the fox home. The little girl is delighted with the small soft creature. The mother feeds the starving and exhausted animal. After two days eating and sleeping the little fox is strong enough to leave and the little girl is better.

appropriately for their role in the family. The father had to work the hardest to restore the balance. Once balance was restored, the girl could recover and the fox and the old woman could go. Who cured whom? The fox was starving and close to death and it also recovered. So we are also reminded that the effects of our actions stretch much farther than we realise.

The tale would be told in an engaging and humorous way so that everyone opened to its message spontaneously both intellectually and emotionally.



What we take in emotionally often stays with us longer than what is merely understood intellectually.

Medicine Wheel teachings are subtle and complex. They speak to the whole being and encourage us through story, humour, song, and movement, to use our imaginations to understand our place in the vastness of creation. Although that place is tiny, we do not feel isolated or dwarfed because we are constantly being referred back to the familiar and the small.

more information

- Annie Spencer combines humanistic psychology with skills from earth-based spiritual traditions and has run ceremonial circles on Medicine Wheel teachings for 20 years. She teaches Women's Mysteries courses and training in shamanic ways.
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Working with the 4 directions

Medicine Wheel teachings help you find a spiritual path rooted in the natural world. There is nowhere better to start than working with the Four Directions which are easy to remember as they are also the four points of the compass. Any of these practices will lead you into an experience of the extraordinary depth and beauty of these teachings. But be patient, it may take you months to experience anything out of the ordinary.

To tap into the teachings of the **East**, commit yourself to rising a little earlier than the sun (easier in the winter than in midsummer of course) so that you can greet it as it appears above the hill, rooftop or billboard that marks the horizon

on the east side of your home. Offer it a small pinch of something that is central to your diet: a pinch of cornmeal or muesli or of herbs: thank it for your life, for the day that is beginning, for anything that comes to mind. This is not an asking, it is a gesture of gratitude. Let the pinch of stuff that you are holding go into the air.

To start your journey in the **South** go out and look for a friendly tree – believe me, some trees are more friendly than others. If you live in a city, fine. There are plenty of trees in parks and along the streets. Many people pass these trees. Few stop to connect with them. When you have found one that you like, visit it regularly. You

don't have to hug it, but stand close, perhaps with your hand on the trunk, perhaps with your back to the trunk. Tell it about your life (you don't have to speak out loud). And stay quiet with it for a few minutes, listening. Can you feel the energy running up the trunk? Do the branches seem to move towards you? How does the tree respond to the day? Does it respond to you? Don't expect miracles but keep visiting every so often. Take it a gift – trees generally like a bit of fish meal scattered at their base – it is good food for them.

To connect with the **West**, look for a small stone or pebble. Maybe you will have to make a special trip to the country or the seaside or a

park to find one. When you find the right one you will be able to feel its vibrational frequency. Be patient. This may take a long time to achieve. This stone may stay with you all your life. Keep it close, tell it about yourself. Ask it what it has to teach you. Don't expect much too quickly. Stones have been around for a long time and are not in a rush like us.

To tune into the qualities of the **North**, practise acts of generosity. Make some small generous gesture (large is even better) to some being – maybe human, maybe animal, maybe plant, each day. And of course you don't have to confine yourself to one. But try to be generous at least once every day.