

Delores Lachappelle, Ritual is Essential

Ritual is Essential: Seeing ritual and ceremony as sophisticated social and spiritual technology

by Dolores LaChapelle

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Dolores LaChapelle was one of the early voices for "deep ecology," the idea that in order to establish a truly sustainable relationship with the natural environment it would take more than laws and appropriate technology. We need a deeper and more personal sense of connection – the kind that so far human beings have only found through ritual and ceremony. She is the author of EARTH FESTIVALS (with Janet Bourque) and EARTH WISDOM, as well as numerous articles on ritual and deep ecology. These books are available from her via Finn Hill Arts, P. O. Box 542, Silverton, CO 81433.

But there's more than just solving the how-to problems. I've often said that if we're going to have a real rural renaissance I'd just take the solving of the how-to problems for granted. The first thing I'd provide would be festivals.

Ralph Borsodi

I will say leave a good quarter of the time for feast and celebration or your soul will die.

Francois Monnet, IN CONTEXT, No. 1

MOST NATIVE SOCIETIES around the world had three common characteristics: they had an intimate, conscious relationship with their place; they were stable "sustainable" cultures, often lasting for thousands of years; and they had a rich ceremonial and ritual life. They saw these three as intimately connected. Out of the hundreds of examples of this, consider the following:

* The Tukano Indians of the Northwest Amazon River basin, guided by their shamans who are conscious ecologists, make use of

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various myths and rituals that prevent over-hunting or over-fishing. They view their universe as a circuit of energy in which the entire cosmos participates. The basic circuit of energy consists of "a limited quantity of procreative energy that flows continually between man and animals, between society and nature." Reichel-Dolmatoff, the Colombian anthropologist notes that the Tukano have very little interest in exploiting natural resources more effectively but are greatly interested in "accumulating more factual knowledge about biological reality and, above all, about knowing what the physical world requires from men."

* The Kung people of the Kalahari desert have been living in exactly the same place for 11,000 years! They have very few material belongings but their ritual life is one of the most sophisticated of any group.

* Roy Rappaport has shown that the rituals of the Tsembaga of New Guinea allocate scarce protein for the humans who need it without causing irreversible damage to the land.

* The longest inhabited place in the United States is the Hopi village of Oraibi. At certain times of the year they may spend up to half their time in ritual activity.

* Upon the death of their old cacique, Santa Ana Pueblo in New Mexico recently elected a young man to take over as the new cacique. For the rest of his life he will do nothing else whatsoever but take care of the ritual life of the Pueblo. All his personal needs will be taken care of by the tribe. But he cannot travel any further than sixty miles or one hour distance. The distance has grown further with the use of cars but the time remains the same – one hour away from the Pueblo – his presence is that important to the ongoing life of the Pueblo. They know that it is ritual which embodies the people.

Our Western European industrial culture provides a striking contrast to all these examples. We have idolized ideals, rationality and a limited kind of "practicality," and have regarded the conscious rituals of these other cultures as at best frivolous curiosities. The results are all too evident. We've only been here a few hundred years and already we have done irreparable damage to vast areas of this country now called the U.S. As Gregory Bateson notes, "mere purposive rationality is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life."

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We have tried to relate to the world around us through only the left side of our brain, and we are clearly failing. If we are to re-establish a viable relationship, we will need to rediscover the wisdom of these other cultures who knew that their relationship to the land and to the natural world required the whole of their being. What we call their "ritual and ceremony" was a sophisticated social and spiritual technology, refined through many thousands of years of experience, that maintained their relationship much more successfully than we are.

The human race has forgotten so much in the last 200 years that we hardly know where to begin. But it helps to begin remembering. In the first place all traditional cultures, even our own long-ago Western European cultural ancestors, had seasonal festivals and rituals.

The true origin of most of our modern major holidays dates back to these seasonal festivals. There are four major festivals: winter and summer solstice (when the sun reverses its travels) and spring and autumn equinox (when night and day are equal). But in between each of these major holidays are the "cross quarter days." For example, spring equinox comes around March 21 or 22 but spring is only barely beginning at that time in Europe. True spring – warm reliable spring doesn't come until later. This is the cross quarter day – May 1 – which Europe celebrated with maypoles, gathering flowers, and fertility rites. May became the month of Mary after the Christian church took over and May crownings and processions were devoted to Mary instead of the old "earth goddesses." Summer solstice comes on June 21. The next cross quarter day is Lammas Day in early August. This is the only festival that our country does not celebrate in any way. The Church put the Feast of the Assumption on this day to honor Mary. Fall equinox comes on Sept. 21 – the cross quarter day is Hallowe'en, the ancient Samhain of the Celts. Then comes winter solstice – the sun's turn around point from darkness to light. The cross quarter day between the solstice and spring equinox is in early February – now celebrated in the church as Candlemas.

The purpose of seasonal festivals is periodically to revive the topocosm. Gaster coined this word from the Greek – topo for place and cosmos for world order. Topocosm means "the world order of a particular place." The topocosm is the entire complex of any given

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locality conceived as a living organism – not just the human community but the total community – the plants, animals and soils of the place. The topocosm is not only the actual and present living community but also that continuous entity of which the present community is but the current manifestation.

Seasonal festivals make use of myths, art, dance and games. All of these aspects of ritual serve to connect – to keep open the essential connections within ourselves. Festivals connect the conscious with the unconscious, the right and left hemispheres of the brain, the cortex with the older three brains (this includes the Oriental tan tien four fingers below the navel), as well as connecting the human with the non-human – the earth, the sky, the animals and plants.

The next step after seasonal rituals is to acknowledge the non-human co-inhabitants of your place. You can begin by looking into the records of the tribes of Indians who lived there and see what their totem was. Look into the accounts of the early explorers and very early settlers. Barry Lopez relates that the Eskimo told him that their totem animal was always the one who could teach them something they needed to learn.

Beginning in the Northwest, because *In Context* is published in the Northwest, it is fitting that we talk of Salmon. Salmon is the totem animal for the North Pacific Rim. "Only Salmon, as a species, informs us humans, as a species, of the vastness and unity of the North Pacific Ocean and its rim . . . Totemism is a method of perceiving power, goodness and mutuality in locale through the recognition of and respect for the vitality, spirit and interdependence of other species," as Linn House explains. For at least 20,000 years the Yurok, Chinook, Salish, Kwakiutl, Haida, and Aleut on this side of the rim and on the other rim of the Pacific, the Ainu (the primitives of Japan) ordered their daily lives according to the timing of the Salmon population.

Several years ago I did some in-depth study of Celtic myth and discovered that Salmon was the totem animal for the Celts, too. According to their myth, there was a sacred well situated under the sea where the sacred Salmon acquired their supernatural wisdom. The famous Celtic hero, Finn, traditionally obtained his wisdom when he sucked on the thumb he had just burnt when picking up the Salmon he cooked. It is not surprising that Salmon links all

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these areas. The North Pacific Rim and the British Isles are maritime climates in the northern half of the earth. Here is the perfect way to ritualize the link between planetary villagers around the earth – through their totem animal.

How can we learn from Salmon? One specific way is to reclaim our water-ways so that Salmon can again flourish. If we reclaim the water so that Salmon can flourish we have reclaimed the soil, the plants and the other species of the ecosystem – restored them to aboriginal health. In so doing we would be restoring full health to our children as well.

Linn House feels that the people who live in or near the spawning ground of Salmon should form associations, not as law enforcement agencies such as the State Fish and Game Department, but as educational groups and providers of ritual and ceremony which would celebrate the interdependence of species. Linn was a Salmon fisherman on Guemes Island; he now lives in Northern California where he is restocking Salmon rivers.

What relevance does this kind of ritual have for people who live in the city? All of us need seasonal and nature rituals wherever we live, but let me give you a specifically urban example.

Siena, Italy, with a population of about 59,000, has the lowest crime rate of any Western city of a comparable size. Delinquency, drug-addiction and violence are virtually unknown. Class is not pitted against class nor young against old.

Why? Because it is a tribal, ritualized city organized around the *contrada* (clans) – with names such as *Chiocciola*, the Snail, *Tartule*, the Turtle, etc. – and the *Palio* (the annual horse race). The *contrada* function as independent city states. Each has its own flag, its own territorial boundaries, its own discrete identity, church songs, patron saint and rituals. Particular topographical features of each *contrada*'s area are ritualized and mythologized. The ritualized city customs extend clear back to the worship of Diana, the Roman goddess of the moon. Her attributes were taken over by the worship of Mary when Christianity came in.

Many famous writers such as Henry James, Ezra Pound and Aldous Huxley sensed the energy of the city and its events and tried to

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write about it but none of them even faintly grasped the yearlong ritualized life behind it. About one week before the day of the Palio race, workmen from the city of Siena begin to bring yellow earth (/a terra from the fields outside Siena) and spread it over the great central square, the Campo, thus linking the city with its origins in the earth of its place. In fact, anytime during the course of the year when someone needs to be cheered up, the sad person is told not to worry because soon there will be "la terra in piazza" (soon there will be earth in the square).

The horse race serves two main purposes. In the intense rivalry surrounding the race, each contrada "rekindles its own sense of identity." The Palio also provide the Sienese with an outlet for their aggression and as such is a ritual war. The horse race grew out of games which were actually mimic battles and were used to mark the ends of religious festivals.

The Palio is truly a religious event. On this one day of the year the contrada's horse is brought into the church of its patron saint. In the act of blessing the horse, the contrada itself is blessed. This horse race is the community's greatest rite. "In the Palio, all the flames of Hell are transformed into the lights of Paradise," according to a local priest, Don Vittorio.

If we want to build a sustainable culture, it is not enough to "go back to the land." That's exactly where our pioneering ancestors lived and, as the famous Western painter Charles Russell said, "A pioneer is a man who comes to virgin country, traps off all the fur, kills off the wild meat, plows the roots up. . . A pioneer destroys things and calls it civilization."

If we are to truly re-connect with the land, we need to change our perceptions and approach more than our location. As long as we limit ourselves to rationality and its limited sense of "practicality," we will be disconnected from the "deep ecology" of our place. As Heidegger explains: "Dwelling is not primarily inhabiting but taking care of and creating that space within which something comes into its own and flourishes." It takes both time and ritual for real dwelling. Likewise, as Roy Rappaport observes, "knowledge will never replace respect in man's dealings with ecological systems, for the ecological systems in which man participates are likely to be so complex that he may never have sufficient comprehension of their

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content and structure to permit him to predict the outcome of many of his own acts." Ritual is the focused way in which we both experience and express that respect.

Ritual is essential because it is truly the pattern that connects. It provides communication at all levels – communication among all the systems within the individual human organism; between people within groups; between one group and another in a city and throughout all these levels between the human and the non-human in the natural environment. Ritual provides us with a tool for learning to think logically, analogically and ecologically as we move toward a sustainable culture. Most important of all, perhaps, during rituals we have the experience, unique in our culture, of neither opposing nature or trying to be in communion with nature; but of finding ourselves within nature, and that is the key to sustainable culture.