

KAITLIN B. CURTICE

Foreword by Simran Jeet Singh

EVERYTHING



IS A STORY

RECLAIMING THE POWER OF STORIES
TO HEAL AND SHAPE OUR LIVES

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KAITLIN B. CURTICE



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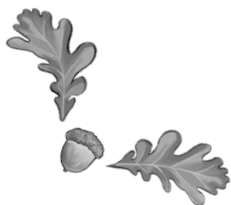
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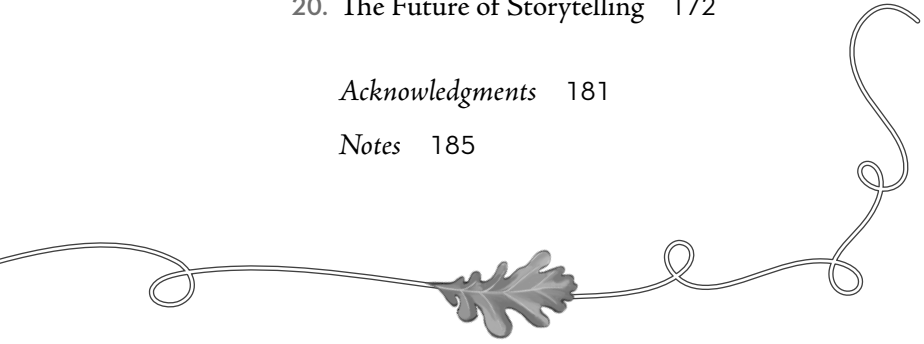
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FOREWORD

Simran Jeet Singh

Not so long ago, and in a land not so far away, I heard leaders discussing religion, racism, and justice. It was a beautiful conversation: gentle yet powerful, compassionate yet difficult.

At the end of it, a woman named Kaitlin Curtice offered this wisdom: “Stay in the spiritual fire. Let it cook you.”

Kaitlin attributed this aphorism to Rumi. She proceeded to explain what it meant to her and how it might serve all of us. Patience. Vulnerability. Intention. Maturation. I loved her message and found it prescient, especially given what so many in the room were struggling with, including me. Personal growth and spiritual practice are not easy. They’re not for the faint of heart. It’s so easy to give in, especially when the going gets rough—and it’s gotten pretty rough the past few years, hasn’t it?

Since hearing Kaitlin speak, when overwhelmed by the struggles of our world, I’ve found myself returning to her words: “Stay in the spiritual fire. Let it cook you.” It’s Rumi’s teaching, and it’s Kaitlin’s too. I’ve made it my own, and now it’s yours as well.

I've learned over the years that this is what friendship is all about. These small insights that serve us in unexpected ways, points of light that connect us with one another. The more we make these connections, the more luminous our world becomes.

Kaitlin's friendship has brought brilliance into my life, and this book on storytelling comes in that same spirit. Stories are friendships, taking us beyond ourselves and connecting us with one another. They transport us to new worlds and contexts, invoking awe and wonder, familiarity and understanding, care and empathy. As a child, I loved nothing more than encountering characters I'd never met before and developing a fondness for them. I'd root for them to prosper, with no regard for how their success might impact me. Stories made me more selfless and more compassionate. Now, I have children of my own, and I see the same in them. Stories absorb my girls for hours on end, shaping their consciousness, their worldviews, their values.

I see the power of stories in my daughters' lives, and I've studied the role stories have played in forming communities. This is why I so deeply appreciate the perspective that Kaitlin offers in this book. Stories are tools that can be leveraged for a variety of purposes, for good and for bad, to unite or to divide. It's up to us to decide what we want to do with them.

In *Everything, Everything*, Jamaican American writer Nicola Yoon lifts up the transformative potential of storytelling: "Stories help shape the way we see ourselves in the world. They help tell us who we can be and what we can achieve."¹ I see truth in her words—that because stories inform our beliefs, they have the power to change our lives and the world around us.

I also see something more. Stories don't just shape us. We also shape our stories. Realizing this has been empowering for me, particularly in a context where it often feels like our cultural narratives are being produced and circulated without our input. They're divisive and inhuman and harmful. It's exciting to realize

that we have some agency, that we have a role to play. The hard part, as with so many things, is knowing where to begin.

That is the promise of this book. *Everything Is a Story* is not simply an argument for why storytelling matters (though it offers that too). It's a guide for learning how to engage a story, with purpose and urgency and care. And like any skilled teacher, this book models for us precisely what it describes. It's a story about a story, infused with Kaitlin's wisdom and generosity.



You think you write the stories
until you realize that they have
written themselves, entire
beings with entire lives you've
yet to even imagine.

They've gone on ahead
to encounter the world,
to live in it, experience it,
making their way like all of us.

And sooner or later,
those stories find their way
back to us again,
reminding us, maybe, of
who we were all along,

that we also began as a story,
grew up and grew out into the world,
only to return home to ourselves
to write our own life as we always
hoped it would be.



AS WE BEGIN

Story is the biggest, most expansive subject I could possibly write on. History is written with stories, societies rise and fall to stories, oppression is born in stories, we fall in love with stories, revolutions and movements begin with stories. *It's all about the stories.*

Stories are as magical as they are mundane; they make up the very essence of who we are as human beings. One of the things I struggle with most as a writer is this question: Am I simply writing about the same thing over and over again, using different metaphors and ideas to get the same concept across?

Perhaps. But, when I step back, that is also how stories work. Throughout time, we are repackaging many of the same stories: redemption, spirituality, power, grief and pain, ecstasy, and, yes, the magic and the mundane of humanity. Look at modern-day fantasy war stories and see Tolkien's influence stitched throughout, or how Tirzah Price brilliantly crafted murder mysteries using Jane Austen novels as a starting point, or how we retell fairy tales and myths again and again so that they can teach us something about ourselves that we may have forgotten.

This is a book of stories, but it's also more than that. This book is a way for us to ask questions *of stories* and to wonder how we use stories to harm or heal ourselves, one another, and this earth. This book is a chance for us to examine how storytelling has been a revolutionary tool for love and a weapon used for power and submission throughout the centuries.

Instead of covering all there is to say about stories, I want us to understand how stories happen. I want us to follow the life cycle of a story, from birth to maturity. I want us to understand that stories are alive, just as we are, that they are a part of us, just as we are a part of them.

This book will follow the life cycle of a story—following the life of an oak tree—which will give us space to unpack different seasons of life: seed (birth of a story), sprout (adolescence of a story), sapling (adulthood of a story), and mature tree (elderhood of a story). I conclude with a dropping seeds section (asking what the future of storytelling means for us).

In each part, each life season, we can ask what a story is doing and how the story is growing. Again, stories are alive, so we get the opportunity to ask, with great care and attention, what it means to tell a story, to be part of a story's growth.

Why the oak tree? The mighty oak is an important symbol in cultures all over the world. In Scandinavian and Celtic cultures, the acorn is a symbol of growth and power, life and fertility. It is a staple food for Indigenous peoples in the Sierra Nevada foothills and mountains, and around the globe. Acorns and oak trees are universal, tying humans to one another throughout history. The acorn is also a personal favorite relative of mine, and I can't wait for you to learn more about them.

I want to pause here to point out that throughout this book, stories will be referred to as *they/them*. Much like Mother Earth and the creatures around us, stories too are alive, moving and breathing, shaping the world that they continually encounter. Let's remember that.

Experiencing the world through words and ideas is how I, as a poet-storyteller, move and breathe, so it is my honor to try to grasp the idea and power of a story through their life and how that life actually affects human history. I'll be sharing bits and pieces of my personal stories with you; even in those personal stories, I hope to shed light on how stories shape us on an individual and collective level.

This is not a book about craft and how to write a story, though I hope that in examining the power of stories, we might ask how the stories we tell about ourselves and one another came to be. The complexity of these questions brings me to the way I've divided this book—by life seasons, by life cycles of a story, because we are, each and every one of us, encountering stories at different phases of our own lives.

A few years ago, I watched a movie with my oldest kid, and there was a moment when the two main characters got in a huge fight, the most complex, climactic moment of the movie, when things got really bad before they got better. These two characters had to fight, had to work through the most difficult stuff in order to solve the problem and get to some sort of resolution.

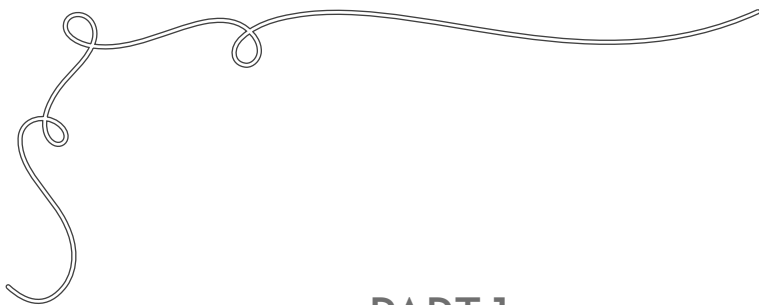
My child was so upset by this moment that he didn't want to finish watching the movie, but I reminded him that we *need* the conflict to get to the resolution. I told him to hold on, to wait and see. Believe me when I say, as someone who grew up constantly trying to avoid conflict, that I don't enjoy it either. I wish we could just work our way through things with tenderness in our eyes and calmness in our words, but that's not often the way things work when stories push against one another and challenge everything we hold dear.

That's why I'm writing a book about stories—because I'm a storyteller and *we are the stories we tell*. We are in a story right now, asking what comes next, grasping for a solution to the turmoil. I believe this world is in a deep, conflictual, prophetic moment, and we are asking who we are in a lot of ways, reckoning with the

stories we've told, the stories we hold, and the stories we hope to pass along.

In the midst of the turmoil, I believe we can become partners to the stories that are told, that we can celebrate our role as humans who get to be part of the story. Where there are stories of hate, war, genocide, and pain, there are also stories of love, peace, belonging, and joy. I believe we can embrace the kinds of stories that propel us toward care for ourselves, one another, and Mother Earth.

May we journey together, with one another, with the stories we tell and the stories that tell us who we are, toward love, kinship, and care in this world.



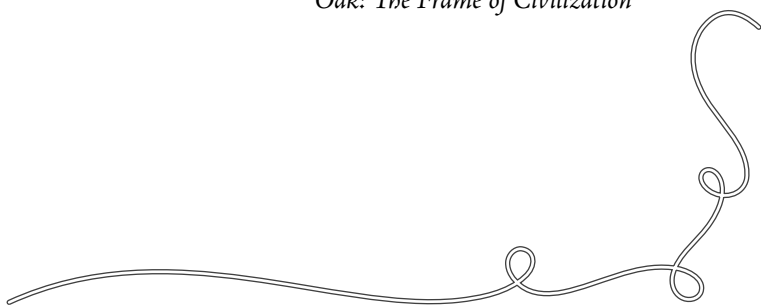
PART 1

SEED



Before and beyond all struggle, what every human seeks is the peace of such joys as lovers, parents, children, and friends experience. Nothing beyond.

—William Bryant Logan,
Oak: The Frame of Civilization





The Story Is Born

It does not matter where they began—in the heat-winded desert,
in the thick mists of a rainforest, in a quiet suburban home,
in the depths of a city, beside roaring waters, in the wild fold of a mountain.
Somewhere, somehow, Story is born.

They are given breath and life, and begin so small,
so small like an acorn.
You can hold them in your hand.
They are tiny, fragile, ready to grow into someone quite mighty, and everyone around them knows it.



1

THE ORIGINS OF STORIES

Who first told you the
story of yourself?
Who decided how
you'd be raised,
where, why, and when?

Who made you think
certain things of
that holy body,
exceptional mind,
and thoughtful heart?

Who held the power to
shape your everything?

On what day did you decide
to revisit the story?

Seed

At what time did you discover
that it was all too much
and not enough?

Where were you when you
promised to love that
body, mind, and heart again?

Who helped you find
your way home to yourself?

Who gave you pen and paper
to write the story
as it always should have been?

Tell me the story again,
and we will grieve what's been lost
and rewrite the next chapter,
and the next, and the next,
and every moment that follows,
for ourselves, for each other,
and for every story
yet to be imagined.



Birth is the beginning of life, of everything that we know and understand as humans, so it makes sense that as we begin to imagine what a story actually *is*, we liken it to an acorn, seeing it as a seed, as a newly birthed being.

Five to seven months after pollination and fertilization, an acorn falls from an oak tree. Acorns lie dormant on the ground from fall to spring, so it takes time for acorns to become who they need to be, for their lives to begin and take form.¹ So it is with a story. Some may lie dormant on the ground, waiting to grow, to become, to find out who they are one day going to be.

Just as acorns are their own beings that have agency but also need the surrounding world to thrive and grow, so it is with stories. Stories are alive, taking their own presence in the world. They are nurtured, every story that grows and becomes—even those that are detrimental to us.

If you look at a group of several acorns together, you'll notice that each is different—perhaps one cap is tipped to the side like a hat on a small head, or the body of another is elongated with a sharp point at the bottom. Like acorns, stories show up in different bodies and forms, and as we get to know stories, we consider what they are capable of.

I share the following poem with you as we begin our journey together, a poem I wrote as I reflected on a special moment, years ago, that I shared with a new friend I'd met at a spiritual retreat in the desert. I offer it to you as we consider this magical reality that we are the story—the acorn, the seed being born all at once.

A friend once told me
I was a lot like an acorn
expanding beyond its bud
with effortless potential.
If an acorn is the beginning,
so is a story, and if I am an acorn,
I, too, am waiting to be told.
So, then, are you, an acorn,
growing through your beginnings
and making your way into
new phases of fullness every day,
making your way toward
the mighty oak, the elder of all elders.
We are stories, seeds, beginnings,
the blessed essence of
what it means to be human,
growing seasonally
until we find our way back

Seed

to the holy compost pile.
We are the seeds, the stories,
the changing landscapes,
the longing and hope
of all future days.



It's not often you stumble upon a place and say to yourself, *This is one of my favorite places in the whole world*. But I did, on a chilly October day in Wisconsin.

On Ho-Chunk land, next to a small body of water called Lost Lake, I sat beneath a small but mighty oak tree, who held and sheltered me for the weekend, who became a dear friend. When I first saw the lake and heard the story of the Ho-Chunk people—that this lake was nearly lost due to colonization and rapid population growth and that it was tenderly yet ferociously cared for by the sisters at Holy Wisdom Monastery in partnership with the Ho-Chunk—I was touched beyond belief. What was nearly lost was found and restored, including the prairies rising up around the lake, tall grasses and pollinators giving protection and care to all that rests around it.

I was at the monastery for a speaking event, and that evening someone had gifted me a pouch of tobacco, which I took out to the prairie the next morning, to that same oak, and used my left hand to sprinkle the tobacco that we call our medicine while my mouth and spirit prayed. *Migwetch, Segmekwe, thank you for protecting us and caring for us*. I said good morning, *mno waben*, and gave the oak a kiss on their rough bark, thanking them for being alive, for being a friend, for being a mentor and guide, an elder, my teacher.

We think sometimes that stories are born in us humans, that we create them and sustain them, that we have the power to twist and change and even destroy them. And, yes, we do, especially in those early years of our lives as we figure out who we are, but

notice the stories told in the world around us. All those stories were ushered into the world at one point, making their presence known. Those origins matter—who was around, how their birth happened, what the environment was that bore them. For the Ho-Chunk people, practices like controlled cultural fires were part of their seasonal lives, practices to manage oak ecosystems and keep species safe and protected. But controlled fires are one practice among many lost to colonization over time. But what has been lost can be restored, and this oak tree friend I found at the Holy Wisdom Monastery taught me that resilience and stories are held in our very bodies from our very beginnings.

When I spent time with this oak tree, I remembered not just the tree's presence but also the collective presence of the Ho-Chunk people, the land and the water, all the creature kin of the area, and, yes, all the settlers who showed up along the way. I acknowledged the origins of kinship and even hardship that started well before my standing next to this oak. These origin stories can never truly be severed.

We may be storytellers, but we are always inheriting stories—from Segmekwe (Mother Earth), from the trees and the waters, the ants and the coneflowers, and, yes, of course, the oak trees.

Consider the story of your own birth. Who was there? What happened? What were the conditions of your coming into the world? We honor one another with birthday parties and gifts every year, but do we thoughtfully reflect on that moment when the world shifted a little, simply because we were in it?

The world also shifts with a story's birth, with a story's beginning.

Here's another question to consider: Is any story completely new and unique? Our birth stories as humans are unique to a point, but we are still human. Acorns fall to the ground and go on their own journey, but they are still acorns. So, what makes a story magical? I'd say it's the journey that a story takes—who the story encounters, how they are shaped, and where they end up.

We are told so many stories throughout our lives, stories in childhood and as adults, stories as we age into the last stages of these human-body lives. We are told stories about creation, about life and death, about family, about friends and enemies, about what we should believe. Sometimes these stories give us room to breathe and grow, and sometimes they suffocate us.

One day last year, in the late afternoon of a chilly autumn day, my oldest child and I gathered a handful of acorn bodies, and I felt the acorns speak to me, reminding me that they'd been around a while and they'd seen the whole of creation in a way that I never will.

With grace, those acorns spoke to me, and I stretched out my palm and looked at them and said yes, once again, to the great mystery that envelops me and causes me to stop breathing and to breathe again, to rest in awe of a world constantly telling me stories that point me back, again and again, to the truth of The Sacred and the sacred magic found in every corner of the universe.



I think of creation stories from cultures around the world when I hold an acorn, when I consider what exactly a story is. In the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee creation story, who is Skywoman, and why did she gently land on the backs of geese to come down to Earth? How did the earth become Odin's wife *and* daughter in Norse stories? Why are there multiple cycles of creation in the Aztecs' story? And how did Esege from the Mongol creation story create the earth out of void darkness?

I'm a storyteller, so every time I learn about another way that humans try to make sense of the world, I get excited. This is what we *do* as humans! We enter into stories, tell those stories, *live those stories*, and sometimes we end up chasing those stories when they take on a whole life of their own. We use stories to affirm what

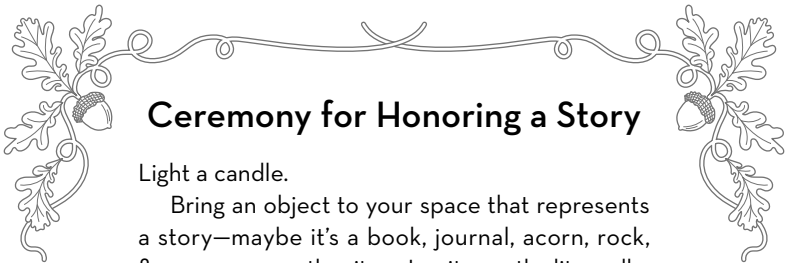
we already believe, and sometimes we even use stories to confuse the truth, to spread lies, and to hurt others.

The best way we honor the origins of stories is with intention and curiosity, ready to ask questions of the stories themselves, questions like, What is this story teaching me here? What does this story teach me about the way I treat others? We can use stories to ground ourselves, or we can use them to keep breathing in and out the narratives that harm us and others. The courageous life is one where we keep leaning in, where we celebrate the complexity of a story and their origins and keep sifting along the way.

So, let's settle into this moment, into this celebration of birth.

Imagine you are holding a small acorn in your hands. You are nurturing the acorn, helping them become who they are meant to be. Hold care and compassion. Take a deep breath, plant them in the dirt, and move on.

Below is a ceremony for honoring a story. If you want to go deeper into a practice beyond this book, I encourage you to spend time in this ceremony and see what you learn about the birth of stories.



Ceremony for Honoring a Story

Light a candle.

Bring an object to your space that represents a story—maybe it's a book, journal, acorn, rock, flower, or some other item. Lay it near the lit candle.

Take four deep breaths to honor the four directions.

We honor here that we are storytellers, keepers, those who pass on stories. This is not something to be taken lightly.

Pick up the item that represents a story and hold it in your hands.

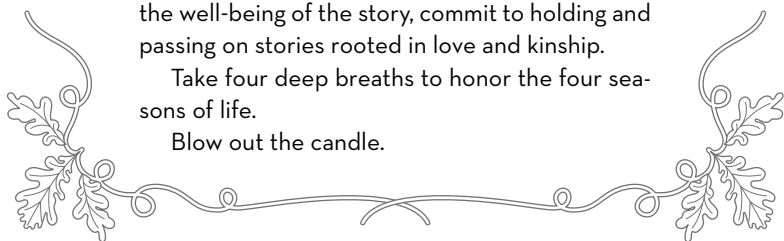
Seed

Close your eyes, feeling the item, honoring the life of a story, the journey they will take and the power they will hold.

In your heart or on a journal page, commit to the well-being of the story, commit to holding and passing on stories rooted in love and kinship.

Take four deep breaths to honor the four seasons of life.

Blow out the candle.



I hope that in honoring the story, in honoring the seed, you recognize them as a kind of home within yourself, where everything begins.

When we think of a story as a living being that moves about this world, we must also consider stories as homes and homes as embodiment. In my book *Living Resistance*, I share from the wisdom of Najwa Zebian in her book *Welcome Home* about the power of stories in building homes within our bodies and lives—we can live in rooms of self-hate or rooms of self-love. Both types of rooms tell a certain story about us.²

If we continually choose a room of self-hate, we begin to tell stories of self-hate, stories that can get passed on from generation to generation. If we choose a room of self-love, we find a different reality, and those ripple effects emerge with tenderness and care. But it's not always as simple as this. Skywoman went on a grueling and terrifying journey before the geese caught her on their wings and gently lowered her down to her new home on *Mshike*, Turtle's back.

We are not automatically given *home*. Some of us journey to find it, and home doesn't always mean the place where we grew up, does it? Many of us are still finding home. When I'm asked where I'm from, I always stumble, because I can't really answer that. I've lived in so many places I feel like a bit of a nomad, and

I've known people from many places who welcomed me as family, as kin. A spiritual home, a genealogical home, a physical home—these things take time and examination, just like that tiny acorn we hold.

As we enter into this journey together, as we consider the origins of a story, the very seed we tenderly hold in our hands, we acknowledge what it means to look for home, to journey toward home, to find home, to create home, to sustain home. Along the way, we go beyond ourselves, asking what it means to be home to others. May we begin there.

2

OAK STORIES

When we stop to consider the utter magic of an acorn growing into a majestic oak, the very science of this miracle draws us in—that a tiny seed, a tiny being that seems so incapable of greatness, could become the giant oak tree.

The oak is mighty in more ways than one and contributes to their environment in countless ways. Oak leaves, as they fall in autumn and remain on the ground through winter, purify ground water, prevent flooding, and help creatures live in safe ecosystems. Douglas Tallamy shares in his beautiful book *The Nature of Oaks*, “Leaf shape tells us both evolutionary and ecological stories.”¹ Oaks have provided wood for boats and lodging for centuries, acorns—ground into flour for sustenance and nourishment—have provided food to many Indigenous cultures worldwide, and oak trees remain a symbol of strength for many communities and nations.

Kevin Wilson writes in his book *The Way of Chai* about our interconnectedness as humans: “For the extent that we see our

destinies interwoven within each other in the human family is the extent to which we can create spaces for mutual belonging and unconditional acceptance in a world that often doesn't know it needs them."²

This sense of belonging and interconnection reflects how oak trees have been a part of human existence for centuries, becoming a beloved and powerful symbol in cultures and religions, and a means of survival for people around the globe. Pause to consider the oak's sheer physical power—oak trees can grow to a hundred feet tall and can have a circumference of twenty feet or more.

The Wí'aaSal, an oak tree in California, has been protected by the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians for generations. *At least* a thousand years old, it is the oldest living oak tree in the world. The Angel Oak of South Carolina is a state treasure, believed to be around four hundred years old. The Darley Oak in Cornwall, believed to possess magical qualities, is about a thousand years old. The largest oak tree in the United Kingdom is the Major Oak; it is associated with the famous story of Robin Hood and has a girth of thirty-three feet. Some locals believe it has the largest oak trunk in the world.³

Expert forest maker James Godfrey-Faussett writes about the history and steadfastness of the oak tree: "The oak family has graced our planet for a remarkable 65 million years and is one of its most ancient species. This long-term survival can partly be put down to the design of acorns. The hard shell protects the seed (or to be correct, the fruit); naturally occurring high levels of tannic acid protect against fungal and insect threats."⁴

The oak is even a haven of symbiosis, sheltering and working in active relationship with all kinds of animals, lichen, and fungi.

It is no wonder the oak tree appears majestic to us humans. But you don't have to physically visit these trees to know how sacred they are—you can look in history books and scan stories

throughout time, across cultures, religions, and places, to understand how incredibly important the mighty oak is to so many.

The oak tree has a deep connection with Druidic cultures, Roman and Greek mythology, Baltic cultures, Christianity, and many Indigenous peoples around the world who consider the oak tree a symbol of safety and security, of peace and gathering.

The Druids believe the oak tree is divine, and they treat oaks with respect, gathering the bark for their daily health, medicine, and rituals.

The oak tree was sacred and powerful to many, from Zeus to Thor and beyond, whose cultures recognized that the oak tree is struck by lightning more than any other species of tree and therefore holds the power of thunder and lightning.

Indigenous cultures still use acorns and acorn flour in many meals today, honoring the ancient tradition of cultivating this essential ingredient. This should cause us to pause and reflect on how Mother Earth has supplied essentials for our daily needs. In the culinary world, we are seeing a resurgence of restaurants trying to return to the sacred origins of food, and acorns play a large role in that.

The state of Michigan, which is land to the Anishinaabe people, commissioned Amber Morseau of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians to create artwork for a resource document for social studies standards. Below is how she describes the artwork for the project, featuring oak trees. As you read the description, take it in like a ritual. Read slowly and imagine the beauty of kinship and belonging shared.

In the middle of the illustration, we have an “Auntie” offering teachings to children in her outdoor classroom by the water. She is surrounded by students offering berries to her, symbolizing that we are not just delivering knowledge to our students but we are gaining knowledge from them as well. These berries come from a bush, adorned with fire, representing the knowledge that is offered by our Tribes. . . .

On the far left of the illustration, you will find a mighty oak tree standing tall, keeping our relatives in the center safe and guarded by the woodlands. This oak tree symbolizes the keeping of this sacred knowledge and the significance it holds to the Anishinaabe People. Teaching under this tree by the water and with the water's relatives is significant because there it acknowledges the ecosystem that exists beyond the human understanding which is always present in our teachings. This is to say that all things are relative and all things are connected.⁵

Because the oak tree is so powerful and considered so sacred, we find imagery around the world that reflects that essence, understanding through art how much oak trees, acorns, and leaves teach us about ourselves. I think of the pagan symbol the Green Man, a man with (often oak) leaves flowing around his face, sometimes with vines or flowers growing from his mouth. The Green Man can be seen in churches around the world, on street corners in architecture, in buildings from New York to London, with the earliest known examples found in Lebanon and Iraq. He is a representation of life and rebirth, the very thing stories also represent in many ways.

When I decided to write this book—embarking on a journey of learning more about the mighty, sturdy, kind, thoughtful, enduring oak as a way to understand the sturdy, enduring legacy of a story—the connection between a story's life and an oak tree's life seemed fitting, a connection that could not be easily broken. I wondered about the lessons, the myths and stories that surround the acorn, the oak tree, their resourcefulness and presence in our world today. From those lessons, may we glean wisdom and strength, and may we use this metaphor to guide our own storytelling, our own tending to the cultures, mythologies, and spaces that shape and surround us.

When I think of the power of trees, I think of Vermont, my home for eleven months in 2020 and 2021. Our beautiful and

difficult short season there reminded me of the need to return to rootedness—of being grounded like a tree. And it testified to the sacred power of finding and creating home. (Portions of the following are from a journal entry I wrote about our season of living in Vermont.)

We lived in Vermont for only eleven months, but for the last two, I attended beginner tai chi classes at Long Wind Farm, a fully organic tomato farm in our small town. I didn't know what to expect when I arrived for that first session, but I knew that the ways I'd been dealing with my body, my story, my own trauma hadn't been enough over the last nine months. I was in a season of what my therapist helped me understand as ruminating, where I'd spend my mornings journaling and reading, but what I was really doing was thinking about my own trauma and story and letting those stories spin around and around in my mind until I became physically exhausted.

So when I found out about this tai chi class, I was drawn in immediately. I'd always wanted to try something like tai chi, something to ground me, something slow and steady that would cause me to pay attention to the tiny movements of my body, of my soul. We started out slowly, gaining traction on a few movements at a time, and a few weeks later when I knew we were leaving Vermont to move to Pennsylvania, I was a little bit disheartened that I was losing this momentum.

This is how it works with our bodies, our minds, our hearts, with the reality of starting over with something, some season, even someone in our lives—it takes so much time and work not to get back to where we were before but to figure out where we are going.

This is where the power of story comes in: What are we saying to ourselves about the season we've left behind, and what are we saying about the season we've stepped into, the one we are daily trying to create and sustain with any level of health or care?

Most of the time, we probably aren't paying attention to these questions. We're just living our lives, and life is just moving us

along in whatever direction it chooses. Maybe the story is just writing themselves and we have no control over the narrative. But what if we did?

One day, we gathered on the large concrete parking lot overlooking the river to hold class as a storm approached. The wind picked up halfway through. There were some concerned looks, but we kept our practice going, movement by movement, an eye on the distance, our feet planted firmly against the ground beneath us.

Our teacher would pause to remind us again and again to steady ourselves, to imagine our bodies like the trunk of a tree, our roots going deep, drinking in water from the soil, holding steady in times of trouble, remaining planted no matter what comes our way. So, move by move, I'd hold that image of a tree, trying to summon the courage to remain steady, trying to trust my body to do what it needed to do to remain tethered, grounded, just like the oak.

This is probably what I learned most from my tai chi class: how to plant my feet and trust them, how to let my whole body lean into the reality that I am solid, I am steady, I can hold firm when everything around me feels like it's crumbling.

We left Vermont soon after I started the class, and I grieved as I said goodbye. Where in the world would I ever again find a tai chi class that meets by a flowing river on an organic tomato farm that's been there since the '80s? I wouldn't, and I knew that. But I was taking the lessons of embodiment with me, and that was absolutely enough.

This, too, is what a story does, stories of faith or stories from our ancestors, stories passed down from generation to generation or the powerful stories we read in books or experience through poetry and other forms of art: A story grounds us and reminds us that we are okay, that we are steady in an unsteady world. Stories keep us going when we don't know how. Stories get us out of our rumination patterns and ask us to imagine the world anew. Stories give us the courage to enroll in a tai chi class on an organic tomato

Seed

farm with a group of strangers just to see what kind of magic is waiting on the riverbank, to see how deep our roots can truly go.

And when we decide to find out, we find ourselves. And the stories told there become the seeds that birth the world around us.

Indeed, we find ourselves ushered into a world waiting to give birth to stories that shelter and hold us.