



KELLY WENDORF

FLYING
LEAD
CHANGE

56 MILLION YEARS OF WISDOM FOR
LEADING AND LIVING

EXCERPT

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Out on the street. This was our prospect in the winter of 2018 when our landlord, a multibillion-dollar-backed investment firm, threatened to take away our ranch just outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico, due to a loophole in the contract. This was not only our family home, including a menagerie of animals, but also the retreat campus of our leadership and personal development organization EQUUS. Like so many business owners, Scott and I had poured everything we had into EQUUS—mind, body, soul. To lose our land now would be a disaster. Was this the end of it all?

After yet another cold, sweat-drenched night, I sat down to my desk in my study—a room reserved solely for my writing (and the occasional house guest). I sat blankly in front of my screen, my heart draining out of my feet. No words were flowing. Just then the phone rang. A kind voice spoke on the other end.

“Hi, my name is Anastasia.”

“Yes . . .” I said flatly.

“I’m from Sounds True publishing. We wondered if you would be interested in writing a book for us.”

And so began these pages. Life has been like that for me. I usually have to be tapped firmly on the shoulder by someone who sees the value in what I do and asked to step forward and share, sometimes despite my own pervading self-doubt. You could say I have a quality of reluctance.

The truth is, I used to be reluctant about simply being human. As a child, the disconnection, frustration, fear, betrayal, confusion, heartbreak, complexity, and challenges that invariably came along with being human overwhelmed me. Ambivalent about the entire experience, I was not altogether sure if I even wanted to be one—a human,

I mean. It seemed so much easier to be, say, an eagle or a deer, a tree, or nothing at all. I regularly questioned the status quo of what we were meant to value and strive toward. And though as a young adult working in the corporate sector I looked successful, internally I was besieged with conflict. This kindled a voracious drive to seek insight and answers so that I could thrive at being human and live by a code that felt intrinsically congruent. This book is a culmination of that lifelong education.

My seeking took me to some very unconventional places, and my path moved like a spiral, never direct, always winding from the inside out and from the outside in. It called forth teachers that emerged from several different and unlikely sources, teachers who have taken a variety of shapes and forms. The natural world has taught me more about being human than any person could, and the precious company of indigenous elders around the world taught me how to translate those invisible teachings of nature into practical applications of daily life. I spent years in India, immersed in the practice of spiritual self-inquiry with a sage in Uttar Pradesh. As the founding editor of an Australian magazine called *Kindred* (which explores the evidence-based conditions that create a just and sustainable society), I immersed myself in studying the field of neuroscience and learned about the biology of thriving. *Kindred* provided me the opportunity to explore the scientific underpinnings of all I had learned from nature, my spiritual work, and the indigenous teachings. And finally, the formal training in becoming a Master Certified Coach taught me to hold space for others on this human journey so that they too could find their way to live, guide their families, and lead their organizations from their own intrinsic wisdom. EQUUS is the full expression of that spiral-shaped journey; we use all those elements in our work with our clients and strive to embed them in our organizational culture.

You may not be as reluctant as I have been, but I'm fairly certain if you are human then you have had—and will have—your fair share of challenges that we all invariably face. Perhaps, like me, you are looking for trustworthy answers and insights and, like me, you have had your fill of conventional approaches to problem-solving and want something that resonates more harmoniously with some quiet calling within you.

This book is a field guide to being human. It weaves together the influences of nature-based intelligence, indigenous knowledge, contemplative wisdom, and neuroscience for a new reality. In it you will meet a number of teachers, and you will have the opportunity to learn from them too, just as I did (and still do). Additionally, you will receive applications and practices so that the teachings translate into lasting change and transformation in your own life, with your family, and for your work. I hope that you will recognize the book's invitation as not only an individualized growth opportunity, but a chance to influence a larger constituency, for we are shaped not only by our private choices, but our lives are coauthored by the cultural milieu within which we abide.

For those of you who are looking for a quick how-to guide, who prefer succinct bullet lists and mental model diagrams, this is a heads up. The type of wisdom that sustains over time and translates into practical measurable change does not deliver first to the mind. It delivers to the heart. According to neurocardiologists, the heart and its complex neural network send more information to the mind than the mind sends to the heart.¹ When the heart informs the mind, the mind gains wisdom. The heart learns through story, through time, and through reflection. For this reason, this book deliberately traverses in such a way for you to learn *differently* for more optimal outcomes. Be prepared to settle in and travel the places it takes you; it may at times feel oddly not rational or linear.

To support your personal growth process, at the end of each chapter is a breakout section titled Spiral Point that features journal questions, suggested exercises, and reflections so that you too can journey from the inside out and the outside in. While I am not a neuroscientist, I do study the field because it's an effective pathway to learning and changing our brains, hence many of the exercises are based in the neuroscientific principles and include somatic (bodily, visceral, felt sense) instructions. Such somatic exercises help you to rewire your nervous system and your brain and therefore create lasting change in your life. When engaging with the exercises, I advise you to make small micro-steps toward change. Studies show that small, practical, easily practiced action steps create significant change over time, rather than huge efforts that invariably fall to the wayside.²

To protect the privacy of EQUUS clients and other individuals referred to in this book, some names have been changed and details excluded. The book includes traditional stories that have been passed down over time and therefore often can't readily be attributed or cited to an individual source, but I do my best to acknowledge my sources wherever possible. I have been sensitive to include only stories that have been freely shared, and have made sure to omit certain teachings not meant for public consumption. I also want to alert First Nations readers (specifically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) that this book contains images and names of people who have died.

And what happened to our property and EQUUS? Writing the book that became *Flying Lead Change* carried us through a personal and organizational turning point—another essential twist in the spiral. We emerged with our land, our family, our company, and our campus not only intact but prospering, and in the process experienced another profound validation of the principles outlined in these pages.

Wi don gi mu

(From the traditional Tewa language, meaning “We are one in mind, heart, and in the spirit of love for all.”)

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What Is a Flying Lead Change?

On a hot, humid afternoon, a small doglike creature nibbles on fruit suspended above a lush, fern-covered ground. The thick jungle forest is bursting with sound, as this is a time when mammal life explodes with innovative evolutionary options. Nearby our earliest ancestor (also small) moves past, vying for the same sweet delicacy. For a moment the two lock eyes.

Fifty-six million years later, in the same place we now call Wyoming, their descendants are working together in perfect harmony, human and horse, to move a herd of cattle off a northern slope into a grassy valley. As the horse gallops up a ridgeline, suddenly the topography changes, and the herd of cattle makes an abrupt directional shift. In response, the horse effortlessly executes what is known as a *flying lead change*—a gravity-defying maneuver that allows them to change balance and respond to the changing scenario without losing momentum or unseating their rider. Like this, horses have been our partner in successfully navigating change for thousands of years—the perfect power couple.

A flying lead change is the equestrian term for a high-level yet natural gymnastic move that happens at the canter, lope, or gallop (a horse's fastest gait). In lay terms, when a horse canters, they lead with either their left or right set of legs. Say you were watching this cowboy gallop up the ridge. You might see their horse reach with their left front leg farther than their right; that would indicate a left lead. Horses will remain in a particular lead (or at least favor one) and continue their trajectory in that manner. It is only by external influences—a radical change in topography, for example—that the horse will change leads.

WHAT IS A FLYING LEAD CHANGE?

The flying lead change, or *flying change* as it is sometimes called, is when the animal, midflight, changes their lead from left to right, or vice-versa. At its finest, when you are astride a highly trained horse who deliberately executes the motion with balanced elegance, a flying change is astonishing to experience.

A masterful feat of gravity defiance that would be the envy of any prima ballerina or black belt, the flying change requires a culmination of complex and coordinated elements executed in one dynamic

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flow mid-air: attunement to change, connection, balance and equilibrium; a quiet mind; openness to new possibilities; tempo; a suspension of pattern while continuing momentum; and finally levitation to create space for a transition of balance and new direction.

Collectively we are facing the need for the same physics-defying maneuver. Our topography is radically changing, which requires us to change the way we lead our lives, families, and organizations. Such topography calls us to execute this change with similar mastery: attunement, care, presence, connection, mindfulness, openness to possibility, levity, suspension of old habits, maintaining momentum, levitation for a transition of balance into something new . . . humanity's flying lead change.

We need more than policy change; we need a collective change of heart, a turn of equilibrium, a radical shift in the dynamics of how we do things. Together in this book we will explore the conditions, principles, and practicalities that will, in the midst of our ever-speeding lives, support us to change our lead midflight into a new way forward that will sustain us across the millennia as the horse has sustained itself for tens of millions of years.

This book is not about horses. It's about you and me listening together for a way of living and leading that is both practical and wise, as taught by an ancient successful system.

Introduction

Our Boeing 720 landed at the Addis Ababa International Airport. It was 1972 and Ethiopia, though on the verge of civil war, beckoned to those in search of the earliest record of humankind—scientists, academics, and explorers. My father was all three. Impatiently he waved at us from across the chain-link arrivals gate on the tarmac. His khaki-clad figure looked odd among the throngs of tall, dark, colorfully decorated bodies. My mother waved anxiously back and closely navigated my little brother and me down the airstairs, our small arms squeezed tightly in each hand.

A celebrated archaeologist, yet a complicated, tormented loner with narcissistic tendencies, my father was accustomed to spending most of his time in the preferred company of three-million-year-old stone tools, artifacts, and bones. One year, he decided we should spend some time with him in his world—the excavations on the side of a collapsed volcano known as Gademotta, in central Ethiopia.

Without much fanfare, he briskly ushered us through the large open concrete hall that was the airport. All around us was chaos and noise. Our rectangular Samsonite bags stood incongruously amongst burlap sacks, chickens and goats in wooden cages, and overstuffed baskets bound by rope and string. The hot air smelled of leather, smoke, sweat, and earth—a smell I recognized from the brightly beaded jewelry my father used to bring home from his travels.

All eyes stared at the two small, very blond white children amongst them—an extremely rare sight in that region of Africa in the early 1970s. People gathered around us, laughed, and exclaimed loudly as they touched our hair, felt the skin of our arms, and cradled our faces with their hands without thought of personal boundary.

I was an unusually observant seven-year-old. Too thin-skinned, my father would say, to societal norms. I was sensitive to the jagged

undercurrent between my mother and father. I was distraught by a felled tree, a homeless animal, or a racist remark. When *Time* magazine featured that terrifying image of nine-year-old Kim Phuc running for her life from a napalm attack, my mother had to console me for countless nights. Serious and melancholic, I took on the gravity of my troubled family and a troubled world—perhaps in response to my father’s self-absorption.

My only refuge was on the back of a horse. At age five I was placed atop my first—a magnificent chestnut thoroughbred named Pilgrim. Jane, my godmother and a seasoned horsewoman, walked him to our front yard on Saturday morning. Still in my pajamas, I bolted out the front door only to be scolded. “No running!” Jane commanded sternly as she hoisted me to settle into the soft, warm sway of Pilgrim’s back. From that moment on I was inexorably consumed by anything to do with horses. In another culture, I might have been considered possessed by horse spirits.

My drawings of horses plastered my bedroom walls. A herd of plastic Breyer model horses of all shapes, colors, and breeds galloped across my bookshelves. My best friend Kayanne and I would prance around the front yards, tossing our manes—I the black stallion, she the fierce and sleek Arabian. My mother succumbed to years of driving me to riding lessons and finally purchased my first horse.

Our environment shapes us. Throughout my childhood, mine was a juxtaposition of two ancient worlds—that of my father’s (the numerous archaeological digs and dwelling sites of various early indigenous peoples around the world) and that of my equine companions (their fields, forests, and mountains). Between those two settings I was intimately informed about life. Parented in the seventies in the Southwest by what I refer to warmly (and gratefully) as benign neglect—the style in those days—I was free to roam the outdoors on foot or on horseback until sundown. This meant I was either hunting for pottery shards and arrowheads inside a collapsed kiva (an ancient underground ceremonial chamber) or trotting bareback and barefooted down a stretch of dirt road. It was my secret domain, this ancient, earthen, animal way of being that I thought was uniquely my own. Until we went to Ethiopia.

We were driven into the heart of the drought-stricken country, although Ethiopia had not yet seen the full human tragedy destined to come with her looming famine. Children raced after our military jeeps as we passed villages—mud and straw huts surrounded by erect, colorfully beaded women. We drove on one of the few roads stretching between Addis Ababa and Nairobi to a small town called Ziway. The countryside was barren, ornamented with the occasional bent acacia tree—a scribble of green above a single crooked trunk amidst a sea of red clay.

Finally we arrived at a small, rectangular cinder-block building of about eight rooms, painted a bright blue and surrounded by an occasional tormented rosebush struggling through the hard, sunbaked earth. Named the Bekele Molla Hotel after its owner, it would be our home for the next few weeks. From there we would take our daily journeys with our father to the 235,000-year-old excavation sites in the Ethiopian Rift Valley.

To me, Ethiopia was beautiful. And the people were even more so. I remembered my cheeks hurting from smiling so much in their presence, how they made my heart tickle inside when they spoke to me in Cushitic, and how they made me laugh when they laughed at me good-naturedly. And that was even before I met Kabada.

Kabada walked with long, graceful strides behind my father, dwarfing my father's six-foot-four build. A white blanket slung elegantly over his right shoulder made him look like an emperor. A single dangling earring accentuated his jawline, his chin held high, his shoulders back. His wide feet met the earth with the snugness of belonging. In one hand was a spear, and in the other, a small metal lunch box.

My father hired Kabada, an Oromo warrior, to guard my brother and me at all times. Apparently two American children playing in the African bush were a kidnapping target in the local growing unrest. "It's for the baboons," Dad said, noticing me staring at Kabada's spear. He swept his arm along the landscape, indicating their probable whereabouts. "He will wedge the base into the sand, like this," he said, gesturing how the spear would be secured to the earth, angled toward the attacker, "and the sharp point will lodge into its chest when it pounces." My father completed the horrifying pantomime

with a hand arching toward its death by finger-point. I of course was not so worried about myself as the poor unsuspecting baboon, simply wanting his dinner.

The Oromo are one of the indigenous peoples of East Africa and the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. As is the fate of so many of the world's traditional peoples, the Oromo were (and continue to be) among the most persecuted during Ethiopia's political struggles, and they suffered severely during the two recent famines that claimed millions of lives, most of them Oromo. Today, thousands of Oromos are kept in secret concentration camps and jails just for being Oromo.¹

Kabada watched over my brother and me with complete concern, as if we were the most important things on earth. He was gentle, with kind, quiet eyes. He stood by as we played in the dust of the excavation sites, propped against his spear—a silent sentinel—while archaeologists crouched busily nearby. At night as we slept, he stood alert outside our door under the porch light, moths flying around his head in zigzagging spirals.

In time, I convinced him that protection was only just part of his job description; the rest was to play with me. Obliging he swung me around in circles and tossed me in the air. He drank tea alongside my teddy bear; he chased goats on my imaginary horse ranch. I grew warmly accustomed to Kabada, though not a single word was spoken between us, and I blended myself into the daily, colorful, laughter-infused clamor that was Oromo life.

One day my father took his team to a remote village and invited us along. The community was comprised of eight circular huts with thatched roofs, some white zebu cows, goats, and a number of smiling men, women, and children. The *sanacha* (elder or chieftain) of the village generously welcomed us. After exchanges of gifts and some conversation translated by my father's colleague, Bahai, the *sanacha* presented his treasured horse—a small grey decorated for the occasion with orange-red tassels and matching rope. In such communities, a horse is a symbol not only of noted leadership status, but of the owner's rarefied capacity to see between realms. It is believed among traditional peoples around the world that horses are messengers from the gods, and therefore they should be handled only by those worthy of such a sacred relationship.²

I desperately wanted to sit on that little horse. Perhaps even ride him around the village, or trot out across the bush and chase baboons. But my parents forbade it, telling me that as I was neither shaman, nor mystic, nor chieftain. For me to ask to do so would be highly disrespectful.

The sanacha then mentioned a village boy who had recently contracted an illness for which he was not recovering. Upon a brief examination by Dad's team members, it was clear the boy needed urgent medical attention. There was a brief discussion between everyone. At once the team moved to get the boy into a jeep and make the long journey on faded dirt roads to the nearest hospital, some hours away.

Days later we returned to the village with the healthy boy. The sanacha, overwhelmed, shook my father's hand vigorously. There was much commotion and singing. Suddenly two men whisked me up and astride the chieftain's horse. With that he put his hands on my father's shoulders and blessed our family, saying that we—and all those we loved and cared for—would be in the protection of his ancestral spirits forever. Though I was too young to understand the significance of that exchange, the blessing ripened in me over time and infused in me a sense of protection and social responsibility.



Me as a child on the chieftain's horse

Weeks later, we were set to depart our tiny motel home. The sun had not yet risen, and Kabada was still at his place by my door, moths flying around the exposed bulb hanging above his head. Only now he was sitting in a rusted metal chair, slumped over listlessly. Around him was much activity as the team loaded up their gear to go. Kabada sat stone still.

Not able to comprehend the situation, I jumped happily up on to his lap and squeezed him around the neck. I thought he would laugh in his usual way, but instead he pulled me in and held me tightly, his long arms wrapping completely around my small frame, his chest rising and falling falteringly against mine. He held me at length without a sound.

I pulled away slightly to look at his face. Tears ran down his cheeks, tiny rivulets streaming through the dust. It was the first time I had seen a man cry. Then I realized I might never see Kabada again. I curled back into the safe harbor of his embrace and began to melt

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into the tender exchange between us that was happening without words—a conversation between the ancient world and the new about care and responsibility. In that moment, we met across a chasm of time,

language, race, and familial ties and without the slightest trace of separation or thought, merged into a state of unconditional love.

At some point in a person's life, if we are lucky, we might have such an uncommon opportunity, when the curtains of mental constructs part and we behold something precious, sacred, and true. Sometimes it can happen at the bedside of a dying loved one or while listening to a piece of music or in nature. Other, truer dimensions briefly penetrate through and leave us forever changed. Those weeks amongst the Oromo and that early morning experience with Kabada under the porch light forever changed me. They created an indelible internal compass setting toward unconditional love that would both inform and haunt me. It embedded an unmistakable calling, which I was compelled to follow for the rest of my life.

My guess is that you feel called, too, to something. And I'd bet that somewhere in your life some event set your inner compass to that calling, whether you were aware of it or not. This book is for the called. It is for thought leaders, visionaries, professionals, parents, creatives, and all those who care. It is for you who have seen or sensed another way and those of you who feel you are being asked to participate in humanity's flying lead change through the way you live and lead. For these are times that require not just social change in the traditional sense, but something magnificent—a civilizational sleight of hand, an artful change of foot midstride in a miraculous act of physics-defying thrust into the unknown.

What was revealed to me in Ethiopia can be best described by one word: connection—connection to oneself, to another, to existence. Do you remember a gentler time in the world when every person was supported with such an intrinsic wholeness? Neither do I. And yet we yearn for it as if we were exiles from a beloved homeland.

Over the span of my life, this yearning formed seminal questions for me personally and professionally: What does it mean to be human? What is the source of disconnection—and, conversely—connection? What are the consequences of a disconnected society—in life and in work? How do we create conditions to restore connection and wholeness? How do we elicit change inside behemoth forces that seem too large to repair? Looking for answers, I researched and searched. I traveled to and lived in vastly different societies and eventually immigrated to Australia. Through my travels and living abroad, I learned that culture plays an integral role in shaping our ideas about who we are as human beings. The modern post-industrialized culture's story, for example, is one of disconnection and separation. Its narrative creates a prison that affects our health, our thinking, our success, and now our very survival.

Eventually this exploration culminated in my founding *Kindred* magazine in Australia. *Kindred* sought to answer some of my questions. My work there exposed me to the latest social theories and brain science. It was there I learned about the brain's right and left hemispheres. While old science mistakenly attributed reason to the left hemisphere and emotion to the right, new science divides the two in

a more nuanced fashion. Put simply, the left brain is about mechanics, rational thought, knowing, subject-object relationships, technology, and things. The right brain encompasses wholeness, connection, listening, the unknown, livingness, and embodiment. They offer two essential versions of the world. Neither side is perfect or better. True intelligence reigns when both sides of the brain work in concert with one another.

However, over the last century our culture has become increasingly left-brained. This is due to the fact that the left system can reinforce itself through all it knows. Because the left brain controls things like technology and the media, it's quite vocal on its own behalf. The right brain, dedicated to listening and the unknown, remains intrinsically silent in comparison. You could say all the ominous challenges of our time are a reflection of that imbalance. The left brain then tries to solve these problems through itself, throwing us into a deadly perpetual feedback loop.³ We have lost our way.

I am not advocating for one side over the other. Both are essential. I'm arguing for a more balanced relationship in service of something beyond what the left brain could comprehend on its own. Optimally, the right brain inspires the left, and the left serves the whole by making manifest the right brain's intuitive wisdom in the world. Instead, the rational mind has become a tyrant master rather than a faithful servant.

While *Kindred* did much to enlighten its readers about the science-based approaches to connection, what was missing was specific right-brained and experiential wisdom available from the two most trustworthy resources that had accompanied me since childhood—horses and the wisdom of traditional peoples.

In response, my work took an abrupt right turn, so to speak. I cofounded EQUUS, a personal and professional development organization that seeks to connect people back to themselves through nature-based wisdom, and from that encounter transform their lives and their organizations. Owned and operated jointly with my partner J. Scott Strachan, our approach synthesizes equine integrated learning with other experiential processes informed by neuroscience, contemplative wisdom, and indigenous principles in order to ignite

right-brained discovery. Our Experiential Discovery and Learning Campus—Thunderbird Ridge—sits at the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range. It is home to a herd of flamboyant horses (and a donkey) whose job is to facilitate clients toward their own awakening and, well, their own flying lead change. A flying lead change allows clients not only to switch leads to the right and access that right-brained genius, but to switch skillfully from one side to the other, depending on the topography. It thus allows them an expanded repertoire of solutions to solve their problems and create amazing lives of meaning and purpose that they never imagined possible.

And what's so special about working with horses? As you will learn in the pages of this book, horses elegantly organize themselves around seven principles: *care, presence, safety, connection, peace, freedom, and joy*. These principles assured their survival for millions of years, making them among the oldest and therefore most successful mammals on earth (only the echidna and platypus have them beat at about 100 million years).⁴ Horses are highly relational to humans (unlike the platypus and echidna), making them consummate teachers of their ageless wisdom. When we are in their midst we become a part of the herd, and it therefore is incumbent upon them to teach us these fundamentals. It is these precepts that create the capacity to execute a flying lead change. The book is organized around these seven principles of this ancient system of thriving. Each part contains chapters outlining specific ways to implement these principles.

People come to EQUUS from diverse walks of life. But predominantly we serve those on the front lines of corporate America—the seemingly privileged few. Curiously, many come when they are out of options. They've sailed to the far edges of the societal seas, done everything by the book, earned success, power, and status. But to their dismay, they discover there is nothing there—no promised land, no happiness or meaning. The proverbial canaries in the civilizational coal mine, these people expose the toxicity of living according to the rules of a disconnected society. We would be wise to see the symptoms upon us now and quickly change our footing to another way forward.

This book gives voice to the right-sided realm. The quiet, open, connected, embodied, and the unknown. I don't advocate that

indigenous and nature-based wisdom is better or perfect; I advocate that it allows us access to something we've lost.

One of my most influential teachers and close friends, whose wisdom informs the pedagogy of EQUUS, was an Australian Aboriginal named, respectfully, Uncle Bob Randall. A *tjilpi* (elder) from the Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara nations in the heart of Australia, he is one of the listed traditional keepers of Uluru, the enormous red rock known to most as Ayers Rock. As an Aboriginal man, Uncle Bob is a member of what is the oldest civilization in the world.⁵ He was also a member of the Stolen Generations—the thousands of Aboriginal children kidnapped by missionaries to be raised by the government.⁶ The policy, perversely called the Aboriginal Protection Act, sought to totally eradicate the Aboriginal race. As the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, A. O. Neville wrote in an article for *The West Australian* in 1930: “Eliminate the full-blood and permit the white admixture to half-castes and eventually the race will become white.”⁷

I first encountered Uncle Bob in 2008, while in Paris of all places. I was travelling with my then-husband and two young children and was several months pregnant with my third child. I was living in Byron Bay, Australia, as the founding editor of *Kindred* when a publisher asked me to compile an anthology of stories about belonging after reading an editorial I had written on the topic (again, tapped on the shoulder). So at the time I was collecting various essays from writers all around the world, some of them from indigenous writers. My once resilient marriage was now fragile and I hoped that our new baby might strengthen our ties. But the trip only provided more stress and we argued—a lot. One afternoon, as I climbed up a flight of narrow, creaking stairs to our simple hotel with my husband and children in tow, I began to miscarry. By the time I made it to our room, I had lost her.

What does one do with a dead child in a hotel room in Paris? In our shock, everything became oddly strange and remotely practical. We found an empty pastry box from our breakfast, carefully swaddled her in a napkin, and placed her inside. Like zombies, we walked with the little box to the only place that felt right—Notre Dame. We lit candles and held each other. As we emerged from the great cathedral, again we were faced with the question of what to do with her next.

Our eyes sadly landed on the Seine River. Without saying a word, my son looked up at me, went back inside the cathedral, and came out with a handful of small candles. We carried the box to the river's edge. On its lid, we placed the candles and some small flowers we gathered from bushes. We lit the candles, then we released the box into the current. I watched the Seine carry my last child out toward the sea. A part of me went down river with her into the abyss.

That afternoon we huddled around a café table, trying to pull ourselves together, feeling way too far away from home. I dully looked up over my tea at a bulletin board hanging over the counter. To my surprise there was a small poster promoting a community screening of an Australian film called *Kanyini* featuring Uncle Bob. As I looked upon Uncle Bob's face, a sudden thought pierced through my traumatized haze—I needed him in the belonging book. I made a mental note to myself to find him when I returned to Australia.

Tragedy can bestow enormous gifts if you are open to them. Had I not lost the baby, I probably never would have met Uncle Bob. As a white woman, I had no previous contact with Aboriginal Australians. The racial divide remains acute in Australia, and most white Australians never cross paths with Indigenous people, who are largely and conveniently tucked out of sight by governmental policy. When I returned home, a series of synchronistic events related specifically to the miscarriage landed me Uncle Bob's phone number, briskly scrawled in pencil by a friend-of-a-friend-of-a-doctor-of-a-colleague on a wrinkled yellow Post-it.

I finally worked up the courage to call the number. After several rings, Uncle Bob answered. Without as much as a *hello* he said, "I've been waiting for you to call." I was confused. I stammered a self-introduction and started to explain why I had called, but he interrupted, "It's time for people to hear what I have to say. Most of my people are too broken to carry on the teachings." He continued, "I was just sitting here wondering, *Now who am I meant to tell?* and you called, and so it's you I need to tell. And you will tell the others." He then laughed, as if he knew he was delivering yet another tap on my reluctant shoulder.

I had the incredible fortune of having much time in Uncle Bob's company over several years until his passing in 2015. He would speak

to me at length with stories or teachings. Yet often we would go hours, sometimes days, without words, which was another kind of instruction.

One morning while sitting over coffee in a busy urban cafe, Uncle Bob was telling me yet another story. The paradox suddenly struck me. Here I was amidst the whirl of modern life, listening to a story that had been handed down for tens of thousands of years, a story that spoke about connection to place, to spirit, and to family, as well as our responsibility to all living things as administered to us through unconditional love.

The people hurried past us—carrying their briefcases, talking loudly on their cell phones—a spin of stress, speed, and anxiousness. And yet what Uncle Bob was living, what he was trying to convey to me, was something utterly forgotten by our society.

I began to cry. Confused, Uncle Bob stopped speaking. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Your people lost everything. *Everything* was taken from you.”

“Are you crying for my people?” he asked. I shook my head. I was crying for mine.

“Uncle Bob, I don’t want to be disrespectful. But your people, they know what they lost. And if they don’t know, they know they lost *something*.”

He nodded carefully.

“We don’t even know that we’ve lost something. That’s how lost we are.”

Uncle Bob hadn’t thought of it that way. And as the world frenzied around us, we wept quietly together, holding hands. Both of us grieving for the entire human race.

“When you get lost,” Uncle Bob told me some months later while taking me to the very site he was stolen as a child, “you retrace your steps to the place where you were before the lost-ness started.” Without words, he then drove me some hours deeper on a dusty red road into the outback. Finally we came to a cut in the fence line, drove into a small clearing, and parked. He got out of the vehicle and started walking through the bush. I followed. We came to a place where the land sloped down, and at the bottom was a *billabong*

(a water hole). Uncle Bob then sat down behind some *munyunpa* bushes about a hundred yards from the water's edge.

“Why are we here?” I whispered, as I sat down too, not knowing why I was whispering. Uncle Bob said nothing.

Then a few moments later, I heard a thundering sound and saw billows of red dust in the distance. Over the rise galloped about thirty wild horses—mares and babies, stallions, young and old, bays, chestnuts, greys, and blacks. They gathered nervously at the water. Some started to drink. Some blew mighty snorts, their heads raised in alarm—they knew something was out there. We sat utterly still, hardly breathing.

I had never told Uncle Bob I was a horsewoman. And I never told him I was inexorably adrift inside the traumatic loss of a child—a grief so all-consuming I was drowning. Or that I was in the throes of yet another divorce that threatened to destroy not only my family, but my career. Or that I had turned my back on my entire spiritual life after suffering at the hands of an unscrupulous narcissistic spiritual teacher. I felt exiled from my entire life. Sitting in the swell of the billabong, at the end of the world, in the middle of nowhere, I knew I was at rock bottom.

“There,” he finally said, gesturing to the herd, “that mob there will get you home again.”



With Uncle Bob in 2008

I didn't realize it at the time, but that moment watching the wild horses began my return to myself, and with it the braiding together of all the key influences in my life: horses, contemplative wisdom, my interest in neuroscience, and indigenous knowledge. The braid of those influences fused into one integrated whole through which I reclaimed my heart.

I wrote *Flying Lead Change* to help take us back to where we were before the lost-ness started, before we were taken from our collective knowing of connection—our very humanity. From there, it puts us on the right footing for transformation, for that leap into a change of lead. *Flying Lead Change* contains the material from my countless hours in the company of Uncle Bob and other respected traditional elders, trusted spiritual teachers, and the over fifty years in the wise and profoundly rigorous company of our most loyal companion, *Equus caballus*—the horse. All of this wisdom is grounded throughout the book in the evidence-based principles of neuroscience.

I do not presume to be, nor do I attempt to be, an expert in indigenous wisdom. I've done my best to be a listener. I do believe, however, that my time in the uncompromising tutelage of horses has influenced me toward a way of listening and translating that is trustworthy. The conversations, stories, insights, and teachings that were offered to me firsthand through the generosity of both horse and human were never meant for me alone. These pages are simply a passing on of that which must be shared, for you who are called to take flight into a new paradigm of living and leading. I sense there is a reason I have been exposed to a unique set of circumstances, woven between the natural worlds of the horse and the indigenous peoples of the earth that offer us a return to our own true nature.

There are many stories in this book—stories handed down, stories about the victory of the human heart in the company of horses, and stories about courageous people making a difference. Storytelling—the handing down of story and teaching—is a potent, trustworthy, and eternal form of instruction. Deceptively simple, story is a powerful device that serves as common ground across cultures. Such sacred words have a life of their own and move like a river, cutting their own way, leading to where they want to go.

It is my hope that the content of this book feels both relevant and respectful. And that it offers restoration of connection, equipping us to take that flying change of lead to live our lives and our organizations with the entirety of our whole-brain intelligence—right and left, heart and mind. If you are pulled to read this book, the words enclosed were meant specifically for you and are handed respectfully from our most ancient brothers and sisters through these pages to you. May you find the balance, courage, and strength to fly, on behalf of humanity and the world.

Sounds True
Boulder, CO 80306

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PRAISE FOR *FLYING LEAD CHANGE*

“As someone who has spent their career working to create unstoppable cultures, I am thrilled that Kelly has written a book like *Flying Lead Change*. With an approach that focuses on principles from the equine world—care, connection, and joy—she has created a culture guide for leaders. When put into practice, these principles have the potential to not only impact teams and organizations, but families and communities as well. This book is such a gift!”

GINGER HARDAGE

former Senior VP of Culture and
Communications for Southwest Airlines

“*Flying Lead Change* is unique and extraordinary. It integrates wisdom with the practical, inspiration with proven research, and laughter with tears. Contemporary leaders who heed the advice and guidance of ancient wisdom will gain essential advantages and be forever changed. It is the clear promise of this book.”

MICKI MCMILLAN, MCC

CEO and founding partner of Blue Mesa Coaching

“After spending time with Kelly at the EQUUS ranch in Santa Fe, it comes as no surprise that she has written a book that’s a true game changer for leaders. *Flying Lead Change* brings together the age-old wisdom of the natural world with the newest data on neuroscience. The result is a guide that is both inspiring and practical—a must-read for any leader who longs to create lasting change in their organization and discover lasting joy while doing so. Kelly’s book will awaken your heart and mind to what it means to be truly human on the ‘great wild ride of life.’”

JAYSON TEAGLE

CEO of Collideoscope

“With compelling stories and deep insight into the shared nature of horses and humans, this beautifully written book teaches us how to change stride in mid-gallop as individuals with each other, and as a species with the earth. Soulful, practical, scientific, and spiritual—what a profound book!”

RICK HANSON, PHD, author of *Neurodharma*

“Kelly Wendorf offers an equine-inspired way of knowing and being in the world. A wise, wise work—about listening, leading, loving.”

RICHARD LOUV, author of *Our Wild Calling* and *Last Child in the Woods*

“As an assault team leader and officer in the Navy SEAL teams, I had constant access to world-class modern training and technology. But it was the ancient lessons—those of Spartans, samurai, and stoic philosophers—that guided my leadership journey to success on and off the battlefield. *Flying Lead Change* is no ordinary leadership book; it is an ancient lessons manual for how to lead and live well in any century.”

NAVY SEAL COMMANDER RORKE T. DENVER,
New York Times bestselling author of *Damn Few*

Discover a new approach to leading and living inspired by two profound sources of ancient wisdom: original peoples and *Equus* (the horse), grounded in evidence-based principles of neuroscience. Leadership teacher Kelly Wendorf reveals how to use seven core principles to lead without dominance or coercion—through *care, presence, safety, connection, peace, freedom, and joy*.

In horsemanship, a “flying lead change” allows a running horse to respond with breathtaking grace to changing conditions. “Collectively, we need a similar physics-defying maneuver,” Wendorf writes. “This book is for the called—thought leaders, visionaries, parents, creatives, and all those who sense we are being asked to participate in humanity’s ‘flying change’ through the way we live, love, and connect.”



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KELLY WENDORF is an executive and personal development certified master coach, motivational speaker, social innovator, spiritual mentor, and socially responsible entrepreneur with an evidence-based approach to creating a just and compassionate society. She is the developer and founder of The EQUUS Experience—an equine-assisted learning process for leadership and self-mastery. For more, visit kellywendorf.com.

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