

By TREBBE JOHNSON

Whenever Lisa Olson returned to her hometown in Wisconsin, she would bundle everyone into the car and drive out to the old farm that had been in the family since the 1800s. Although Lisa's parents had sold the place years earlier, the family still felt deeply connected to it. The house that had belonged to Lisa's grandmother stood on one side of the road. Pastures ranged over the rolling hills. Tall oak and beech woods lined both sides of the valley, and when sunlight suffused through them, they seemed as enchanted to Lisa as when she and her sister had played there as children.

On an autumn afternoon in 2004, this traditional outing had special significance. Buckled into his car seat among the adults was Lisa's five-month-old son, whom Lisa was looking forward to introducing to the farm. But as they approached the area, everyone gasped. The house was still there, but the surrounding woods had been clear-cut. Stumps and broken branches exposed jagged views of the hills. In shocked and tearful silence, the family turned around and went back the way they had come. After Lisa arrived home in California, feelings of grief and anger kept battering her. She knew she had to take action, and as the weeks went by, she knew that the action had to be a ceremony.

Rituals for Wastelands

We shut ourselves away from wounded places, psychologically, emotionally, and communally, but there is a better way to heal ourselves and our world.



On a visit to Wisconsin the following spring she again drove out to the farm. This time she went alone. Neither her father, who blamed himself for not having put a covenant on the land, nor her mother, who could not face looking at the devastated woods, felt able to accompany her. Lisa parked the car and made her way through the debris of the clear-cut to a rock she'd loved to sit on as a child. First, she gave gratitude to the trees for all they had provided to the soil, the birds and animals, the sky, and the people. She wept for what was lost. Wishing to leave something of herself, she cut and buried a piece of hair. Finally, she asked what the forest wanted her to know. "I realized the land did not belong to me," she said. "Even in the midst of the ceremony, I saw that there was still life there. I saw a pheasant. Flowers were starting to pop up. Green growth was coming through the brown. This gave me hope and faith."

Holding What It Meant

Why bother to spend time in a desecrated place? Why not focus our attention and activist energy on protecting places and species that still have a chance to survive?

Because even though a beloved place has been degraded by clear-cutting, toxic waste, urban sprawl, or some other kind of ecological damage, our emotional connection to it lives on. We remember not only what a forest, seashore, riverbank, or even the vacant lot we played in as children used to look like. We also remember what it meant to us, how our feelings shifted when we entered its wild terrain, and how we discovered there an aspect of ourselves that seemed authentic and empowering. Certain places are presences, as intimately and inextricably bound up with our view of ourselves and our world as the important people in our lives.

Perhaps it is for this very reason that the idea of confronting damaged places or endangered species may strike us as too painful to consider. Our tendency is to push them to the back of

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our consciousness, fearing, like Lisa Olson's parents, that such an encounter could pierce us with a sorrow so mortal we might never heal. The human tendency to avoid what is unpleasant is exacerbated by the physical placement of many environmental trouble spots. Swaths of clear-cutting, for example, are often invisible from the highway, where a scrim of healthy trees maintains an illusion of dense forest. On a societal level the pattern is even more insidious. A toxic incinerator or landfill is often strategically sited in a poor community, where people have fewer resources to fight it. And so, in a kind of complicity, we shut ourselves away from wounded places, psychologically, emotionally, and communally. Even dedicated environmentalists, who have worked long hours to protect a place or species, sometimes turn their backs if they lose the fight, stifling a sense of failure by shifting their energy quickly to another worthy project.

Yet, as with any shadowy aspect of our consciousness, what we avoid continues to plague us, whereas what we agree to face offers us the possibility of transformation and wholeness. And as Stephen Aizenstat, the founding president of Pacifica Graduate Institute, has written, "Avoiding our relationship with nature only hastens the inevitable: the death of the natural world."

One way to acknowledge our love for nature, grieve for its destruction, and kindle compassion is through ritual. Ritual can help us recognize beauty in people and in our surroundings and inspire one another to develop creative responses to heal ourselves and our world.

A Path toward Change

In October 2000, shoppers and business people in downtown Charleston, West Virginia, were startled when the wail of bagpipes suddenly filled the air. Men and women wearing black began to file silently down the street toward the state capitol building, some bearing coffins, others carrying cardboard tombstones on which were printed the names of mountains: Pumpkin Knob, Peter Knob, Big Fork Ridge, Black Mountain. This was the Funeral for Mountains, organized by local environmental organizations to call attention to the destruction of hundreds of Appalachian peaks. Once part of a softly undulating horizon, the mountaintops had been irrevocably blasted into flatness to facilitate coal mining. "Before then, 'mountaintop removal' was almost a bad word. You didn't talk about it," says Maria Gunnoe of Bob White, a small town about 30 miles south of Charleston. She herself was galvanized by the ceremony and now works as a full-time activist with the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition. "People in Charleston had no idea what was happening up in the mountains. The funeral put it on their radar." Since then, people in communities where millions of tons of toxic debris have buried streams, smothered valleys, coated towns in black

dust, and forced families from their homes have continued to use a combination of political activism and spiritual mindfulness to cope with the threat.

A ceremony need not be elaborate to be moving and effective. It can be a simple, spontaneous act that bonds person and place in a new, meaningful way. When a group of 15 people who attended a conference in Virginia decided to make a pilgrimage to a forest where 14,000 acres had recently been scorched by fire, each person took time to sit alone, pay attention to what the land was telling them, and tune into their own feelings. One woman, Carolyn, found her attention drawn to a blackened sapling. The tree's plight reminded her of her sister, who was currently suffering a kind of personal burning through cancer and the treatment of it. Carolyn knelt on the ground, encircled the tree with her arms and, weeping, sang a lullaby.

Empowerment through Art

Acts of attention and creativity can enlighten the community and empower activists. Forming a mandala out of beach trash, then scooping the artwork into trash bags and carting it away; making an altar outside the gate of a decommissioned nuclear power plant where fuel rods remain buried deep underground in concrete vaults; draping cloth the saffron color of Buddhist monks' robes around the stumps of ash trees that were cut down after an infestation of ash borer — all of these intimate feelings outwardly expressed can change the individual in unexpected ways.

Artist Mike Beck initially regretted making the trip from Florida to British Columbia. As part of a small group doing vigils in a clear-cut forest on Vancouver Island, the scarred landscape depressed him. He was about to walk off in search of a patch of grass when he heard the words, "Sit a stump." Startled, he obeyed. He "sat the stump" in the degraded forest for hours.

That simple message stayed with him after he returned home. "I was in a difficult marriage. When things got tough, I had plenty of things to escape into — my woodcrafts, stained glass. But whenever I wanted to run, I would say to myself, *Sit a stump. Be still. Don't run from this anymore. Learn what's to be learned. Don't run away from hardship.*"

Adopting Orphans

Attending to broken places, endangered species, and distorted natural processes (such as chickens raised in factories or peanut butter tainted in filthy facilities) may transform not only humans but nature itself, says David Powless, an Oneida Indian, engineer, meditation teacher, and business entrepreneur. Powless came to this realization firsthand. In 1978, after learning that he had received a National Foundation grant to develop a method of recycling steel, he clambered to the top of an enormous pile of industrial waste and declared, "I will conquer you!" Instantly, however, he recognized that this was the wrong approach. "I saw that the waste was not an enemy to be conquered but part of the earth that had become orphaned. My task was to help it regain its place in the cycle of life." He believes that asking damaged places what needs to happen there would help bring people back into balance with their surroundings and remind them that the land has a life of its own.

Tuning to the needs of the natural world is both a spiritual and professional practice for beekeeper Ron Breland of West Nyack, New York. In his smoker, he burns only sweet-smelling white sage

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Creating a Ritual

Unfortunately, opportunities to create rituals for damaged places and endangered species are abundant: the landfill at the edge of town, the factory chicken farm that produces your dinner, the polluted river flowing below the bridge you drive over every day, your own flower garden that is no longer visited by honeybees.

1 Alone or with a group, go to one of these places. Before you set out, decide the point of your ritual. Is it to bless the place, grieve for what has happened to it, offer prayers or wishes for the healing of the land and the community? It's helpful to have an idea of how you want to begin and how you want to end the ceremony, and then allow yourself to be surprised in the middle.

2 Approach respectfully, perhaps in silence. Be mindful of how you walk on the earth—not just for Earth's sake but also for your own. Don't break laws or endanger your safety and health.

3 When you arrive at the place, take time to absorb the surroundings and your own responses to it. Better yet, "listen" to the land. This kind of listening is a deep attentiveness that occurs not just through your senses but through your feelings, your imagination, your memory, and your intuition. Give each person an opportunity to express his or her feelings and memories about the place, both before it was damaged and after.

4 Ask what kind of physical action is appropriate for your ceremony. Potent symbolic gestures that have been used by diverse cultures around the world for millennia include stepping over a threshold, cutting something, binding two things together, breaking something, making prayers, making vows, washing or purifying, changing clothes, and creating something together. Consider also how you want to position yourselves during the ceremony. Will you stand in a circle facing one another, or will you face some aspect of the place? Will you move — from darkness to light, say, or from dry land to water and back again?

5 Once you begin the ritual, let go and don't try to control the process. Note, lightly but observantly, what is happening among the other people and with the land itself. Where is your attention drawn? What do you feel? Is the wind blowing? What kind of wildlife is present and what is it doing? You will probably discover that just by settling into an open, attentive, purposeful state of being, the ceremony develops a life of its own and all participants enter into a kind of partnership with it. What do you sense the land needs from you right now? If you have an inkling of something to do, do it.

6 End the ritual in a decisive way, so everyone knows that it is complete. You might end with a song or a prayer, by touching the earth, or by raising your arms into the air.

7 Afterward, try to make time and space for everyone to sit in a circle together and share the stories of what happened for each of them.



Rituals

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instead of wood pellets. Breland's aim is to "resanctify" beekeeping, showing the same respect for bees as the peoples of the ancient Near East and the Aegean. There, the mysterious insects with their collaborative communities, production of sweet honey, and warning sting were considered messengers between the worlds. Now, Breland says, bees are treated as commodities. With 30 years of experience behind him, he is convinced that the reason for the recent disappearance of honeybees — a phenomenon that baffles experts and worries farmers whose crops depend on pollination — is because they have not been treated right. "The apiary needs to be a sacred space," he says.

Every Act Has a Meaning

We cannot know the effect a ritual will have — who will be moved to which acts, how the land will change. That is part of the beauty and power of ritual: we do it because we must. We do it out of love.

Two months after the September 11

attacks, a ceremony called Attending the City took place just beyond the twisted wreckage that had been the World Trade Towers. The event included an invocation to the four directions, songs, and the opportunity for each person to write a wish or prayer on a strip of red ribbon that they then tied to the fence. Finally, each person committed to bringing "an act of beauty" into the city in the next week. These acts ranged from adopting an animal whose owner had been killed when the Towers fell, to baking lasagna for the crew at a neighborhood fire station that had lost several men, to posting an original poem about the disaster on lampposts across city. At the end, strangers were hugging one another. People felt united in their sorrow and emboldened to participate in the restoration and healing of their city. For months afterwards, the prayer ribbons fluttered in the wind.

Trebbe Johnson is the author of *The World Is a Waiting Lover: Desire and Quest for the Beloved* (New World Library), and a pioneer of Vision Arrow vision quests. For more information see page 00 and visionarrow.com.