

ROOT & RETURN

A Nature-Based Creative Expression Journal

Kaeli F. Hansen

kaelihansen.com · rootandreturn.org

“You don’t have to find yourself. You need only return home to yourself — the path is already within you.”

— Kaeli Hansen

© Kaeli F. Hansen. All rights reserved. Free resource offered by Root & Return, a nonprofit project.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Welcome

There is a you that has been waiting.

Somewhere underneath the roles you have been playing, the stories you have been handed, and the ways you have learned to survive — that self is still there. Patient. Rooted. Welcoming you home.

I know what it is to set yourself aside for so long that you forget you did it. I spent years being what was needed — for others, in my work, in my relationships — and did so with love. But I kept giving without allowing much love from others to reach me, and as a result, I felt depleted. The circle of love was incomplete because it includes both giving *and* receiving.

Despite my depletion and feelings of lost love, I discovered that love is more like a river than a reservoir. After the loss of my first husband, I found that the love I had poured into caring for him did not disappear with him. It flowed onward — the same love expressing itself in different ways. Love, it turns out, underlies everything. What runs dry is not love itself, but our access to it when we have forgotten to tend the channel it flows through.

This journal exists for one purpose: not to fix you, not to produce beautiful art, but to help you find your way back to your root — your very essence and soul — so that what has been waiting underground can finally find its way home to the light. This is a journey of transformation.

Root and Return is for everyone, regardless of ability, mobility, vision, hearing, or other differences. If a prompt does not work for your body or your life, please adapt it freely.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE JOURNAL

PART ONE	PART TWO	PART THREE
Going to the Root	What the Roots Know	New Growth
<i>Awareness. We go inward to root ourselves. We begin to remember what we have set aside.</i>	<i>Action. We go underground together through creativity, nature, and honest reflection.</i>	<i>Awakening. We rise. We integrate. We make a conscious choice about how to live going forward.</i>

A NOTE ON HANDWRITING

Throughout this journal, you will be invited to write, draw, doodle, and reflect. If you are able, writing is best done by hand — it engages the brain differently from typing and is more directly connected to feeling and memory. If physical limitations make handwriting difficult or impossible, please use whatever method allows you to show up most fully and honestly. The goal is honest expression, not a particular instrument.

A NOTE ON FREEWRITING

Many prompts in this journal invite you to freewrite — writing continuously without stopping to edit, correct, or judge what comes out. Simply let the pen move and follow it. The inner critic will want to interrupt. Acknowledge it, put it aside, and keep writing. What often emerges in freewriting is precisely what we have been trying to avoid knowing — and that is exactly the material that transforms us.

PART ONE — GOING TO THE ROOT

SESSION ONE

Arrival: Noticing You Have Been Away

Awareness · Going Inward Through Nature and Introspection

The Root & Return Compass

TO BE COMPLETED AT THE BEGINNING OF SESSION ONE AND AGAIN AT THE CLOSE OF SESSION SIX

For each of the four directions below, rate yourself honestly from 1 to 5. Place a dot on the medicine wheel at the distance from the center that matches your rating. Connect your four dots. The shape you see is where you are right now. There is no good shape or bad shape. It is simply true.

[Your medicine wheel drawing space — a circle with North/South/East/West labeled and five concentric rings]

NORTH

Mental

How clearly can I hear my own thoughts?

Can you distinguish your own voice from the voices of obligation, worry, and other people's expectations? Is your mind a place you can visit with some quiet, or does it feel crowded?

My rating today (1–5): _____

What I notice when I sit with this question:

SOUTH

Physical

How present am I in my body today?

Do you know where tension lives in you right now? Can you feel your own breath without having to think about it? Is your body a place you inhabit fully, or one you mostly push through?

My rating today (1–5): _____

What I notice when I sit with this question:

EAST

Spiritual

How connected do I feel to something larger than myself?

This might be the divine, the universe, nature, community, creative force, or the quiet knowing that lives beneath thought. It requires only your honesty.

My rating today (1–5): _____

What I notice when I sit with this question:

WEST

Emotional*How freely can I feel and express what is true for me?*

Are your feelings accessible to you, or have they gone somewhere quiet to wait? Is there something you have been carrying that has not yet had a place to land?

My rating today (1–5): _____

What I notice when I sit with this question:

Connecting to Nature

This practice begins every session in Root and Return. It is the first step toward the root — the moment of turning toward the outer world before turning inward. Reconnecting with the natural world brings us back to our roots because we are made of the same stuff as the earth and the stars.

Find something in your environment — a rock, a tree, a plant, a bird, a cloud moving across the sky, a shaft of light falling through glass, or the sound of wind or rain. Give it your full attention for **two to three minutes**. Do not analyze it. Do not try to find meaning in it right away. Simply receive it, as you would a gift from someone who loves you.

If you can go outside, go. If you can open a window, open it. If you are homebound, look from wherever you are. Research confirms that even passive nature observation measurably restores wellbeing and reduces stress. Nature does not require a forest. It requires only that you look.

What did you choose to observe, and why do you think that particular thing called to you today?

Write here:

What did you notice that you might not have noticed if you hadn't set aside some time to be with Nature?

Write here:

**Did anything in what you observed remind you of something in your own inner life right now?
What was it?**

Write here:

Journaling — The Opening Circle

You are not writing for an audience. You are writing to find out what you actually think and feel. Freewrite if you can. Let the pen move before the inner critic catches up.

What brought you here?

What is happening in your life right now that made you pick up this journal? A few honest, unpolished sentences are worth more here than a paragraph of careful explanation.

Write here:

What do you hope to find — or remember — by the end of this journey?

Try not to think too hard about this one. Write the first true thing that comes.

Write here:

What ground rules do you want to set for yourself as you use this journal?

These are promises you make to yourself, not to anyone else. Some people write: I will write honestly even when it is uncomfortable. I will not judge what comes out. Write whatever is true for you.

Write here:

A QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU THIS WEEK

“When do I feel most like my authentic self? What is happening in those moments?”

You do not need to answer this now. Carry it with you. Let it work on you quietly. Come back and write about it before Session Two.

Your reflections on this question (return and add to this throughout the week):

Write here:

A Reflection to Carry

I once sat under an oak tree in the deepest grief of my life and watched a branch that had been cut away sprout new shoots from the scar. I did not like what the tree was telling me. But eventually I accepted that sometimes a huge part of our lives must be removed for new growth to occur.

You have opened this journal. Something in you is already reaching toward the light. Be patient with the process. Roots take time.

OPTIONAL — If You Are Using This Journal With a Group

Building rapport with the group requires trust. It is important that everyone can express some vulnerability and have a chance to share. In your next group meeting, you are invited to share:

- What called you to this work
- One thing you observed while connecting to nature, and what it stirred in you
- One ground rule you have set for yourself

When we witness each other's creative process with genuine, nonjudgmental attention, it elevates everyone's awareness — not just the person sharing. You may find that someone else's words unlock something in you that your own words have not yet reached. That is the gift of the circle.

REFERENCES

- Kaplan, R., & Kaplan, S. (1989). *The experience of nature: A psychological perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Marano, G., et al. (2025). The neuroscience behind writing: Handwriting vs. typing. *Life (Basel)*, 15(3), 345.
- Rogers, N. (2026). *The creative connection for groups*. University Professors Press.
- Ulrich, R. S. (1984). View through a window may influence recovery from surgery. *Science*, 224(4647), 420–421.
- van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score*. Penguin Books.

— end of Session One —

Session Two will be available soon at rootandreturn.org