

SACRED RETREAT: Using Natural Cycles to Recharge Your Life

In the push for progress that is central to the values of modern life, we have forgotten the necessity of retreats for rebalancing ourselves. Ancient Earth-based people recognized the value of regular withdrawing from the world as essential, designating times of women's bleeding or times of men's sweat lodges as sacred retreats. These times of retreat were considered necessary to maintain harmony within the family, the community, and with the Earth. Worldwide, indigenous peoples have included sacred retreats as a way of assuring peace and balance within their societies, yet our modern world has lost the understanding that retreats are just as important as progress.

All things in nature move in cycles, and these cycles define life and death on Earth. Yet even as science has explored the cycles of life, women's cycles have been ignored, dismissed, or pathologized, and men's cycles have gone unrecognized, preventing us from being who we truly are. Culturally we have moved away from nature into a disconnected, technical approach to living that is stressful because it is out of harmony with our natural biological needs. This artificial way of living has thrown our most important relationships out of balance, even endangering future life by aligning our lives with technology over nature. Rather than appreciating the benefits of our natural cycles, we have been encouraged to design our lives according to an artificial calendar that artificially pressures us into a linear, progressive model of life—appointing nights, weekends, and holidays as the only sanctioned times for rest, regeneration, and introspection.

Unlike the modern Gregorian calendar that artificially programs times of rest, calendar consciousness was first developed by women, based on the natural body calendar. People who live close to nature observe that life consists of interconnected processes. Through this understanding, Earth-based people acknowledge and respect the natural changes of women, unlike women who follow the rules of modern societies. When women's cycles are ignored,

Drawing on the wisdom of ancient cultures & the natural cycles of life, Pia Orleane outlines the sacred retreat process, offering a cleansing practice for body and mind to awaken creativity & intuition, and reattune with the rhythms of nature.

controlled, or denied, there are far-reaching harmful effects, not only for women themselves, but for all of us as we detach from nature.

Every part of being human includes a cycle of some sort. More than one hundred functions and structural elements in humans oscillate between maximal and minimal values once a day, including our breath, our blood, and our hormones. Every day our bodies produce more than 300 billion new cells. We take more than seventeen thousand breaths and average thirty thousand blinks of the eyes every day. Our hearts beat more than two-and-a-half billion times in an average lifetime. It is difficult to find any aspect of being human that does not include some kind of cycle. However, humans have done their best to ignore natural cycles, abandoning natural human rhythms for the more controlled industrial, technological rhythms of life. The acceleration of technological rhythms in day-to-day living is an affront to the human nervous system and contributes to our separation from nature and from each other. Times of sacred retreat are absolutely essential to our own well-being and that of the Earth.

As we have separated ourselves from nature, modern cultures have suppressed women and denied men the understanding of how to honor our natural biological cycles. Slowing down to receive guidance is important for all of us, and yet, slowing down is considered less important than being productive in modern cultures.

Women have always had a special time nature sets aside to expel the old and make room for the new. Men have a more challenging time designing retreat time for their own clearing and creative process. However, men can create their own retreat times by going camping either alone or with other men who have a similar purpose. The ManKind Project, MenSpeak, and A Circle of Men are examples of groups that encourage men to retreat together to regain the balance and harmony that they have lost in society's warped value system.

We all need to honor times to slow down, listen, and wait. When we wait before acting,

our actions are accomplished more efficiently and more quickly because we have respected the pause in the creativity cycle.

When we synchronize our lives with printed calendars and artificial rhythms ruled by electric lights, natural rhythms of rest and regeneration that follow nature's rhythm of day and night are denied. Our artificial man-made timing spurns the wisdom of the body. Because of this, times for our most precious inspirations are postponed until nights and weekends, when we may simply be too tired to do anything but collapse into an exhausted sleep. As a culture we have lost the awareness of differences between doing and being, and the appropriateness of right timing for both. Doing requires participating in life by taking action. Being requires slowing down (or withdrawing temporarily) to listen to one's intuition and guidance before acting. Anyone who is continually in a role of action will eventually find himself or herself caught in patterns of reaction and possibly even overreaction, if they do not allow space for clearing, introspection, intuition, guidance, and creative problem solving. Likewise, we are missing a general understanding of the natural flow between giving to others and nurturing ourselves. Nature is not static, and we are part of nature. We have seasons as well—times to be dormant and times to be active and bloom.

One night in my own sacred retreat, I had a very powerful dream. I dreamed I was walking down a trail in the woods when I encountered a bear and a mountain lion. I was terrified, for they approached me and began to rip the flesh off my bones. They persisted until I was completely consumed, and then they spit me out in a new form. I watched myself disappear, and my terror vanished as the dream animals gave me new life. With the new arrangement of my bones in the shiny new skin of my dream body, I proceeded down the trail until I came to a hidden waterfall. I approached it, stretching out my hand to touch the shimmering, azure water. In the dream, I noticed my hand and the water were the same—transparent, sparkling, and beautiful. This was a new and key understanding for me. I was connected to the water. I wakened from that dream a different person. At the time I was pursuing my Ph.D. in psychology, and I was in search of an appropriate topic for my dissertation. I designed a research study to examine sacred retreats among women who agreed to sleep separately from their partners during menstruation. The results of this study revealed that participants experienced increased creativity, enhanced intuition, more meaningful dreams, and better harmony in their relationships.

I believe these benefits are available to all of us when we allocate time in our busy lives for sacred retreats. And a room of our own is not the only, or even necessarily, the preferred, way of creating such a retreat. We can immerse ourselves




MEET THE AUTHOR

Pia Orleane, Ph.D., is an author, lecturer, and former practicing psychologist. The recipient of an international award from Saybrook University for her research on the importance of natural cycles for life, she travels the world giving talks on the value of the divine feminine and natural cycles

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in the quiet of nature to create a sacred space and balance ourselves internally. The power to bring harmony and peace back to the world is born out of these sacred times of solitude. It is within our power to dream up a million ways to make a difference. A sacred retreat is about listening to our inner wisdom to know when is the most appropriate and most effective time to cultivate visions and dreams, to make a special project really work, to help our families and communities, to make a difference in the world. Rhythms of life bring change. If we honor the necessity of sacred retreats and listen well, we can direct these changes to create a better world. 

Bookshelf

SACRED RETREAT: USING NATURAL CYCLES TO RECHARGE YOUR LIFE BY PIA ORLEANE, PH.D., published by Bear & Company, Paperback (240 pages)

