



Talking Leaves: Volume 1, Issue 1

Spring Equinox 2012

Welcome to Yggdrasil

Yggdrasil is a collaborative venture begun by Joe Landwehr and Sara Firman - the culmination of our life experiences; our work as healers, teachers and writers; our soul journeys; our dreams and our quests in nature. We envision Yggdrasil to be a school for visionary contrarians, integrated with a spa retreat for the evolving soul, set within a self-sustaining forest garden community.

Yggdrasil will serve those who sense the need to stop what they are doing, and begin again - after a period of self-reflection, healing, and reconnection with a deeper mythopoetic place within themselves. We believe that it is only from this place of deep connection with our individual souls and with the *anima mundi* - the soul of the world itself - that we can gain the clarity of vision, the creative power, and the sustainable passion with which to change the world in ways that benefit not just humans, but the entire web of Life on Earth.

Yggdrasil is the World Tree on which the Norse god Odin hung for nine days and nights, when channeling the magical language of the runes. Yggdrasil was watered daily by the Norns - three goddesses who held the fate of the world in the balance of their caring commitment. In naming our retreat Yggdrasil, it becomes a mythopoetic space where those who participate are empowered to help realign the world with the natural order as they absorb the wisdom of the World Tree with which they commune and for which they care on daily basis.

We envision Yggdrasil as a co-creative venture that will take the enlightened, committed involvement of many souls, each with something unique to offer. An extraordinary mix of talented people have come together so far to participate in a Talking Council, whose task it will be to guide Yggdrasil through the early stages of its birthing process. Beyond that we hope to build a larger community of people who resonate with our vision, and are willing to help hold a sacred space with us in which it can come into tangible form. This quarterly newsletter – published near the equinoxes and solstices – will be our vehicle for staying in touch with this community and keeping you informed of our creative process.

You are receiving this copy of our first newsletter either because you expressed an interest in the wake of my vision quest last October – in which Yggdrasil was originally conceived, or because Sara or another Talking Council member has told you about it. If you want to know more about Yggdrasil, we have a 34-page vision statement or a shorter 2-page summary that we will be happy to send you. You can contact us at joelandwehr@socket.net and/or sara.firman@yahoo.com.

The Talking Council

In this first issue of our newsletter, we would like to introduce you to our Talking Council – the circle of souls that will guide Yggdrasil through the early stages of its manifestation process. We are setting up this circle as a council of elders because we believe that what we are doing here is a sacred endeavor, and we want to approach it in a sacred manner. The Talking Council is an ancient practice encouraging participants to speak and listen from the heart, and designed to draw forth the best that each has to offer.

Yggdrasil's Talking Council is a self-selected group of people who responded to our vision statement with enough enthusiasm to want to be involved in the birthing of what we hope will be an extraordinary gift to our troubled times. Each of these people is multi-talented and already quite busy with lives of passionate creativity, activism, and service to people and planet. We deeply appreciate their willingness to take on yet another challenge with such fierce optimism and dedication to making the world a better place.

Here we are in our own words:

Sara Firman (Sulis): My most profound experiences of healing resonance came through receiving and giving aquatic bodywork. A friend says: 'Water is to the body as dreams are to the soul'. I find this to be true. In the last 20 years, as bodyworker, eclectic movement teacher, spa manager and private retreat owner, I have gained a broad range of experience in providing therapeutic services. I love creating beautiful and peaceful settings, facilitating safe yet transformative experiences, and enabling clear and harmonious interactions. With degrees in botany and genetics, my early career was in scientific publishing. But I'm a gypsy poet at heart and believe that our human problems will be resolved not by science but by the creative expressions of soulful immersion in and respect for the natural world. I prefer a life-style of simplicity and sufficiency immersed in nature. Born in England, I have lived in and visited many places, including Africa, the South Pacific, Brazil and

Israel. I presently live with Joe and our cat Marigold in an Ozarks forest with a clear river running through it. Caring for the land has become my passion.

Brooke Halpin: I like to describe myself as a “whole-brainer,” with extensive experience in both business and the arts. I am an accomplished composer, musician, painter, author, and lyricist, as well as a businessman, producer, and public relations executive. I have produced television shows, and composed music for television and film, including the 1985 Academy Award winning film *Molly’s Pilgrim*. Profoundly influenced by the Beatles growing up in the 60s, I recently published a book about the Beatles and an app based on the book. In 2005, I set up a non-profit called the Strawberry Arts Foundation to give children greater access to music and the arts. Joe and I grew up together, and recently became reconnected, while he was writing his vision statement. He sent me a copy at a time when I was struggling with my own awareness of just how broken this world is. Shortly thereafter, I had a powerful dream that suggested I was meant to be part of this exciting project.

Jack Hebrank (Hawk): I work as an engineer, inventing things involving biology. I taught mechanical engineering at the college level for 20 years, and as a consultant, have worked with several small startups. Some of my happiest times were spent about 20 years ago, helping to start the child-centered middle school where my kids went when they were young. At the school, I ran a Capstone Design Program, teaching kids to build things. In my spare time, I dance, having started learning Limon style at age 49. I love Limon's gestures of the grandness and majesty of the human life. For the past 20 years, I’ve attended an annual gathering called the Long Dance in the New Mexico desert, where I participate in a ceremonial dance around a central drum. It is at this dance that I first connected with Joe. I’ve also enjoyed doing contact improv, whenever the opportunity arises. I began working as an unpaid apprentice healer about five years ago and have done several Harner shamanism courses.

Nia Kallhof (Narayanii Ma): During my college years in Santa Cruz, CA I discovered I was very drawn to the mystical and transcendent, a major turning point since I was raised in an agnostic non-religious family. In 1971 I began a meditation and yoga practice, which is still a major focus of my life 40 years later. I also began a lifelong fascination with the sacred practices and sites from cultures across our planet. I spent many years embodying the roles of wife, mother and schoolteacher and learned a great deal about unconditional love and surrender. 2003 was another major turning point as I released those roles to move to Hearthaven, a small spiritual community and women’s retreat site in the Missouri Ozarks dedicated to the Divine Mother. Now, with plenty of time to study, connect with nature and simply BE, I began the process of rediscovering myself as elder, healer, and spiritual guide. Two very important steps for me have been becoming a spiritual mother minister and a crystal resonance therapist because both give me a specific channel to receive and share divine love. I’ve also had time for spiritual adventures across our continent and in Mexico, Peru and Egypt.

Joe Landwehr (Graywolf): I am an astrologer of 40+ years experience, seeking an eclectic integration of astrology, spiritual psychology and ancient wisdom teachings. Throughout the 1970s, I studied kundalini yoga with Yogi Bhanan, and siddha yoga with Swami Muktananda,

while training as a psychotherapist. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, I taught workshops in movement, experiential astrology, and group process at an annual ceremonial gathering in the high desert of New Mexico, and began incorporating sweat lodges and vision quests into my spiritual practice. In the early 1990s, I founded the Rainforest Information Center to raise funds for ground-level permaculture projects in Ecuador. Since 1993, my focus has been teaching the language of astropoetics – an image-based, experiential approach to an astrology of self-reflection – writing three books about it, and founding The Astropoetic School of Soul-Discovery. On a vision quest in southern Utah in October 2011, I began to conceive an extension of the school that – combined with my partner Sara’s idea of a Deep Forest Spa – will become Yggdrasil.

Kate (Ceitidh) Riley: I have had a lifelong commitment to holistic living and the study of innovative approaches to wellness. My first epiphany was in 1966 when I read Gandhi’s autobiography, *Silent Spring* and *The Jungle* in high school. By the time I graduated in 1969, I was a vegetarian, and my senior term paper was annotated with quotes from Krishnamurti, Gandhi, Carson and others. Earth Day 1970 was another life-changing moment. I have been a bodyworker and a yoga teacher since 1976, and a somatic psychotherapist since 2004. From 1996-1998 I was the host/producer of a weekly television show on health issues. As a spa director and spa consultant I have been an innovator in implementing a sustainable, organic, and locally sourced philosophy in the resort spa arena. Through the Riley School of Integrated Somatic Bodywork, my specialty in bodywork is working with people who are in chronic pain and facilitating wellness workshops that address healthy living/ eating/ product choices in various venues, including cancer support centers.

John Staniloiu: For the past 40 years, I have been an educator, committed to alternative education, civic and human rights, world hunger, alternatives to human incarceration, and various environmental issues. I have university degrees in education, counseling, and administration, and have worked as a counselor, school principal, and consultant. My greatest learning experiences have been in the inner cities and ghettos of urban centers, the hills of Appalachia, the barrios of Mexico, the prison cells of state-run facilities, and service ventures in Rwanda and northern Uganda, Africa. In the 1980s, I created and ran an alternative school for teenagers on 800 pristine acres of land in southern Missouri, where I presently reside in a community committed to sharing resources and developing self-sustainability. I have been trained as a leader of Native American sweat lodges and vision quests, and have spent hundred of hours in self-development courses. My intention for the rest of my life is to create peace, harmony, joy, laughter, and empowerment wherever my journey takes me.



The Talking Council had its first meeting on February 21, mostly getting to know each other and seeing where our common interests lie. It is interesting to note that all seven of us have had some experience teaching and/or administering schools of our own. Brooke, Jack, John and I have all had experience helping to create and/or administer non-profits. Sara and Kate share experience as bodyworkers and in spa retreat management, as well as a more organic and holistic vision of spa

very different from what is typically promoted commercially. Kate, John and Joe have been trained as professional counselors/psychotherapists. Sara and Jack have studied astrology at The Astropoetic School. Nia, Sara, Kate, and Joe have studied and taught various forms of yoga. Jack, Sara, and Joe have experience and interest in various forms of ceremonial dance. Sara, Kate, Nia, Jack, John and Joe share an interest in shamanic healing practices. John, Nia and Joe have lived in intentional community. Sara, Nia, Jack and John have traveled extensively, lived and/or worked abroad. We all have a deep love of the Earth that stems back to childhood, and Sara, Nia, John and Joe all have roots here, actively stewarding land in the Ozarks.

It should be interesting to see where we go from here. We're sure there is more common ground to discover, as well as fertile areas of cross-pollination in the dialogue of our differences.

As we envision the Talking Council, we have room for two more people. Nine is a number associated with Yggdrasil – there being nine worlds co-existent in the mythopoetic space around the World Tree in Norse cosmology.

In particular, we would welcome Talking Circle members with experience in permaculture, green building, wilderness survival skills, grant writing, fundraising, Bohm's method of dialogue, and/or group facilitation skills. Anyone with a sincere resonance with our vision, and the willingness to commit to a yearlong series of 2-hour teleconference calls is welcome to join us.

In our next meeting on March 23, we will be forming smaller groups to address various preliminary issues on the road to manifestation. You'll hear more about and from us in the newsletters to come.



An Ongoing Conversation With Our Larger Community

In the past months, we have had a number of interesting dialogues with several of you in our larger Yggdrasil community, as you have responded to our vision statement. We consider these dialogues to be important feedback, central to the process of getting clearer and more articulate about what we are doing and why. We would like to share excerpts of these dialogues with you in this newsletter, and invite additional conversation. The following is a composite dialogue of questions from various readers of the vision statement and our response. Questions and comments from our extended community are posted here in black, and marked CM for Community Member.

Joe: As part of my original vision, I was told that my central task was to become “a clear-eyed, open-hearted witness to both the suffering and the beauty of the world, and then giving voice to what I experienced.” Bearing witness to the pain and suffering of the world, and tending our sacred wound (both individual and collective) will be – as stated in the vision statement – a central component of the curriculum at Yggdrasil.

Why is it important to bear witness to the pain and suffering of the world?

CM1: There is a need, if nothing else, to *witness* the end of things in this world. A need for some of us to preserve what is good by memory, by writing, by storytelling - that old question taken from Clarissa Pinkola Estes' story - who will sing over the bones of all that is good in us and in the world if it isn't us?

My very fierce friend said it this way recently: "It's the story of our times and we have to tell it. That's what communicators do. You bear witness, you hold together, you make sense, you cohere, you love, you celebrate, you never give up, you never stop writing, connecting, making meaning. You hold the fire." I don't mean witnessing in the sense of watching, passively. Not in any passive sense at all.

Joe: I think your idea of witness is close to mine. I do not see witnessing as a passive role at all either, but an active engagement with the land, with people, with whatever one is attending to, with all senses, heart, and mind open. It is a full participation - a taking in and then a response from the fullness of one's being.

Part of it, too, I think, comes from our understanding that we are an integral part of the whole community in which we participate - in the same sense that the southern Ute considered it to be their sacred duty to witness the sunrise and help sing the Sun up every morning. Not because the Sun couldn't do it without them, but because they and the Sun were co-participants in a community effort to "keep the land (and all its sentient inhabitants) alive."

I think there is a political aspect to the witness that is also important. Much of the damage that is done to the world - both human and more-than-human - is done beyond the range of scrutiny, with decisions made behind closed doors, media increasingly barred from documenting or reporting on various dastardly deeds, whistle-blowers and eye-witnesses increasingly being intimidated, and in some cases killed.

Those who witness these things are like those who sing the Sun up every morning - also helping keep the world alive, in a different sort of way. Being a witness in this world, I think, is an act of great courage, and can potentially be about putting one's life on the line for what one deeply believes.

CM2: As the crazy as the world looks to me it's hard to imagine anyone opening willingly to it.

Joe: It's not the craziness of the world that I feel drawn to open up to, but the deep vulnerability beneath it, the place where we are all just fragile humans trying to cope with our fears and manifest our dreams, the common ground where what we do to ourselves, each other and to the Earth matters more than any pretense we might put forth as a shield. My way is to seek to peel away the layers and penetrate to the heart of the matter. I think the craziness comes from trying to avoid the real issues or pretend they don't exist.

In the vision statement, we wrote, “Despite the evolution of the feminist worldview, and attendant opportunities for the advancement of women within society, ours is still largely a world dominated by the masculine psyche. To the extent that the masculine psyche is wounded – separated from the more-than-human community by a sense of superiority, and from other humans by the hierarchical systems it creates to maintain its advantage – then the world in which we all live will be severely compromised.

Most men, and many father-identified women learn early in life to suppress pain, deny their wounds, and muster Herculean strength in moving forward in willful ignorance of them. When this happens, these wounds reverberate unconsciously and leave a legacy of carnage in their wake.

Wouldn't be better to focus on something positive?

CM3: I do not like the phrase “wounded masculine.” I would tend to want a phrase that pointed to wholeness and oneness.

Joe: I understand your reservations. My sense about it, however, is that we cannot attain wholeness and oneness without tending to our sacred wounds with loving care.

I see the sacred wound - of both masculine and feminine - to be a gift that serves as a catalyst for a lifetime of growth. This has certainly been true of my own wounds, which - among other positive outcomes - are what led me to my quest, and to the vision I am now seeking to manifest. The journey is always toward wholeness, but along the way, this entails embracing the thing we least want to embrace. Without it, something essential is missing.

CM3: I can see that my wounds got me where I am today. I also think I would like to get over being led by my wounds.

Sara: Your comment really strikes a cord with me. I'm noticing that many of us, me included, are feeling tired of being or feeling wounded. I'm thinking that integration of the masculine and feminine within each of us is much more challenging than we ever imagined.

Walking down the children's toy aisle in Walmart yesterday I saw the same old pink and blue distinctions for girls and boys. Still drawing lines between left and right, hard and soft.

What I realize is that you (as Elder woman) and Joe (as Elder man) are in your writings showing how much bravery it takes to walk a different path. Your wounds have brought you to a magnificent place (in my eyes and for others) though I know it must hardly feel like that to you sometimes.

Today I came across this:

It takes great courage and internal strength for the wounded healer to retrace her challenging past history in order to alchemically transform it into a wellspring of self-knowledge, faith and

wisdom. Like a salve that heals a wound but leaves a scar, a wounded healer's scar tissue is their past personal story that can be retold to inspire and heal others. This past personal story gives the wounded healer their unique healing skills to empathically understand and feel the fear, pain and suffering of others.

Joe: In our vision statement, we wrote “Our quest to discover who we are as souls, and what it is we are here to contribute seems to be complicated by the fact that we feel ourselves to be separate from the rest of Creation. . . . The soul's quest, as we understand it at Yggdrasil, is not supported by this attitude of separation. Instead it requires each of us to be in intimate relationship to the more-than-human world - and in open hearted and genuinely curious conversation with other humans of diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and interests. This kind of dialogue requires us to approach the world knowing that everything in it - more-than-human, as well as human - is alive, intelligent, and a potential source of wisdom.

What does it mean to dialogue with the more-than-human world?

CM4: Maybe it is just me, but I have difficulty with the word "dialogue" when discussing interaction with the natural world. For me it would be more fitting to use "commune" or "communication" since ~ at least in my own experience ~ my interactions with the natural entities/beings do not come in words. I also have difficulty with the "more-than-human" world ~ implying a hierarchy which I don't see - it implies a separation ~ an “us and them” mentality.

Joe: I do not consider there to be a hierarchy within the natural world, nor do I think humans are inherently separate from nature. But as a culture we have separated ourselves. When we think of ourselves in relation to nature at all, we generally conceptualize a hierarchy with humans at the top. To correct these hierarchical delusions, the term 'more than human' reminds us that humans are not as strong as elephants, not as fast as mountain lions, not as smart as dolphins; we can't fly like birds, spin webs out of our own bodies like spiders, or echo-navigate like bats. The implication of the term - the way I read it - is that we have a lot to learn from these other life forms, and that learning begins from a place of humility, a realization that there is much more to the natural world than humans are normally able to see, precisely because they consider other-than-human world to be somehow 'less than'.

Sara: The term 'more-than-human world' was actually coined by David Abram in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Abram probably wanted to avoid the separation some experience with the word 'nature', and point to humans being just a small part of that.

Joe: Abram makes a strong case for the evolution of human dialogue from an original attempt to commune with nature, and to understand it. Now we think of dialogue as a human construct, but what if humans only really learned how to dialogue in the first place from the more-than-human world? I think this is why I like the word, 'dialogue,' as well as the idea of considering dialogue between humans and other intelligences within nature as natural as human-to-human dialogue. Rather than anthropomorphizing nature, I think - with Abram's perspective as a context - it takes

us back to our roots in nature - which among other things is a constant interchange of information that we could participate in, if we understood the language.

Sara: It does get philosophical and really the objective is to remind ourselves of interconnection, interdependence and to develop a deep relationship with the other beings that share the planet. So much of current language doesn't support that at all.

I found it interesting that Bill Plotkin in his book *Nature and the Human Soul* describes many of his personal experiences communing with nature and very often it starts as an emotional or feeling tone and is translated (in his mind) into words. A painter could just as well produce an image or a musician a piece of music in order to share with another human.

Joe: I agree that the dialogue between humans and more-than-humans is really a matter of communion, of paying attention, of entering into the more-than-human world with the intent to connect with it, and of being present and letting the response register in the body, mind, and heart.

On my quest, the dialogue I had with the more-than-human world was not primarily verbal. I did speak my part of the dialogue out loud, but the response from the more-than-human world did not come in words. Still, in order for it to register in a way that I could understand it, I had to translate it into words. So you could say that the dialogue is really in my head, and that I am interpreting what I see, and hear, and feel. But I'm not sure at this point, that there is another way for humans to do it. Since this is a school of humans attempting to commune with the more-than-human world and become a more conscious part of it, dialogue would seem to be the vehicle for that. I also wanted to include human-to-human dialogue as part of the process and to suggest that - despite the "language barrier," our interaction with the more-than-human world need not be that different, if we are open to it. It is a way to begin to erase or at least counterbalance the human-centered notion that only humans are capable of dialogue.'

As writers, Sara and I are always trying to find the right word to say what we want to say. Sometimes the right word just doesn't exist. I do have great respect for the work of David Abram, Bill Plotkin and the Animas Valley Institute, so I have borrowed "more-than-human world" from their work with deliberate intention. Perhaps a better word exists, but I have yet to hear it, or come up with it myself.

CM4: I understand we have to use words ~ and I do see what you are saying - but you are "preaching to the choir" so to speak. What about all the other folks who don't have a clue - yet - what you are trying to say?

Joe: I suspect that if folks really don't have a clue what we're on about, they won't come. That's OK. What we're doing here is not for everyone. Having said that, as a writer, and as a co-carrier of this vision with Sara, I am always trying to build bridges. Words are a vehicle for that, although sometimes they do get in the way.

Someone who is on the edge of making a shift in their relationship to the natural world might be ready to entertain the notion that "dialogue" with trees and rocks and clouds is possible, whereas "communion" may be a bit scary. Communion to me means total immersion; whereas dialogue is a way to dip your big toe in the water and then see where it goes. Other people may have different associations with different words, and that is the tricky part of communicating outside of the choir - since no one choice of words will speak to everyone.

We may have to do this one conversation at a time. That's OK. Actually, I think at this point, this is mostly how we envision it happening.

How do you pronounce Yggdrasil?

Sara: <http://www.howjsay.com/index.php?word=Yggdrasil>

Our Invitation to You

If you want to be part of this ongoing conversation, dialogue, and/or communion we are calling Yggdrasil, let us know. We'd love to hear from you at whatever level of involvement you are inspired to want to participate. You can:

- 1) Request and read the 2-page vision summary.
- 2) Share this newsletter or the 2-page vision statement with select friends or acquaintances you sincerely believe will be interested. If you do, please copy your email to us at joelandwehr@socket.net and/or sara.firman@yahoo.com.
- 3) Read the more comprehensive revised 34-page vision statement. This is different than the more personal 39-page version most of you who are on the newsletter mailing list have probably read. We ask that you not share the more comprehensive vision statement, but instead refer your friends to the shorter 2-page statement, and let them contact us for more.
- 4) Join the Talking Council. We have room for two more Talking Council members to help guide the vision into manifestation. If you resonate at a deep enough level with what we are trying to do, this could be your opportunity to dig more deeply into your own mythopoetic roots, even as you help steward the fruiting of the vine.

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Keep an eye out for the next Talking Leaves – Summer Solstice 2012

