



pressing pause at gwinganna

writer Kathleen Murphy

The past six months have been huge. Everything seems to have happened, including an elopement (my own) paralleled with the sudden death of a close friend and mother figure. Combine this with long work hours, juggling several jobs and roles, frequent travel and trying to stay on top of it all... you have a recipe for burnout.

So I'm taking some time out at Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, nestled among leafy mountains in Australia's Gold Coast hinterland. As I peel off the highway and make my way there along winding roads, through rolling green hills, I wind down the window and breathe in gulps of crisp, clean air.

DAY ONE

Arriving at Gwinganna I encounter my first obstacle: a gate. I buzz reception and the gate glides open. I watch as it snaps neatly closed behind me. This precedes my second obstacle: the steepest driveway I've ever seen. After an arduous climb to the top, I step out of the car and my senses are pleasantly assaulted by the sharp smell of native plants. I head towards the main area of the retreat centre – affectionately termed the 'village'. Some of the village's buildings were relocated here by the property's previous owner. Among them I find a quaint Methodist church hall, an old Masonic lodge, and several Queenslander homes (open plan, wooden houses with

peaked, corrugated iron rooves – common to this area of Australia). There is also a tiny cricket stand.

I am given a warm welcome and shown to my home for the next six days: my own villa in a secluded area slightly apart from the village. It perches on the edge of a ridge overlooking the valley below and out to the distant ocean. On the deck outside my bedroom I have an infinity plunge-pool that is cantilevered above the surrounding bushland. I could soak here all week... but not today. I have an appointment at the spa.

I hop into the buggy parked outside and head down to Gwinganna's 33-room Spa Sanctuary. It is the largest in the Southern Hemisphere and offers a menu of treatments

that reads like a small novel. A wall of water bars my entrance, turned off by sensors as I approach – a reminder for me, and everyone, to slow down. The entrance opens up to reveal the circular design of the spa sanctuary, among abundant greenery and surrounding bushland. Huge glass walls in the reception area allow me to gaze over the scene.

This afternoon I am having a Tribal Dreaming experience with senior therapist Stephen McInnes. We begin with a walk into the surrounding bushland and talk about why I'm here, what I would like to let go of, and what I would like to welcome into my life. More time and space is what I'd like. As we talk I feel a dense pressure in my solar



THIS PAGE: Villa in a secluded area apart from the village; mind body pavilion; Bushwalk through bushland.
OPPOSITE PAGE: Tribal dreaming experience. OPENING PAGE: Gwing spa lounge.

plexus. I close my eyes and breathe while Stephen performs a smudging ceremony. I imagine the dense feeling disintegrating.

We move to a treatment room and I am instructed to draw two oracle cards. From an animal deck I draw a wallaby. Wallabies, due to their physicality, cannot move backward - this card represents progression, healing and growth; it is telling me to keep moving forward without looking back. From the Dreaming deck I draw an Emu (Dreaming is part of Aboriginal culture, its stories explain the relationships between land, animals and people). Based on traditional stories, the Emu will do whatever it takes to fit in, and win, but without connecting to her heart. This card is about a need to be accepted and worrying about the opinions of others. Ouch, appropriate.

The massage begins and with the flowing Kahuna movements, warmed oil and hot stones I sink deeply into my body. Stephen works through knots in my back and neck; as he massages through my right shoulder, the pain and tension is so strong I want to cry. I do. The pain releases and flow continues. An abdominal massage (Chi Nei Tsang) is profoundly uncomfortable, particularly around my solar plexus, but I try to remember to breathe. I am painted in ochre clay and wrapped up tightly; it is so warm and cosy, I feel like melted butter. Stephen plays the didgeridoo over my body, the sound and vibration flowing through me.

I am unwrapped and sit up to see how my body is painted in different colours and

designs with the clay. I feel like I am both floating and heavily grounded. I retreat to slowly wash off the clay then sit with Stephen to talk through how I feel. I am given a small river stone as a symbol of the things I have let go and am instructed to bury it in the earth. As we leave, I make to go back out the way we came in – I am gently reprimanded and reminded that there is no going backwards. I follow a different path out.

It is dusk when I emerge and I sit for some time under a huge tree on the lawn looking out over the valley, listening to the wind rustling in the leaves above.

DAY TWO

I open my eyes to sun seeping into my bedroom. It has been raining overnight and a deep mist envelopes the valley below. Gwinganna means ‘lookout’ in the local Aboriginal language and I think how perfect that is as I lie in my hazy half-awake state. I slide out of bed and wonder what the time is. Suddenly I panic that I’ve missed the wake up call and am late for this morning’s activities. I rush to the tea station where I’ve been told to meet. I’m half an hour early. The others gather and we are taken out onto the grass for half an hour of Qigong. I learn about the importance of breath and flow through these gentle movements. As we finish, the sun streams through the clouds.

Before breakfast there are several exercise options and I choose a hike with resident botanist John Palmer. As we wander,

John provides anecdotes and information on several of the native species we pass, answering our many questions. We walk through bushland, hiking through some heavily treed areas until we reach the yoga deck, high above the retreat. The view is gorgeous. As we descend along a knobbly track, my thoughts turn to breakfast.

I am given a shot of apple cider vinegar to stimulate my digestion before sitting down to the serious business of eating. Each mealtime is one hour long, to encourage slow chewing and enjoyment of the food at hand – this is a timely reminder for me as I am often guilty of rushing through meals between appointments or in front of the computer. Breakfast begins with fresh fruit and activated (pre-soaked) nuts, followed by corn fritters with fresh avocado and tomato salsa. I wolf the lot. Slowly.

After breakfast there is more exercise and I choose Zumba. I’ve never tried it and I’m ready to get my heart rate up. An hour later I’m soaked in sweat and smiling broadly after complete lack of coordination (largely my own), laughter, loud music and high energy. A banana and almond smoothie is my mid-morning treat. Yum.

I head into a workshop with nutritionist Caroline Scott. As a clinical naturopath I’m familiar with her discussion topics, but as a normal person I benefit from listening in. I enjoy Caroline’s dynamic style, it conveys her passion and inspires us. Today she talks about digestive health and the importance of good absorption. We discuss diet and

lifestyle, digestion and stress – and the influence of these on health.

I try to ignore a dull ache in my temples that has been building all morning - the discomfort of caffeine withdrawal. I usually have an espresso each morning (ok, sometimes two) and my body isn’t appreciating the break. I drink plenty of water and am given some magnesium to take the edge off. It helps, but I feel squinty. I’m also exhausted after such an energetic morning and use Dreamtime (the afternoon period during which most people take advantage of the spa) to meander back to the villa, hop into the pool and soak.

As I float in the water I reflect, now more than yesterday, on how profound the Tribal Dreaming experience was. It resonates strongly. I feel like I am reconnecting with what is important to me. I wonder if I truly care about those little things that stress me out day-to-day, or if they’re masking a deeper unrest? Having the time and space to contemplate this absorbs my afternoon.

DAY THREE

I’m half-awake when I get my cheery wake up call at 5.30. No headache. I make my way to Qigong on the grassy hill – it is no effort to move slowly this morning. I choose to skip bushwalking before breakfast in favour of deep water running. I want to shake this lethargy out of my bones. I have a good level of fitness and I exercise most days – walking, running, yoga and the incidentals of stair climbing and city walking. However,

floaty around my middle, I find one hour of running, scissor kicking and resistance exercises truly challenging. Lethargy begone!

After breakfast I opt to join a Body Play workshop in the yoga pavilion. This is found only at Gwinganna and uses dance and movement to unlock emotions. Our facilitator, Kay, sets the intention for us – joy. We start slowly moving about the space, letting different parts of our bodies ‘dance’. The music and energy in the pavilion is welcoming and I feel free to move uninhibited. The music speeds up and the beat gets stronger; I’m whirling, kicking, laughing, skipping. We all are! Joy bubbles effortlessly. At the end of the session we want to keep dancing – Kay gives us one final song and the group goes mental: whooping, stamping, jumping and dancing. I’m spent and sink to the floor to watch the others. I can’t stop smiling. I’m sweaty, red-faced, exhausted and exhilarated. I feel like I’ve found my heart again. My playful, creative, true self is emerging. I love it.

I relax until lunch: vegetarian san choy bow (using deliciously spiced lentils and quinoa) with a selection of fresh salads. All of Gwinganna’s food is organic and much of it is grown in their own gardens, dotted around the property. Knowing this makes it

taste even better.

It’s Dreamtime and I head to the spa for one of Gwinganna’s renowned treatments – Rockupuncture. I have heard about this from several people, both before and during my stay, and can’t wait to try it for myself!

I shower off my dance-sweat and slip into a fluffy white robe to wait for my treatment. Senior therapist Keri Krieger finds me daydreaming and takes me through the spa maze to her treatment room. I lie down comfortably and the session begins with pulse diagnosis. This Chinese medicine practice uses the pulse – and its many fluctuations – to indicate health and constitutional conditions. My adrenals are overwhelmed, diagnosed through my kidney pulse, and my liver is under strain. Keri asks about my emotional state, particularly around grief, as my lung pulse indicates I am holding a lot in. I explain how I have been squashing the overwhelming sadness of loss underneath work and ‘everything else’ for several months. As I talk I feel emotion bubbling up. I start to panic and am reassured that nothing should be forced, these emotions can be released now or later – it’s up to me. I breathe deeply. Keri gently places needles in points on my abdomen, legs, feet and head. These are covered with towels and warm stones.





THIS PAGE: Dining pool; outdoor yoga; healthy cuisine. OPPOSITE PAGE: Kangaroo; Bedroom in the villa; Gwinganna's garden; Spicy carrot dip.

I relax as they heat up energy channels and encourage the flow of Qi. Keri continues to check my pulse and adjust or add needles. She begins a flowing hot stone massage that sinks me into my body and calms my chattering mind.

An hour and a half later, I feel so good I could hug the world. I float out of the room directly into the Sound Lounge, which overlooks the spa sanctuary. I sit in a large reclining chair, have a lavender-scented pillow placed over my eyes, and plug into a custom designed soundtrack that completes the bliss-out experience. The lower bass notes cause a subtle vibration in my comfy chair that helps to drop me off to sleep. After half an hour I gently wake, slide off the eye pillow and gaze out at the lush greenery below.

Back at the villa, I startle a sleeping wallaby snoozing not 10 metres from my door. As he jumps out in view I jump back in fright, we both stop for a moment before he bounds away.

In the evening I attend a relaxation session in the old church and as I lie on pillows in the dim light, listening to the relaxation teacher's voice, I feel myself drifting away.

DAY FOUR

I feel groggy when I open my eyes to the bright sunshine streaming into my room. I panic again that I've overslept – I leap up and check the time, but it's not even 5am.

I look out over the pretty morning and sit down to write until the wake up knock on

my door half an hour later. I make my way to Qigong – I've come to enjoy this meditative start to the day, I find it energising. I then join in with what promises to be a tough hike down to the very bottom of the mountain on which I'm staying.

The walk is not long (perhaps only two to three kilometres), but it is arduous – particularly returning up steep and occasionally slippery slopes. The last section covers the retreat's steep driveway and by the end my heart is thumping and face is flushed.

I take my morning shot of apple cider vinegar and help myself to fruit and yoghurt as well as scrambled eggs, spinach, mushrooms and gluten-free toast. If I ate that much for breakfast usually, I'd feel uncomfortably full, but rising with the sun and taking a whole hour over which to eat gives me time to enjoy and digest.

I make my way to the pavilion for a stretching and yoga session for the next hour. Instead of pushing myself to be the most flexible and hold postures for the longest period (as I have a history of doing) I focus on listening to my body and respecting my limits. My calves are tender after yesterday's deep water running and although they warmed up during the hike I'm careful not to push myself too far.

Today's workshop is with Karl Ostrowski, who talks to us about the best way to move our bodies, build core strength and maintain longevity. Staying active, maintaining muscle mass and consuming an alkalising diet are the key points I take from this. I can do that, surely.

I next meet with Carmen for a postural realignment session. She lies me down and examines my spine, alignment and the way my feet fall. My right side is significantly tighter and more restricted than my left. My hip flexors are also both incredibly tight, particularly on the right. Years of sitting behind a desk and road-running have not helped this situation. By using gentle rocking, stretching, resistance and MET (muscle energy technique), I am looser and more balanced by the end of the session. During the treatment, Carmen and I talk about our lives and the many adventures we've had along the way. We find similarities and like-mindedness and at the end of the session I feel I've met a kindred spirit.

I spend the afternoon on a daybed writing, reading and daydreaming, then enjoy a delicious dinner of chermoula-encrusted fish and fresh vegetables preceded by some particularly tasty small bites, including a mushroom paté and a chilled cucumber soup.

DAY FIVE

The sun is hot as we practice Qigong. I focus on the balance of yin-yang and try to ground myself to the earth. Afterward I choose to join in with the more energetic walk up to the top of Mt Gwinganna. Today I gain momentum as I power upwards. A short detour partway up one of the side tracks finds me wandering along a wide leafy path under a dense canopy. It's breathtaking.

Fresh mango and coconut at breakfast

makes my heart sing. We all gather for an after-breakfast stretch in the pavilion and I stay on for the next hour and a half of yoga. I listen to my body and after the morning's activities I feel the need for nurturing exercise. I couldn't have come to a more perfect class – our instructor Helen takes us through a series of flowing, restorative postures. I melt into these happily.

After a lunch of cauliflower chowder, brightly coloured salads and a fish terrine, I make my way to the spa for some time in the steam room, which houses an enormous amethyst crystal and is infused with essential oils. The pretty ceiling lights in this darkly-tiled room represent the stars of the Southern Cross. A sign tells me not to stay in longer than 10 minutes at a time, but I only last five – the heat is absolute. A mixture of steam and sweat streams off me. I run to the outdoor monsoon shower and relish in the cool water. Then back in for more. I do this several times and as I sit in the heat, I enjoy how present I am in my body, how clear and how clean I feel. When I've had enough, I have a cool shower, dry off, drink several glasses of water and head up to the Whisper Lounge – a leaf shaped room on the upper level of the spa from which I can look out over the entire complex. Two rainbow lorikeets play outside the window while I luxuriate.

After my relaxation coma, I head to the wellness centre where I meet with naturopath and nurse Shannon – I will be having a consultation and live blood analysis with her. We talk through my current health, stress levels and energy. The blood analysis looks at the quality of my blood cells and shows adrenal stress, mild dehydration and the likelihood of some digestive disturbances. My digestion has been imbalanced – particularly since returning from a recent trip to South America. Shannon also takes photos of each iris and we examine them on a large screen. My eyes show major tendencies toward sugar imbalance and poor tolerance of high carbohydrate foods. Emotionally, they indicate a tendency to push myself hard, be my own worst critic, be overly sensitive and guard my heart. All of these so true! I am prescribed an adrenal and energy tonic along with a good quality probiotic.

By evening I feel completely wiped out

and am quiet at dinner. I eat a delicious roast mushroom dish followed by apple, pear and mint tea. As I'm leaving, I hear the distinctive whine of bagpipes start up as John emerges out of nowhere into the garden. It is beautiful and cuts through the night. I continue back to my room with the haunting strains hanging in the air behind me.

DAY SIX

My last day. I open my eyes to the early morning light sitting golden on the treetops outside my room. I jump up and stand outside, looking out over the mist that still hovers in lower pockets of the valley. I close my eyes and listen to the birdsong – magpies, kookaburras, whip birds and more I can't name. The crickets are still out and they provide a bass note. I can smell the mix of Australian native trees that is endemic to this part of the world. I feel rested and calm – if only I could begin all days like this.

I make my way to Qigong and afterward join Gwinganna's gardener (and former chef) Shelley Pryor on a tour around the organic fruit and vegetable gardens. I walk through the gardens tasting various leaves, fruits and flowers that are handed my way. I get up close and personal with the fluffy white chickens (Chinese silky bantams).

I breakfast on fruit, muesli and yoghurt before heading over for an energising weights session with trainer Jason. I feel like getting my heart rate up – particularly as I'm on my way back into the city this afternoon. I lose count of the number of squats he has us do, but I feel the effects long after stopping.

I freshen up and make my way over for the final workshop, a cooking demonstration with head chef Hermann Schafellner. He leads the kitchen that has prepared the amazing food I've eaten over the past six days. Hermann starts with fresh almond milk, followed by tahini balls, date and almond slice (I want to lick the bowl!) and finally a Thai beef salad.

Lunch follows, incorporating the dishes prepared in the workshop. I eat with joy and appreciation. Everyone is buoyant and so am I – after six days of clean living in beautiful surrounds, tended to by beautiful staff, I feel renewed and fresh and ready to throw myself back into the crazy world waiting outside that gate.

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