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Marking and Making the (Earth's) Body: on Ritual, Relationship, Place and Pedagogy

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Rituals belong to us, and we to them, as surely as do our language and culture. The human choice is not whether to ritualize but when, how, where, and why.

—Driver 1998, 6

“Our grandmother tongue”

Our lives are full of rituals. Of course, the word “ritual” immediately conjures up thoughts of grand events such as weddings, funerals, christenings, bar mitzvahs, retirement parties, and graduations. But countless tiny rituals fill our days and nights. These rituals are so small we may hardly notice their existence, and barely see their significance: the first morning coffee, the bedtime story, the daily walk home from work, the long soak in a bubble bath, the good night kiss, the phone call to distant family members on Sunday. When we ritualize, we engage in ludic labour and purposeful play, investing all of life with meaning.

The discourse of ritualistic practice is sensual, somatic, tacit, and nonverbal. It melds thought, feeling, imagination, dream, and intuition with the concrete movements and actions of material bodies within a particular environment. It serves to awaken awareness, and to focus intention through sharpened attention to one's own body and the body of the earth. The performance of ritual is the “unity of doing and observing” (81). Thus, in ritual, “the body that does is of no less importance than the mind that knows” (Driver 1998, 81). Indeed, one could say that the body that does, *is* the body that knows.

In the following narrative I meditate on the knowing body and the “unity of doing and observing” during the performance of a winter ritual.

Winter labyrinth

Last Winter Solstice, a Vancouver community group performed several public ceremonies to celebrate the return of the light after the darkest day of the year. The group created a candlelit labyrinth in the gymnasium of a downtown community centre. So intense was the desire to ritualize through communal ceremony that members of the public queued for up to two hours for the privilege of walking it. The line of people snaked all through the hallway

and almost out of the building.

When my husband and I finally came to the head of the line, we were admitted into a dark, cavernous, enchanted space. As we entered I gasped at the magical atmosphere, so different from the linoleum floors, fluorescent lighting, and detergent smells of the community centre's hallway. The only light in the huge space came from the hundreds of candles that were placed on the floor to mark the edges of the path through the labyrinth. They cast a gentle, soft glow that was just sufficient to see one's route, and the forms of the dozens of people who were walking the serpentine path all at the same time, each one hushed, and deeply engrossed in their own personal journey.

We waited until we were beckoned to the mouth of the labyrinth. I went ahead of my husband, focussing my concentration inward for the coming journey. Although a hypnotic Gregorian chant was playing, my heart was beating fast. I had walked a labyrinth before, and was aware of the tremendous waves of energy that could be generated simply by putting one foot in front of the other. I held my breath and was swallowed whole by the labyrinth. Following the path of candlelight, I took each step slowly, carefully, and soon found myself spiralling to the opposite end of the room, and then back around again, this time the other way. On one circling of the labyrinth I was at the outermost edge of the spiral, and then on the next I was close to the centremost space. It was impossible to tell which way the labyrinth would take me, and I was carried along as if in the arms of the bubbling white rapids of a mountain river. I became aware that I was praying. As I moved, I prayed. As I prayed, I moved.

Time slowed. Eventually I entered the heart space of the labyrinth and stopped for a while by the pink firelight ball of a luminous paper lantern. As people circled and swirled all around me in the dark, I wanted to stay forever in the labyrinth's embrace. But I moved with the flow of people out of the rosy centre, following the dizzying route step by step outwards and around, a single bird flying amidst a flock of one hundred. As I left the labyrinth, awakening once again to the outer world, like Jonah spat out of the whale's mouth, I became aware of the dozens of people who had been sitting around the edges of the room, watching the peaceful movements of the walkers, meditating in silent reverence on the flowing aliveness of our bodies through the dark Solstice night.

By walking the labyrinth I came to understand in an embodied way that ritual is our primary form of communication. Tom Driver (1998) believes that, “[r]itualizing is our first language, not our ‘mother’ but our ‘grandmother’ tongue, and as such it is something we do not outgrow” (13).

Certain things can only be expressed in ritual. Ritual is without equivalents or even alternatives...that which can be expressed only in ritual is not trivial. It is, I think, crucial, and because of it I take ritual to be the basic social act. (Rappaport, cited by LaChapelle 1992, 147)

Thus, the play-work of ritual is central to human life, as it is to all animal life.

Ritual carries phenomenal power. It is a catalyst for processes of innovation and creativity, and is thus generative of new knowledge. The knowledge generated by engagement with ritual permits change in the participant's consciousness, thereby enabling the participant to co-create new ways of being with the world. Driver (1998) calls ritual a “technology of transformation” (47) in that it works to establish social order, deepen communal life, and change relationships with humans and with the wider community of living things, including the earth.

Ritual is “world-making” (Driver 1998, 149). As a truly holistic form of communication, ritual incorporates and unites the material human body, the physical earth, and the non-tangible realms of emotion, intuition, spirit, rational thought, and socio-political and cultural values. The ritual processes re-order and re-balance the energy between and within

all these diverse elements.

The performance of ritual is also an antidote to feelings of isolation. In the world of ritual, one is reminded that the self does not, and can never, exist in isolation, but is always in community. The self is merely a single weak fibre spun into the hardy strands that comprise life. The silken webs of sacred meaning, spun through the constant processes of ritual, connect us intimately to the self and, at the same time, to the Other. This sense of connection is particularly heightened in nature rituals (LaChapelle, 1988). One is always in the company of an Other: the sky, the sun, the moon, the wind, the rain, clouds, fire, trees, plants, and animals. To think otherwise is to be condemned to a mechanistic view of the universe, and a deadening, dualistic way of thinking.

In the following passage I explore the experience of a personal ritual in which my connection to the earth was especially heightened.

The tree on White Mountain

I was so far away from my mother when she was dying that we had no chance to say goodbye. After the funeral in London, I returned to my job in Japan with my new husband. But, overcome by grief and guilt, I could think only of times past and of how much I wanted to be with her. I seemed to have forgotten about life as a newly wed, and began to suffer from headaches and dizziness. My doctor in Japan diagnosed low blood pressure, and gave me a prescription for some little white pills, which I didn't take.

After the funeral I happened to see a book on my mother's bookshelf, which had been written by my regular physician in London. This doctor, Christine Page (1992), wrote that in traditional systems of medicine, it was believed that breaking primal relationships with the earth leads to sickness, which in turn manifests itself as mental or physical illness, and that making a reconnection with the natural world is a healing act. She wrote that in Tibet, traditional healers often prescribed walks in the forest as a cure for depression. For illnesses such as low blood pressure that were traditionally believed to be caused by soul loss, it was advised to find a tree and to physically connect with the energy that flowed from the earth, up through the roots and into the trunk.

I decided to try this traditional cure for low blood pressure. After all what did I have to lose? I made sure not to tell anyone about my plans, though. So I slipped away secretly, and took a walk in the forest on Shiroyama, the White Mountain, which lay just five minutes from where I lived, in search of the right tree.

As a child growing up in Scotland I seemed to know every tree and rock and hollow and stream within a mile's radius of our house. But, like most grown ups in our fast paced world, I had lost this kind of intimate connection with my own habitat. I climbed the mountain slowly looking for the perfect tree, a tree that seemed to be inviting. All of the trees on the mountain seemed unfamiliar to me, even though I had climbed this route many times before.

The forest backed an ancient Shinto temple, and was also the famed setting of an adventurous escape by a local warrior who had evaded an entire enemy army. The local people had cherished this forest for generations, so none of these trees had ever been cut down for commercial use. Most of the trees on the mountain were many hundreds of years old. I climbed on and on searching for a tree. Just when I thought that I would have to look elsewhere, there it was, some ways away from the stony path. A huge, ancient cedar.

It looked like the oldest tree on the mountain. The root system was colossal. The main trunk was dark and dead, and the bare branches reached way up into the sky. Perhaps the tree had been hit by lightning? The old trunk was completely hollow. I'm sure I could have crawled in and then have stood up completely to my full height. But I was too scared of the bats and snakes and spiders that might have called the hollow home. From the base of this

lifeless central body, however, sprang another giant, living trunk — a whole new tree. One of the strong branches from this new trunk swung down in a low arc. It was quite easy to climb up onto this low branch. Broad and smooth, it was the perfect place to sit. Reclining was even more comfortable, and as I lay back against the branch, looking up at the light dappling through the swaying green canopy, it seemed as if the tree were cradling me. I felt welcome here.

One of my earliest memories was of a time when my mother took me to a London park near our home. Lying in my stroller, I looked up at sunlight playing on the leaves of an old elm. Now, lying back like a baby on this cedar branch, I dreamed of nothing in particular, letting thoughts simply come and go, relishing my solitude, soothed by the sounds of the mountain forest. As I relaxed into its bark skin, the energy of the welcoming tree branch flowed along my spine, revitalizing my whole body.

I came up to my secret forest cradle every day. One day, at a hairpin turn in the crooked path, almost a third of the way up the mountain, a snow-white cat stepped out in front of me and stretched its tail upwards as if in greeting. “Hello cat,” I said, a little afraid of the feral feline. The sleek, muscular cat meowed quietly and then rubbed its body against my shins. I gingerly stepped over the cat, and set off for my special tree. The cat followed. When I stopped, she stopped. It was clear that the cat wanted to walk with me. Again, I set off, and the cat accompanied me up the mountain until the tree was in sight. Then she disappeared into the undergrowth. Each day after that the cat, whom I called Shiro (which means “White” in Japanese), would magically appear at the same spot on the trail, as if she had been expecting my arrival, and I would be escorted by my familiar companion, the white feline spirit, up the twisting mountain path to within sight of my healing tree.

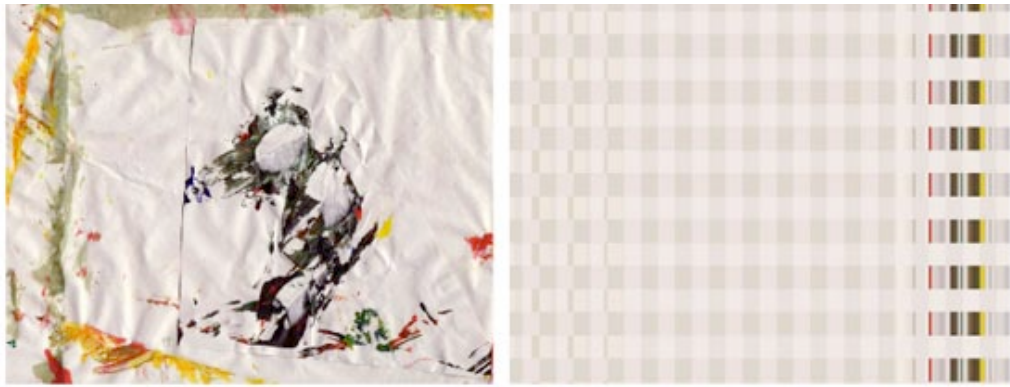
A week after I had begun my daily walks up the mountain with the gentle Shiro to rest in the cradling branch of my tree, my blood pressure had returned to normal. I was still grieving for my mother, but I felt as if I were again in the land of the living. Although a Western doctor might believe that my cure was a happy coincidence, perhaps a doctor who practiced a traditional, earth-based medicine would say that, with the assistance of the spirit of the wild white cat, my mountain guide, I had been able to tap into the life energy that was flowing through the ancient tree. Even though I was feeling well, I still continued to climb the mountain regularly, accompanied by Shiro, to visit my tree. I got to know both Shiro and the tree pretty well. And, when I left Japan eighteen months later, I missed the tree, and Shiro, more than most of my human friends.

Sacred connection: Marking and making the (earth’s) body

What sparked my desire to perform this healing ritual, to make the daily journey to sit with the tree? According to Driver (1998), the strong desire to perform ritual stems from a “prolonged or acute absence of moral guidance” (44). In my particular case, I did not know how to live after the death of someone I had loved so much. The symptoms of my grief gave physical expression to this lack of knowledge, and did not diminish until I turned myself over fully to the practice of the ritual.

In order to immerse myself in the flow of this special ritual, I had to find a place that was in some way set apart from my daily life as a teacher, wife, sister, daughter and friend, a place in which my social status and professional roles were not important. This in itself is a healing act. As Joseph Campbell (cited in Whyte, 2001) writes:

You *must* have a place to which you can go, in your heart, your mind, or your house, almost every day, where you do not know what you owe anyone, or anyone owes you. You must have a place you can go to where you do not know what your work is or who you work for, where you do not know who you are married to or who your children are. (157)



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Such a place is a liminal space, a subjective space in which we are not defined by familiar social boundaries or expectations. The place of ritual may be set apart from the mundane world either spatially or temporally, or both (Driver, 1998). For reasons of privacy, I chose a tree that was secluded, very nearly at the top of a mountain, just back a little from the stony path, and reserved a small part of each afternoon after school to spend time there. It was my *intention* to ritualize that made the walk up the mountain and the daily meditation with the old tree a ritualized rather than a mundane act. For the healing to work, I had to respect an imaginary, but crucial, threshold between the workaday world and the world of ritual.

Although I did not at first consciously realize the significance of my chosen ritual space, I was fortunate to begin my search for my healing tree on a mountain. In many spiritual traditions across the world, mountains, in all their magnificent wildness, have been recognized as places of vision. Indeed, in ancient Japan the name *yamabushi*, which literally means “those who sleep in the mountains,” was given to Buddhist pilgrims of the Shingon sect who wandered mountains in search of enlightenment (LaChapelle, 1988). In the Shinto religion, many mountains were revered as sacred places, especially volcanoes. Shiroyama, where I took my daily walk, was a mountain that was flung up on the edge of a caldera after the volcano Sakurajima had exploded. Located on the edge of a tectonic fault line, a site of great power, the mountain intuitively felt like the obvious place to begin my search for a suitable tree.

When I lived in Japan, I marvelled at the beauty of the venerated trees that surround Shinto shrines. In Shinto, trees may either be the dwelling place of *kami* (Gods), or they may be recognized as sacred in their own right. As LaChapelle (1988) points out, in the West we would imagine that sacred shrines are provided with trees, but in Japan such sacred trees are often furnished with shrines. Since leaving Japan, I have learnt that many other cultures have also recognized the sacred qualities of trees: Christian mystics, Zen practitioners, the ancient Celts, and many First Nations peoples have valued the powers of trees, and have sought out particular trees to enhance the practice of meditation, to provide deep psychic and physical healing, to take away labour pains when giving birth, to mediate between the upper and lower worlds, as well as to aid in divination (Brussat & Brussat, 1996; LaChapelle, 2001; Pennick, 1996).

In Japan, it is not unusual to pass sacred trees, or rocks, or other sacred places beside waterfalls, or on riverbanks as one goes about everyday life. Local people bring offerings—a cheap jar of sake, a few cigarettes, a Satsuma orange, flowers in a plastic cup, or a couple of sweet rice cakes. These places of devotion are sometimes located at busy city intersections, or even in the middle of shopping malls. No matter: the shrine, whether large or small, provides the necessary spatial threshold that is required to demarcate the sacred place from the surrounding hubbub.

A sacred place may seem elusive, but it is instantly recognizable to those who are attuned

to its moods, and have striven to develop a personal relationship with that small corner of the earth upon which he or she lives. If one moves through a place with attention, one may recognize such power points (LaChapelle, 1988). The sacred place is found whenever mystery breaks through into our consciousness, and is recognized and accepted. To a large extent, this requires a leap of imagination.

Starting from the premise, commonly held by many traditional cultures, that the earth is alive and infused by a vital spirit, which manifests itself through the material, Pennick (1996) describes how a person may bring the soul of a place into being.

[T]he landscape is filled with places where spirit is present. Every time we experience it, this presence encourages us to make an imaginative act that personifies the place to us. Then we perceive its qualities as a personality. This is the *anima loci*, the place-soul. When this is acknowledged and honoured, ensouled sacred places come into being. Our actions enshrine the *anima loci*, bringing the unseen into physical presence...Traditionally, it is viewed as a presence or being that exists beyond the everyday realms of human cognizance, perhaps possessing its own consciousness and personality. (13)

Ritual is inherently interactive and social, a practice that assumes a sense of self that is expanded and communal, and that invites the energies of the *anima loci* to congregate and unite. Thus, to practice ritual is to give physical expression to the belief of community and mutuality with the earth.

The knowledge—that the earth is alive and that all is in balance and relationship—is central to any understanding of the sacred. In perceiving the vitality, intelligence, and personality of a particular place, one may begin to come into intimate relationship with that place. We humans can easily recognize the cyclical flow of cosmic energy in the patterns and movements of the earth: we see it in the movement from night to day, in the ebb and flow of tides, in the waxing and waning of the moon, and in the death and rebirth of plants and animals in the ever-changing seasons. During ritual our awareness of these cyclical flows of energy sharpens.

Despite a general awareness of the earth's cyclical flow of energy, I was still overcome by feelings of guilt, grief, and anger after my mother's death; I was unable to let my mother go, incapable of accepting her death, the inevitability of change, and my season of loss. It was only through actually *doing* the healing ritual that I was able to understand these concepts in a fully embodied way. By meditating, feeling the flow of energy through the ancient, knowing, half-dead, half-live cedar tree, I once again became acquainted with and accepting of the cyclical nature of life and death, and felt myself once again reenergized and in friendship with the earth.

Such powerful transformation is possible when the *anima loci* is invited to gather together with human energy through the performance of the ritual, multiplying their powers "by fusion," as it were (Driver 1998, 156). The ritual, in the midst of performance, takes on a momentum, direction, and will of its own. Taking place in liminal space-time, at the margins of the everyday, at what the ancient Celts called "thin places," the processes of ritual have a somewhat anarchic, chaotic quality. To an extent, the outcome of the ritual is beyond the participant's control. The unexpected is likely to happen. A tree might beckon to you with the whispering of its needles. A snow-white cat could magically appear. The participant is invited to respond playfully: "Hello cat!"...

Although rituals are used to transmit old cultural knowledge, by their very nature, they cannot be performed the same way twice. Erickson (cited by LaChapelle, 1988) recognizes the perpetual uniqueness of ritual:

Ritualization is grounded [in the life of those involved] and yet permeated with the spontaneity of surprise; it is an unexpected renewal of a recognizable order in potential chaos...It minds instinctual energy into a pattern of mutuality, which bestows convincing simplicity on dangerously complex matters...Thus, the decay or perversion of ritual does

not create an indifferent emptiness, but a void with explosive possibilities. (151)

Given the awesome potential power of rituals, it is no wonder that so many are kept secret. We often keep secret that which is most precious to us, that which we desire most in the world, but which might be damaged by too much public scrutiny (Whyte, 2001). Choosing to guard the energies of my own healing ritual, I told no one of my daily meditation in the arms of the cedar tree.

In the final instance, what did I learn from the practice of this particular ritual? Looking back, it can best be summed up by a line from “The Great Treatise” of the *I Ching* (cited by LaChapelle, 1988): The greatest virtue between heaven and earth is to live (116). Through the practice of sitting cradled in my healing tree, I also came to know that ritualized acts provide a rhythm and shape to the unseen powers that sustain life itself. Each ritualized act adds a further layer of meaning to the diverse narratives of our lives. If one pays sufficient attention to the everyday, one may come to invest every mundane act with sacred meaning, becoming acquainted with the sacral. The sacral may be defined as the “ritualizing of all things—small and large—that are invested with life’s essential meaning” (Lerner, in Brussat & Brussat (Eds.) 1996, 398). Through the regular practice of ritual, one begins to know the mystery of the sacral, opening to its daily lessons, whatever one is doing.

Ritual/relationship/place/pedagogy

“Learning and teaching...are the very intersubjective core relations of everyday life. They exist beyond the classroom,” writes Carmen Luke (1996, 8). Pedagogy takes place in diverse sites, not only in kindergartens, schools, and universities. Thus, I define pedagogy broadly as that which acts upon and acts with human beings in such a way as to transform their embodied consciousness, thereby producing meaning in the process.

As the mind is embodied, the body itself may be considered a primary educational locus. It is at once a site of struggle, pleasure, desire, control, fear, shame, and pain. The embodied self simultaneously constitutes and is constituted by the discursive environment, becoming inscribed with discursive practices in so doing. Indeed, the pedagogical act is a “material series of processes, where power actively marks or brands bodies as social, and inscribes them, as an effect of this, with differentiated attributes of subjectivity” (Grosz, cited by Kamler 1997, 371).

Clearly, the knowing self can only exist in relationship with others. Ted Aoki’s (1997) marvellous description of “the educated person” underscores the importance of working towards further understandings of the relational and embodied nature of knowledge and pedagogy, and reminds me that such work is at heart a deeply ethical practice. He writes:

The educated person...knows that an authentic person is no mere individual, an island unto himself or herself, but a being-in-relation with others, and hence, at core an ethical being... the educated person, thus, not only guards against disembodied forms of knowing, thinking, and doing that reduce self and others to things, but also strives, guided by the authority of the good in pedagogical situations for embodied thoughtfulness that makes possible living as human beings. (1)

Ritual may be consciously employed to deepen such embodied thoughtfulness.

Rituals are not merely passive reflections of political and ethical practice; they *are* political and ethical practice, simultaneously celebrating that which they constitute in the very act of performance. Those rituals, which are directed towards ethical transformation, are liberating and increase individual and collective freedom (Driver, 1998). However, the transformative power of ritual may also be used to do harm, decreasing individual and communal harmony and peace. Through the performance of ritual, it is possible to create and maintain structures of violent power. This is achieved by channelling aggression to establish and fuel ruling classes, and by harnessing the awesome processes of brutality and colonization to

conquer, dominate, domesticate, and devour the Other, whether that Other be a culture, an ethnic group, a social minority, or a single human being.

The practice of ritual can loosen our grip on an atomistic notion of self, and open us to the sensuous richness and mystery of the everyday world. It is an embodied pedagogy where we may learn and re-learn our kinship with the earth. Ritualization allows the already permeable human body to extend itself and become part of the earth's body. As we grow to know a particular place through the intimate connection of ritual, so does the place begin to know us. The ritual place invites us into its living presence, as we ritualize and invite its living spirit into our presence. We know and are known. In ritual, we mark and make the earth—the blue-green body of which we humans are a part—and the earth marks and makes us. The mutual reciprocity of such exchange may be called medicine, or it may be called pedagogy. It is a living pedagogy, a living poetry.

The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquarians chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit—not a fossil earth, but a living earth. (Thoreau, cited by Hayden, 1996, 17)

Through the practice of ritual we rekindle the embodied knowledge that we are grounded in the material reality of the earth and of the everyday: This profoundly transformative pedagogy acts directly upon our embodied minds. It is an alchemical process, one where visions and dreams arise in our consciousness, giving birth to new ways of being and living.

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