

# Trauma Stewardship

An everyday guide to caring for  
self while caring for others

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## INTRODUCTION

### Understanding Trauma Stewardship

“Are you sure all this trauma work hasn’t gotten to you?” he asked.

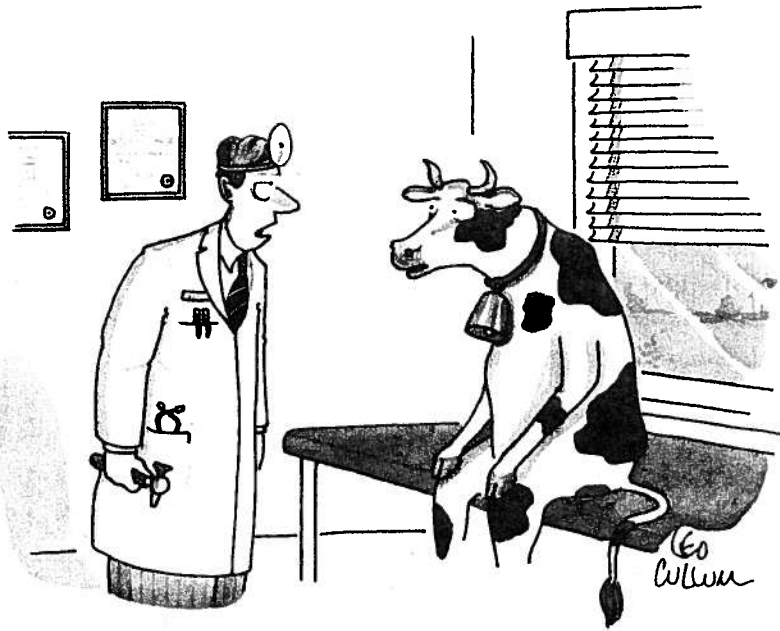
We were visiting our relatives in the Caribbean. We’d hiked to the top of some cliffs on a small island, and for a moment the entire family stood quietly together, marveling, looking out at the sea. It was an exquisite sight: turquoise water as far as you could see; a vast, cloudless sky; and air that felt incredible to breathe. As we reached the edge of the cliffs, my first thought was: “This is unbelievably beautiful.” My second thought was: “I wonder how many people have killed themselves by jumping off these cliffs?”

Assuming I was merely giving voice to what each person was thinking, I posed this question out loud. My stepfather-in-law turned to me slowly and asked his question so sincerely that I finally understood: My work *had* gotten to me. I had always considered myself a self-aware person, but this moment was the first time I truly comprehended the degree to which my work had changed me.

That was in 1997. I had already spent more than a decade working, by choice, for social change. My jobs had brought me into intimate contact with people who were living close to or actually experiencing different types of acute trauma: homelessness, child abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse. As I continued on this path, my roles had grown and shifted. I had been an emergency room social worker, a community organizer, an immigrant and refugee advocate, an educator. I had been a frontline worker and a manager. I had worked days, evenings, and graveyard shifts. I had worked in my local community, elsewhere in the U.S., and internationally.

Over time, there had been a number of people — friends, family, even clients — urging me to “take some time off,” “think about some other work,” or “stop taking it all so seriously.” But I could not

hear them. I was impassioned, perhaps to the point of selective blindness. I was blazing my own trail, and I believed that others just didn't get it. I was certain that this work was my calling, my life's mission. I was arrogant and self-righteous. I was certain I was just fine.



*"The ringing in your ears—I think I can help."*

And so in that moment, on those cliffs, my sudden clarity about the toll of the work on my life had a profound impact. Over the next days and weeks, I slowly began to make the connections. Not everyone stands on top of cliffs wondering how many have killed themselves. Not everyone in the grocery store is scoping out potential perpetrators. Not everyone is doing background checks on people they date, and pity is not everyone's first response when they receive a wedding invitation.

After so many years of hearing stories of abuse, death, tragic accidents, and unhappiness, of seeing photos of crime scenes, missing children, and deported loved ones, and of visiting the homes of those I was trying to help — in other words, of bearing witness to others' suffering — I finally came to understand that my exposure to other

people's trauma had changed me on a fundamental level. It was like a kind of osmosis: I had absorbed and accumulated the trauma to the point that it had become part of me, and my view of the world had changed. Without my noticing it, this trail I was blazing had led me into a tangled wilderness. I was exhausted, thirsty, and no longer had the emotional or physical supplies I needed to continue.

I could have ignored that realization on the cliffs. Historically, there is a widely held belief within the fields where I worked that if you're tough enough and cool enough and committed to your cause enough, you'll keep on keeping on, you'll suck it up: Self-care is something for the weaker set. I had certainly internalized this belief to a large degree, but once I realized how much the effects of trauma exposure had impacted my life, I could not return to my former relationship with my work.

Instead, I began the long haul of making change. I knew that if I wanted to bring skill, insight, and energy to my work, my family, my community, and my own life, I had to alter my course. I had to learn some new navigational skills. First, I needed to take responsibility for acknowledging the effects of trauma exposure within myself. Second, I had to learn how to make room for my own internal change — to create space within to discover the new approaches that would allow me to heal and continue with clarity on my chosen path. Only then would I find a new framework of meaning with which to understand my witnessing of trauma — the concept I came to call trauma stewardship. And only then would I become truly accountable to those I serve, to the larger movements of which I am a part, and to myself.

Seung Sa, the founder of the Kwan Um School of Zen, once said, "The Great Way is easy; all you have to do is let go of all your ideas, opinions, and preferences." And so I began slowing down enough to truly reconnect with myself. I learned how to be honest about how I was actually doing moment by moment. I put myself literally at the feet of a great many teachers, medicine people, healers, brilliant minds, and loved ones. I asked for help. I began to reengage with my environment and the wilderness around my home and to learn all I could from the mountains and the rivers and the lakes and the oceans. I began a daily practice that has allowed me to be present for my life

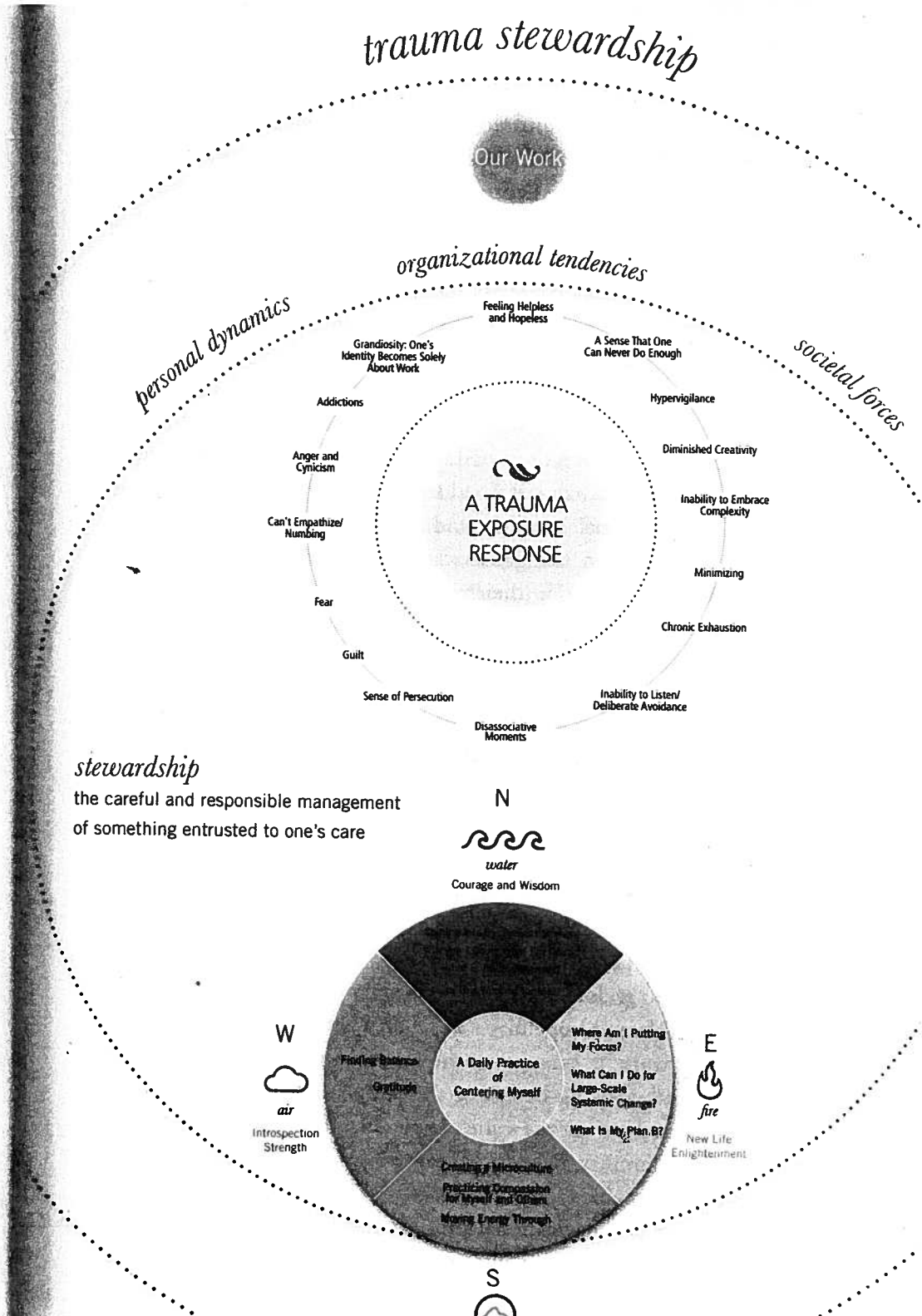
and my work in a way that keeps me well and allows me to work with integrity and to the best of my ability.

Ultimately, these efforts led to internal shifts which enabled me to recognize the ego that for years had motivated me to keep on keeping on in my work long after I had stopped being truly available to my clients or myself. Instead of following my ego, I began to choose a humble openness to learning from all living beings and larger forces about being in service to the world. Over the years of this journey, I came to a deep understanding of how our exposure to the suffering of others takes a toll on us personally and professionally. The depth, scope, and causes are different for everyone, but the fact that we are impacted by the suffering of others — that we have a “trauma exposure response” — is universal.

Although the phenomenon is profound and widespread, trauma exposure response remains a subject that is only slowly coming to the forefront as a larger social issue, as opposed to an individual struggle. First recognized a decade ago in family members of Holocaust survivors and spouses of war veterans, trauma exposure has only recently attracted broad attention from researchers, who are now working to assess the broader societal implications. To cite just one example: According to a March 2007 *Newsweek* article, a U.S. Army internal advisory report on health care for troops in Iraq in 2006 indicated that 33% of behavioral-health personnel, 45% of primary-care specialists, and 27% of chaplains described feeling high or very high levels of “provider fatigue.” The article concluded with this blunt appraisal: “Now homecoming vets have to deal with one more kind of collateral damage: traumatized caregivers.”

Pioneering researchers have given our experience of being impacted by others’ pain a number of names. Charles Figley has used the terms “compassion fatigue” and “secondary traumatic stress disorder.” Laurie Anne Pearlman, Karen W. Saakvitne, and I.L. McCann have referred to the process as “vicarious traumatization.” Jon Conte uses the words “empathic strain.” Still others call it “secondary trauma.”

In this book we will include this trauma exposure response under a larger term: “trauma stewardship.” As I see it, trauma stewardship



how we are impacted by our work, and how we subsequently make sense of and learn from our experiences. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, stewardship is defined as “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care.” Stewardship, the dictionary adds, may mean taking care “in a way that takes full and balanced account of the interests of society, future generations, and other species, as well as of private needs, and accepts significant answerability to society.”

By talking about trauma in terms of stewardship, we remember that we are being entrusted with people’s stories and their very lives. We understand that this is an incredible honor as well as a tremendous responsibility. We know that as good stewards, we get to create a space for and honor others’ hardship and suffering while not assuming their pain as our own. We get to care for them to the best of our ability while not co-opting their paths as our paths. We are required to develop and maintain a long-term strategy for ourselves such that we can remain whole and helpful to others even amidst their greatest challenges. To participate in trauma stewardship is to continuously remember the privilege and sacredness of being called to help another sentient being; it means maintaining our highest ethics, integrity, and responsibility every step of the way. In this book, I will attempt to provide readers with a meaningful guide to becoming a good trauma steward.

The early American author, naturalist, and philosopher Henry Thoreau was said to have been torn by two powerful desires: “to enjoy the world and to set the world straight.” This book is written for anyone who is doing work with an intention to make the world more sustainable and hopeful — all in all, a better place — and who, through this work, is exposed to the hardship, pain, crisis, trauma, or suffering of other living beings or the planet. This book is for those who notice they are not the same people they once were, or are being told by their families, friends, colleagues, or pets that something is different about them.

This book is a navigational tool for remembering that we have choices at every step of our lives; we are choosing our own path. We can make a difference without suffering; we can do meaningful work in a way that works for us *and* for those we serve. We can enjoy the

world *and* set it straight. Taking care of ourselves while taking care of others allows us to contribute to our societies with such impact that we will leave a legacy informed by our deepest wisdom and greatest gifts instead of burdened with our struggles and despair.

As the author of this book, I don’t believe that I am actually bringing anyone new information. I’m simply offering reminders of the lore that people from different walks of life, cultural traditions, and spiritual practices have known for millennia. There is a Native American teaching that babies come into the world knowing all they will need for their entire lifetimes — but the challenges of living in our strained, confusing world make them forget their innate wisdom, and ultimately they spend their lives trying to remember what they once knew. (Some say this is the reason the elderly and very young children so often have a magical connection: one is on the cusp of going where the other just came from.) This book aims to guide you, the reader, in navigating a way home to yourself. It has been written in the absolute belief that all of the wisdom you are about to encounter is known to you already. This text is simply a way to help you remember.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### The Fifth Direction — A Daily Practice of Centering Ourselves

There are only so many ways to commit suicide when you're 13 years old. Or so I thought. I've never been the most creative person but what I lacked in innovative thinking, I made up for with time. I had so much time to think about how to end my life. It was the only way I could fall asleep at night during what turned out to be the last year of my mom's life. Each night I'd go from *She can't die. She won't die. There's no way she'll die. Please live. Please live. Please live to If she does die, I cannot live. How will I kill myself?* Daily, that was how I centered myself. Every night, that was how I fell asleep. In terms of preventing this catastrophe, it seemed only two things were possible. Either I would find the cure for cancer, or God would appear and intervene. While I would have done anything to cure cancer, my bets were on God appearing. I knew that others died of cancer. But not my mom. She was my whole world. Your whole world can't just end one day, can it?

Three years from when she'd been diagnosed with cancer, and two years, nine months, from when they said she'd most likely die, she did die. And my world, as I knew it, ended. Although I did not commit suicide, something bleak and incredibly life altering did happen. I lost all the trust and faith I had. Because the truth was, no matter how sick my mother had gotten, I had clung to my belief that the worst would not happen. I continued to trust. I stayed strong in my faith.

When she died, my trust and faith disappeared and I began to live exclusively in my head. My heart was uninhabitable, so I found refuge in my mind. I was endlessly vigilant. I focused my energy on controlling my surroundings. I managed my new reality by trying to

will into existence a way to move through each day. I was entirely uncentered. For anyone who can relate to this, you know that substituting an external architecture for an internal sense of structure can be bulletproof for a time. But only for a time.

Nineteen years later, I would have an opportunity to realize that my faith and trust were not gone entirely, only buried — deep, deep down. Once again I found myself fervently repeating, *Please live. Please live. Please live.* This time I was pleading with my firstborn child, who was being pried from my womb by three sets of doctors' hands. The labor had been 36 hours long. Having had the honor of watching several friends give birth by that point, I knew, intellectually, that anything can happen during labor and delivery. But that didn't count for much in the face of that willful part of my being that had flourished since my mom's death. It kept insisting that, *of all things*, I could deliver a baby on my own. This is perhaps one of women's most ancient beliefs, and for me it was totally unconscious, but it was deeply held nonetheless. The hospital assistance was a nice touch, I thought, but there was no way I was going to be someone who actually needed it.

So on that night, sprawled under impossibly bright lights, numb from my chest down, listening as they cut me open, hearing them agree that "this baby is nowhere *near* coming out," knowing they were trying to pull my child out of me, I had an epiphany. I could only survive this through faith and trust. *Faith and trust.* Faith and trust, where was I going to find them? For the last 19 years, I'd found all comfort by seeking things outside of myself. By trying to control things. Control and faith don't coexist well together and control was not going to work here. I could not move. Even my tears were being wiped away by someone else — a saintly anesthesiologist. I couldn't micromanage these people, I knew nothing about their craft. I could not think clearly, and what was there to think about? There was only one contribution I could make to this situation, and that was to keep my own heart beating. And so I went deep inside.

I focused on my breathing and going deeper, breathing and going deeper, until I arrived at some unfathomable place that contained what had been locked away for almost two decades: my sense that there was indeed something larger in which I might feel faith and



trust. In those moments, which seemed to last an eternity, I remembered what it felt like to be centered. I was humbled; if my life and my baby's life were to be saved, it would be by others, most of whom I didn't know. I felt grateful; their voices sounded as if it would all be okay. I kept breathing. I had not been centered in humility, gratitude, and faith for a long, long time. I had been living in my head, and my heart had been asleep.

While my mother's death and my baby's birth were not experiences that lasted indefinitely, their legacy has. In those moments of becoming a mother, I was brought to my knees and, on some level, I have never gotten up. I can still micromanage and be controlling and live in fear with the best of them, and yet I was able to find a center again, something I thought I had lost with my mom. For me being centered has come to mean being able to call up that place of humility, gratitude, and trust innumerable times each day. It is what guides any mindfulness I'm able to muster, and it's where I return when I am most challenged.



*"We're encouraging people to become involved in their own rescue."*

And this brings us, finally, to the fifth direction. The four directions ultimately lead to the fifth. This direction leads us inside to our core, where we center ourselves, and then, gracefully, leads us back out, renewed in a way that allows us to engage with the outside world at our best. The frequency with which we choose to come home to ourselves and then go out again will vary for everyone. It is my hope that the four directions will aid you in having more and more and more access to the fifth direction — your most awakened self. Many of us are familiar with living in our heads, depending on our intellect, and developing enough external architecture to function and get by. But if we are to truly care for ourselves in a sustainable way, let alone anyone else — if we are to *thrive* — then something greater is required of us. We must discover an awareness of what allows us to live, moment by moment, from a centered place, from an awakened heart.

Throughout history, sages have said that the means to find our truths are already in our possession. We are all capable of creating a daily practice to center ourselves. Eventually, this may allow us to reconnect with the parts of ourselves that feel wise, resourceful, and even divine. But on any given morning, it will help us to create an intention for our day ahead. A practice may occupy two minutes or two hours, but the hope is that this is something to which you can commit. Your practice will change over time, but what is important is that you prioritize this communion with yourself enough that you come home to yourself daily, if not several times a day. A doctor in a First Nations health services clinic echoed what many of us might say as we describe our attempts to make regular space for ourselves. "I've done yoga for years. I mean, I haven't done it for a long time. Well, I do it in my head."

As a boy, Deepak Chopra watched the practitioners who regularly rose before dawn to gather for daily meditations. In *The Book of Secrets*, he explains that by greeting the sun upon its arrival, the meditators believed they could influence the day. Every morning, they expressed an intention for meeting their purpose that day. For us, too, creating an intention is like allowing sunlight to flood the next few steps in front of us. We don't know where we will end up, and we certainly don't know how we will get there, but by creating a deliberate intention about what we want for our next hour, next

meeting, next interaction, or next day, we are participating in a powerful process of centering ourselves.

The possibilities for practice are nearly infinite. But whether we root ourselves in meditation, prayer, biking, dancing, or singing, a daily practice gives us a chance to create a truly sustainable life for ourselves. Our capacity to help reform our organizations, our communities, our movements, and ourselves is fundamentally altered when we initiate each step from an intentional place within. American Catholic peace activist James Forest said, "What American peace activists might learn from their Vietnamese counterparts is that, until there is a more meditative dimension in the peace movement, our perception of reality (and thus our ability to help occasion understanding and transformation) will be terribly crippled. Whatever our religious or nonreligious background and vocabulary may be, we will be overlooking something as essential to our lives and work as breath itself."

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**TRY THIS**

1. When your day begins, close your eyes, take several deep breaths, and ask yourself, "What is my intention today?" If you have small children or loud chickens demanding your attention before you are conscious, ask yourself this while feeding your children or gathering the day's eggs, but create an intention for the day.
  
2. At the end of your day, before sleep overtakes you, ask yourself, "What can I put down? What am I ready to be done with? What don't I need to carry with me for another day?" Put it down, and don't pick it up again the next day.
  
3. Designate a day of rest. Whether you identify it as Shabbat or the Sabbath or simply a day off, designate a weekly day of non-obligation for yourself. Like the holy days of religion, this will serve to remind us that if we are truly to reconnect with ourselves, work and creation must stop. Our day of rest will also remind us that who we are as individuals and as members of society is about our deepest essence and not about what we produce during the week. In addition to your day of rest, allot some time for yourself each day where you don't obligate yourself to anything, but instead give yourself total freedom to delight in one of your favorite states of being. Be present with this for however long you are able. Notice how you feel when you free yourself from obligation and allow yourself to be centered within.

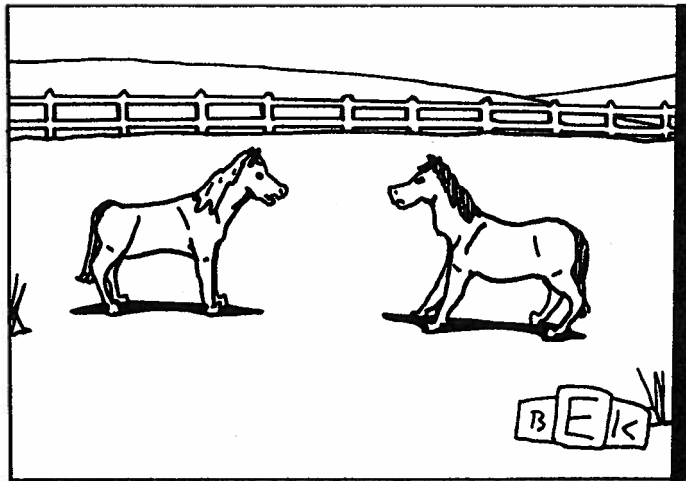


## CONCLUSION

### Closing Intention

"Don't ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

Howard Thurman  
Civil rights leader



"Really, only you can tell yourself to giddyup."

At certain times of year in the Pacific Northwest, there are so many spider webs outside in the early morning that it's hard to move without colliding with one of these glorious creations. I try to take my moments of sudden stopping as a reminder of Chief Sealth's insight that we are all a part of a much larger web of life. As we prepare to depart on our separate yet connected journeys of trauma

stewardship, it helps to remember that this web of life, as it extends throughout the world, is vast, intricate, and complicated in ways we may not understand.

Because the web of life is too complex for any human being to know completely, people often lose sight of the fact that there *is* a whole. But there is. And when we look at the spider's creation, it is clear that even the slenderest strand makes a difference to the **strength** and sustainability of the entire miraculous structure. The same is **true** for each and every one of us. It *matters* that we try to do **no harm**. It *matters* that we try to keep our energy moving and **healthy**. It *matters* that we appreciate life's strength and delicacy. It *matters* that we awaken to the web's presence and then interact with it **in an intentional and deliberate way**. Otherwise, we will walk **right through** our own web without ever seeing its beauty, the way it reflects **the** sunlight or collects the morning dew.

As we continue on our journeys, may our lives be informed **by** our deepening awareness of our role in life's web. May we **care well** for ourselves, and may we care well for others. May we remember **that** the courage on this path lies in the way we take each and every **step**. "If one is to do good, it must be done in the minute particulars," said the English poet and artist William Blake. May we remember **that** trauma stewardship requires us to honor others in a way that is **possible** only if we have made a commitment to our own path of **wellness**. May we discover peace amid the strife, joy amid the suffering, and trust amid the groundlessness that is, ultimately, life's course.