

Write to the Heart of Motherhood
connecting to our true voice in the middle of our messy lives

Week 6. THEME AND GUIDANCE



INTIMACY WITH ALL THINGS

Hello, and welcome to our final week together in this course!

It is such a profound honor to be in this practice with you, enacting the beautiful gesture of turning and tuning to our own creative spirit — in all the mundane, ordinary moments of just sitting down at the desk. In the hard days when we are so tired it hurts. In the glorious hours of flowing, illuminated, energized expression. In the wisps of just thinking, “Oh, yes, my voice... no time now, but I remember you! I remember what you feel like. I remember the circle of women that care about hearing you. And I will come back to you when I can...” In the weaving together and meandering away and weaving together again.

It’s an honor to be in this practice with you, in which we value dropping down into the next level of connection and intimacy with ourselves and each other as a life-giving dimension of our motherhood, and of simply being alive. Thank you for your gumption, and your verve, and your unique ways of showing up to write — both to and from this open, interconnected Heart of Motherhood.

Before we move forward, let's briefly look back. I want to offer a condensed overview of where we've been, invite you to investigate what's been most valuable, and feel into where we intend to go from here. How can we integrate our own most meaningful threads from the venture of the past five weeks, and forge a way forward and beyond, in intimacy with our motherhood, our creativity and, ultimately, our whole lives?

Perhaps because I am a kinesthetic learner — I learn by doing — it feels most relevant to me to offer a kind of physical or subtle gesture at the heart of each of our past weeks' themes — a distilled instruction for activating the essence of that teaching. I hope this is helpful to you!

So, here is an overview of where we have been together:

- In Week One we started by stopping; the theme was START HERE, WHOLEHEARTED. This instruction can always serve to refresh our attention, in any given moment — like pressing control + alt + delete on your computer. The heart of the teaching is to pause our knee-jerk pathways of perception and behavior, look around at the nuances of the actual moment, and open our senses and fresh attention to the inherently poetic nature of reality. So, a distilled gesture would be: PAUSE + TURN THE DIAL TO PERCEIVE THE POETIC. Or, even more distilled: PAUSE + ATTUNE
- 2) In Week Two we listened in order to give voice; the theme was LISTENING and VOICING. This is a critical moment of organizing our body, mind, and breath to write from the heart rather than from ego, from curiosity and aliveness rather than from fear — collecting and heightening our concentration and remembering our deepest reasons for writing. We are writing to give voice to truth through our unique configuration of self (not to try to prove something or get a reward) and we listen wholeheartedly and vigorously for what that truth wants to say right now. Distilled gesture: BODY, MIND, and BREATH JOIN TOGETHER + LISTEN TO WHAT HEART WANTS TO SAY. Or, simply: CONCENTRATE + LISTEN TO HEART

- 3) In Week Three we explored plunging into our solitude in writing, and reaching out into connection and community with others; the theme was PRIVACY and COMPANY. We highlighted the importance of Concentration, Courage, and Play in engaging both domains, of Listening, Imagination, and Vision especially when we are working alone in our writing, and Self-knowledge, Conviction, and Presence-beyond-ego when we engage in connecting with others around writing. Distilled gesture: TURN INWARD and OPEN EYES + STEP OUTWARD with STRENGTH and EASE. Or, even more simply: VISION IN, RESILIENCE OUT

- 4) In Week Four, when our theme was PLAYING and WORKING we explored some key elements of the nature of play: suspension of normal rules and boundaries, creation of new worlds or games, wholehearted participation with aliveness, activity which absorbs us and becomes its own reward (autotelic), exploration of primordial energies, and engagement of the conversational, oscillatory movement between two sides of paradox or polarity. We looked at some reframes on ordinary associations with working, such as “joyful exertion” or giving ourselves devotionally (linking to the root “disciple” in discipline). Perhaps most importantly, we asked of ourselves, “What game am I playing right now?” and considered the possibility that Play has no opposite — that the spirit of play can be remembered and engaged in any and all conditions. Distilled gesture: WHAT GAME AM I PLAYING RIGHT NOW? Or, simply: PLAY!

- 5) Finally, last week, in Week Five, we turned our attention to the ways that creation is intimate with destruction; our theme was CREATING and DISMANTLING. We asked what parts of ourselves have been dismantled as we’ve been recreated and reborn as mothers, as well as what mindsets and behaviors must be dissolved in order to powerfully connect to our own creative spirit. We also looked at how removing and trimming excess material in our writing is itself a creative act, one that requires as much concentration and heart as the language generating part of the process. Distilled gesture: LET GO + RECEIVE

Now, carrying the essential gestures of the past five weeks in our hearts, available to activate whenever we like, I want to offer INTIMACY as a pathway/ experience for moving forward beyond this course. The great Zen Master Dogen, who founded the Soto school in 13th century Japan, defined enlightenment as “intimacy with all things.” I’ve loved this since the moment I heard it. It makes sense in my bones. It feels like remembering something I was born knowing, but forgot. *What is intimacy?* How does that word make you feel? Like *love*, there are so very many flavors of *intimacy*, and in a moment we’ll explore some ways of framing and eliciting this experience.

But first — why? Why engage this topic of intimacy as our pathway to transition from this course to our continued practice as mother-artists or mother-writers? I recently did a lecture in my Yoga 1 class at Naropa University about the Yamas and Niyamas, the ethical principles in Patanjali’s system of the 8 Limbs of Yoga. I invited my students to get quiet and cultivate a meditative awareness, and then consider in their life anyone or anything that they had banished from their hearts. Perhaps there was a sound and just cause for creating space, distance, or a boundary with this someone or something. Great. We all need healthy boundaries and autonomy, and both can be signs of development. But what about at the level of your heart — I asked them to consider. What is the impact of keeping “others” banished from our own heart space? Is there any sensation of pain or exhaustion within your own being from holding that gesture of separation — at the level of heart? Finally, I asked them if it might be possible to maintain whatever healthy space or boundaries at the interpersonal, social level, but to invite this someone or something back home to the heart.

In sharing afterward, we found that this gesture of inclusion at the level of heart was incredibly relieving, easy, and natural for some of them, and even brought a rush of energy for not having to hold a subtle stance of separation inside. But for some of them, it felt tricky and confusing to choose to keep distance from someone on the outside, in life, and yet still allow them into their heart. This gesture of intimacy or union with all our relations, at the level of heart, regardless of what actions are most skillful and just on the outside, is the essence of the ethical practices in yoga, as well as in many other wisdom traditions, or simply living intuitively as a good, whole

person. The ethical practices both spring from, and lead to, the realization of our interconnection with all that is.

So — that’s why I’ve chosen this theme for our final week. Not as an ethical practice, per se, but as an invitation to bring it all home to the heart, to invite our whole selves in, to invite our whole experience in, to invite everything we think is bad or ugly or “out there” home, finally, in the space of the heart. Not to collapse necessary distinctions on the outside, in our relative world, but to soften our hearts to unfurling into their true shape and size, which I believe and experience to be enormous — boundless — even, ultimately, infinite. This is where our true resilience is sourced — that our hearts are massive, and radically inclusive, even as we do what we need to do in the world and in relationship to maintain and express intrapersonal and interpersonal integrity. I choose this theme because I believe our hearts yearn for this, to melt open, to cradle it all, to release the exhausting clench or holding of a wall, and to give up. To surrender. To allow. To love it all, even what we hate. To be intimate with all things. For me, this brings relief, new energy, and a holy ache and tenderness in relation to all that is in form and beyond form. This gesture of opening my heart to intimacy with it all also brings a paradoxical strength and wisdom in discernment about where I do need to fight, push back, or let my anger flare to clarify what is most important to me in the world. I hope you feel the difference between what I am talking about and some kind of squishy, spineless spiritually bypassing perspective. Finally, I find that when I soften and allow intimacy with all things in my own heart, I also discover that I am invited to an experience of being more “on the inside” of reality, of belonging to this life-and-death mystery from the inside out. Brother David Steindl-Rast, Benedictine monk and elder, says, “Mysticism is the experience of infinite belonging.”

Sometimes this is ordinary, like just feeling at home in my own skin or relaxed in conversation with a stranger. Sometimes it includes dissonance and isolation, but an “ok-ness” with the dissonance and isolation, and sometimes it includes a more extraordinary kind of intimacy — an intimacy AS the moment, almost as if I’ve dissolved into a seamless whole. I like all the flavors of intimacy — I think they’re all interesting in their own way. What does intimacy mean to you,

feel like to you? Is there a favorite flavor, or a flavor you long for? What is the opposite of intimacy, and what's that like, in your experience?

For our purposes here in Week Six of our course, the invitation is to allow everything to come home in the space of your heart. If there is resistance to bring it all home in the heart, the invitation is to intimacy with that very resistance — it's welcome too. Intimacy with all the sensations that might come up toward anyone we might believe deserves to be banished forever from our hearts. "Intimacy with all things," even the refusal to be intimate with all things. Even not knowing where the hell to even begin to cultivate intimacy with anything. Allowing that, too.

This invitation is a life path, for me — in everything from writing to mothering to making love to grocery shopping. Intimacy with whatever is here right now. Not in an over-dramatic, saccharine way, but in a natural, even playful way. And again, there are an array of flavors of intimacy for each of us to taste: sometimes for me it feels like curiosity about something enigmatic or far away, sometimes intimacy feels like being very close to something or someone, and even exchanging energies or feelings back and forth, and sometimes intimacy feels like actual union or oneness. There are different tones of contact, different degrees of closeness. But always, there is the renewing of the invitation to all things to come home in the heart. And the forgetting of the invitation, and the renewing again — haha!

After living with Dogen Zenji's definition of enlightenment as a riddle or path for the past few years, I've realized a personal recipe for catalyzing intimacy in my own experience. As with most of our explorations in this course, it involves playing within a polarity or paradox. I find that there are two sides of a spectrum I can engage and filter reality through, and then with them both activated, I almost reliably melt open into intimacy with the moment. Ingredient one is another teaching from Dogen Zenji, in which he instructs meditators to practice with a "non-gaining mind." This non-gaining mind lays down expectations for things to get better, for the self to get more, or for anything at all to change in order to simply arrive right here. Yes. Such a relief.

But this perspective alone can nullify or numb into a kind of inertia, I find, without including its opposite: Desire. So, yes, non-gaining mind. AND – desire, clarified. The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, gave instruction to “have few desires, but have great ones.” And a Rabbi my husband is friends with, taught him that one definition of enlightenment in Kabbalah, the mystical branch of Judaism, is “the clarification of desire.” In my experience, desire is the single most powerful force in my being — and peeling back the layers over and over on my more superficial desires allows me to participate with a core pulse in my soul, to be guided by a mysterious fire that gives innate and utter satisfaction. To follow any old desire feels risky and immature. But to explore what are the deepest desires in my being, and then give my life energy to those currents feels clarifying, potent, and deeply meaningful.

So those are my personal keyholes to intimacy: cultivating non-gaining mind, and then arousing the deep desires in my being. Sometimes, funnily enough, they give birth to one another, as so many opposites do: If I put down any hope for gaining more, in any sense of those words, I fall into a simple presence with reality as it is, which allows my body to relax enough to actually feel the deep currents of desire and yearning — to live as love, to create love and artifacts of love — AND, if I allow the desire and yearning to really surge and move me and find full expression, they move in an arc of manifestation that completes itself cyclically, falling into states of natural rest, organically birthing an experience of non-gaining mind. And they flow into and out of each other — empty of desire, full of desire — if I let them have their natural course through me. Always, always, if these two perspectives or experiences (non-gaining mind and clarified desire) are engaged, intimacy is a by-product. Or, perhaps a better way of saying it is, intimacy is revealed as a more original, essential, or true experience of reality. Again, this is intimacy at the level of heart, existing even in the face of physical distance or healthy interpersonal boundaries.

What does this have to do with writing? Everything. Our intimacy with each moment of existence is inseparable with the life force in our writing, which others feel and are moved by, as well as our own satisfaction in our experience of writing. I think we’re just more nourished by our writing when it’s an expression of intimate wholeness and truth, rather than something

we're trying to manufacture. We could force a whole fancy paragraph from a state of inner division or isolation, and it would be lifeless compared to simply writing "I am here," and feeling intimate with those words, feeling them emerge or spring directly from the moment.

And, what does this have to do with mothering? Again — everything. Although it's obviously healthy to not hold our role as mother *too* heavily or solidly, and perhaps even lay it down to rest in certain moments when our children have other trusted care, we are mothers now till the end of this life. What more intimate role is there? What role demands more closeness and presence — both in being able to take the perspective of our child(ren), whether young or grown, in order to empathize with them, as well as in being able to hold and metabolize the full range of feeling states induced by the tremendous responsibility, love, terror, frustration and wonder of having given physical passage to another being, and now holding them in our heart's gaze, however close in or far off they are, till death do us part. The role of mother trains and demands intimacy with being human to such a degree that the words feel almost interchangeable to me. Mothers are Jedis of intimacy — with being alive, being in love, and with the vulnerability of having our hearts walk around outside us as our children.

I want to share with you a poem I wrote four years ago, a very simple poem that poured out of me one day while I was with baby Lundin watching the rain. I invite you to get quiet and still, connect with your breath for a couple cycles, and again invite your heart to soften its boundaries into intimacy with yourself and the world, the ordinary and extraordinary, the seen and the unseen around and within you. Pause for a few moments of quiet and then simply listen and receive:

MEDITATION ON MOTHERHOOD

Crying breasts.

Crying baby.

Crying sky.

Milk,
tears,
rain

all moisten
and bring forth
what's coming

into being.
All we have to do
is the very next thing.

And now, here is an excerpt from another very different poem, a poem which meanders into what I experience as a vivid, poetic intimacy with reality — not a solid, unchanging intimacy, but a fluid, nuanced attentiveness and affection which hugs the contours of the moment and encounters a raw beauty in the unfolding layers of this life. Here is the second half of this poem:

I KNOW MY DOG IS DREAMING

– Alfred K. LaMotte

I once thought I was a Taoist. I once thought I was a Christian.

Now I know that my religion is what comes from honeysuckle
and alfalfa, the gold

I drip on stone-cut buckwheat groats. My religion is
the syncretism of raspberries, walnuts, and cream.

My religion is the way children and their grandparents

behave around food,

when their parents escape to the kitchen to argue in secret
desperation about the cost of staying alive.

My religion is your arms around me, mine around you,
and the willingness to remain like this and do nothing

while our hearts murmur to each other about how
hard and simple it is to ask for love.

Lovely — thanks for your attention to these poems as spaces for intimate exchange. I'll leave
you with their aftertaste as well as a little distilled summary of the voyage we've charted
together these weeks, so the essential gestures are super handy for your reference.

If you ever feel adrift from your own creative spirit, you can always:

1. PAUSE + ATTUNE
2. CONCENTRATE + LISTEN TO HEART
3. VISION IN, RESILIENCE OUT
4. PLAY!
5. LET GO + RECEIVE
6. INVITE NON-GAINING MIND + DESIRE, CLARIFIED

I will be here, remembering and forgetting the pathways to and from this sacred heart we share, intimate with all the beautiful and difficult textures of mothering, creating and living life. I will think of you all with great respect and love, and find you when I write to and from the Heart of Motherhood. May we all be fortified by our own innate wisdom yearning to speak through us, by giving it life through language, and by hearing that wisdom spoken back to affirm and confirm us through our new web of friendships here. All my Love to you as you adventure forth.