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Cultivating an Ecospiritual Imagination

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Cultivating An Ecospritual Imagination

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A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Humanities

Dominican University of California

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Abstract

Ecospirituality synthesizes aspects of ecology, spirituality, and feminism, emphasizing reciprocity and relationship. It can be seen as a spiritual expression of environmentalism, offering hope and ways to cope during the Anthropocene. During this era of heightened uncertainty and grief related to ecological collapse, one key capacity, imagination, will serve humanity as it recalibrates and restructures in response to the climate crisis. This textual analysis, creative research, and reflection will explore the process of cultivating an *ecospiritual imagination*, a relational mindset supported by embodied experiences such as rituals and contemplative practices that honor a reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world, including other species, the elements, and processes of birth, death, and regeneration.

This project contributes to the current conversations about an ecological identity across academic disciplines while also adding to the growing body of heuristic research. The author investigates how ritual and contemplative practices support a deepened connection with the natural world. By undertaking a heuristic investigation into the role of ritual and embodied contemplative practice to cultivate an *ecospiritual imagination*, this project contributes to the discourse related to situated knowledge, Celtic spirituality, contemplative practices, ecological grief, and environmental humanities.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Ecospirituality synthesizes aspects of ecology, spirituality, and feminism, emphasizing reciprocity and relationship. It can be seen as a spiritual expression of environmentalism, offering hope and ways to cope during the Anthropocene. During this era of heightened uncertainty and despair related to ecological collapse, imagination will serve humanity as it recalibrates and restructures in response to the climate crisis. My textual analysis, creative research, and reflection will explore the process of cultivating an *ecospiritual imagination*, a relational mindset supported by embodied experiences such as rituals and contemplative practices that honor a reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world, including other species, the elements, and processes of birth, death, and regeneration.

As noted in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, myth, symbol, and ritual are key aspects of religious expression. Text, image, and embodied experiences foster a religious imagination. While an analysis of sacred story and symbol is beyond the scope of this thesis, much attention will be spent on examining the role of communal and individual ritual in developing imaginative capacities that are interwoven with ecological awareness. For many in the western world who have inherited paradigms of separation from and dominion over nature, it is necessary to reimagine aspects of relating to the natural world. Cultivating an *ecospiritual imagination* is about creating the conditions to perceive one's place of belonging *with* the natural world.

Claiming one's sense of belonging to the natural world engenders a desire to be in "right relationship" with air, earth, water, and fire as well as with humans and earth others. In *If Women Rose Rooted*, Celtic specialist Sharon Blackie declares that Eco-Heroines are on a journey of "collective re-enchantment---a reanimation of the earth" (361). While Blackie's focus is on

bolstering women's fragmented sense of self and agency, men are likewise suited to fostering ecological identities.

Ideas that purport that women will save the environment perpetuates what environmental feminist Val Plumwood describes as a "simple reversal model," confirming women's "immersion in nature" (31). Plumwood critiques efforts to throw women and nature "into an alliance" and she is suspect of theories in which "women consciously position themselves with nature" (21). To be clear, Plumwood does not advocate that women should not be in relationship with nature; rather, she denies that women have a special connection with nature and are therefore more suited to save the environment. Cultivation of an *ecospiritual imagination* is not a gender-specific project. Humanity is equally dependent on people of different genders, ages, and geographic locations to address the climate crisis.

This inquiry involves several key questions: How can one foster a feeling of rootedness, reciprocity, and stewardship to the place where one lives? And, what actions, or practices, can one engage in to help transform and heal inherited cultural paradigms of hierarchy and domination that are common to western culture? Building on heuristic research methods as described by Clark Moustaka in *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology and Applications*, my inquiry process related to ecospirituality and imagination will involve "self-search, self-dialogue, and self-discovery" (11). My creative research and reflections on cultivating an ecospiritual imagination through ritual and contemplative practice where one lives will add to the current conversations about an ecological identity across academic disciplines while also adding to the growing body of heuristic research as a methodology to investigate the "human experience" while honoring the "unshakable connection" between "what is out there" and "what is within" (Moustaka 12).

An overview of ritual and practice will situate my personal inquiry into a broader context. Subsequent chapters will explore two different rituals: a memorial service for Grey Whales held at Dillon Beach, California in July 2019 and the annual Women's Dream Quest at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. I will describe each ritual and my personal reflections related to participating relative to my broader question about cultivating an ecospiritual imagination. Finally, I will describe and reflect upon my engagement with three nature-based contemplative practices in order to investigate the process of how engaging in contemplative practices fosters an ecospiritual imagination. In this way, I will join others across time and space who have turned to ritual to "make and remake their worlds" (Paintner 3).

This project will contribute to the emerging fields of religious ecology. Scholars and co-founders of the Forum of Religion and Ecology at Yale University, John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, offer a related framework of connection, interdependency, and action that dissolves hierarchical notions of divinely sanctified human dominion over nature. Over the last two decades, Grim and Tucker have helped to develop the field of religious ecology which they present in their introductory text *Ecology and Religion*. Their research and scholarship strive to answer questions related to stewardship and "shared concern for our planetary future" (Grim 11). Grim and Tucker assert that scientists can "appreciate how religions have woven humans into nature with ritual, symbols, and ethical practice" while followers of world religions might "gain insight into how ecologists value nature for conservation, for aesthetics, and for ecosystem management" (11).

Moreover, Grim and Tucker challenge the "dominance of science and technology" and a worldview which calculates the value of nature in "instrumental and economic" terms (22; 34). They question whether or not it is possible for members of western, modern, industrial society to

shift thinking away from an anthropocentric view of nature to a broader view, which they call “anthropocosmic,” in which humans view themselves as interdependent with nature. This type of shift in thinking begins with a transformation of imagination. Grim and Tucker ask: “Can we reimagine ourselves as embedded in the ecological and cosmological processes that have birthed us?” (44). Grim and Tucker note that “nature spiritualities” are developing beyond institutionalized world religions, offering practitioners opportunities to express individual and collective expressions of connection, reverence, and ecological grief (30). Whether one identifies with a particular world religion or a more generalized spiritual path, ritual and contemplative practices can help to motivate, transform, and sustain the human spirit during this era of increasing anxiety and despair related to climate collapse.

In a similar vein, Irish philosopher, theologian, and author, John O’Donohue explores the inherent potential of Celtic spirituality to nourish the human spirit through a worldview which establishes a non-dual sense of belonging with the natural world within a living cosmos. In several books, including *Anam Cara*, he describes awareness of one’s embeddedness as an important aspect of the *Celtic imagination*, an embeddedness best represented by a circle. The circle not only signifies the relationship between symbol, imagination, and worldview, but it represents the rhythm of experience, nature, and divinity (xix). O’Donohue chips away at the nature-human dualism typical of the modern, industrial world, and offers spiritual insights to the world, Celt and non-Celt alike. He refers to this as “the gift of an inner friendship that embraces Nature, divinity, underworld, and the human world as one” (xviii).

O’Donohue’s description of a Celtic imagination, coupled with the call to reimagine our relationship with the natural world by Grim and Tucker, informs my ideas related to fostering an ecospiritual imagination. Likewise, Celtic spirituality specialists, Sharon Blackie, psychologist,

author, and mythologist, and Christine Valters Painter, Celtic spirituality scholar and bestselling author, also influence my desire to explore how ecospirituality and imagination are interrelated to the cultural inheritance of a Celtic ancestry.

In line with O'Donohue's focus on the circle, Blackie questions conceptions of linear cause and effect by exploring the possibility of ancestral links among women that cross over boundaries of both time and space. Of particular interest to her are ancestral memories and Celtic cosmological narratives that link Celtic women throughout the world. Weaving together myth, memoir, and accounts of contemporary women in *If Women Rose Rooted: The Journey of Authenticity and Belonging*, she claims that women are particularly connected to nature, as revealed in ancient Celtic mythology. This is part of her strategy to empower women through the mythopoetic tradition to become modern-day Eco-Heroines, emboldened to act on behalf of nature.

Blackie asserts that Celtic women, no matter where they live, can tap into a profound sense of belonging by reconnecting with Celtic roots. This Celtic worldview is an "ancestral memory" that helps "to find the Old Woman of the World in whatever shape and form she manifests in the place where you live" (360). Blackie leads retreats and workshops in Europe and North America. On the website for her foundation, The Hedge School, she reports: "A surprising percentage of the people who take my online courses or join my retreats in Ireland are from North America; at the last count, it was around 80%." Clearly, Blackie's work appeals to the millions of descendants of immigrants from Celtic lands to this continent. She has something to offer those who "hunger to find ways of meaningfully incorporating Celtic traditions into their lives (Blackie 357). As a woman of Irish descent, I am particularly interested in how my ancestors and the Celtic imagination inform my own experiences of the natural world.

Sharon Blackie and Christine Valters Paintner are transplants to western Ireland. Each moved there in order to immerse herself in the Celtic landscape and culture. In addition to leading pilgrimage experiences for modern-day seekers attracted to Celtic spirituality, each woman has an online presence and publications to communicate with people all over the world who wish to connect with their respective teachings. Blackie focuses on reclaiming pre-Christian wisdom of the ancient Celts to reimagine mutually respectful relationships that transform patriarchal expressions of domination over other humans and the natural world. Painter's interest is to help others bridge ancient contemplative practices rooted in monastic traditions with everyday life in the modern world. Paintner and her husband, John, are co-authors of *The Soul's Slow Ripening: 12 Celtic Practices for Seeking the Sacred*.

Like Blackie, Christine Paintner also weaves together mythopoetic and spiritual traditions. Paintner's framework is informed by Celtic Christianity, a tradition that honors a "fusion" of pre-Christian practice within Celtic Christianity. She argues that the "Irish monks integrated Christian teachings with the Druidic wisdom of their ancestors and created a spirituality that was much more indigenous to the place they lived" (xvii).

The Paintners serve as an example of American seekers relocating to a specific place with significant spiritual roots. This contrasts with American seekers of Celtic ancestry who are returning to Celtic wisdom traditions to help them feel more connected to the land where they are transplants. I belong to the latter group. My maternal and paternal ancestors came from Ireland during the mid-late 1800s following the Potato Famine that devastated western Ireland, an area historically impoverished due to English colonialism. Approximately one hundred years later, my parents moved their young family to California during the early 1970s. We moved "out West" away from extended family in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, thereby severing roots that

had developed over four generations in this country. I relocated to Sonoma County almost twenty years ago. During the rainy season, when the parched landscape becomes lush, nearby emerald green rolling coastal hills and oak woodlands evoke Ireland, a place I have had the privilege to visit twice during my adulthood.

In addition to contributing to the field of religious ecology, and specifically to calls for rekindling the Celtic imagination, my project will also enrich a newer discipline, environmental humanities, as partially advanced by feminist Australian environmental-philosopher Val Plumwood and her longtime friend and colleague, Deborah Bird Rose. According to Rose, she and Plumwood strove to “stimulate and sustain the great humanities’ project of imagining and working our new ways to live with the earth” (93). They shared a conviction that philosophy needs to cross-pollinate with poetry and literature in order to “vivify, to leap across imaginative realms, to connect, to empathize, to be addressed and to be brought into gratitude” (106). Following decades of scholarly and environmental activism, Rose and Plumwood conclude that imagination is central to the transformation of thought, identity, and action. Imagination is necessary to envision new patterns of reciprocity and relationship. An ecospiritual imagination supports alternatives to binaries and dualisms, patterns of domination that must be addressed individually and collectively in western culture.

Plumwood’s foundational ecofeminist text, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, first published in 1993, upends persistent binaries central to western philosophy: nature/culture, female/male, matter/mind, and savage/civilized, to name a few. She follows the thread of binary thinking expressed as dualistic identities over two millennia. Plumwood identifies dualisms central to western culture that are related to power imbalances in our world, dualisms that perpetuate a master-slave system wherein the master class dominates others and benefits from

interrelated power imbalances. She asserts that understanding these dualisms can and should be applied to an analysis of our relationship with the other species of our world in order to correct the imbalance.

The five most persistent dualisms she identifies are backgrounding, radical exclusion, incorporation, instrumentalism, and homogenization. Backgrounding refers to a perspective in which “the master’s view is set up as a universal,” while the dominated other’s needs are “inessential” (48). Other humans and the natural world are in the background and are there to serve the needs of the master. Plumwood points out that the master denies his dependency on all that is backgrounded. She claims that the master is “dependent on the slave for fulfilment of his needs,” but denies, hates, and fears this dependency (49). The second dualism, radical exclusion, builds on backgrounding. Plumwood explains, “Because the other is to be treated as not merely different but inferior, part of a lower, different order of being, differentiation from it demands not merely distinctness but radical exclusion, not merely separation but hyperseparation” (49).

Radical exclusion promotes maximizing distinction and difference in a polarized manner. According to Plumwood, “Radical exclusion requires unbridgeable separation, a separation not open to change” (51). Backgrounding and radical exclusion reinforce notions that nature serves as a mere backdrop for human activity, and that human activity is more important than natural processes. Reciprocal relationships are distorted within these dualisms. Distortion is particularly evident in the third dualism, incorporation, wherein “the other is defined and perceived in relation to the master” (52). Agency or subjectivity beyond the master is subsumed, assimilated, or ignored to the benefit of the master, for the “master consciousness cannot tolerate unassimilated otherness” (52). Nature is perceived as a resource, and is commodified.

The fourth dualism, instrumentalism, extends this denial of the needs or agency of others through objectification of the dominated by the dominator whereby “those on the lower side of the dualisms are obliged to put aside their own interests for those of the master or centre, that they are conceived of as his instruments, a means to his ends (53). Plumwood describes a lack of empathy or kinship within dualized relationships. An example of instrumentalism applied to forestry: Trees grow in the forest to provide timber for humans to build fences, structures, or ships. Further, a lack of perceived intrinsic value of the other is amplified by moral constructs whereby the dominated is judged by standards that privilege the dominator. The dominated is construed as being less worthy or less moral: “the underside is not part of the sphere to be considered morally, but is either judged by a separate instrumental standard (as in the sexual double standard) or seen as outside morality altogether” (53). Worth and value of an instrumentalized “other” is based on the needs, desires, and moral criteria established by the dominant group. This is a result of an imbalance of power that leads to a lack of empathy, a lack of consideration that the marginalized “other” has needs, desires, and functions distinct from the dominator.

According to Plumwood, the fifth dualism, homogenization, produces binarism, a division of the world into two orders in which diversity and differentiation of the dominated other is disregarded (53). This serves to strengthen the master’s perspective and position of power since “residing at what he takes to be the centre, differences among those of lesser status at the periphery are of little interest or importance, and might undermine comfortable stereotypes of superiority” (54). Others are reduced to the function that they serve, “and the relationship of domination destroys the ability to perceive or appreciate characteristics of the other over and above those which serve this function” (55).

Backgrounding, radical exclusion, incorporation, instrumentalism, and homogenization of nature is an extension of framework privileging reason, maleness, and domination. According to Plumwood, “nature includes everything that reason excludes” (20). While it is important to consider distinctions among each of the five dualisms, they are interrelated and each is a facet within a broader hierarchical “concept of difference” (60). For the purposes of this exploration of cultivating an ecospiritual imagination, it is critical to understand that these expressions of power manifest as a “hyper-separation” between humans and nature wherein human identity is perceived to be “outside nature” (2).

An ecospiritual imagination, by fostering reciprocity and relationship, can help to transform each of these five dualized identities central to western culture into what Plumwood calls “an ecological identity” (60). An ecological identity is based on tending to a relationship *with* nature. An ecological identity recognizes the importance of biodiversity, and honors that humans are one out of over one million other species. This is different from extractive or industrial identities that lead to excessive removal of a species to satisfy human desires, such as the decimation of California sea otters during the 1800s to support the fur trade, or monocropping which leads to soil depletion and the dependence on synthetic inputs. Despite the enduring influence of western notions of separation from and domination over nature, she asserts that these bridges can be repaired through an “intentional stance” which recognizes “the earth other as a potential intentional subject, as one who can alter us as well as we, it” (137).

Chapter Two

Ritual and Contemplative Practices

Nature-based rituals and contemplative practices can serve as a starting point for those seeking to slow down enough to be present to the rhythms and wisdom of the natural world. Sharon Blackie describes the capacity to tap into lessons from the natural world as one element of the Eco-Heroine's journey. She contends that women with Celtic ancestry can "carry the ancestral memory" or "native ways of looking at the world" which include knowledge that the Earth is animate, life is sacred, and that humans need to live in harmony with the cycles and seasons of the year (360). For those who are sensitive to problematic issues relating to cultural appropriation and who inhabit colonized lands such as the United States, Celtic practices and traditions can provide those with Celtic roots access to indigenous traditions which support connection with the land where one lives.

Similarly, John O'Donohue, states that an experience of disconnection from nature is both common and tragic. He observes that any members of modern cultures languish, often unconsciously, in exile. O'Donohue proposes that it is possible to reclaim a sense of belonging common to the Celts through developing the faculty of imagination to see what is visible and invisible.

For O'Donohue, the Celtic imagination is infused with a profound sense of belonging to and with the natural world. O'Donohue stands on the shoulders of his ancestors in his rejection of a dualized notion that humans are outside of nature. This idea of divinity expressed in landscape survived the overlay of Christianity on indigenous Celtic spirituality. Contemporary scholar of Christian spirituality and practitioner of Celtic spirituality, Christine Valters Paintner describes a historical period from the 5th-11th centuries, as a time when "earth-honoring" Celtic

Christianity flourished (ix). Painter taps into this ancient Celtic wisdom to create contemporary contemplative practices available to modern seekers living throughout the world.

Similarly, contemporary Bay Area psychotherapist, ritual leader, teacher, and author Francis Weller offers workshops, online courses, and community rituals to assist people to reconnect with their ancestors, themselves, their community, the land where they live, the natural world, and to spirit. He states that ritual offers “containment (through the depth of community) and release through a structure (Weller, 73). Weller notes several key characteristics that inform his concept of ritual, whether experienced individually or in community. A ritual includes intentional gestures through which participants have direct experiences with spirit or intuition that arise from the specific place where the ritual is occurring.

Weller encourages people to create rituals that reflect the specifics of place, “the terrain, the animals and plants, the communal wounds, the patterns of weather, the stories and myths, the collective sufferings, the beliefs” (77). Imagination, emotion, music, song, and dance are central to ritual. Typically, rituals also express religious or spiritual elements that connect participants to an experience of the transcendent, or to what Weller and others refer to as the imaginal realm. Along with Blackie, Paintner, and O’Donohue, Weller realizes that members of modern industrial society live disconnected from traditions of their ancestors. He cautions against merely appropriating ritual practices, and encourages individuals and communities to attune themselves to where they live and to let the rituals emerge in a manner that reflects the people who are participating and the land on which the ritual is occurring. Weller’s mentor, Dagara shaman Malidome Somé, expresses this point succinctly: “ritual [should] not be simply copied from one civilization to another” (Somé 97).

Somé suggests that those interested in developing rituals can be “inspired by some cultures still in touch with it” (97). To Somé, rituals reflect the “instinct of the community” which can be characterized by a unity of spirit, trust, openness, love and caring, respect for the Elders, respect for Nature, and a cult of the Ancestors (52). When approached with reverence and humility, rituals offer the potential to restore connections on interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. How, then, can members of contemporary society reclaim and reinstate ritual? According to Somé, members of work-obsessed cultures must learn how to slow down before they can remember how to perform rituals. Performing rituals will, in turn, help members of work-obsessed cultures to face what needs to be faced (17).

Climate change, or climate collapse, is the central issue of our time and needs to be faced with courage, action, and clarity. In cultures wherein nature and non-humans have been devalued for hundreds, if not thousands of years, an important aspect of engagement with climate collapse is to repair the split between humans and nature. Rituals offer a dynamic process of community or individual engagement through which participants release, reconnect, reorient, and renew. Ritualizing ecological grief creates opportunities for expression of difficult emotions related to an uncertain planetary future such as anxiety, sadness, despair, or apathy.

Chapter Three

Grieving Where Land and Sea Meet: A Community Ritual to Memorialize Gray Whales

Nancy Menning, contemporary professor of World Religions and Environmental Studies and Sciences at Ithaca College, seeks to include the religious imagination, an aspect of mythopoethic thinking, within practices and scholarship related to environmental humanities. A 2017 publication, *Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, includes a chapter by Menning entitled “Environmental Mourning and the Religious Imagination.” She analyzes four distinct mourning rites common to Judaism, Tibetan Buddhism, Islam, and the Dagara people of West Africa in search of how these communal expressions of grief relating to human deaths could offer lessons about how to mourn ecological losses. She asserts that ecological losses differ from human deaths because “humans are often complicit” directly or indirectly, and therefore “must mourn what we have lost and what we have destroyed” (40). Participation in mourning rituals “helps survivors reorient their lives in the absence of what has been lost” (41). According to Menning, religious practices and rituals build up a religious imagination which then becomes a specific capacity

to interpret generously the particularities of rituals performed in distinct cultural and historical contexts, to reflect thoughtfully on one’s own personal and cultural commitments in dialogue with the beliefs and practices of others, to apply creatively the insights derived from one context (human deaths) to another (natural or environmental losses), and to commit vulnerably to newly imagined practices and rituals for mourning environmental losses and sustaining environmental activism: aligned with one’s own biographical, ecological, and historical context. (44)

Menning points out that there is a dearth of rituals and practices to mourn ecological losses. This is in contrast to elaborate rituals and practices to honor human deaths that exist across cultures.

In her cross-cultural study, she refers to the work of Dagara shaman and scholar Malidoma Somé. Somé considers himself to be a bridge between indigenous, tribal wisdom and the modern, industrial world. He recognizes that ritual has the power to heal a void that comes from a sense of dislocation from self, community, culture, place, and time prevalent in industrialized societies. This dislocation is the source of a deep wound that manifests in human relationships, but also in the human relationship with earth others. Malidoma Somé has also significantly influenced ritual leader Francis Weller over several decades. Through his writings, workshops, and rituals, Weller strives to heal wounds of separation throughout modern society. Weller believes that ritual practices help to foster a “deepened imagination” that is “capable of experiencing our intimacy with the surrounding world of finches and dragonflies, creek and woodlands, neighborhoods and friends” (2).

Over the last twenty years, Weller has developed community grief, gratitude, and reclaiming rituals throughout the United States. Though he is not affiliated with any particular religious tradition, he draws from the Buddhist system of five gates for meditative practice to describe what he calls The Five Gates of Grief: Everything We Love, We Will Lose; Places That Have Not Known Love; The Sorrows of the World; What We Expected and Did Not Receive; and Ancestral Grief. The third gateway, The Sorrows of the World, relates to ecological grief.

Analysis of Weller’s work is absent from current scholarship on ecological grief and can be explored to shed light on the interplay between religious imagination and ecological activism. Additionally, the fifth gate Weller names as Ancestral Grief offers the potential to heal grief that

relates to gaps between ways of the Old and the New World (64). Weller contends that many whose ancestors immigrated to the United States from other lands experience a disorientation from culture and a sense of belonging to a place that is a source of grief. Further, he claims that descendants of immigrants hold onto this grief of dislocation unconsciously, “even after many generations in the new land” (64).

Recently, Weller helped to organize a community grief ritual that serves as an example of how to grieve communally during this era of climate change. Gray whales washed ashore along North America in large numbers during the late spring-early summer of 2019. According to an NPR report by Nat Herz, “Why Are Gray Whales Dying?,” experts suspect that the strandings were due to malnourishment (www.npr.org). According to Herz, the die-off of the whale population is attributed to two likely explanations: “carrying capacity,” a term referring to “the maximum number the whales’ habitat can sustain” or global warming. Human activity, hunting, brought the grey whale to the brink of extinction by the 1940s. Following decades of protection, the population rebounded. The deaths of these giants of the Pacific Ocean captured the attention of many who wondered what were the implications. What did this phenomena mean for the gray whale, for the ocean, and for humans who live on a planet that is about 70% water?

Bay Area Elders organized a two-hour free community ritual on Saturday, July 20, 2019, at Dillon Beach in Marin County as a way to respond to this troubling spike in mortality rates among this ancient species. Local poet Elizabeth Herron stated in publicity related to the event that the organizers held three intentions: to grieve for the whales who have died and express our gratitude for the generations of their companionship; to provide the community with the space and ritual to express their grief for the loss of the whales and the degradation of their ocean home; and to raise awareness about the impacts of climate change on the marine environment.

This memorial service and grief ritual serves as an example of “fresh sensibilities regarding nature” that Grim and Tucker propose that humans will need to transform sustain the human spirit “in the face of impending ecological collapse” (169; 170).

Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman, Canadian scholars and co-editors of *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, predict that we are beginning an era of “ecological mourning” (6). Cunsolo and Landman refer to contemporary feminist philosopher Judith Butler’s sense that there is a generative quality to grief when it honors others who have previously gone unnoticed, unrieved (13). As discussed by Cunsolo and Landman, Butler proposes that when elements of shared vulnerability are present, as in ecological grief, so too is the potential for ‘we-creating’ (12).

Cunsolo asserts in a chapter entitled, “Climate Change as the Work of Mourning,” that there is a “serious gap in academic literature, political practice, and media discourse around climate change” and that grief connected to environmental loss relatively absent in “public and academic spheres” (172). She contends that ecological grief and mourning have a “unique potential to expand and transform the discursive spaces around climate change” largely because they extend “the concept of a mournable body beyond the human” (173). Francis Weller’s grief work recognizes the transformative power of ecological grief.

According to Weller, we are each called to have “an apprenticeship with sorrow” that enables “us to face what is taking place in our lives, our communities, our ecologies, families, and culture” rendering us capable “to respond, to protect, and to restore what has been damaged” (10). Weller makes a direct connection between a healthy relationship with grief and activism. He notes: “A congested heart, one burdened with unexpressed sorrow, cannot stay open to the world, and consequently, cannot be fully available for the healing work so needed at this time “

(75). Fittingly, Weller was among the small group of elders who organized and facilitated the recent Gray Whale Memorial and Grief Ritual.

In addition to Weller and Heron, the other organizers, Larry Robinson, Doug Von Koss, and Paloma Pavel are esteemed artists and activists. While I was unfamiliar with Elizabeth Heron and Paloma Pavel prior to the ritual, I have attended other workshops, rituals, and events organized and facilitated by Francis Weller, Larry Robinson, and Doug Von Koss in recent years.

Volunteers arrived at the ritual well before the first participants to prepare the ritual space at Dillon Beach, a privately owned beach, a few miles west of the Marin County hamlet, Tomales. Organizers selected an area partially encircled by sandstone cliffs to the east and open to the western expanse of the beach and the Pacific Ocean. Colorful flags attached to wooden poles placed in the sand enclosed the ritual space not defined by rock.

An elder-in-training who took part in a men's initiation group led by Francis Weller several years ago met participants at the entrance, or threshold, to the ritual space. During the set-up time, well before participants arrived, he walked the perimeter of the ritual space and completed a ceremony at its center before taking his place as the gatekeeper at the opening between two rock outcroppings that served as a natural threshold.

Reverence for thresholds echoes an aspect of Celtic spirituality described by Christine Paintner. She explains that "the Celts describe thresholds as 'thin times or places' where heaven and earth are closer together and the veil between the worlds is thin" (1). She points to the placement of threshold stones at entry or exit points at Celtic sacred sites as evidence of how vital thresholds are within the Celtic imagination. Also positioned at the threshold were two other volunteers: a musician playing the didgeridoo and another helper who welcomed

participants while distributing strands of grey yarn to be worn as bracelets, a gift from Japanese environmental activists as a gesture of solidarity. Flowers lined a path to the threshold. At the designated time, the organizers gave a signal for participants to cross the threshold into the ritual space.

Over the next several hours, elders led various aspects of the ritual, which included a welcome, an invocation, a poem, a song; the laying of flowers in a circle to denote the space in which each participant could add a rock to create a communal cairn as a monument to the deceased gray whales; a second song; a stone ritual; the third song to accompany a procession to empty the saltwater and stones into the ocean; a final poem; and a final song to end the ritual. The ritual included “movement, rhythm, expression of emotion, and direction of attention,” all elements of ritual space that Weller says “open gateways to the sacred” (78).

At different points, Weller led everyone through two brief rituals involving stones. First, he spoke briefly about grief and shared a song that he originally learned from Malidome Somé, and from whom he was given permission to share with others. While the larger group sang this song, people took turns approaching the center area, raked and decorated with flowers, carrying rocks to build a collective group cairn to mark our grief for the death of so many gray whales. I became absorbed by the experience of singing in unison with a large group. People moved to and from the center area at different paces.

I found myself feeling a bit detached and decided to remove my sandals. Feeling the sand on my bare feet helped to connect me in a sensuous way to this specific place. This simple act made a big difference in my ability to feel present. Once I felt like I had more fully arrived, I approached the center. People were kneeling, sitting, and bowing. Some were quietly crying,

others were more vocal. Being encircled by song helped to sustain my focus and to feel supported by others as I had supported them.

The song leader taught a new song to begin the second stone ritual. Large wooden bowls filled with seawater were placed around the communal cairn. Similar to the first stone ritual, each person was invited to come to the center. This time, however, everyone was invited to speak their sorrow and apologies to the whales into a smaller stone before placing it in the water. Once the rocks were placed, the whole group continued singing while processing behind volunteers carrying the large bowls to disperse the water and rocks into the ocean. Some cast flowers into the sea and others placed their flowers like sentinels upright in the wet sand. The group clustered together and closed the ritual with the same poem that opened the ritual, bookending the opening and closing of ritual space.

Spontaneously, another participant drew a seven-circuit classical labyrinth into the moist sand and several people, including me, took turns walking this ancient pattern for contemplative walking. Some left immediately following the ritual, while others lingered to socialize or enjoy quiet time on the beach. After a time, I noticed the organizers forming a final circle together in the ritual space. I felt a deep appreciation for the intention that these elders brought to their offering.

Collectively, they shared their talents and gifts to create a community ritual that serves as an example of what Ashlee Cunsolo argues we will need more of as we experience losses connected to climate change. Following is a synthesis which outlines four criteria specific to Cunsolo's framework:

1. Expressing: Humans need to eulogize the names of the non-humans lost at public events and to create works of art, literature, and writing.

2. Witnessing: Grief needs to be witnessed and shared by others in diverse public spaces that provide places for people to collectively mourn in ways that are indeterminate, adaptive, open-ended, shared, and premised on a submission to transformation.
3. Exposing This expression of grief needs to expose the collective vulnerability of humans and non-humans.
4. Reframing: Allows emotions other than anger or rage to be included as meaningful and powers aspects of climate change. (178-179)

Those gathered at Dillon Beach eulogized the gray whales who perished in the waters of the Pacific Ocean. We grieved in public, tucked away yet visible to other beachgoers. The poetry, song, and expressions of grief bespoke feelings of connection and vulnerability to all life. This ritual provided an outlet for people with a wide range of involvement with environmental causes. Numerous well-known environmental activists, some who specialize in permaculture, watershed-related issues, and others who focus more on issues relating to the diminishing honey bee population were among those gathered. They blended into the group and were able to participate and share their grief. This experience inspired a natural apiarist present to organize a similarly structured ritual to memorialize the honey bees within a week of the whale ritual, demonstrating the ripple effect of relatively simple rituals that emerge from the collective wisdom of elders who recognize the interdependence of humans with the natural world.

Participation in the Grey Whale Memorial and Grief Ritual provided me the opportunity to connect with other people who grieve the loss of large numbers of yet another species. It strengthened my sense of connection to the whales that migrate along the coast where I live. Perceiving a connection with earth others, including the vast majority that remains largely unseen by the human eye, is an expression of an ecospiritual imagination. The ability to confront and deal with the problems of climate change, such as increasing pressures on the oceans and

marine life, requires resourcefulness and creativity, additional aspects of an ecospiritual imagination.

Chapter Four

In Partnership With the Imaginal Realm: Judith Tripp and the Women's Dream Quest

Since the late 1980s, women have gathered in Grace Cathedral for an overnight experience, the Women's Dream Quest. This ritual serves as a potent example of how ritual can simultaneously build and upend traditions. As noted by religious studies scholar Catherine Bell, "Ritual *can* be a strategic way to 'traditionalize,' that is, to construct a type of tradition, but in doing so it can also challenge and renegotiate the very basis of tradition to the point of upending much of what has been seen as fixed previously by other groups" (124). What is being renegotiated during the Women's Dream Quest? In a word: patriarchy.

San Francisco Bay Area transpersonal psychotherapist, spiritual counselor, musician, healer, workshop and pilgrimage leader, Judith Tripp has led Women's Dream Quest for over 30 years. In 2012 she published *Circleway*, a comprehensive overview of the intention behind and structure of the Dream Quest. The Quest is an experiential workshop comprised of several large group and small group rituals, as well as individual practices such as self-guided walk on a labyrinth or therapeutic artistic activities. Like Weller, O'Donohue, and Blackie, Tripp values the imaginal realm, the "land of the soul" (51). Tripp finds inspiration within diverse spiritual traditions: Christian, Jewish, Pagan, Buddhist, Muslim, and Indigenous, in order to celebrate "the feminine face of God" (6). Tripp is well-versed with Celtic traditions and sacred sites. Similar to Blackie, she leads pilgrimages to sites with links to the Celts, from Chartres Cathedral in France to Chalice Well in England.

Judith Tripp began to lead the Quest in San Francisco soon after its inception. Subsequently, she has traveled throughout the United States and internationally to share this experience with women of diverse backgrounds. Her efforts stem from her desire to repair what

has been split by hierarchical dualisms common to patriarchy, e.g. mind over body, male over female, culture over nature, and rationality over imagination. Tripp has great respect for the imaginal realm. She considers her work with subtle energies and spirit as a partnership between forces that have been dualized. As Tripp describes in her memoir about leading the Quest, women are invited to immerse themselves in activities designed to loosen the tyranny of time, rationality, and the masculinized modern world. She explains, “Our quest is to explore and experience the inner, intuitive side of life” (10).

In addition to the imaginal realm, Tripp also articulates a connection to archetypes. Tripp believes that women are particularly linked with the archetype of the circle. She considers the circle an inspiration and organizing principle for the Quest (58). She reflects that a sense of equality, safety, and healing emerge when participants gather in small and large group circles throughout the overnight workshop.

Judith Tripp incorporates the circle throughout the Women’s Dream Quest. At Grace Cathedral, women gather in a circle atop another circle: a replica of the 11-circuit Medieval Labyrinth which has graced Chartres Cathedral in France since the 1200s. This replica is inlaid on the cathedral floor. For many years, Tripp has been a facilitator and workshop leader for Veriditas, a non-profit dedicated to promoting the use of the labyrinth as for contemplation and renewal, whose founder, Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress, is credited for reintroducing the labyrinth to many, including members of Grace Cathedral during the 1990s. Tripp perceives the labyrinth to be “a ground of being inscribed with a path” that “diagrams the possibilities of turning and returning again” as well as teaching “about relationship; about encountering, passing, being passed by others and about meeting another person at the edge or in the center of life” (27).

An additional imaginal circle of protection is created when the women evoke the four directions, a schema that Tripp connects to the traditions of Plains Indians indigenous to North America, as well as Jungian psychology (75). Honoring and invoking the divine in every direction is also rooted in a Celtic worldview in which the divine is expressed in “every direction--north, east, south, and west--as well as within, between, beneath, and above” (Paintner 77). The link between the practice of invoking the four directions and Celtic spirituality informs my sense of cultivating an ecospiritual imagination because it connects me with my ancestral heritage as well as offering a practice to help me connect to the land wherever I am.

In 1988, Tripp developed what she calls a *Circles Meditation*. She reflects that this meditation came to her as she was preparing to attend a conference which she also helped to organize in Costa Rica that blended psychology, spirituality, and activism for peace. The Circles Meditation that Tripp leads during the Dream Quest invites women to first imprint a mental picture of the circle that the women present are creating with each other. She then guides the women to imagine additional layers of concentric circles surrounding them, like tree rings, starting with the women themselves, followed by circles of beloveds, spirit guides, ancestors, and finally, a circle that “includes all beings with whom we share the planet” (91). She explicitly invites women to envision critters and creatures of the natural world with whom our lives are embedded as part of the circle.

Small group time during the Quest offers the opportunity for women to further explore connections with each other, as well as with earth others. Following a procession through the cathedral, women take turns randomly selecting from an assortment of Animal Cards that corresponds with the small group that they will be a part of throughout the Quest. Tripp invites women to consider any “serendipity” or “synchronicity” that might be connected with the

particular animal card that they select. She guides them to “imagine that the animal they choose will have a message for them about the dedication-intention that they set earlier” (96). As part of small group time, each small group leader shares symbolic meaning in their group’s animal based on her research.

During the first small group sharing, participants respond to the information shared about the chosen animal as they feel comfortable. For example, a small group with the snake as their animal might reflect on where women might be metaphorically shedding old skin to allow new growth or a woman might recount an actual encounter with a snake and how this impacted her. This component of the Women’s Dream Quest provides an opportunity for each woman to activate her imagination in a way that honors earth others. Participants reflect on how a specific animal interacts within an ecosystem, with special attention paid to particular sensory or symbolic associations connected to the specified animal.

In the early morning, after free time to walk the labyrinth, to make art, or to sleep, women gather for the second time in their small groups to share any further insights or reflections that may or may not be connected with their animal. An important culminating activity for each group is to enact a brief skit together, an embodied, spontaneous expression. These skits are performed in-the-round and are held as a way for everyone to have “a chance to give back to the whole circle” (128).

The power of the skits lies in their playfulness and in their simplicity. Women imitating movement characteristic to each animal brought forth feelings of joy, silliness, reverence, and sadness in ways that mere words could not. Perhaps the strength of these skits has to do with the freedom and safety women felt to move their bodies in ways that are not typical in a culture wherein many women experience the effects of objectification. During the skits, women move

for movement's sake. This creative, kinesthetic endeavor elicits palpable joy, even with some nervousness that some feel during group performances.

I have attended the Women's Dream Quest twice: the first time as a participant in 2017, when I drew a snake card, and the second time, in 2018, as co-leader of a small group assigned the wild turkey. For the November 2019 Quest, I will return as co-leader of a small group, working with the owl. My experiences of working with Animal Cards in this way has increased my interest in animals, in general. Additionally, I approach encounters with animals that I directed my attention to during small group work with increased attention.

In addition to the archetype of the circle informing the structure of large and small group practices throughout the Quest, Tripp reflects that one of the most important parts of the Quest is the affirmation of the feminine aspects of the divine. She strives to heal a wound of the excluded feminine by calling on the Divine Mother as expressed in diverse religious and spiritual traditions as well as uplifting the sacred feminine found "within the archetypes of maiden, mother, crone, the warrior, the sage, and the fiercely compassionate one" (61). Tripp seeks to shift the patriarchal concept of divinity as a transcendent male by sharing sacred stories, symbols, and rituals designed to quicken the religious imagination to include a concept of visceral, immanent, and feminine divinity. For Tripp, the Divine Mother "manifests here on Earth, through our bodies, here, now in our own human consciousness" (65). Divinity, nature, human bodies and consciousness are integrated within Tripp's framework. The Women's Dream Quest promotes reverence for nature through ritual. During the ritual, the interrelatedness of all life is reiterated through song, dance, listening circles, creative expression, contemplative time, and ritual.

The Women's Dream Quest is an extended ritualized experience that empowers each participant to renegotiate how each relates to her own sense of the Divine. While singing, dancing, and sharing during small and large group activities, participants move and vocalize in ways that are not typically associated with a formalized cathedral setting. The Quest also highlights that women are part of a web of life that includes earth others. Interdependence with and care of the natural world is explicitly spoken about repeatedly during whole and small group experiences, such as during the opening Circles Meditation or while working with specific animals during small group time. Throughout the Dream Quest women are invited and encouraged to pay attention to the other species with whom we share the planet. These various components of the Dream Quest coalesce to create an experience infused with ecospirituality and ripe with imagination.

Just as the Quest provides individual and group experiences to strengthen connections to the natural world, Sharon Blackie describes a related quest of empowerment and engagement, one that she calls an Eco-Heroine's Journey. Blackie envisions personal and planetary healing through individual and collective efforts. She does not espouse progress or reform. For Blackie, an Eco-Heroine seeks to work with plants, animals, the land itself, and other humans in relationship with the earth.

Tripp invites participants to hold in their hearts and their imaginations the power of the many circles invoked and experienced during the Quest. She invites women to return to this imaginal circle as a source of strength and comfort. Her final words to the women include a prayer of protection: "Go well, be safe until we meet again. This circle is forever and always" (130). This benediction echoes an ancient Celtic spiritual practice, a prayer known as a *lorica*

that is related to one of the twelve practices, Encircling, explored by Christine Paintner in *The Soul's Slow Ripening*, her contemporary guidebook for seekers interested in Celtic spirituality.

Chapter Five

Celtic Contemplative Practices: Walking the Path of My Ancestors Where I Live

Similar to the embodied spiritual experiences embedded in rituals such as the Gray Whale Memorial Service and Grief Ritual and the Women's Dream Quest, early Celtic monks developed practices to support their connection to the Divine. As previously mentioned, Celtic monks were steeped in a non-dualistic spiritual lineage, so the dichotomy between inner-outer or transcendent-immanent as commonly understood by many in western culture, then and now, was anathema to their worldview. The early Celtic monastic worldview promoted human interdependency with nature that was not gender-specific.

Christine Valters Painter's contemplative practices aim to help humans reconnect with nature in a less binary construct of female versus male. While contemplative practices such as walking meditations are common throughout diverse spiritual traditions and appeal to those who wish to have a somatic experience of presence, Celtic spirituality offers support to those yearning for "a vision of life that feels more aligned with the natural world" (Painter xii). In *The Soul's Slow Ripening: 12 Celtic Practices for Seeking the Sacred*, Painter has created a guidebook for contemporary seekers. Through a blend of personal narrative, scripture reflections, hagiography, and prompts for creative arts, such as photography and writing, Painter encourages her readers to engage in contemplative practices which she links to Celtic monastic traditions. These include: the practice of thresholds; the practice of dreaming; the practice of peregrination (wandering while surrendering to God's direction, listening to synchronicities and patterns); the practice of blessing each moment (to live life from a place of gratitude and mindful awareness); the practice of soul friendship; the practice of encircling; the practice of walking the rounds; the practice of learning by heart; the practice solitude and silence; the practice of seasonal cycles; the practice

of landscape as theophany; and the practice of three essential things (x). From among these twelve, I selected three to inform my creative research: thresholds, encircling, and walking the rounds.

I was initially drawn to these particular practices because each involves movement and could be done outside. After working with them, I also realized connections among these practices and the labyrinth, a pattern that I have been studying, reflecting on, and teaching about for several years. Fittingly, I began my creative research about contemplative practices with the practice of thresholds.

As mentioned in my analysis of the Gray Whale Memorial and Grief Ritual, thresholds, whether literal or figurative, are recognized as dynamic and significant in the Celtic imagination. Thresholds are physical and symbolic liminal places that encourage awareness. Individuals encounter multitude thresholds throughout life: thresholds of time, of space, of season, of life, death, and regeneration. Paintner speaks to the challenge that thresholds present: “they demand that we step into the in-between place of letting go of what has been while awaiting what is still to come” (3). Paintner’s exploration of the significance of symbolic and literal thresholds includes a discussion of St. Brigid of Kildare.

Inside my home, above the front door, hangs a Brigid’s Cross, an ancient symbol of protection that is customarily hung above or on the main doorway of a home. Brigid is an iconic figure in Celtic mythology and hagiography. Revered by some as the triple goddess of poetry, blacksmithing, and healing, Brigid is also beloved as one of Ireland’s three patron saints. St. Brigid is credited with founding a Christian monastery in Ireland over 1500 years ago.

Brigid's crosses are woven by some to mark Imbolc, a Celtic harvest festival that falls halfway between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox. Imbolc is celebrated on February 1st, the same day that St. Brigid's Feast Day is also celebrated within the Catholic tradition.

Whether called Imbolc or St. Brigid's Day, February 1st is considered as the very beginning of spring in Celtic cultures (Painter 121). Paintner describes how the "earth softens and the seeds deep below stir in the darkness" even while snow and frost dominate the landscape in the northern climes (121). According to Paintner, *imbolc* translates as "in the belly" (121). Imbolc honors the fecundity of the Earth, the fertile womb of soil where seeds quicken in the darkness. This symbol above my door marks a significant threshold and reminds me of my place "in the belly" of nature. Pairing this knowledge with a somatic experience in nature further enlivened my ecospiritual imagination.

For a few weeks, I set an intention to pause at the threshold underneath the Brigid's cross before heading out for a twilight walk. This was surprisingly challenging, even though I frequently sit down almost directly in front of the threshold to put on my shoes. Passing over the threshold, my attention was often already directed at what I was observing outside or other thoughts. The walks themselves provided ample additional thresholds to experience. The routes I took varied slightly, but all of the walks occurred within or adjacent to an ecological system prominent in Sonoma County: The Laguna de Santa Rosa.

The Laguna is a freshwater channel that traverses over 20 miles from its headwaters in southern Cotati, an area that is considered at risk for urban-suburban development. In addition to being the largest tributary of the Russian River, its vast watershed, estimated to be 254-square miles in size, supports "a mosaic of wildlife habitats, from oak woodlands and grasslands to streams, marshes, and vernal pools, that support a wide variety of wildlife" ("Where the Laguna

de Santa Rosa begins “). The Laguna defines the Santa Rosa Plain, and it has been severely impacted by development, industrial, and agricultural practices over the last 150 years. As a resident of Sebastopol, I interface with this wetlands ecosystem with varying degrees of consciousness every day.

During the designated time period for my research, I traversed four different routes to experience the threshold time of twilight within this ecosystem: first, a mowed path through grasslands; second, a mowed path that also includes oak woodlands; third, a combination of mowed grass, hard-packed earth and pavement; and finally, a country road that borders a portion of the Laguna that is designated as a “Wildlife Area” and falls under the jurisdiction of California Fish and Wildlife.

I crossed paths with great blue herons, hawks, bats, Canada geese, owls, quail, dragonflies, moths, crickets, wild turkeys, and deer. In the soft evening light, plants like burdock, Queen Anne’s Lace, and pennyroyal caught my eye. I began to wonder which plants and grasses were native and which were introduced. I quickly realized how little I knew about the other-than-humans where I live. My questions led me to purchase a field guide published by the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, a non-profit organization founded in 1989.

As noted on the organization’s website, Foundation organized with the intention to conserve, protect, and restore the watershed, which includes 30,000 acres “of creeks, open water, perennial marshes, seasonal wetlands, riparian forests, oak woodland and grassland” (“About the Laguna”). In order to purchase the field guide, I stopped by the offices of the foundation, a place that I had wondered about and driven by hundreds of times. I visited with office staff before buying the guide and left mulling over how I could connect more with this organization as a volunteer. Engaging in this contemplative practice led me to cross a literal

threshold, connecting me to a long-established and effective local non-profit dedicated to restoration, conservation, and education related to the Laguna.

I further enhanced my personal connection to the land I inhabit within the Laguna de Santa Rosa's ecosystem while engaged in a second Celtic contemplative practice, one that Paintner refers to as Encircling. Paintner details a Celtic prayer of protection, or *caim* (76). She refers to theologian Philip Sheldrake's scholarship to further define this tradition. She quotes Sheldrake's conclusion about these prayers:

such protective prayers of blessing for boundaries, whether of places or around individuals were quite common in the Celtic tradition. They are almost certainly adaptations of pre-Christian rites. Although the forms differed, such prayers often involved blessings and signs of protection being made to all four quarters of the world, then to the earth and finally to the skies above. (76)

As one who has felt conflicted about an element of cultural appropriation involved in calling in the four directions as borrowed from Native American traditions during rituals and ceremonies led and attended by groups outside of those traditions, I find comfort and inspiration knowing that invoking the four directions is a Celtic practice. Paintner describes the purpose of these "encompassing" prayers as a way "to remember the continual presence of the divine in every direction---north, east, south, and west---as well as within, between, beneath, and above" (77). Within this practice of encircling or encompassing there lies a more authentic alternative to calling in or praying to the directions for those connected to Celtic traditions culturally or spiritually.

Paintner asks, "What do you discover when you look for the divine presence in every direction?" (77). Paintner suggests bringing along a camera to add a creative component to this

contemplative walk. This particular practice is both receptive and creative, wherein one is instructed to “pause regularly” when “something shimmers” or inspires one to linger in order to receive the image and to record it as a photograph. She makes a distinction between “taking or capturing” rather than “receiving” a photo. She asserts that the former is reflective of our consumerist grasping, scarcity-focused mindset” whereas the latter is more akin to contemplation, which engenders “a sense of wonder and gratitude” (10).

Another distinctive element of this exercise involves moving in a circle. She instructs one to begin by photographing what is in front, but “then to turn a quarter-turn to the right to receive a photo there; then make another quarter-turn, and receive a photo; then one final quarter-turn, and one more photo there (77). This contemplative practice expands one’s capacity to observe more closely, to attune oneself to one’s surroundings with a fresh perspective. Paying attention to what is what is to the left, to the right, or to what is behind loosens the tyranny of forward-thinking that is connected to the myth of progress.

Over two weeks during August 2019, I engaged in the Encircling Photography Exercise and followed Painter’s open-ended suggestion to “spend some time with the images” in order to “notice and discover” (77). I combined reflecting on the images themselves with creating a journal entry for each day in which I recorded the time of day, the location, as well as which direction I faced when something first captivated my attention. In addition to information about the starting point, I made notes about each of the subsequent quarter-turns. Due to my work schedule, I completed the exercise in the morning or in the evening, often at twilight. As I reviewed photos and journal entries, I became aware of several patterns relating to what captivated me.

Flowers, shrubs, and trees that I have planted or tended first drew my attention during the majority of the walks. Twilight colors of pink, fuschia, lilac, and purple caught my eye twice, while a swarm of dragonflies and a cluster of badger burrows each captured my interest. Tree trunks, tree branches, and tree canopies consistently inspired me to pause and take a photograph. Typically, I selected a starting image that I could approach, such as a sunflower in bloom, a pumpkin on a vine, or an oak seedling. Subsequent quarter-turns revealed trees or buildings in the distance. Mowed dry grass, barbed-wire fencing, PVC piping, and parked cars appeared most in my 3rd or 4th quarter-turns. Twice, I consciously explored above, below, front, and behind.

Curiously, I began my circular journey facing west, east, and north almost equally, but not once did I begin while facing south. Reflecting upon this contemplative practice, I recognize the wisdom of Paintner's challenge to hold this exercise as a way to expand one's horizons beyond "what is in front of us" to take in more fully what is "to the side of or behind us" (77). My camera lens reflected my anthropocentrism, and this contemplative practice helped me to witness and reflect upon that which captured my attention to photograph and how I engaged in the process. Plants or spaces that I tend captured my interest. I felt drawn to the vibrancy of colorful flowers or pumpkins, often ignoring or overlooking grasses and weeds that self-sow or are monochromatic. This discovery has led me to ponder my relationship to the land where I live: how am I consciously or unconsciously perpetuating a relationship rooted in backgrounding nature?

While the Encircling Photography Exploration revealed my inclination to notice and be drawn to that which I have actively tended, the Walking the Rounds contemplative practice challenged me to work with my own vulnerability in the natural world as well as training me to notice the fragility and resilience of Valley Oaks. As stated by Painter, the practice of Walking

the Rounds is linked to *deiseal*, an Irish practice characterized by walking around a sacred site or monument sunwise “in harmony with cosmic forces” either “one, three, five, seven, or twelve rounds, always in harmony with creation and the rhythms of the universe” (89). Painter points out that this “intentional way” of walking is not “a mindless exercise of superstition but instead a sacred invitation to bring ourselves fully present to this moment and to walk with full mindfulness and affectionate awareness” (82). Presence and affinity have a role in developing an ecospiritual imagination.

In the same vein as O’Donohue and Tripp, Paintner claims that walking in a circular manner loosens the mind, the body, and the spirit, offering ease and expansiveness. Further, she proposes that walking with an intention to be present and receptive to the wisdom of the natural world can be considered an expression of gratitude and prayer. Most compelling is her assertion that this practice differs from “walking to get somewhere” because “walking the rounds invites us to continue journeying in place” (89). As one who already engages in walking the rounds of labyrinths, I began this practice with enthusiasm. Per her suggestion, I selected a favorite tree to walk around in a sunwise manner over the course of two weeks. I anticipated that this would be primarily a restorative practice, but I was wrong. During my first walk, I had to confront my romantic projections onto my relationship with nature.

On a cool morning, I walked up to a majestic oak tree that I have driven and walked by countless times over the last two decades. I approached the tree joyfully and with a sense of awe, for now was my moment to deeply connect with the oak tree. I quietly began my walk, trying to walk under the outer-reaches of the vast canopy. I quickly became tense and worried as I scanned for ground nests due to my severe allergy to yellow jackets and moderate allergy to honeybees. At the edge of the canopy tall grasses grew and I also became nervous about picking

up deer ticks. Low-hanging branches and the understory obstructed my path for about one third of the way around the tree. I also began to feel a sense of shame that I could not definitively identify this oak's species.

Wearing sturdy shoes, long pants, a long-sleeved-shirt, and a sun hat, I returned for my second walk more protected and humbled, reminded that my walk in nature is not a one-way exchange, and that nature will be acting on me as much as I will be acting upon it while I walk underneath the oak.

This oak, which I identified as a Valley Oak, *Quercus lobate*, has likely been standing for at least 100 years, and I was entering into a habitat zone for countless earth others. During the second walk, I continued to tread cautiously around the outer edges of the canopy, but I also began to notice the plentitude of acorns maturing on the branches. As I moved in closer to one of the clusters of acorns, I heard the buzzing of a yellow jacket approaching a nearby cluster. It buzzed around me and followed me as I continued walking. Once it lost interest in me, I paused to study more acorn clusters. I knelt down on the ground to take in the lowest-lying branch and then looked up to the highest visible branches from that same vantage point. I was awestruck by the sheer mass of this tree. During a subsequent walk, I experienced feelings of awe and wonder when observing new growth at the tips of the branches.

I decided to try walking the rounds in the evening to avoid yellow jackets and honeybees. During one evening walk, I stayed close to the trunk. Sheltered by the canopy and in proximity to the quiet strength of the tree trunk, I felt safe enough to allow accumulated sorrow flow through me. I lingered under the canopy until after sunset and was surprised to see a lone honeybee gathering its final pollen of the long summer day. I continued to walk under this "Grandmother Oak" during most evenings, relaxing into the cricket song rather than sustaining

vigilance for the buzzing of insects. I shifted my behavior for self-preservation, which mirrors the rallying call of environmental activists for humans to shift our patterns of consumption and exploitation in order to preserve the future of countless species, including our own.

This practice of walking the rounds under a majestic oak that is otherwise in the background of my daily life sharpened my powers of observation to notice oak seedlings and trees of various ages and sizes that are managing to grow along roads or at the edges of property lines along fences. Human interaction with the environment has negatively impacted the habitat of Valley Oaks throughout Sonoma County. In spite of human degradation of habitat, oak seedlings continue to sprout. This resiliency evokes reverence for the regenerative power of nature along with the need for increased attention to habitat preservation and restoration. By increasing my connection to one oak tree in my local environment, my capacity to consider oak habitat on a regional level also expanded and spurred me to connect with a local non-profit engaged in community-based stewardship initiatives.

Participating in three of the twelve Celtic contemplative practices featured in Paintner's guidebook has increased my awareness of thresholds, the presence of divinity in all directions, and the potency of circumambulation in the outdoors. In an era where pilgrimages to sacred sites need to be balanced with considerations of the carbon footprint associated with air travel, Paintner's contemplative practices offer a simple solution. One need not travel to far-away lands in order to cultivate an ecospiritual imagination. Contemplative practices in "nearby nature" serve a similar purpose while using far fewer resources. Even the most mundane threshold, such as at the front door, can be imbued with intention. Merely shifting one's attention in consecutive quarter-turns can awaken a sense of interconnectedness. Finally, walking consciously around a

tree that one regularly passes can spark curiosity toward and respect for nature's complexity and resiliency.

Engaging in contemplative practices where one lives can support a deep sense of belonging, which is part of what Sharon Blackie describes as "The Heroine's Return." Blackie encourages women to "come to know the landscape" where one lives, wherever that may be (373). This knowledge comes through direct experience with the weather, the seasons, the plants and animals of a specific place. Pilgrimages in "nearby nature" bolster one's sense of belonging to the ecosystem where one lives.

Paintner's contemplative practices provide structured prompts for experience and reflection, which are essential components of caring for one's internal ecology which helps to spark or sustain one's ecological identity. Her guidebook appealed to me because of my Celtic heritage. However, these contemplative practices can be adapted to authentically reflect the spirituality of the practitioner.

Nature-based contemplative practices can be individual or communal experiences and are opportunities for self-awareness while also serving to deconstruct a sense of separateness that pervades western, industrial societies. As noted by Jacob Richey and Paul Wapner, both environmental activists and contemplative practitioners, the "core insight of ecology" is that "The blade of grass not only depends upon water, sunlight and soil to grow, but is actually constituted by those elements; without them, it would cease to exist. Likewise, without the grass, water, sunlight, and soil would assume a different character" (15). Contemplative practices in nearby nature can help shift one's inner and outer experiences of where one lives and can serve as a catalyst for engagement or a sustaining force to continue engagement over time.

Contemplative practices, long central to mystical traditions, foster insight, presence, and equanimity. Three articles published in 2017 in *The Arrow*, an interdisciplinary journal focusing on politics, economics, ecology, transformation, and the social sciences, explore the intersection of contemplative practice and environmental activism. Co-authored by contributing editor Jacob Richey and professor of environmental politics, Paul Wapner, the first article, entitled “Inner and Outer Ecologies: Contemplative Practice in an Environment Age,” outlines how environmental activists, researchers, and policy-makers are turning to contemplative practices such as “journaling, yoga, prayer, labyrinth walking, visualization, dance, qigong, and similar techniques” to cultivate “greater awareness for one’s inner landscape” (7). According to Richey and Wapner, contemplative practices yield important “gifts”(7). Taking part in contemplative practices develops four capacities:

It can help us cultivate subjective clarity when engaging in environmental issues, refine our ability to respond, overcome fixation on measurable outcomes that can interfere with transformative action, and dismantle our sense of separateness of the earth and each other. (6)

These capacities help to spur and sustain environmental engagement as well as nurture a sense of well-being in spite of dire predictions of degradation and crisis.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

As Val Plumwood articulated over twenty-five years ago, an ecological identity emerges from being in a mutually respectful relationship with the place where one lives and the earth others who also inhabit the place. Paying attention to where one lives, while also focusing on the fragility and interconnectedness of all within the web of life, leads to a sense of belonging *with* the natural world. Broadly speaking, the western worldview perpetuates ideas of separation from and preeminence over the natural world. It is possible to reinterpret and rethink these culturally inherited frameworks, and this is where imagination comes in to play. Members of modern industrial societies need to create a new vision of humanity as interwoven with earth others and the earth itself that is rooted in place. An ecological identify requires awareness of what is observable or experiential, as well as imagination to open up to what is possible. Reclaiming a sense of belonging with the natural world involves reimagining a worldview and remembering or creating new ways of being in relationship with the earth and earth others.

It is possible to cultivate an ecospiritual imagination whether one lives in an urban, suburban, or rural area. Characteristics of an ecospiritual imagination include reverence, responsibility, connection, interdependence, and engagement with the natural world. An ecospiritual imagination helps to foster awareness, presence, and care of inner and outer ecologies.

Knowledge of what is outside of us and what is inside of us comes through participation and reflection. Contemplative practices strengthen one's capacity for presence and reflection to inner and outer worlds. According to Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and environmental activists such as Richey and Wapner, "human interiority" is shaped by "environmental circumstances"

and underscores the “two-way relationship between our external and internal lives” (13). Though rooted in a Buddhist spiritual framework, Richey and Wapner’s ideas complement my own exploration of how Celtic contemplative practices support an ecospiritual imagination. Being present with nature also includes paying attention to environmental challenges.

Richey and Wapner assert that “environmental challenges can become grist for the spiritual mill, an opportunity to practice spiritual warriorship” (13). Furthermore, they propose that climate change could be seen “not simply as a dilemma that we must confront externally or that we must soldier through; it is also an opportunity for growth and self-knowledge” which could lead to humans “developing more sensitive and aware selves” (14). This awareness stems from recognizing the “truth of our interdependent relationship with the environment [that] is lapping at the feet of coastal cities, burning down homes, and starving essential crops of water,” reminding humanity that the “well-being of the environment can no longer be distinguished from our own” (16).

While some activists like Richey and Wapner see a clear connection between contemplative practices and sustained engagement with environmental concerns, this perspective remains on the fringe of academic research. Rachel Demotts, Associate Professor and Director of University of Puget Sound’s Environmental Policy and Decision-Making Program, concurs. Demotts contends that in spite of interest among seekers and some scholars about the interrelatedness of environmentalism and contemplative practices, “the integration of such practices in the study [and experience] of human-nature relationships” is largely absent from mainstream academic research (21). Nonetheless, she maintains that practicing contemplative practices helps to increase awareness of “interconnectedness within environmental teaching and scholarship” (21). She recognizes that ancient contemplative practices “offer direct ways to teach

skills for meaningful engagement, observation, and understanding complexity” (24). Building on Demotts’ conclusions, I assert that contemplative practices which lead to an increased sense of partnership with the natural world are integral to stimulating an ecospiritual imagination.

Contemplative practices and rituals can heal the split between humans and nature during the modern period. As Grim and Tucker explain, this is due to the fact that “human linguistic, narrative, and ritual practices co-evolved within nature’s rhythms and restraints” (34). Grim and Tucker explain that humans find resonance with biocultural symbols of air, earth, water, and fire because they mirror our elemental nature: “A human life that comes out of the elements of Earth and ultimately returns to these elements seeks such deep connections through religious symbols and practices” (37). These symbols correspond to religious and ecological processes: orienting refers to air, sky, and celestial bodies; grounding to the earth, the soil, and land on which we stand and in which we dwell; nurturing evokes water and food; while transforming connects to fire and forces with the power to create, destroy, or heal (37).

Cultivating an *ecospiritual imagination* is not a gender-specific enterprise. This relational mindset honors a reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world. Ritual and contemplative practices support an embodied connection with elements such as air, earth, water, and fire. By going out into the natural world to practice ritual and contemplative practices one immerses oneself in a sensory experience beyond artificially regulated indoor environments in which humans control temperature, lighting, and sound. Going outside quickly exposes the hubris of the western construction of human identity as “outside nature” (Plumwood, 2). Plumwood quotes environmental scientist, David Suzuki to make the point that “humans are animals and have the same dependence on a health biosphere as other forms of life” (6).

Much of humanity also inhabits religious ecologies. As Grim and Tucker state, “religious ecologies weave humans into the elements of life both practically and symbolically” (37). Within world religious traditions, “unique narratives, symbols, and rituals express their relationships with the cosmos as well as with local landscapes”(21). These narratives, symbols, and rituals will need to adapt as humanity responds to disappearing glaciers, rising oceans, and species extinction. Imagination is a precursor to innovation. Humanity will require both imagination and innovation to meet challenges related to climate change.

Within academia, interdisciplinary studies such as environmental humanities and religious ecology weave together interests that do not otherwise fit into standard academic divisions. By undertaking a heuristic investigation into the role of ritual and embodied contemplative practice to cultivate an *ecospiritual imagination*, I have entered into the discourse related to situated knowledge, Celtic spirituality, contemplative practices, ecological grief, and environmental humanities.

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