

# Inner Tracking

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The premise behind the practice of Inner Tracking is that your education is most likely to be transformational if it touches you deeply—not exclusively on an intellectual level.<sup>1</sup> This self-awareness practice, adapted from the spiral structure of the *Work that Reconnects*,<sup>2</sup> is designed to help you turn inward to reflect on the question: How is your learning affecting you as a person? Educators operating with the modern Western worldview have often ignored or discouraged emotional responses to learning because of the concern that acknowledging emotional responses might threaten the objectivity of knowledge. This approach is problematic for at least two reasons: First, an emotional response is still present and active, even if we try to ignore it. Awareness can thus increase the clarity of our knowing by helping us see that our knowing is situated—meaning that our knowing is shaped by limited perspectives. Second, our emotional responses can help us decide how to act on our learning. I am not suggesting that we be driven solely by emotional reactions but rather that our emotions provide us with significant and useful information about ourselves, our values, and our relationship to the world.

Each part of Inner Tracking described below refers to the “content, community, or learning process” of the class. “Content” here means the knowledge of history, culture, nature, etc., that is explored in the class. “Community” refers to the learning community of the class—the students, peer mentor (if applicable), instructor, guests, etc. “Learning process” means your own experience of learning in the class. You may, for instance, be struggling with some aspects of the class or learning new things about how to learn.

**Preparation:** To complete the Inner Tracking practice, you will need a quiet space (if possible) and some time to reflect (about 30 minutes), as well as a way to write down your thoughts.

**Centering:** Before you respond to the four questions below, please take a moment to center yourself as you begin to turn inward. First, check in with yourself: what’s your emotional tone, or how would you describe the quality of your awareness in this moment? (Some possibilities might be: energetic, neutral, tense, tired, clear, foggy, calm, sad, excited, bored, anxious, curious, etc.) Second, if it would feel comfortable to you, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. (As an alternative, just breathe normally while placing a hand on your chest or belly, or simply sit silently for a moment, feeling how gravity pulls your body downward.) When you feel ready, continue with the four questions below.

**1. Giving Gratitude:** What is something from this course (content, community, or learning process) that you are grateful for? (Write 125–200 words.)

- Gratitude is a fitting place to start your reflections because it may help you connect your learning to values you already hold or aspirations you have for yourself or others.
- Giving thanks is fundamentally connecting, because it reminds us that we depend on other people and the larger Earth community for our very lives. Practically speaking, gratitude can help us cooperate with others. It keeps us from taking things for granted. A powerful example of a gratitude practice is the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Thanksgiving Address, which has been used for

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<sup>1</sup> Learning that “touches you deeply” might affect your emotional landscape, but it may also affect your identity and values.

<sup>2</sup> See Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work that Reconnects* (New Society Publishers, 2014), 67–68. Although my implementation is distinctive, the concept of “Inner Tracking” has especially been promoted by Jon Young of the 8 Shields Institute.

centuries to give gratitude for “the full circle of Creation” and to cultivate a spirit of “one-mindedness” in preparation for important ceremonial, political, or diplomatic work.<sup>3</sup>

- Giving gratitude also helps keep us intellectually and emotionally balanced, especially during difficult times when we are inclined to focus mostly on criticisms or losses.
- For this part of the practice, consider finding gratitude for the opportunities you have had to learn, for ways your understanding was expanded by classmates, for people you have studied who worked on behalf of a value you hold dear, or for something you appreciate that has been passed down or preserved over the generations. For example, you could give gratitude for something that you value that people in the past have made sacrifices for, or you could give gratitude for the persistence of First Nations people and wisdom traditions, despite centuries of colonization. Choose something that is meaningful to you.

**2. Honoring Pain:** What is something from this course (content, community, or learning process) for which you feel sadness, grief, anger, frustration, or disappointment? (Write 125–200 words.)

- Joanna Macy and Molly Brown have written that “pain is the price of consciousness in a threatened and suffering world” (21). To study history, the humanities, or the natural world is to come face to face with tremendous loss and suffering, as well as with astounding beauty and resilience. We must be able to see both of these aspects of human experience and the larger community of life. As with gratitude, grief (if expressed and shared) can be very connecting. It is a “common bond,” in the words of Francis Weller—a reminder that “our lives are intricately comingled with one another.”<sup>4</sup> Far from being self-indulgent, honoring pain or grief is a critical practice for coming to terms with and learning from our experiences as human beings.
- Grief can mean simply *sadness*, but expressing grief (or grieving) is a way of processing sadness. Indigenous and traditional cultures have ways of dealing with grief in a communal way. The invitation here is *not* to enter into a full-blown grieving process (which requires support) but rather to acknowledge any sadness, frustration, disappointment, or anger that you may have experienced as part of the learning process. Macy and Brown refer to this as “honoring our pain” (67).
- Expressing grief does not mean “getting over” a loss, whether personal or collective. We often continue to hold sadness after expressing grief. This may be especially true for historical trauma. Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman have described “non-redemptive mourning” as a kind of grieving that is “not intended to finish with the past and return to ‘normal life,’ but rather to keep the past from slipping away in a present that continues to deny it.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, expressing grief is a way to acknowledge what has happened—not to deny or forget it. Part of learning deeply about the past is accepting what happened within human communities (and the community of life) in the past—communities with which we are still connected today.
- For this part of the practice, consider acknowledging how some past injustice caused suffering or loss, and how that suffering or loss may still have repercussions today. Or, you might recognize a frustration that some of the things you previously learned turned out to be incomplete, misleading, or untrue. Or, perhaps you experienced some frustration or harm because of the behavior of other members of the learning community.

**3. Seeing Anew:** How has something from this course (content, community, or learning process) helped you see the world in a new way? (Write 125–200 words.)

- This facet of Inner Tracking can be more intellectual than the others, but it may take you beyond how you usually think about learning. The idea of “seeing anew” reminds us that learning is not simply about accumulating knowledge. Learning can bring us new ways of seeing and thinking.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Thomas, “Words that Come before All Else,” in José Barriero, ed., *Indian Roots of American Democracy* (AKWE:KON Press, 1992), 10–11.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2015), xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 123.

- For this part of the practice, give a specific example (or examples) of something that you see or think differently about than you did before taking the class. Consider whether and how some aspect of the course gave you new insight into the world or into yourself, or a new way of understanding some aspect of the human experience. For example, maybe you think a bit differently about what it means to study history, human society, or the natural world.
- While Macy and Brown originally called this part of the spiral “Seeing with New Eyes,” the Work that Reconnects Network has renamed it seeing with “new/ancient eyes,” in order to recognize that many of our insights recapitulate or repeat very old insights from indigenous cultures and ancient wisdom traditions (many of them outside of Western culture).<sup>6</sup>

**4. Going Forth:** What’s something from this course (content, community, or learning process) that you want to carry forward in your life? Is there something here that will help you be the kind of person you would like to be or make the impact you want to make? How might you act on the insights you have shared here? (Write 125–200 words.)

- This question gives you an opportunity to take ownership of and responsibility for some aspect of your learning. What do you take away from the class that will help you be the person you are becoming?

**Closing:** As you complete this practice, take a moment to notice, again, how you are feeling right now. Without judgment, notice any changes from when you started the practice.



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<sup>6</sup> For an updated overview of the Work that Reconnects Spiral, see <https://workthatreconnects.org/spiral/>.