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Earth Joy Writing: Creating Harmony Through Journaling and Nature by Cassie Premo Steele

Anne Milne
University of Toronto Scarborough

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Stumbling along the Writer's Way

***Earth Joy Writing: Creating Harmony through Journaling and Nature* by CASSIE PREMIO STEELE**

Ashland Creek Press, 2015 \$17.95

Reviewed by **ANNE MILNE**

Full disclosure: I hate helping myself. Indeed, my impulse to read and review this self-help book came out of that fact. And *Earth Joy Writing* did not disappoint me, nor did it really change my attitude and behaviors. I still hate helping myself, but I liked what Steele got me to think about and do “through journaling and nature.” Perhaps there is hope. Perhaps I can learn to like, even love, helping myself. I think that is the promise and the premise of the book.

That said, *Earth Joy Writing* is hard. But with Steele as my guide, I really tried to follow along. I did not think I could properly review the book without engaging in the program Steele lays out for her learners. She is a positive guide and nicely manages the balance in tone between sincere and flaky. There were moments in the opening pages that made me worry—for example, the idea that by following along, “we could heal ourselves and the earth” (6). But I liked that she emphasized emotional involvement, “co-creating in a shared environmental space with different parts of the natural world” (3), and writing as a process and a practice. I was reassured by her repeated emphasis on grounding, on “using your own hands,” beginning with “you wherever you are” (6), and being “gentle with your resistance” (34). By the time I finished reading the introduction, I genuinely felt she had prepared me to begin.

Steele's emphasis on journaling and nature means that the book is organized by the seasons and the months of the year. I treated this structure literally in the beginning, jumping into the book at page 145, in “August,” but as I engaged in the exercises and moved into “September,” I found myself ranging around in the book more to investigate what Steele had in store for the other times of the year. Ranging seemed appropriate. The book is designed to activate the reader into regular journaling using prompts that take her into memory, into outdoor places, into the body, using exercises that encourage not just writing, but drawing, collage, photography, music, movement, and even eating. The graphic design supports the reader through the effective use of white space to make space for contemplation, to give the reader and nascent journaler time to begin, and to break up the many tasks the book offers. Steele also links readers to her website, where they can find guided meditations and poetry connected to the exercises in the book.

Partnering with the natural world in *Earth Joy Writing* means that many of the exercises take the reader outdoors. While it is unlikely that I will “put on a song that [I] like and let [my] body move” outdoors (35), I am willing to concede that Steele's attention to sensual experiences through a direct engagement with nature has a strong appeal. I found myself most attentive to her walking and listening exercises, where generating a written account makes sense to me. I was less certain of the value of “choosing a mammal . . . that symbolizes your life's path right now” and answering questions about this “life's-path teacher” (48-49). I actively resisted these sections.

But I appreciated that the book explicitly gave me permission to do that.

Earth Joy Writing is definitely not all about the writing. And Steele explicitly distinguishes her program from other writing programs. Other programs, she suggests, encourage goal-setting and success, “putting the cart before the horse” rather than “living creatively” (22). While *Earth Joy Writing* evokes Julia Cameron’s 1992 bestseller, *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, Steele’s emphasis is on creating rather than recovery. Despite the twelve-months-of-the-year structure, this book is not a twelve-step program. But it is a busy book.

This busyness often overwhelmed me. To fully engage in *Earth Joy Writing* is time-consuming, and I found myself skipping exercises that I thought were interesting but would take too long to do. One of these exercises involved locating photographs from childhood, converting those photos to black and white,

reconfiguring the photos using chronological, emotional, and architectural categories, and answering a series of questions. The exercise appealed to me, but I did not do it. Maybe later. Maybe never. My response to this exercise encouraged me to consider whether *Earth Joy Writing* would be valuable in my own teaching. How would my students respond? In the right context, I think it would be exciting to help students make the explicit connection between journaling and nature through a series of exercises. After all, practicing *Earth Joy Writing* has already taught me something and I appreciate what I have gained. Indeed, I have even written a few things down.

ANNE MILNE is a Lecturer at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Her academic publications focus on local culture, animals, and land-use issues in eighteenth-century British poetry. She is also a visual artist at work on a creative non-fiction project.