

The tree on White Mountain: On ritual, spirit and place

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The Tree on White Mountain: On Ritual, Spirit and Place

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Abstract

In this autobiographical essay, I reflect on the healing and transformational power of ritual. Here, ritual is perceived as a holistic form of communication that incorporates and unites the material human body, the physical earth, and the non-tangible realms of emotion, intuition, spirit, and thought. The processes of ritual rebalance the flow of energy between and within these diverse elements, and act as a catalyst for change in the participant's consciousness. Thus, a ritualised act can change the very order of the world itself.

The performance of the personal ritual described in this essay was sparked by my grief over the death of someone I loved very much – my mother. The symptoms of my grief were a physical expression of my lack of knowledge about how to live after her death, and did not diminish until I had turned myself over fully to the practice of the ritual. The ritual itself was a simple one: a daily walk up a mountain path to sit in a particular tree. Indeed, at the time, I did not think of this daily act as ritual. Nonetheless, the performance of the ritual honoured and reconnected me to early childhood memories of my mother, and to the earth's body, and also permitted me to recognise and engage with the anima locus, or place soul, of the mountain tree.

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, overcome by grief and guilt, I could think only of times past and how much I wanted to be with her. Though I returned to my job in Japan with my new husband, I seemed to forget about life as a newlywed 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.

While in London for the funeral, I happened to see a book on my mother's shelf by my physician, Christine Page. I read how traditional healers believe that breaking primal relationships with the earth leads to sickness, which manifests itself as mental or physical illness. In Tibet, healers often prescribe walks in the forest as a cure for depression because reconnecting with the natural world is seen as a

healing act. For illnesses such as low blood pressure that are thought to be caused by 'soul loss,' they advise sufferers to find a tree and physically connect with the energy that flows 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 and secretly slipped away to walk in the forest on Shiroyama, the White Mountain, which lay just five minutes from where I lived. As a child growing up in Scotland I seemed to know almost every tree, rock, hollow, and stream within a mile's radius of my family's house, but like most grown-ups in a fast-paced world I had lost this intimate connection with my own habitat. Now all of the trees on the mountain seemed unfamiliar to me even though I had hiked this route many times before. I climbed slowly looking for the perfect tree, a tree that seemed to be inviting.

The forest backed an ancient Shinto temple, and it was also the famed setting of a local warrior's adventurous evasion of an enemy army. The local people had cherished this forest for generations. None of its trees had ever been cut down for commercial use. Indeed, 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 distance away from the stony path: a huge, ancient cedar. It looked as if it were the oldest tree on the mountain. The root system was colossal. The main trunk was dark and dead, and the bare branches reached high 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 stood to my full height, but I was too scared of the bats, snakes and spiders that might call the hollow home to venture inside. From the base of this lifeless central body, however, sprang another giant living trunk – a whole new tree. One of its strong branches swung down in a low arc, broad and smooth. It was the perfect place to sit. Reclining was even more comfortable, and as I laid back against the branch, looking up at the light dappling through the swaying green canopy, the tree seemed to cradle me. I felt welcome here.

I came up to my secret forest cradle every day. One day, a snow-white cat stepped out in front of me

at a hairpin turn in the crooked path and stretched its tail upwards, as if in greeting. “Hello, cat,” I said, a little afraid of the feral feline. In response, the sleek, muscular cat meowed quietly and then rubbed its body against my shins. I gingerly stepped over it and set off for my special tree. The cat followed. When I stopped, she stopped. It was clear 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. Every day after that, the cat, whom I began to call Shiro (which means “White” in Japanese) would appear at the same spot on the twisting mountain path, as if she had been expecting my arrival. From there, I would be escorted by my white feline spirit guide up the twisting mountain path to within sight of my healing tree.

One of my earliest memories is of my mother taking me to a London park near our home. Lying in my stroller, I looked up at the sunlight playing on the leaves of an old elm. Now, many years later, in the forest of Shiroyama, I lay back on a huge cedar branch like a baby in a cradle. Bathed in dappled light I dreamt of nothing in particular and let my thoughts simply come and go, relishing my solitude, soothed by the sounds of the mountain forest. As I relaxed into the cedar’s bark skin, the energy of the welcoming tree branch flowed along my spine, and revitalised my whole body.

A week after I began my daily walks up to the mountain tree, my blood pressure returned to normal. I was still grieving for my mother, but with the assistance of the spirit of the wild white cat, my mountain guide, I was able to tap into the life energy flowing through that ancient, knowing, half-dead, half-living tree. By performing this personal ritual on White Mountain, I once again felt reenergised and in friendship with the earth, and willing to accept the inevitable, cyclical nature of life and death.

Even though I felt well, I continued to climb the mountain regularly to visit my tree, accompanied by the gentle Shiro. When I said goodbye to Japan eighteen months later I missed the tree and Shiro more than many of my human friends. But I was able to leave the country feeling more complete, and more fully connected to the earth’s body. It was through this healing ritual that I was able to accept my mother’s death, the inevitability of change, and my season of loss. I could now understand these concepts in a wholly embodied way. Through ritualised performance, I had infused the routine walk up the mountain to the tree with sacred meaning, and had come to know the mystery of the sacral, opening my heart to its daily lessons.