

# Compassionate Care Retreat in Foix

How does a four-day retreat in the French Pyrenees sound? I would love nothing more than to share a few days with you this coming February. We will be guests at La Ciboulette, a tranquil inn with lovely en-suite double bedrooms, a welcoming dining room with an open fireplace and a gorgeous meditation room. We will have the entire property to ourselves and be graciously cared for by Leela, who owns and manages this center, **February 17-20, 2020.**

If you have had dreams of the French countryside and time connecting with other like-minded women, please consider my invitation. Over four days together, our activities will provide time for compassionate self-care and developing your thoughts on how you may offer this care to others. We will take time for daily meditation, yoga, walks and rich discussions on healing and the role of Gemmos – and be nourished by lovingly prepared meals.

**Dates:** Monday, Feb. 17, starting at 5 p.m. (you may arrive as early as 3 p.m.) to Thursday, Feb. 20, at 2 p.m.

**Place:** La Ciboulette, Foix, France

**Accommodations:** Shared double rooms with en-suite full bath

**Meals:** Plant-based, gluten-free meals, beginning with an evening meal Feb. 17 and ending with lunch Feb. 20

**Pricing:**

- **Full retreat price**, including three overnights and meals (Monday dinner – Thursday lunch): \$350 USD, 315 Euro
- **Full retreat, day price**, no overnight accommodation, including meals (Monday dinner – Thursday lunch): \$285

USD, 255 Euro

- **Extra nights** in your assigned room, with breakfast and dinner or lunch before Feb. 17: 40 Euro per night, arranged directly with Leela, La Ciboulette at [laciboulette-foix@outlook.com](mailto:laciboulette-foix@outlook.com)
- Alternative lodging after Feb. 20 is readily available in Foix or Toulouse.

**Travel:** Travel arrangements are not included in these prices. Flights should be arranged into the Toulouse airport. Options for travel between Toulouse and Foix include car rental and a 1.5-hour easy drive into Foix on the motorway. Once you leave Toulouse, there are no major cities, and directions are quite simple into the village.

Alternatively, there is a direct express shuttle bus every twenty minutes from the front of the airport to the Montabiau train station in central Toulouse. Direct trains run between Montabiau station and Foix approximately every hour. Arrangements can be made with Leela for pickup at the train station in Foix. There is an excellent train app, Trainline EU, to view train schedules, purchase and save your tickets.

If traveling internationally, I would advise planning to arrive no later than Sunday to give yourself time to make the necessary connections.

There is a newly-built, good-quality NH hotel adjoining the Toulouse airport if you prefer staying there overnight on your arrival or departure date. The entrance is at the end of the terminal.

**Please note:** English is spoken at the car rental, bus terminal, train station and hotel. You can also communicate with Leela in English.

*Photo by Tournasol7*

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# Playing with Fears

I am just back from my morning swim, and I have to tell you what happened. I was presented with a writing prompt too perfect to pass over. That topic would be fear. What makes it even more interesting is that the topic of fear has come up several times in different ways this week. I would like to explore with you the idea that facing our fears must be really daunting and oppressive. Is that really true? Are there ever times when facing your fears wasn't a negative experience? Might it be possible to reframe that story? Is it possible you could lean into your fears in a playful way? That's a good question that I had been pondering when along came this experience. Of course, it would happen while I was engaged in one of my most favorite ever activities, swimming.

So what was the scary challenge? It had to do with a five-letter word that begins with S.

Living in Texas has forced me to come to terms with the snake population that I happen to share this beautiful region with. I get it. If I am going to engage with nature here, I am probably going to see some snakes... sometimes more, depending on the time of year. This is all fine and well, but swimming with snakes does push me out of my comfort zone in a big way.

What I find interesting is how my deep relationship with the San Marcos River has helped me take my fears down a notch at a time. The first fear being that I would end up being carried away to the Gulf of Mexico! Back to the snakes.

It is actually pretty cool to watch a snake move down the river when I am sitting on a rock watching. It is also fine to encounter one up ahead of me. Today however, was a new twist. As I hit the midpoint on my journey upstream, swimming under a

series of low hanging pecan tree limbs, I caught a glimpse of a 6-foot long ribbon snake uncoiling from a high branch and slithering into the water just an arm's distance away. Ha! What to do? Well, there actually was part of me that was a bit mesmerized by its graceful beauty. Then there was the other part that really did not want to share my water space with this guy, especially now that I knew he was there. So I had a choice, to turn back and miss my swim or keep going. That's when I had a little talk with myself. That talk addressed the fact that I know that this river has snakes in it and yet I swim in it every single day. So clearly I've been playing a game called "what I don't see can't hurt me." That's a mental game that doesn't really work with my belief systems I apply to other areas of my life. So now that the snake has shown itself, what has changed? Not a thing.

Please know this isn't to encourage you to jump into a river of snakes, but rather to spark your reflecting on your own fears. Is there anything you love doing with all your heart, but you have allowed your fears to limit your enjoyment? Play with completing this statement, I love \_\_\_\_\_ as long as \_\_\_\_\_ doesn't happen. How many of those statements can you write about different activities? What might it be like for you to play with just one, letting that limit or restriction you have set crumble away?

Oh, and in case you are wondering what I did? After a few moments of consideration, I continued on upstream with my newly acknowledged swim partner.

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## **Introducing the Restoring**

# Immunity Podcast

Today I am so excited to announce my latest project. With the help and inspiration of one of my new interns and Gemmo Moms, Megan Ethridge, I have created the Restoring Immunity podcast!

This first series with Megan is geared particularly to moms. Each 20-30 minute episode covers a common acute issue and how to resolve symptoms using Gemmotherapy. Listen now to our first episodes on fevers, colds and virus support.

Once this series is complete, I will partner with other co-hosts to dive into topics of emotional immunity, fertility, aging and more. Follow my podcasts on Spotify, Radio Public or Google Podcasts and receive a new episode each Tuesday (coming soon to iTunes). If you like what you hear, please share a link with your family and friends.

Passing along knowledge and wisdom on the subject of restoring immunity is my life passion. Although I'm a writer at heart, publishing takes time. Podcasting, however, offers an opportunity for me to share new insights in a quick and accessible manner. Let's see where this takes us!

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## Everyday Lessons

*From the moment we wake up in the morning to the moment we settle in at the end of the day, we are afforded so many authentic places to practice. Every experience of hardship provides fertile ground in which we can root our practice.*

*– Justin von Bujdoss, "Ask a Teacher"*

This beautiful, everyday life that you are living with your loved ones is truly ALL that is needed to grow and become the best version of yourself. Every day is a fresh start, every moment a new and authentic opportunity to grow.

I'll admit it, I just experienced a "hit my limit moment" with my darling 17-year-old son. I am sure this is shocking to hear, especially if you, too, have raised or been a teen. Seventeen is such a smooth and easy age, right? It turns out that is not true. I've personally discovered that there are two particularly challenging periods of being a teen. These periods seem to occur just upon the transition to the teen years and then again for an excruciatingly long stretch between the ages of 17 and 20 years. While discussing the specifics of what was so excruciating today might be really fulfilling for me at this moment, I will actually set out to share how the last hour or so provided me with countless lessons. The lessons were clear and tangible because I was willing and able to give the situation some time and space.

My experience went something like this. "Fill in the blank" discussion begins innocently, yet quickly hits a point of a standoff. If it were to continue, it would surely escalate and serve no one. We, fortunately, have learned to call it off and each head to our personal spaces, not without just a little bit of foot-stomping (absolutely not me).

Then came the challenging part.

1. Really stopping and not following up with all of the snarky comments that came flooding into my head (and I am sure, his)
2. Cooling down
3. Considering what was underneath my frustration, what emotion was driving this confrontation and sitting with that emotion until it dissipated
4. Considering what might be underneath his frustration and some questions I might ask to help me understand his

position

While this looks like a lot of processing it actually happened within a span of 30 minutes or less. I then got myself a cup of tea and did something entirely unrelated.

Within an hour we met up again, my son initiating it this time, which was a cause for celebration itself. In a short stretch, we each listened to one another and found an agreeable place in which we could park the topic for now. So there was not a full resolution, but we found a place in which we both could find some comfort and were able to get back to relating with one another with ease.

In this everyday experience, I learned that sometimes my son I can both fear the same thing but for different reasons. I learned that having a better understanding of his perspective reduces my fear. I also learned that when I get caught up in what's not working, I lose sight of all the things that are going well, and I can choose where I want to place my focus.

This simple yet very real story is an example of mindfulness off the cushion... and an everyday lesson. You, too, can reap these benefits from a short and sweet daily meditation practice. While getting to and sitting on that cushion is a story in itself, the rewards of that practice look just like I described above. It's the skill to become an observer of yourself and of others, and the ability to question the story you are telling yourself. Instead of letting your emotions roll you into a place that is limiting and without perspective, try something different. Try stepping back, physically, as I did with my son if that is possible. If not, do so internally by checking in on your breath and placing your focus there. Then, check in with some other possible story lines. Are there other ways this story could end than the one you have created? Finally, find the courage to say, "Hey I don't like the way we left this. Is there a way we could move forward?" That last step does take courage but is

the most important in our personal growth.

So what do you think? Are you ready to tune into your day and the lessons within your reach?

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## **Where Does Gemmotherapy Fit in the World of Herbal Medicine?**

It isn't often that my schedule permits me to offer a live class in the U.S., but I cleared the weekend of Nov. 9 when an invitation to teach at AOMA Graduate School for Integrative Medicine arrived. If you are looking for an opportunity to study with me directly, here is your personal invitation! (Register online)

Meanwhile, you may enjoy this interview with AOMA, where I discuss my approach to Gemmotherapy and its place among other therapies.

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## **Swimming Upstream**

Every morning, between 7:30 and 8 a.m., I sit on the steps that lead into the San Marcos River, put on my fins and goggles, and head upstream. Returning downstream, I'm often asked how far I made it, and my answer is always this: "As far as the river and I could agree on today." And that is the truth, because each day my swim is a negotiation between my

body and the ever-changing current of the river. What started out as a pure curiosity to see what was around the bend upstream has spun into a rich and rewarding daily ritual.

I was born an Aquarian, and my earliest joyful memories as a child are those of wading in creeks. Weekends in the Bay Area always involved a trip to the beach. Then, in my adolescence, when we moved to the Sacramento Valley, I swam on swim teams, river rafted and worked summers as swim instructor and lifeguard through college. Wild swimming, however, was never really my thing. Mostly because wild swimming also included other wild things that I wasn't so sure I wanted to share my swim experience with. But something changed when I reached my 50s, and I started challenging a variety of limiting behaviors I had adopted over a lifetime. Today I am so grateful I broke through all my fears regarding open-water swims. I can't imagine missing out on my morning interactions with the San Marcos River.

Here are some lessons that my swims upstream have taught me. These lessons have become equally useful in and out of the water:

*The current is constantly changing, and so is my body.*

*Navigating is more about technique than strength. Swimming smarter is more useful than swimming harder.*

*A new angle of approach on a challenging stretch can get me to the other side of it.*

*Pausing to reassess may be all that is needed.*

*Let go of any expectations to reach a certain destination. Swim for the experience, enjoying all the lessons along the way.*

Interactions with nature hold so many metaphors for life, whether you sit in the garden observing insects on the ground,

stand under the night sky, take a hike among the trees or swim like I do. Connecting with nature on a regular basis keeps us in check. It keeps us on an authentic path. Everything I encounter on my swim is real. There is nothing contrived about it. Yet the moment I leave it, I encounter a world so vastly different. Carrying the lessons learned into my day is a simple yet profound way of remembering what is really important and focusing my energy there.

Is there a ritual in nature you have found to connect with your authentic self? Is there one you would like to create? Keep it simple so it fits your life today, and as your life changes, you can make room for more. What small step can you say yes to? Pay attention to the lessons that nature shares so generously.

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## Are You a Gemmo Mom?

*“The odd thing about these deep and personal connections of women is that they often ignore barriers of age, economics, worldly experience, race, culture – all the barriers that, in male or mixed society, had seemed so difficult to cross.”*

*– Gloria Steinem*

In a recent conversation with my dear friend Christine, I shared a story from my time as a young mother. I hadn't considered the relevance of that story until now. During the early 80s, the decade of shoulder pads and big hair, I was a mother of two preschoolers and an officer's wife. To most, that role meant staying home, stenciling the yellowing walls of the military quarters, holding teas and NOT having a career. I did have a career. Mine was in the field of

education as an innovative and aspiring school administrator. It may come as a great surprise to young women today, but just thirty years ago I was often chastised and called on the carpet by my then-husband's commanding officers. My offense was not putting my husband's career first and foremost – challenging the status quo.

This was a painful period in my life because I struggled with wanting a meaningful career that was important and right for me – versus what was expected. What I was sorely lacked was a tribe – peers who thought like I did and, more importantly, took action. Thank goodness things have changed for military spouses. But I still remember with clarity the deep sense of isolation which led me to considerable self-doubt.

## **Forming community**

My desire to challenge the accepted way of doing things has not faded over the years. Today however, it has moved to the arena of health. Due to my history, I feel a deep bond with the women I coach who find themselves trapped between imposed healthcare norms and their deep-seated beliefs that there is another way to achieve lasting health and well-being for themselves and their children. Like me in the 1980s, these women could benefit greatly from a community of peers who shared similar struggles and mentoring on navigating upstream against an often powerful current.

I began to envision ways I could do my part to mentor and provide a safe and forum to connect.

Last spring, I launched Gemmo Moms and literally connected moms from California to Kyiv. We met bi-weekly, and the concept developed organically. Staying in tune with the needs of the group, I led them down a path of self-discovery to prepare each one to advocate for themselves and other mothers in their circle of contact.

## **New programs**

This fall, I am thrilled to announce four independent Gemmo Moms series, which include:

- Everything Acute
- Conscious Conception and Pregnancy
- Coaching Skills
- Building Emotional Immunity

To offer this support to mothers of all ages and stages in life is so near and dear to me. I can only begin to imagine how different my self-image and life choices would have been if I had had such a group as a young woman and mother. It is my desire to be the support I would have loved and to encourage my students to begin similar groups of their own when they feel ready. I am so proud to share that some of my first students already have!

## **Who can join Gemmo Moms?**

Any woman, at any stage of mothering, who would like to learn more about supporting natural immunity in children is invited. If you already have experience with Gemmotherapy, all the better, but if you are brand new you are equally welcome. Questions? Feel free to respond directly to this blog post so others can benefit from our exchange.

## **Hear what others say**

Now that you've heard my perspective, I thought it fitting that you hear what a few of the original Gemmo Moms have to say about their personal experiences in the program:

*“Gemmo Moms helped me feel connected to other mamas who are exploring Gemmos with their families. It feels so good to not be pioneering this alone! There are amazing women all over the world who are curious about and inspired by this healing path. Lauren provided a safe and comfortable space for us to*

*develop more self awareness and support one another on our Gemmo journeys.”*

*– Kara from Austin, Texas, USA*

*“The Gemmo Moms program is an experience like no other! Lauren led us on a transformational journey that brought us to a greater awareness of ourselves in an incredible community of women. I highly recommend Gemmo Moms if you’re looking for a deeper, more connected way of helping family, friends, or clients with Gemmotherapy.”*

*– Christina from California, USA*

*“I loved my meetings with Lauren and the other beautiful women who formed our Gemmo Moms group. It felt like an anchoring moment of my busy week when I could settle while soaking in the precious information which Lauren generously shares.”*

*– Sarah from Toulouse, France*

*“Gemmo Moms gave me a tribe of like minded mamas who encourage, love and support me! It helped to build my confidence, grow physically, spiritually, mentally and emotionally, and challenged me to unlock a deeper part of myself and what I’m capable of.”*

*– Megan from Louisiana, USA*

*“I enjoyed connecting with other Gemmo Moms and exploring the further potential we have for better caring for others. Lauren is a thoughtful guide into insights that can be used in a practical way.”*

*– Stephanie from Maryland, USA*

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# This Journey's Growth

*"In a forest of a hundred thousand trees, no two leaves are alike. And no two journeys along the same path are alike."*

*– Paulo Coelho*

We are all on a journey, and each day presents unique opportunities for growth. Some journeys move you physically to distant lands. Some move you mentally through ideas, thoughts and emotions. And some journeys allow for both. Each journey, from the mundane to the awe-inspiring, offers unique opportunities for growth. And the trick is, those gifts may only be offered once. So let me share these two simple tips to reap all that is offered: remain present and remain open, and you will surely receive what is meant for you.

I have been on a two-month journey that has carried me to distant lands beyond what I could have imagined for myself – as well as familiar places. My journey has opened my mind to many thoughts, ideas and new perspectives. Some benefits have already begun to materialize, like new branches on the tree representing my work. Others have arrived in the form of seeds that may or may not develop with nurturing and time.

Here's what has materialized over my two months in Europe:

## 1. **Partnerships**

A totally unexpected and organic development is the creation of partnerships with two of my European students. While still in the early stages, there is a clear commitment to preparing recordings of the ten Foundations of Gemmotherapy modules in both Russian and

French languages! While this will be a huge endeavor, it is a giant step forward to share my systematic approach to restoring immunity. I am thrilled and so grateful to Brigitte and Lena, who will make this possible. Once we have a model established, it will be quite easy to set up further partnerships where there is interest.

## 2. **Gemmo Moms Cluj-Napoca**

Another branch developed quite organically with the help of Dr. Dana Campean and Coach Dumitrita Margineanu. The first Romanian Gemmo Moms group met during my stay in Cluj, and we filled the room with curious moms brimming with questions about their children. It was remarkable to be present for this inaugural meeting, and I can't wait to see how it grows and inspires future groups.

## 3. **A Publication Date**

My third book, Restoring Your Immunity, is now set for official publication in French by the Piktos Publishing group for February 2020. For you English speakers, please note my agent is actively searching for an English language publishing house to pick up the contract as well.

## 4. **A Fourth Book**

The start of my fourth book is official. With the brilliant support of my Romanian colleague, Dr. Neli Olah, I will create a clinical and physiological guide to the primary Gemmotherapy extracts. While this will be quite an endeavor, my plan is to have my work completed and ready for translation by May 2020.

## 5. **A Blind Study**

Also with the support and guidance of my Romanian colleague, Dr. Neli Olah, I have prepared a course which includes the first blind study of Gemmotherapy extracts. This study will be a continuation of my work with micro-dosing extracts for the nervous system. The study will be one of two planned over the next twelve months and will begin in September. More information will be available later this month.

## 6. **A French Retreat**

The notion of hosting a retreat in Ariege has been hovering for a year now. This summer, I've made it so far as to identify the focus of the retreat, isolate two possible dates and finalize the venue. It's actually been a big dream of mine, and I couldn't be more thrilled to make this dream a reality with my international group of inspiring movers and shakers, Gemmo Moms.

Other developments – my new seeds – contain immense potential for growth, but they could also lay dormant or never sprout at all. It is no coincidence we are approaching fall, the season in which seeds are scattered, some sprouting in cool temperatures and others waiting for the warmth of spring. So, knowing which of these seed ideas will choose to germinate is something only time will tell.

Here are ideas that were born this summer:

### 1. **Internship Program**

I'm so excited about this idea that is showing some life this summer. It's been hanging around for years, and I knew it was just a matter of timing. It's too soon for details, but certainly, in the works this fall is an internship opportunity for my students ready to begin their own practices. Just the thought of this makes my heart fill with joy!

### 2. **Expanding My European Travels**

Now that a new frontier for my work has opened in Eastern Europe, my annual summer trip feels quite stretched. This summer's experience has led me to consider a more sustainable way to teach in both geographic areas. It has not yet materialized, but the seed of this idea is to return to Europe twice annually, teaching during winter in the west to include Belgium and France, and during fall in the east to include Romania and Ukraine. This makes sense in this moment, so

until I gain more insight I am preparing to give it a test run for 2020.

### 3. **Teaching Polarity Analysis Homeopathy**

This is certainly not new, but this seed won't go away. And there is renewed interest in co-teaching Polarity Analysis with my husband, Joachim. He is responsible for building a widely circulated homeopathic software. Polarity Analysis, or PA, is the homeopathic remedy selection method developed by my mentor and our dear friend, Dr. Heiner Frei. If you are a patient of mine, you are used to the polar questions I ask about your symptoms. Coming closer to germinating is our teaching of this method together in 2020. The challenge for us will be to harmonize our very different teaching styles. If it's meant to be, how we manage this will open up for us.

### 4. **New Friends and Acquaintances**

Meeting new people, especially when you are awake and aware of the value, is like opening a present. No doubt there is a gift, a lesson, an insight or future connection to be revealed. Which one is often not apparent on first meeting, but over time is made known. I so enjoy this experience – especially hearing people's stories – and this summer I was not disappointed. From Belgium to Romania and Ukraine to France, I will carry home the seeds of these contacts. I treasure hearing the dreams of so many – and what each has done to realize his or her dreams is both inspiring and motivating.

While I have been off on my journey, you too have been on your own. Perhaps yours led you to a new geographic location or a journey within yourself. Where has your journey taken you? What have been your immediate benefits? What seeds have you been offered that may need time to germinate? The lessons from our journeys don't need "work" to be received. They only need your attention and a bit of solitude. Can you give yourself the gift of presence? Can you remain open wide enough to

receive all that you are being offered?

It's been my pleasure to share my summer journey with you. Thanks for joining me.

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## Life as an Experiment

*"Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do."*

*– Mark Twain*

This has served as my motto for at least the last two decades. It continues to serve me in the face of my own fears, lines from old stories, questioning from my family and even surprising bouts of homesickness. It continues to guide me because I am committed to living my life without regrets. If life is one big experiment (and I am certain it is), I have surely entered a new phase. Boundaries that I perceived to be real are continually revealed to be illusions. Visiting Kyiv last month was all about dissolving geographical boundaries. But there are so many other boundaries in our lives. Some of these boundaries protect us, and some, in the end, limit us from living life to its fullest. We can gain further inspiration from Twain in the way he continued after the lines above: *"Throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."* I am.

While I may not have caught the full potential of those trade winds this past week, I did my best to explore, dream and discover all the riches here in Ariege. After six weeks of solo travel, my husband, Joachim, caught up with me in Toulouse. I was thrilled to see him for countless reasons, and

at the top of the list was my excitement to share Foix. In summers past, we have based ourselves in villages outside of Lavelanet and quickly discovered the vast differences in climate and topography over a 30 minutes drive to the other side of a mountain. Foix was the home base I chose for myself last winter to finish my third book, and I quickly fell in love with the mountain views, the warmth of the people and the charm of this small city. Now we had a week off to set sail together.

Although I had known Day 15 of Tour de France would end at Prat d'Albis, just above Foix, I had not given it much thought. That is, until I realized it would literally pass along the street above our house. For any TdF fans, may I just share that we had a front-row seat for the approach to the final ascent of the day? And it was so simple to stroll up the hill, finding a seat along the stone wall to cheer the racers on with our neighbors. We were advised to arrive an hour before the riders were due, for the pre-race entertainment. Our timing was perfect. Just as we settled in, the caravan of wacky sponsor vehicles arrived, tossing out swag to bystanders. It was quite the thrill to see the riders arrive over the hill, with Simon Yates (winner of the day) already far ahead of the pack.

I wasn't too sure how we would improve on that impromptu viewing of TdF, but each day we've had a healthy dose of the natural beauty of our location. Never traveling further than 30 minutes by car, we still only put a dent into our list of options. There is just so much to see and do in this part of Ariège. If we did nothing but follow the local markets, picnic and swim in the village streams, it would have been fulfilling enough, but there really was so much more.

Within this region, there are three magnificent prehistoric caves. We chose to visit the Niaux Cave, just a 20-minute drive from Foix, passing Tarascon-sur-Ariège. For years as a high school history teacher, these caves have been on my

bucket list, but getting to the Pyrenees always seemed a bit out of reach. Now with the opportunity here, I have to say there was just a bit of hesitation. There was no doubt I really really wanted to experience that art, and at the same time, I really really hate caves, especially long, dark slippery ones. I will say in truth the experience definitely did not disappoint, and at the same time, I was delighted to see the light of day at the end of the tour. While I was prepared to be in awe, I really had no idea how powerful the experience would be. The number of paintings alone was surprising, but the attention to detail was astounding. Imagining life that long ago, and the scenes that took place as those paintings were created, is truly overwhelming.

The small town of Foix is a busy place year-round, with a cultural events calendar to challenge cities three times its size. There is literally something artsy happening every week, and lucky for us, our dates in town aligned with the Regional Folk Festival, the Jazz Festival, a weekend antique market and the African Dance Festival. Not usually a festival fan, here in Ariege I am quite comfortable sharing space with the few hundred rather than thousands who enthusiastically attend nearly everything offered.

JazzFoix was a real find, since Joachim is a jazz guitarist and performed for years with a band in Stuttgart before our move to Texas. He was delighted, and more than a little surprised that I had bought three-day passes for the two of us, with a commitment to attend the 9:30 p.m. concerts. Afternoon naps allowed me to power past my bedtime three nights in a row, much to my own surprise! It certainly helped that the event was literally two blocks from our house. On the first night, we realized that in our twenty years together, we had never attended a single concert as a couple. To be sure, there was a bit of a learning curve, as Joachim is a front row, center seat kind of guy, opting for the full experience, whereas that was my worse nightmare. I prefer something midway

back on the aisle, allowing for some perspective to take it all in. It was good that we had three nights to find our way to a good compromise. We enjoyed ourselves so much, we already have the dates on our calendar for next summer.

Scorching temps across France last week led me to make a pact to swim or wade into every stream or river encountered. It was a fabulous idea, and let me just say, I swam in water so cold it hurt even after I was out! Not so many years ago, I would have laughed if anyone had suggested I swim in anything less than 80 degrees. And to think of all I would have missed!

I love local art events and have attended some very special ones over the years, but last week I attended the most enchanting one ever. It was Vagabond Arts, hosted annually in the tiny hamlet of Baulou. Cars are left out on the main road, and the experience begins as you enter the forest paths. Every building in the hamlet, from the church to the barns, is put to use to display work from area artists. Each display was an installation in itself under the canopy of moss-covered beech trees. The effect was mesmerizing, and I left completely rejuvenated, as if I had been to a spa.

Wasn't it perfect that the weather cooperated with my plan to wrap up our week with a short train journey to the thermal baths at Aix-les-Thermes? We went from highs of 98 degrees to rainy skies and 70 degrees, and rain overnight on perfect cue. A 40-minute train ride to the ski resort village of Aix is a treat in itself, but then two hours in the thermal baths with spectacular mountain views puts it over the top. Taking the train is a must, because the last thing you want to do when your bones are like jelly is to mess with driving home. If you needed another reason to visit Ariège, this should do it.

We have fallen more in love with Ariège on each visit, and we certainly dream of creating a second home in the area. However, with all of the unexpected events and changes in the last year, I have become immensely aware that how I will work

in Europe is still unfolding. It would be lovely to make a second home base in Foix, but I think for the meantime, I'll need to take life in six-month chunks and see how this continues to play out. With that in mind, I do have a return ticket to Europe for February 2020. That ticket gets me to this continent. The where and for how long will need to make themselves known in the next chapter, setting sail beyond the safe harbor of home.

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## Invitations

*"Destiny's interventions can sometimes be read as an invitation for us to address and even surmount our biggest fears."*

*– Elizabeth Gilbert*

Sometimes, invitations can challenge our fears. Right now, I have received an invitation that has been developing over nine months in bits and pieces. For some time, I did my best to politely attend to the gentle requests as they arrived but refused to see the big picture they were forming. Instead, I choose to direct my focus to what appeared to be more important tasks. This summer, however, the gentle nudging is over and there is a tangible pull in a direction quite unexpected and to be honest, a little bit scary.

Have you ever received an invitation that you tried to ignore? I am sure you have. Like most things in life, invitations arrive with a variety of qualities. Some are tangible, printed on embellished papers, and some are spoken. Some demand attention, while others are subtle, arriving as hints, glimpses and whispers in your dreams. Invitations may arrive

for a joyous celebration or to begin a friendship. Perhaps you have received an invitation to forgive someone from your past, or to take on a new responsibility at work.

It takes a lifetime to learn to receive each invitation with gratitude, then discern the right response. There was a time I thought every invitation was a gift from the universe and I was compelled to accept. I'm thankful to be beyond that stage. Now I know invitations arrive to help us clarify who we are, how we will spend our finite energy and what purpose in life will we fulfill. And in that, sometimes our answer is a resounding "yes" and other times a "no, thank you".

Back to my series of invitations. What is it that I find a bit frightening? I am six months out from my 60th birthday and have lovingly created the home I longed for in the sweet, slow pace of San Marcos, Texas. I can not begin to express how much I love this home, and even more, the fact that all of my children are nearby. I treasure our monthly family meals together and opportunities to meet my girls for lunch or pedicures on the days I ride to Austin with Joachim. What a gift. I recognize it because of the years we were a continent apart – or times when we were near but I was not emotionally present to reap the benefits of my dear family.

Why now, when I have created such a cozy nest for myself, am I being called in a powerful way to work in another continent? And not just the west of Europe, which is a second home to me, but now Eastern Europe too? I had accepted over the past years a life between Texas and Western Europe. Yet now, here comes this invitation stretching well beyond my comfort level, appearing of its own accord. It's no longer willing to wait quietly in line – it wants my attention here and now.

I have come to know that all invitations are an offering. How they are answered is for me to discern. And thankfully, I have learned over the last decade to open the door to each request and let it sit a bit. Leaning in to see what it will serve,

and whether this is a wise investment of my energy. It's quite a bit like checking the weather. That is, checking by stepping outside rather than checking your phone app. How does it feel? Will I need a jacket to be more comfortable? Or is it too hot or too cold, and I should just stay home?

And then there is the issue of travel. Although traveling is exciting, it can also be draining. If I must travel to share this message, there is clearly a limit, as I am not getting younger. Every time I share a plane with a struggling senior, I whisper a silent prayer that by the time I reach that age, those who need what I have to share will come to me!

You know, there is a famous homeopath, George Vithoukias, who over time created a thriving school on his home island in Greece. Now that's a model I could aspire to. But then, where would that be? In the French Pyrenees? In A village in Baden-Württemberg, Germany? Along the banks of the San Marcos River in Texas? Or perhaps the Carpathians?

Today, it seems too soon to tell. I sense more traveling is required before the answer arrives. This time feels like one of those days when you step outside and the air and sky are far too changeable to predict. While I love the potential of days like that, I am not so sure that I love the situation I am in.

Having just traipsed across Eastern Europe, it is clear the message I delivered is being well received. I am sharing a natural path for restoring immunity and reclaiming power over your own health. People here are not only ready to listen – they are ready to take action. What I am sharing doesn't feel new. It is reminding them of how healing used to be perceived. So the importance of this journey is clear. What is not clear is how I can address my need for home – and more importantly, can I have my cozy nest AND travel farther than I may feel comfortable? My search for a home, a refuge and a place to retreat began early in my life, and the fear of getting too

far from mine is hard to ignore.

So, what's a girl to do? Well, I'll tell you what I am going to do next. I am going to take a week off from teaching, clients and overthinking. I am going to enjoy time with my husband, who has just arrived, with the gorgeous backdrop of the Midi-Pyrenees. Today the Tour de France literally whizzes by our back yard, and next week the local jazz festival sets up one street over. I certainly plan to work in some hikes in the forest, a few swims in the river and cooking delicious meals together with local produce from the markets. As always, I'll shift gears as answers begin to appear, and perhaps a path will form that allows me to share what I know, wherever that leads me, while maintaining a deep connection with my family and home. It doesn't have to be an either-or – but I may need some occasional reminding.

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## La maison d'Hortense

*She was 97 and still tended her rose garden – her namesake Hortensia bushes, the berry brambles and fruit trees that filled the steeply terraced lot behind the house. Getting up and down those stone steps certainly took effort these days – but oh, that view was remarkable. Hortense loved this home as much as she loved her independence. She worked to quiet the ongoing concerns of her family members over her living alone. What could possibly happen at this point? While she woke grateful for another day each morning, she knew her time here on earth was growing short. How the end would come did not concern her in the least. She was fearless – because wise Hortense had allowed life to fuel her courage rather than spark anxieties.*

*Hortense insisted on caring for herself and living out her*

days in her childhood home, where she with her husband, Gaston, happily reared their daughter. The father of Hortense built the three-story home in the early 1930s. He situated it just above the historic center of Foix to take advantage of the sun through the cold winters and offer magnificent views of the mountains. He filled the terraced hillside with fruit and nut trees and arranged a square plot for a kitchen garden just outside the front door. The house served as the family's refuge for nearly a century. Eventually, Hortense's five grandchildren filled the rooms with sweet memories over the days spent here during their school holidays. She could still hear their joyful voices, chasing one another up and down the spiral staircase, making a day of exploring the treasures in the attic and picking their heart's content of whatever fruit was ripe. Of course, they were all grown now, with families of their own. And that is exactly how it should be, she thought. They are now making treasured memories in their own homes.

After giving her roses a quick trim, Hortense made her way to the kitchen to prepare herself a cup of tea. Carefully carrying it around the corner into the sitting room, she felt an unusual heaviness come upon her. Perhaps the climb up the garden steps was too much for her today. She found a safe spot for her tea on the side table and eased herself onto the sofa. I'll just close my eyes here for a moment, she thought. And that is how Hortense left this world. Peacefully, with a smile on her face, having spent the morning tending to the home she so loved.

My scheduled seminars and succession of flights across Europe have come to an end and finally, the time came to travel from Kyiv to Foix. The first leg of the journey, from Kyiv to Frankfurt, was smooth — and there the delays began. From the very un-German-like chaos at passport control to the grounding of all flights into France, I saw my blissful return to Foix slipping away. And was the car rental process in Toulouse

always so excruciatingly slow, or was my impatience getting the best of me? Hunger, exhaustion, 90-degree heat (even at 8 p.m.) and malfunctioning car air conditioning provided a meltdown recipe for sure. But the calm company of my travel buddy and navigator, Lena, helped me stay in check.

The welcome committee to Foix, Cathy and her charming partner Paul, had prepared a lovely evening meal of fresh vegetables and were full of suggestions for my weeks ahead. By the time we moved to the terrace to enjoy the beautiful night sky, it was nearing midnight and I could feel myself nodding off. Seeing my pitiful condition, Cathy ushered me off to my home for the next month, suggesting kindly that we talk more in the morning.

Under different circumstances, I would have jumped at the chance to explore this charming house, but my heavy lids and lack of focus left me no choice. I wanted nothing more than a quick shower and to find my way into bed. Asleep instantly, I slept with the deep peace and satisfaction of having reached my final destination after the trek across Europe.

I woke to birdsong and the golden light of sunrise peeking over the mountains. The cool air morning air that drifted across my room was a welcome change after weeks in big cities. It was then that I became conscious of a comfort and peace that penetrated the very core of my being. This was a feeling that I associated with a place and time in my life, but where? I didn't dare stir in bed, afraid any movement would disrupt this perfect, dreamlike state. But was I dreaming, or was I awake? The sensation of familiarity was so profound it could not be ignored. I've been here before, I thought, not here physically but here in this feeling that warmed my heart and filled me with joy. This room, this house, had awakened memories so long tucked away — and they were of my grandmother. While my eyes may have delivered a different message, my heart conveyed that I was in my grandmother's house. Now before you (or my children, if they are reading

this) begin to fret that I have become delusional, I do know I wasn't in my grandmother's house. And yet, in that moment I went back to 1970, in the tiny bedroom just a few steps from hers, in her Bay Area bungalow.

Growing up, my Grandma Tillie's house was my sanctuary from my childhood home, filled with chaos and trauma. I feel quite fortunate to have found a place of refuge for those first 11 years of my life. It was the only place I knew where I could count on waking up to safety and peace — and be fed meals prepared with love. Her presence was a balm to my young heart and soul.

Unfortunately, when I could have used her most as I approached adolescence, my grandmother passed suddenly. We were all there, picking her up for dinner out at her favorite Chinese restaurant. One moment she was full of life, joking with my father — and then she just sat down and was gone. In that split second, I lost my beloved grandmother — and maybe more important, my island of safety.

This past December, on another trip to Foix, I shared lunch with my new friend, Cathy. She had invited me to celebrate the completion of my book and to bid me farewell. We sat on her terrace soaking in the winter sun, enjoying the spectacular view of the mountains and the delicious meal she had prepared. I marveled at the serenity of her setting, given it was a just a five-minute walk from the downtown market and shops. Teasing Cathy, I tasked her with finding me a house on her street for the upcoming summer. I don't know which one of us was more surprised when she actually did, and it was right next door to hers!

As my summer plans solidified, Cathy contacted the owner of the house next door — Hortense's daughter. She was delighted to have an opportunity to share her mother's house and worked out a simple agreement with Cathy. As it turned out, aside from some cleaning and gardening, the house had been virtually

untouched for three years. And if truth be told, it felt like it hadn't been touched since the 60s!

So this is how I came to stay in what is truly still Hortense's home. Her lively energy and determination are still very present — as well as her flair for decorating, which includes the frequent use of crocheted doilies. ☐ My first week has been an interesting opportunity for self-discovery, as there are certainly times in my life when this setting would have felt just a bit creepy. But it actually could not be further from the truth. Here and now, this house is a welcome respite from my teaching and travels, from finally finishing that third book, from a year of moving houses and all that this year of motherhood has delivered. I am grateful to Hortense for creating such a welcome space, and I could not feel more at home. And who knew it would be in the French mid-Pyrenees where I would connect with my long-deceased California grandmother?

Stay tuned, because this story has just begun! I've had quite the week of setting up house and shifting into the slower pace and simple pleasures of village life. If you'd like to tag along on this journey, you can keep up with my daily adventures on Instagram!

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## Kyiv

Let me be honest here. On the bucket list of places I'd like to visit in my lifetime, Ukraine was never near the top. Actually, it wasn't even in the top 100. Absolutely no offense intended, but there was never a real curiosity, and after the unrest in 2015 any chances it had were pretty much extinguished. Now that I am here in the city, I've spent considerable time wondering why this was true. Why have I felt

an undercurrent of unease since heading farther east?

I discovered the answer easily when I considered some old stories. I'm a child of the Cold War era and a product of Catholic Schools. I am certain there was not a day of my childhood that we didn't pray for those forced to live behind the 'Iron Curtain." According to Sister Mary Julius, bless her soul, I should never take for granted my freedom to pray and go to church, because there were frightening parts of the world where that was not allowed. And, she continued, children who did go to church would just disappear. For six-year-old Lauren, who already had her own suitcase full of fears, this was really too much to handle. I am pretty sure, along with a host of other vows, I took one then to never to travel beyond that "curtain," whatever that meant!

So here I am, 59 years old and seriously trying to reconcile the beautiful, bustling city of Kyiv and its friendly residents with the ridiculously scary stories from my childhood. Along with that comes a practical question: Why Kyiv, and why now?

Remaining open to invitations that speak to my heart is a skill I've learned over time. It is a middle path that presents itself when you grow beyond the story of your experiences and connect with your true identity or soul. There you can develop the skill of discernment. This is the skill that protects you from impulsively jumping at every offer, as well as its polar opposite: living on the sidelines of life as a doubting skeptic. Both extremes result in their own kind of regrets.

If either of these paths sound familiar to you, know that the balance between them is an art. And it is exactly where you can live out your fullest life. This middle path requires giving yourself permission to *fail* (although there are no real failures) and then evolve, embracing the lessons from each experience. Accepting your failures requires self-compassion

and an open heart, one that opens wider with time. This opening is growth and will deepen your trust in your innate wisdom.

So, how does this all relate to Kyiv and the fact I am here? The story actually began last September, when Lena appeared online in my Foundations of Gemmotherapy course. My curiosity getting the best of me, I wrote her to ask how someone in Kyiv found my practice. You can read about her answer here. From the start, her determination and grasp of the topics matched her enthusiasm. I recognized Lena's passion as it was similar to what I felt seven years ago. If my travel could support a movement in Kyiv, with Lena at the lead, then it would be well served.

I can now say our mission was successful. Lena has rallied some powerful individuals who I know will each do their part to establish Gemmotherapy in Kyiv and Ukraine. I feel honored to play my part in what will unfold.

My days in Kyiv have been primarily about teaching. Each morning, we packed our bags, picking up fresh juice on the way to a homeopathic clinic in the city center. There, we met the most remarkably enthusiastic group of students, which included medical doctors, a dentist, osteopath and interested mothers. And when on July 4 this sweet group threw an impromptu celebration for me, my heart was won. They said, "We will take every opportunity to celebrate independence, yours or ours." These are words I will remember each Fourth of July to come.

Each day, we returned home spent from working in two languages, and after some tea and quiet, we would walk. Lena graciously shared her majestic home city with me. I have especially enjoyed my time with Lena's beautiful family in their flat. On the fourth floor of their historic brick building, we were at eye level with the gorgeous, starred domes of St. Volodymyr's Orthodox Cathedral. If I ever forget I am in Kyiv, those domes quickly help me place myself. In

fact, I had a magical view of the center golden dome, glistening against the night sky, as I fell asleep each night.

If I consider which European city Kyiv reminds me of, the closest would be Frankfurt. It is also a busy commercial and administrative center with tree-lined boulevards, but that is where the similarity stops. In central Kyiv, there are over 30 unique styles of buildings alone, from art nouveau and Ukrainian baroque to Soviet modernism. Experiencing so many different eras of history within a single block can be a bit mind-blowing. Known for its beautiful domed churches, Kyiv is home to over 950, many of those dating back to the 11th century. St. Sophia's, the UNESCO treasure, is just one example and a short walk from Lena's flat. There you can't help but connect to Kyiv's rich historical past. Commissioned by Vladimir the Great, St. Sophia's foundation was laid in 1011. Thankfully, historians rallied to save it during the Russian Revolution of 1917.

And because no travel story would be complete without a bit about the food, let me just say I've been in veggie paradise, much to my great surprise. Even though my arrival in Kyiv pushed midnight, I was still greeted with a bowl of soup. Soup, I've been told, is the national dish of Ukraine. And what better soup to mark my first day than Borscht. Here you can find Lena's vegan recipe. Since then I've had an opportunity to experience outstanding meals in restaurants featuring Israeli, Georgian and Odessa cuisine. Nothing makes me happier than an array of vegetable sides, uniquely seasoned and simply prepared from local produce.

I think I was most surprised by the offerings at the Georgian restaurant. Given the scant knowledge I had of Georgia, I am now intrigued. Sondro, Lena's husband, is Georgian and he has proudly shared photos and stories that certainly have me considering a visit. This week I share one of my favorite dishes.

So, Kyiv? It certainly isn't the scary place 6-year-old Lauren pictured. It is cosmopolitan yet traditional, modern yet historical, bustling yet peaceful. And remaining open to this opportunity has left me with not a single regret, but rather a heart full of joy.