

Duane writes: Francis Weller is the only person I asked to write the preface for the *Choosing Earth* book. He reaches deep into the “long dark” of the coming decades and then into our awakening to a higher maturity that supports an evolutionary leap forward. Francis know that our collective awakening will not come without tremendous suffering as a catalyst for awakening to a new a future of profound promise for humanity. I am tremendously grateful for his introduction to *Choosing Earth*.

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At the Threshold: Grief, Initiation, and Transformation

by Francis Weller

“In a dark time, the eye begins to see.”

—Theodore Roethke

We are living in turbulent times on this beautiful planet. All pretense of immunity is collapsing as we realize how completely entangled our lives are with one another—with kelp beds and calving glaciers, with wildfires and rising sea levels, with refugees and the anxious dreams of young people everywhere. The disequilibrium shaking the world feels like a continual tremor along the fault lines of our psychic lives.

Very few things feel stable. It is like a fever dream. Maybe we have reached the initiatory threshold required to wake us up. Whatever is happening, much will be asked of us if we are to make it through the whitewater of this narrow passage. We do not know what lies ahead, but one thing is sure: This is a time for bold gestures. It is time to wake up and humbly take our place on this stunning planet. The future is speaking ruthlessly through us.

James Hillman, the brilliant archetypal psychologist, wrote, “The world and the gods are dead or alive according to the condition of our souls.”¹ In other words, the vitality of the animate, sensuous world and our encounter with the sacred depend on our souls being fully alive! A soul that is awake is

entangled with the living world—its beauty, allure, and wonder, its sorrows, rips, and tears. Given the state of the world and our soulful lives, we must pause and ask, “What is the condition of our souls?” From all observable accounts, the prevailing condition is desperate, empty, ravenous, impoverished, and grief-stricken. In the language of some traditional cultures, we would diagnose our times as one of soul loss. To lose soul is to feel emptied of wonder, joy, and passion. It is to feel cut off from the vitalizing relationships with the living world, leaving one stranded in a deadened world. The long-standing intimacy with the multiple folds of the Earth—her myriad of creatures, the stunning profusion of color and fragrance—would be forgotten. In place of this, we substitute a frenzied striving for power and material gain. This is the dominant reality for much of white, technological, late-capitalistic culture. Soul loss leaves us flattened and empty, always wanting more—more power, more things, more wealth, more control. We forget what truly satisfies the soul.

I have spent nearly four decades tracking the movements of soul, most especially through the lairs of grief. In my practice as a psychotherapist and in many workshops, I have seen the wide range of sorrows that we carry in our hearts. From early traumas, deaths, divorces, suicides of beloved family or friends, addictions, illnesses, and more . . . the “size of the cloth” has become painfully apparent. More and more frequently, I hear in the laments of individuals, not so much grief for their personal losses, but for the wider, wilder world that is being diminished minute by minute. They are registering in their souls the sorrows of the world. Strangely, this gives me hope.

The sheer weight of these personal and collective sorrows is enough to crush our hearts, forcing us to turn away and find solace in anesthesia and distraction. When we come together, however, and share these stories of sorrow in grief rituals, something begins to change. When our sorrows are witnessed and held within a community of compassion, grief can surprisingly turn to joy, to a love emboldened for all that surrounds us. Love and loss have been eternally entwined. To acknowledge our grief is to free our love to fall outwards into the waiting world. Something is stirring in the depths of the times. Our collective denial appears to be cracking. We can no longer deny

the fact that the world is radically changing. We sense in our bones the breakdowns occurring and, along with it, our hearts feel weighted with grief. It may be our shared sorrows, stirred by our love of this singular, irreplaceable planet, that will ultimately activate our communal commitment to respond to the rampant denigration of the world. Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “If grief can be a doorway to love, then let us all weep for the world we are breaking apart so we can love it back to wholeness again.”

THE LONG DARK

Duane Elgin’s *Choosing Earth* is a demanding book, asking us to do the hard work of turning into the coming waves of breakdown, bewilderment, chaos, and loss. He invites us to participate in the most difficult transition humanity will ever have to make—an invitation we hoped never to receive. Its arrival declares that the planet has already radically and irreversibly changed, and it is now up to us to respond. Yet, hidden within this ominous threshold-time are the seeds of humanity’s possible maturation into a planetary community. As this book lays bare, however, the passage will be long, and we will be working these evolutionary changes for decades and, most likely, for generations to come. So, dear reader, persist, even though it is difficult. Even though your heart breaks a thousand times. As Buddhist scholar and eco-philosopher Joanna Macy said, “The heart that breaks open can contain the whole universe.”

Elgin does not offer prescriptions for fixing what is happening, nor encourage some return to a better past, nor does he suggest we surrender to ruin. He soulfully recognizes that we must go through this time of collective initiation in order to take our place as responsible adults collaborating in the creation of a healthy and vibrant community of all beings. This is challenging reading. Much will be evoked as you take in the information, the timelines, and the grief of our evolving story. Read on. The future is not set and each of us is a makeweight in the shaping of what is to come.

This descent takes us down into a different geography. In this shadowed terrain, we encounter a landscape familiar to soul—loss, grief, death,

vulnerability, fear. This is a time of decay, of shedding and endings, of falling apart, and collapse. This is not a time of rising and growth. It is not a time of confidence and ease. No. We are hunkered down. “Down” being the operative word. From the perspective of soul, down is holy ground. We are being escorted into the hallways of soul.

We are entering what could be called the Long Dark. I say this not with a note of despair, or with an attitude of hopelessness, but, instead, recognizing and valuing the necessary work that can take place only in the dark. It is the realm of soul—of whispers and dreams, mystery and imagination, death and ancestors. It is an essential territory, both inevitable and required, offering a form of soul gestation that gradually gives shape to our deeper lives. Certain things can happen only in this grotto of darkness. Think of the wild network of roots and microbes, mycelium, and minerals, making possible all that we see in the day world, or the extensive networks within our own bodies, bringing blood, nutrients, oxygen, and thought to our corporeal lives. All of it happening in the darkness.

Collectively, we are not familiar with descent as something valued and essential. Most of us live in an ascension culture. We love things rising up ... up ... up ... always up. When things begin to go down, we can feel panic, uncertainty, and even dread. How can we meet these unpredictable times with any sense of courage and faith? Courage to keep our hearts open and faith that something meaningful lurks in the descent. How can we, once again, come to see the holiness that dwells in darkness?

To remember the sacredness in the dark, we must become fluent in the manners and ways of soul. We are required to develop another way of seeing as we descend ever-further into the collective unknown. We are asked to remember the disciplines of soul that will enable us to navigate through the Long Dark. This is a time to practice deep listening, which acknowledges the wisdom in others and in the dreaming Earth. When we listen deeply, we begin to uncover what wants to be brought into being. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs, a black feminist writer and poet, asks, “How can we listen across species, across extinction, across harm?”

Qualities and disciplines we need to collectively practice include the following:

- Restraint offers a breath, a pause, a moment of reflection, which allows things to be revealed. Restraint enables something to ripen before we move into action.
- Humility honors our mutuality and brings us close to the ground, a gesture that keeps us aware of our entanglement with the living world.
- Not knowing reminds us that we live in mystery, an ever-unfolding, unshaped moment. We do not know what is going to happen, and this truth keeps us humble and vulnerable. And finally . . .
- Letting go . . . rooted in the fundamental truth of impermanence. Each of us is preparing for our own disappearance as well as witnessing the constantly shifting world. We are reminded of the continual process of change.

Each of these disciplines helps us to cultivate our presence in the underworld of the Long Dark. Primary among the skills we need to cultivate in these uncertain times is our capacity to grieve. Even our basic trust in the future has been shaken as we awaken to the emerging climate crisis and erosion of the social fabric. As a result, we now face a vital truth: We are entering a rough initiation.

ROUGH INITIATIONS

Uncertainty has come into our homes and found its way into each of our lives. What was once stable and predictable has been shaken and we have begun a steep descent into the unknown, surrounded by insecurity, fear, and grief. Many of my clients confess that what troubles them most is the condition of the world! The symptoms are no longer confined to our intrapsychic realities—our personal histories, wounds, and traumas. The patient is now the planet itself, manifesting symptoms of collapse, depression, anxiety,

violence, and addiction—felt in the wider body of the Earth, rattling our deep psychic ground, affecting everything.

Hidden within our shared experience of suffering, are the
unripened seeds of initiation.

Daily, we receive news of the latest frightening climate report, of violations to our human and more-than-human kin, of tragedies in all parts of the world. Our psyches are inundated. The scale of suffering and loss is hard for us to comprehend as individuals. We are not wired for this level of persistent, collective trauma. We are designed to metabolize the challenges and sorrows of our local community and our own encounters with suffering. Learning to digest this wider emerging reality requires the support of community, rituals that can help us stay connected to our souls, along with a compelling story that invites us to dream of what is possible. Without such deep connections, we will continue to rely on strategies of avoidance and heroic striving, hoping to bypass painful encounters.

As we slowly digest the contents of *Choosing Earth*, we come to realize that we are tumbling through a rough initiation, with radical alterations occurring in our inner and outer landscapes—simultaneously deeply personal and wildly collective, binding us to one another. Everyone we meet—in the grocery store, in line at the gas station, walking their dog—is tangled up in this liminal space between the familiar world and the strange, emergent one. Hang on!

The deep work of traditional initiations was meant to dislodge an old identity. The process was designed to produce enough intensity and heat to cook the soul and prepare initiates to take their place in the care and maintenance of the commons. It was never about the individual. It was not about self-improvement or making them into someone better. No. Initiation was an act of sacrifice on behalf of the greater community into which the initiate was brought and to which he or she now holds allegiance. They were being readied to step into their role of maintaining the vitality and well-being

of the village, the clan, the watershed, the ancestors, and the continuum of generations to come.

We are meant to be radically changed by initiatory encounters. We do not want to come out of these turbulent times the same as we went in, personally or collectively. At this moment in history, we need to respond to radical change. This period of rough initiation has been brought about by multiple crises: economic instability, cultural and political upheavals, massive relocations of refugees, racial and gender injustice, food and water shortages, uncertain availability of healthcare, and others. Undergirding them all is the collapse of our ecological systems. As this reality comes closer and our imagined separation from nature is thinned, we recognize that our sense of who we are is entirely entangled with coral reefs and monarch butterflies, blue fin tuna, and old-growth forests. Their decline is our diminishment. As Elgin writes, “Eco-collapse brings ego collapse.” The Earth container is breaking, and with it the fiction of separation. Our rough initiation is bringing about the death of our collective adolescent identity. It is time to ripen.

So now what? How do we navigate this tidal surge of uncertainty? How do we engage the world in the absence of the ordinary? Fear can rattle us and activate strategic patterns of survival. This is evident in the resurgence of old modes—such as scapegoating, projection, hatred, and violence. These patterns may allow some to temporarily avoid the descent, but those strategies cannot help us across this tremulous threshold into a planetary civilization. For that, we need to amplify the potency of the adult. As is true of any genuine initiation, it requires a maturation of our being and stepping more fully into our robust identity, rooted in soul. We must become immense, capable of welcoming all that arrives at the gateway to the heart.

AN APPRENTICESHIP WITH SORROW

Our collective initiation will inevitably bring us face-to-face with extreme layers of loss and grief. Elgin makes this very clear. The ongoing winnowing of species will deplete the Earth’s biodiversity by a staggering amount over the

coming decades. Human deaths will multiply as food and water sources disappear and regional violence increases over diminished access to resources. Economic disparities will level an untold degree of suffering on billions of individuals. Grief will be the keynote for the foreseeable future. Our ability to stay present to this tidal wave of loss depends on our capacity to cultivate this essential skill. We must take up an apprenticeship with sorrow.

Our apprenticeship begins when we come to understand that grief is ever-present in our lives. This is a difficult realization, but one that has the opportunity of opening our heart to a deeper love for our singular life and for the wind-swept world of which we are a part. We begin with the simple gesture of picking up the shards of grief that lie littered on the floor of our house. We begin by building our capacity to hold sorrow in the tender hut of the heart. Through this practice, we learn to welcome the pervasive and encompassing presence of grief. And then we invite one, two . . . a few trusted others, to gather and share the ongoing waves of sorrow as they come ashore. “Our ability to love and comfort is expanded by others’ grief, our own too-big-to-be-contained pain finds its freedom in others’ witnessing of it.”

Grief is more than an emotion; it is also a core faculty of being human. It is a skill that must be developed, or we will find ourselves migrating to the margins of our lives in hopes of avoiding inevitable entanglements with loss. Through the rites of grief, we are ripened as human beings. Grief invites gravity and depth into the psyche. Fortunately, we possess the capacity to metabolize sorrow into something medicinal for our soul and the soul of the world.

One of the essential practices in our apprenticeship is our ability to hold one another in times of grief and trauma. This skill has, for the most part, been lost under the extreme weight of individualism and privatization, especially in Western, industrial cultures. This has had a profound impact on how we process and metabolize our personal encounters with loss and intense emotional experiences. Without the familiar and reliable container of community, these times can penetrate our psychic lives, leaving us shattered and shaken, frightened and unsure of our next step.

Trauma is any encounter, acute or prolonged, that overwhelms the capacity of the psyche to process the experience.

In these times, what confronts us is too intense to hold, integrate, or comprehend. The emotional charge saturates our capacity to make sense of the experience, and we feel overwhelmed and alone. Absence of an adequate holding environment, capable of supporting us in these times, generates traumatic experiences. In other words, pain itself is not traumatic. Unwitnessed pain is. This time of rapid and heartbreaking planetary change reminds us that we are in this together and we can offer one another the holding space needed to process our shared sorrows.

But what of traumas impinging on us from the wider world? Here, Elgin proposes a new way of framing the global field. He introduces Chronic Planetary Traumatic Stress and writes: “The difference between PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and CPTS is that, instead of a relatively brief and confined episode, the trauma is life-long and planetary in scope. There is no escape—the burden of collective trauma permeates the psyche and soul of humanity.” There is no escape! Whether we acknowledge the wider traumas or not, our psyches register the disruption. How could we not? Our lives, our bodies, our souls, are entirely entwined with the beauty and sorrows of the world. As Elgin points out, without containment, the chronic traumas of the planet will leave many of us “deeply wounded, both psychologically and socially.” The capacity to create spaces potent enough to hold the intense energies of our raw grief is a key element in our apprenticeship with sorrow.

Every trauma carries grief within it. Loss is woven within trauma’s textures; and the scenarios laid out by Elgin for the next decades and beyond are filled with trauma and sorrow.

How are we to respond when life confronts us with overwhelming circumstances? How can we hold all that we feel when the source is far beyond our ability to control? How do we recalibrate our inner lives to heal our psyches in times of trauma? Here are a few offerings for tending our souls during traumatic times—and who isn’t living in traumatic times?

1. Practice self-compassion. Self-compassion helps us hold our vulnerability with kindness and tenderness, allowing us to remain soft and open. Times of great uncertainty call for a level of generosity to ourselves that helps offset the effects of trauma that can often envelop our emotional body. This must be our first and primary intention: to hold all that we experience with compassion—to offer a safe place for our fears and grief to land.

2. Turn toward the feelings. No bypass or strategy of avoidance can help resolve the difficult emotions we will encounter. Turning toward our suffering is essential. Not only must we endure times of pain and sorrow, hoping to get beyond them, we must also actively engage them and feel them fully. This move takes great courage. However, without adequate compassion and support, it is hard to open ourselves up to the painful emotions that await us.

3. Be Astonished by Beauty. Trauma has a profound impact on our feelings of aliveness, often generating a state of numbness or anesthesia. This anesthetized state protects us for a time from having to encounter the raw, searing emotions that often accompany trauma, but it also dulls our sensual engagement with all that surrounds us. Beauty's allure helps to fully open the aperture of the heart. Sorrow and beauty side-by-side. The soul has a fundamental need for encounters with beauty—a central source of nourishment that continually renews our sense of vitality and awe.

4. Patience. Healing from trauma takes time. Patience helps heal vulnerable pieces of soul splintered by trauma. Knitting a bone takes time. Mending the soul takes even longer. Be patient with your process. The soul's deep wisdom knows the value of going slowly. Stepping out of the manic pace of modern culture is essential for regaining our footing in the world of soul. Patience is a discipline, a practice that reassures wounded, vulnerable souls, and helps us reap the benefits of our efforts.

A GRADUAL AWAKENING, AN EMERGING WORLD

Our long apprenticeship with sorrow results in a spaciousness capable of holding it all—the loss and the beauty, the despair and the longing, the fear and the love. We become immense. Our steady devotion to working with the heavy cargo of grief, slowly softens the heart and we feel our connection with the wider, sentient world expanding. Our time in the depths helps us to develop a felt intimacy with the Earth and the cosmos. We come home. We sense a diminishing distance between us and others. Our identities become permeable, and we feel a growing kinship with the human and more-than-human community. A new reverence for life emerges as we sense the living presence of the Earth as an organism embedded in a living cosmos.

This is our dawning experience of a possible future for the Earth. A mature humanity is emerging, but it is tender, vulnerable, and fragile. We are entering our early adulthood, not yet developed sufficiently to withstand much pressure. Thresholds are tenuous, unsteady, and unpredictable. As we enter, what Elgin calls “The Great Transition,” we are required to return to humility again and again. What humanity has endured over the Long Dark must now be harvested with patience. Our work is to protect this emerging sensitivity and pass it along to the generations that follow. Each successive generation can fortify this evolving awareness, adding its own understandings, practices, rituals, songs, stories, and more—until it becomes a robust presence in accord with the evolving cosmos.

As we mature as a species, we enter a more reciprocal relationship with the Earth. We are called to strengthen the values and practices that help sustain the body of this exquisite world. Values such as respect, restraint, gratitude, and courage help to fortify our ability to stand and protect what we love. Reverence and humility remind us that our lives comingle with all life. What affects one strand on the web affects all. We are here to participate in the ongoing creation, to offer our imagination, affection, and devotion to sustaining the world.

Elgin makes the need clear: we must cultivate a robust collective of adults whose primary fealty is to the life-giving world on which we depend. We

must be able to feel our loyalties to watersheds, migratory pathways, marginalized communities, and the soul of the world. We must feel the bedrock of our aliveness, and the reality of our wild and exuberant lives. Initiation tempers the soul, drawing out its hidden essence and calls forth the medicine we came to offer this stunning world. We are needed!

Initiation ripens us and readies us for greater participation in the care of the cosmos. This is at the heart of why we are here as a species. Our cosmological purpose is to keep the dream of the world alive. There is beauty, dignity, and grandeur in that calling. It is becoming increasingly clear that this realization must become deeply embedded in the hearts and souls of people in the coming decades. In essence, we are being asked to consecrate our lives, to practice reverence in our actions. This is the first truth that must settle into the bones of anyone who undergoes this planetary initiation. In addition, initiation implies soul medicine. We are asked to give away the particular gifts we came here to offer. Initiation also loosens the tight collar of civilization and leads us to reclaim the wildness within. The grip on our domesticated psyche relaxes and we are able to enter a multicentric world where everything possesses soul and is a form of speaking. And one last truth that comes with initiation: We are asked to build a house of belonging that can extend places of welcome to those who feel unseen and disconnected.

For those of us privileged with the gift of advanced years, it is incumbent upon us to turn and face those who follow, the generations of younger ones whose future is seriously jeopardized by our neglect of the world. I see the understandably bewildered, angered, grief-stricken faces of millions. I don't know what to say, only that I see you. I acknowledge your sorrow and your despair, your outrage, and confusion. Your trust in any possible future is being eroded day-by-day. What you inherently expected—a future brimming with possibility—is fading and evaporating even as you reach for it. I feel the immense sorrow in your hearts. I see it whenever we share a moment. It is etched on your face, in your words. I am sorry. Please know that many of us are doing everything we can to find a way through this narrow passage to offer a world worthy of your lives.

I also see your passion and your commitment to fight for a life that has meaning and beauty, belonging, and joy. I see your longing to fashion a living culture congruent with the ways and rhythms of the Earth. I see your creativity and wild imaginings, seeing things in ways my generation never dreamed of. You are powerful in the midst of your grief. You have been asked to carry so much, so soon, and the initiatory impulse may have been activated before you were ready. And maybe not. You may be the ones capable of finding a pathway through this collective dark night of the soul.

A NEW HUMAN, A NEW EARTH

It is a privilege to be alive at this moment in our collective story. We are the ones straddling this threshold-time. We are the ones who can choose to participate in the repair of the Earth and in the creation of a living planetary culture. We are the ones alive at a moment of immense possibility when we can restore a sacred covenant with the animate world. We are the ones who can respond to these circumstances and participate in imagining the shape of a new Earth. The Earth, however, is profoundly wounded and will require patient restoration. Attending to the sacred duty of repair is a deep imprint of our initiation.

Every human being alive will experience the rough initiation of these times. No one will be exempt from the effects of the deteriorating climate or the stresses and strains that will befall our economic, political, and social lives.

Initiation is not optional. The lingering question is will we choose to participate in the process of initiation? Will we be able to see beyond self-interest and be capable of thinking like a planetary community? We will be reshaped in profound ways, one way or another. If we choose to accept the challenges of this threshold-time, we may emerge ripened and ready to participate in, what geologist Thomas Berry called, the dream of the Earth. The hallmarks of this new self will reveal someone more attuned to responsibilities than rights, more aware of multiple entanglements than

entitlements. We will be initiated into a vast sea of intimacies, with the village, star clusters, and gnarled old oaks, wide-eyed children, the pool of ancestors, and the scented Earth.

The importance of this choice cannot be overstated. By participating in the difficult work of radical change, we are quickened, in some deep way, to carry essential medicines for our beleaguered world. This implies that we learn how to live within the means of the Earth to support us.

“Choosing Earth” means choosing simplicity, community, reconciliation, and participation. These are gestures we can all make, now. We can remember our primary satisfactions—the core constituents of a healthy soul life. These elements evolved over several hundred-thousand years and shaped our psychic lives in ways that led to a sense of contentment and satisfaction. When these requirements are met, we do not crave the newest device, or the latest model car, or the next form of anesthesia. Essentially, we are freed from toxic consumerism and materialism. We live simply and we simply live. In order to feel satisfied, we need touch that affirms and soothes, to be held in times of grief and pain; we also need abundant play, and sharing food with others, eaten slowly over heartfelt conversations; we need dark, starlit nights when words are not required; and, of course, we need the pleasures of friendship and unselfconscious laughter.

We require a vital ritual life that connects us with the unseen world in crucial times—such as crossing the threshold of initiation, tending to the vulnerabilities of illness, or celebrating our communal gratitude for the blessings of this life. We need an ongoing, intimate, and sensual connection to the wild pulse of nature; our hearts and ears need to delight in storytelling, dancing, and music. We crave the attention of engaged elders, and we thrive in a community rooted in a system of inclusion based on equality. These are what we truly desire.

Let us be willing to descend, together, into the vast darkness of this time and see what resides there, in the mystery, waiting for our devoted attention. So much is in bud, the poet says. So much yearning for expression. A larger journey lies ahead, one where we may find ourselves growing into something unimagined, birthing a new being, a bio-cosmic presence.

This is the time in which we can dream of what may be. Many of us will not see the other shore of the Long Dark. But some may. As Duane Elgin writes, “Now I see myself planting seeds of possibility, but without expectation that I will live to see them blossom in a new summertime or partake of their fruits in the harvest of a distant autumn. My approach now is to trust the wisdom of the Earth and the human family in bringing forth another season of life.” That is an elder’s blessing. We live for what may be, knowing we may never see the fruits.

The only way out is through and the only way through is together. This is a collective initiation. This is the gestation period for a possible planetary community. We are the midwives, the elders, the guides to our future life. It is a good time to be alive.

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