

The Council of All Beings: Origins and Innovations of a “Re-Earthing” Ritual

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Introduction

Much has been written concerning the environmental movement and the various philosophical and ethical positions concerning the environment and environmental crisis.² Less well-explored, although certainly not ignored, has been the development of environmental or nature-based spiritualities which either derive from these environmental philosophies, or which precede the more formal process of philosophical articulation.³ Even less explored have been the particular sets of practices such as rituals, role-plays or other performative acts which serve to create the conditions in which experiences of connection with the earth or the natural world can occur. In this article I examine the Council of All Beings, which is one such ritual that has arisen out of the Deep Ecology movement and is a “re-Earthing” ritual designed to “help end the sense of alienation from the living Earth that most of us feel, and to connect us with new sources of joy, commitment and inspiration that follow from union with Gaia” (Rainforest Information Center, 2000).⁴

This particular Council of All Beings was one of several workshops, trainings and rituals I studied as a participant-observer over a course of several years of research into the performative practices of the Deep Ecology movement.⁵ I centered much of my research around the work of Joanna Macy and the Institute for Deep Ecology, located at that time in Occidental, California. The institute was initially co-founded in 1992 as the Institute for Deep Ecology Education by Fran and Joanna Macy, in close association with

Bill Devall, Stephanie Kaza, Elias Amidon, Elizabeth Roberts and others, and situated in Boulder, Colorado. By 1996 the organization had moved to Occidental, California, shortening its name to the Institute for Deep Ecology (IDE). For the first several years, IDE sponsored workshops and trainings in deep ecology. Many of the trainings featured various teachers of deep ecology or environmental activists who ascribed to the principles of deep ecology. In the late 1990s, IDE went through a self-evaluation process that resulted in a shift from small, workshop-styled trainings to larger conferences co-sponsored with other progressive groups, such as the Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Cultural Conservancy, Global Exchange, New College of California, Youth for Environmental Sanity, and the Indigenous & Non-Indigenous Youth Alliance. This marked increasing coalition-building around social justice issues. Since 2002, however, IDE stopped offering workshops and closed its offices. Although it has not officially dissolved as a non-profit at the time of this writing, its activities have been drastically curtailed. Because of this, it is important to place in the public archives a record and analysis of the work done by IDE. This article contributes toward that goal.

In this article I first place the Council of All Beings within Deep Ecology, and then describe its history and etiology of the original format as designed by Joanna Macy and John Seed. From this discussion I proceed into an ethnographic discussion of a particular Council I attended in August, 2000, which was sponsored by the Institute for Deep Ecology. Finally, I discuss several issues which arise concerning the use of this ritual in the development of nature-based spiritualities.

Deep Ecology

Deep Ecology is a radical environmentalism which is based upon the recognition

of the interconnection and interdependence of all things. By “all things” I mean literally that: rock, soil, air, water, plants and animals. Deep Ecology’s commitment to this basic premise allows for the development of various philosophical elaborations of this basic theme, or “ecosophies,” in the words of Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer who first coined the phrase “deep ecology” (Naess, 1973).⁶ The Deep Ecology movement seeks to look at the deeper structures of philosophical and religious thought which inform action at the political, economic and social or cultural levels. Alan Drengson characterizes the contrast between “deep” and “shallow” as follows:

The word “deep” in part referred to the level of questioning of our purposes and values, when arguing in environmental conflicts. The “deep” movement involves deep questioning, right down to fundamentals (Drengson, 1999).

Deep ecologists seek to affect environmental change by changing the assumptions humans have made about their relationship with the natural world in which they live, and of which they are an intrinsic part. Deep Ecology endeavors to adopt an ecological point of view and way of seeing that sees things in their network of interrelationships and interdependencies. Naess envisioned that ecosophies could be developed out of any set of basic religious commitments, whether they were Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, pagan⁷ or whatever. Of interest is the fact that in addition to existing religious expressions, we are seeing the development of what can be best described as an ecological spirituality along with attendant practices and even rituals designed to create a sense of the ecological self in persons.

This intention is stated explicitly in the online Council of All Beings manual published by John Seed and Eshana of the Rainforest Information Centre:

The Council of All Beings is a series of re-Earthing rituals created by John Seed and Joanna Macy to help end the sense of alienation from the living

Earth that most of us feel, and to connect us with new sources of joy, commitment and inspiration that follow from union with Gaia.

Many people INTELLECTUALLY realise that we are inseparable from Nature and that the sense of separation that we feel is socially conditioned and illusory. These rituals enable us to deeply EXPERIENCE our connection with Nature, in our hearts and our bodies(Rainforest Information Centre, 2000a).⁸

History of the Council of All Beings

In 1985, John Seed worked with Joanna Macy and Pat Fleming and others to develop the Council of All Beings. I quote at length from John Seed’s own description of what led to his collaboration with Macy on the first Councils.

It's remarkable that we as a species are capable of going to war, dying and killing each other by the millions in defence of one social fiction after another, whether it's a country, or an ideology, or a religion, and yet when the very biological fabric that underpins all of these things, out of which everything we know is woven, when this is being torn to shreds, somehow sending \$25 to Greenpeace is more than most people can manage. It's like there is a spiritual disease, it seems to me, and unless we can address that, all of the other work that we're doing will in the end come to nothing. These were the sort of conclusions I was reaching in the mid 80's when I had the good fortune to meet Joanna Macy when she came to Australia doing workshops called Despair & Empowerment.

We had been struggling with sandminers and police to protect the beautiful ancient forests growing on the frontal dunes of a beach that we loved and had lost that action. One day they had arrested everybody, they cut down all the trees, they just brought in huge teams of men and cut down all the great trees so that there was nothing left to defend, everything was gone. So we had our despair pretty well together, and decided that this would be a good test of the workshop, that if empowerment could come from the despair that we were feeling then we would like to know about it, and indeed it did !

I had at this time been steeping myself in the philosophy of Deep Ecology which sees the root cause of all of these problems as being our human centredness, that chauvinism that leads us to prize humanity over everything else. It's like prizing one part of the body over the rest of the body. No part of the body can live unless the whole body lives ! No species can live without the Earth to support it, no place can be protected unless there is a planet for it to exist on. Somehow our focus is always too narrow and if we want to have a healthy humanity who are truly human, then it isn't enough just to try and protect human interests, we have to protect the matrix within which humanity

exists. Somehow, it seemed to me that this wasn't reflected in this Despair and Empowerment workshop. The workshop was very exciting because it really encouraged us to feel things that we had been denying. It encouraged us to look at the denial of our feelings - of the fear, the horror, the rage at what was happening to our world. The likelihood of nuclear war at that time seemed very strong, and rather than hide these things away, rather than imagine that we could feel good by pushing these things away from us, Joanna encouraged us to feel these things and to share them with each other. Through various exercises she made it safe to explore, to be vulnerable, and in the final ritual, the despair circle, people were calling out, and crying and wailing, yelling in their anger, and it was kind of like any New Age therapy workshop, except that people were crying out about what was happening to the Earth and I had never seen that before. It wasn't just about themselves, and it was a very powerful experience. But still there was this human centredness. When people cried about the threat of nuclear war, it was very much about the effects of nuclear war upon one species, the humans, and future generations of that species, and only lip service was paid to the 10,000,000 other species that would be affected. Somehow, we were still the centre of everything. In the sharing at the end of that workshop I shared that the sense of empowerment was undeniable, it was incredible what happened when we acknowledged these feelings and shared them with each other, the sense of apathy and paralysis seemed to evaporate as Joanna had promised. But it still seemed as though there was something important missing - deep ecology.

Joanna, it seems, had been coming to similar conclusions and we talked afterwards, we went for a long walk in the bush, and out of that grew the idea of the Council of All Beings - a synthesis of despair and empowerment and deep ecology. It brought a biocentric flavour to the despair work, and a process to deep ecology, whereby deep ecology wasn't just ideas any more that passed through the mind but somehow left behavior unchanged. These ceremonies and rituals seem to be a profound way of moving us to that place where our values can change, where it isn't necessary to make sacrifices to change our lifestyle, but rather where we find that when values change then changes in lifestyle just happen by themselves. It's like shedding a skin or something like that (Rainforest Information Centre, 2000b).

Growing in part out of Macy's Despair and Empowerment work, the early Councils of All Beings led participants through a process of mourning and the expression of anger and outrage for the environmental destruction they knew about or had personally experienced. Then using guided visualization, movement, and dance, participants re-experienced their entire evolutionary journey. Participants were then led through rituals

designed to bring them in contact with an “animal ally” who would speak through the participants during the Council session. Masks were then made to represent these animal allies and give voice to the “voiceless ones.” During the Council session, these animal allies spoke through the voices of their human interlocutors offering words of challenge and guidance to empower the work of the participants in behalf of the earth (Seed, *et al.*, 1988: 5-17).

I help organize and lead gatherings called the Council of All Beings, and the exercises we do at these gatherings give us a sense that we are not so much a personality as an intersection of these great cycles. We begin to break the illusion of being separate from the rest of creation. I can lay on the ground and feel the vibration of this earth which gave rise to me and which has sustained my ancestors and everything else for four thousand million years in incredible intelligent harmony (Nisker, 1992).

Original Format of the Council of All Beings

Joanna Macy points out that the name “Council of All Beings” is used in two ways. More strictly, it refers to a ritual lasting anywhere from one to two or more hours, in which people gather to speak on behalf of other species. More generically, it refers to a longer process, often amounting to a weekend workshop, in which the more strictly-termed “Council” is the culminating event (Seed, *et al.*, 1988:97) There are three basic parts to a Council of All Beings workshop: The Mourning, The Remembering, and Speaking from the Standpoint of Other Beings (the Council proper).

One of the key points of Deep Ecology is the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things – living and non-living. Because of that interconnection, people can experience felt connections with the natural world, and as that world is threatened, destroyed, or obliterated, people experience that loss as grief. The mourning is the time to acknowledge that grief and express it, perhaps even for the first time out loud.

Deep ecology remains an abstract concept, without power to transform unless we allow ourselves to feel – which includes feeling the pain within us over what is happening to our world. The workshop serves as a safe place where this pain can be acknowledged and expressed (Macy, 1991:200).

In previous work in the nuclear disarmament work, Macy discovered that people had great awareness of the dangers of nuclear arms, but were paralyzed into inaction when faced with the enormity of the problem and its apparent intractableness. She realized that many people were suffering from a sort of psychic numbing described by Robert Jay Lifton in his work with victims of trauma and nuclear bomb blasts. The only difference was that the people Macy encountered suffered from a sort of anticipatory psychic numbness. She realized that much of the numbness was a result of trying to bury great feelings of grief and anger. What was necessary to awaken people to action was to awaken these long-suppressed feelings and emotions and give them expression. Macy devised various exercises, ritualized enactments and role-plays that provided structure and safe space for their expression.

In her deep ecology work, Macy utilized these insights about psychic numbing and placed them in the greater context of the interconnectedness of all things. Deep Ecology teaches that one of the problems of human civilization is its existential disconnection from the rest of the natural world. This manifests itself in various forms of alienation, including alienation from other human beings and alienation from the natural world in which humans find themselves. The natural world becomes a collection of objects (“resources”) to be used by humans however they see fit. Other non-human beings lose subjectivity in this process. When that subjectivity is lost, the ability to maintain relationships and connections is also lost. These losses result in feelings of grief, as is true for

any loss. However, when the subjectivity of the natural world is denied, then the feelings of loss have no recognizable or acknowledged origin.

The mourning ritual at a Council of All Beings serves to give name to those losses and to begin the process of returning subjectivity to the natural world. In fact, many people prefer to refer this as “intersubjectivity,” a term that acknowledges that our own subjectivity is caught up in mutual subjectivity with other beings, and that we do not exist apart and fully separable from the world around us – living and non-living.

Macy counsels that “...the best methods are simple ones, for it is natural to mourn and important to speak, at last our sorrow” (Macy, 1991:200). The mourning can take the form of simply naming things that are disappearing in our world, or it can be a more formal ritual such as the reading of a list of endangered species, a ritual Macy has written up as “The Bestiary” (Macy, 1991:193-5, Seed, *et al.*, 1988). However it is done, the mourning lays the foundation of internal openness to the felt connections with the natural world.

Yes, in the grief and anger that well up, we rediscover a passionate caring. And this caring springs from our interconnectedness. Why else do we weep for other beings and those not yet born? there’s no cause for so great a sadness if at root e are not one. Deep ecology serves as the explanatory principle both for the pain we experience on behalf of our planet and its beings and also for the sense of belonging that arises when we stop repressing that pain and let it reconnect us with our world (Macy, 1991:200).

The remembering is designed to recapitulate in the participants their own evolutionary history. Key to this process is the coupling of imagination with a cosmology based in a scientific understanding of the history of the universe. Being based in part in the new cosmologies articulated by persons such as Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry (See Berry, 1978, 1985, 1988, 1991; Swimme, 1986; and Swimme and Berry, 1992), the evolutionary remembering is a guided visualization that leads participants through the

entire story of the emergence of life on earth from the primordial stardust of the Big Bang. This remembering is intended to bring to the participants consciousness the innate wisdom they each possess as a result of several billion years of development and evolution. As Macy has often said, “Act your age: 4 billion years old.”

Sometimes, this evolutionary remembering is facilitated by drumbeat mimicking a heartbeat, inducing a trancelike state. But altered states of consciousness are not necessary for this. “Ordinary consciousness is certainly sufficient, however, to allow us to shake off for awhile our solely human identification and imaginatively to enter the experience of other life-forms’ (Macy, 1991:201).

Macy has written specific examples for the remembering, but what is necessary for this step is a recounting of the cosmogony of the earth and a tracing of the development of life on the earth, finally leading up to human evolution and the very cells within the very hands of the participants gathered at the council. All of which serves to stress the connectedness of participants with the natural world through a shared evolutionary history.

The final portion is the Council proper, or speaking for other life-forms. In this portion, after each participant has determined what other life-form or natural form⁹ will speak through them, time is spent making masks depicting that other entity. The masks are important for submerging the human identity of the participant for the period in which they serving as voice for their alter entity. Participants then gather in a circle, with their masks in front of their face. Instructions are given. Then the Council proceeds as one-by-one each entity speaks. It is important for their to be some form of human presence to listen to the Council. However, it is customary for the humans not to respond or make ar-

gument. their task is simply to listen and to acknowledge what has been said. This can be accomplished by having each person place down their mask after they have spoken and come into the center of the circle and sit in the role of human listener. Or people might take turns in the center when they are not speaking as another entity. After each entity has had a chance to speak, they are also given a chance to offer the human listeners some wisdom or attribute appropriate to who they are that can serve as strength or encouragement for the human population to change its relationship with the natural world. When everyone being has spoken, the circle is ritually dissolved in some fashion, and participants disperse.

Council of All Beings Workshop Sponsored by the Institute for Deep Ecology 2001

During the summer of 2000, the Institute for Deep Ecology sponsored a Council of All Beings at Gillespie Group Camp in Tilden Park, one of the Regional Parks of the Bay Area in California. The two facilitators for this event were Lisa Faithorn and David Graves.¹⁰ In what follows, after a brief background description of each of the facilitators, I describe the physical setting and the schedule of the weekend. I then engage in an in-depth description and reflection upon my experiences at this workshop.

Facilitators

Lisa Faithorn, Ph.D., is a research anthropologist, organizational consultant and environmental activist. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Earth Island Institute and has taught for many years at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. At the time of the Council, Lisa had recently resigned her position at CIIS and was in the process of evaluating where her life would take her in the next stage of things. As a teacher at CIIS, Lisa incorporated the Council of All Beings into her classroom curricula

as a field trip experience. I had met Lisa before at the 1997 Training sponsored by the Institute for Deep Ecology at Whidbey, Island.

David Graves was a deep ecology teacher in the Human Consciousness Department of John F. Kennedy University, Orinda, California. When not teaching at the university level, David did restoration work in natural areas found in San Francisco urban parks. He also wrote natural history essays for publications committed to preserving local biodiversity.

Description of Place

Tilden Park is located in the hills above Berkeley, California, and ranges from areas developed for human use, such as playing fields, a carousel, a small-scale railroad, to undeveloped, “wild” or more “natural” areas. Gillespie Group Camp (see diagram 4, below) is located at the southern end of Tilden Park on a relatively level space on a ridge between two creeks. The area around the camp is primarily Bay Laurel and California Live Oak forest. Centrally located in Gillespie is a large level open field, which is surrounded by a perimeter of ring of Redwood trees. The oval field is primarily grass turf, complete with an installed sprinkler system which comes on at night. The redwood perimeter is also artificial, having been planted by humans a number of years prior. The Redwoods have achieved a sizable canopy, and the floor beneath them is blanketed with Redwood needles, but little else.

Located next to the Redwood-ringed field were a number of picnic-style tables, as well as a recently-completed covered shelter. Down a path to a lower level was another covered shelter, complete with fireplace. This covered shelter was bounded on three sides by stone walls, with a roof that sloped downward to the fourth side, which was completely open. The group activities for the weekend moved between these three areas: the open field, the picnic area and the stone shelter. Individual or dyadic activities encompassed the surrounding terrain and trails.

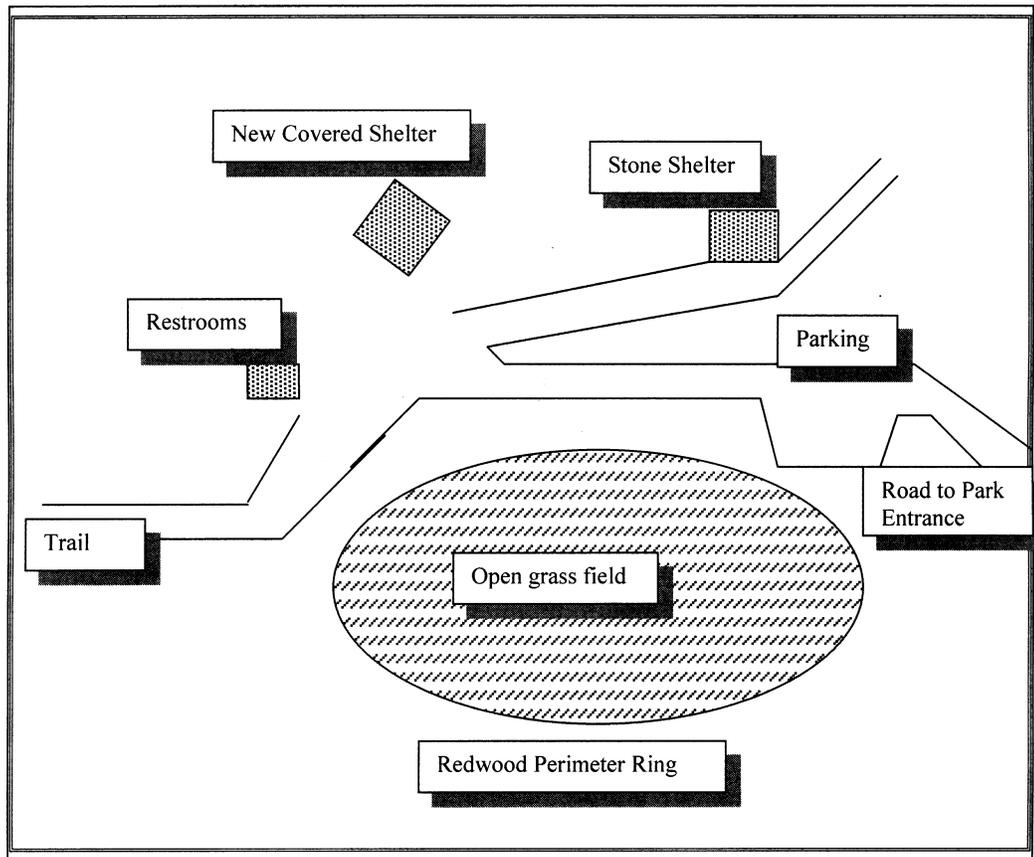


Diagram 4: Gillespie Group Camp

Description of the Workshop

“Workshop” is somewhat of a misnomer in regard to a Council of All Beings. “Council” is how it was referred to at the weekend I attended, although the Council of All Beings proper is actually just one part of the entire experience. For the purposes of this dissertation, I shall refer to the entire experience as a workshop and reserve the word “council” for the actual Council of All Beings itself.

The workshop took place during a 24-hour period. Participants arrived at Gillespie at 3:00 p.m., Saturday, August 5, 2000. The workshop concluded at about 3:00 p.m., Sunday, August 6. Participants and facilitators all slept in tents in the Redwood perimeter, and all meals were eaten together in the picnic area. Everyone brought their own food, so while meals were eaten together, food was not communal, although some people did share some of the food they had brought.

The basic outline of the workshop was as follows:

1. Arrival and set-up of tents.
2. Opening circle in the open field. Introductions and description of the schedule for the weekend.
3. Grounding to place.
 - a. Individual time spent wandering around the immediate area. Locating a special spot.
 - b. Return to circle. Sharing of experiences.
 - c. In dyads, sharing of special spots with one another in a blind trust walk.
 - d. Return to circle. Sharing of experiences.
4. Dinner.
5. Gather at stone shelter for sharing of eco-stories.
6. Chakra work at stone shelter to open up to power animal visitation.
7. Free-time/Bedtime.

On the next day the schedule was:

1. Wake-up and optional meditation in the stone shelter.
2. Breakfast.
3. Prayer stick exercise in the stone shelter.
4. Solo time in surrounding area.

5. Return and lunch/mask-making in the picnic area.
6. Council of All Beings in the open field.
7. Breakdown of tents and campsites.
8. Closing circle in the open field.
9. Departure.

In the sections that follow, I will describe what transpired during each of these periods, particularly in terms of my own experience. Interspersed with these descriptions will be personal reflections and commentary on the activities. Following this, I will discuss some personal reflections on the weekend.

Arrival and Set-up of Tents

As people arrived, we were greeted informally by one of the facilitators, David Graves or Lisa Faithorn. We were invited to set up our tents anywhere in the Redwood perimeter. As I arrived, people were in various stages of arrival and tent set-up. I picked out a location not too far from the others, set up my tent and settled in.

David Graves had brought a large hanging gong that he carried around. The gong produced a low, mellow-sounding ring which did not carry very far, and was almost indistinguishable from other background sounds of human activity in the distance, and the sound of the wind in the trees. As we grew more accustomed to its tone, however, we were more able to distinguish its ringing, which called us together for group time. At the sound of gong, we gathered in a circle at one end of the open field.

Opening Circle in the Open Field: Introductions and Description of the Schedule for the Weekend

In the circle, we went around and introduced ourselves. We each gave our names (we confined it to first names only) and shared a bit about what had drawn us to the weekend. The group consisted of the two facilitators and nine participants. Of the partic-

ipants, four were men and five were women. During the sharing and introductions, a range of familiarity with Deep Ecology and the Council of All Beings format emerged. Two or three of the participants had heard about the weekend at a talk given by Julia Butterfly Hill and Joanna Macy in San Francisco June 29 at Fort Mason Center in San Francisco.¹¹ One or two more had received information in mailings from the Institute for Deep Ecology. Several others did not reveal how they had heard about the workshop, sharing instead why they were there. Two persons specifically shared that they were in the midst of a career shift, and were interested in shifting from their work in the corporate world to work that supported their growing environmental consciousness and concern for greater sustainability.¹² Two persons had come at the invitation of another participant, and were not familiar with Deep Ecology, although they indicated that they remained open to the design and activities of the workshop. Two persons were therapists, one of whom had done work at the Tamalpa Institute in Marin County, which I have described earlier. One person had also participated in the Embodying Nature workshop with Anna Halprin and Ken Otter that I have detailed previously. None of the participants had ever attended a Council of All Beings before.

After we had introduced ourselves and identified our particular interest in the workshop, Lisa gave an introduction and very brief overview of some of the basic tenets of Deep Ecology, with an emphasis upon the shift from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. She explained that the Council of All Beings is designed to be an experience in this shift of consciousness. David then gave an overview of the schedule for the rest of the workshop, and certain logistical details were discussed.

Grounding in Place

The grounding in place exercise consisted of four parts. The first part involved individually wandering around the area and locating a special spot. In the second part we returned to the circle and shared our experience. In the third part we went out in dyads, and shared our special spots with one another in a blind trust walk. For the final part we returned to the circle and shared our experiences again.

We were invited¹³ to wander around the area contiguous to the camp for about an hour, not wandering too far from the open field. We were instructed to see what presented itself to us, what struck us in particular – a feature of the landscape, an animal or plant, a sound, whatever -- and then bring back something tangible but not living from that place to share with the group in circle. We then dispersed for the next hour.

Personal Experience

As I wandered at first through the Redwood perimeter ring, I began to focus upon the auditory environment. I heard the sound of insects, perhaps cicadas, and cry of a hawk, the crocking of ravens and the wind through the trees. I also heard the sound of what I often call “humanization”¹⁴ – an occasional automobile, the whistle of the reduced-scale railroad in Tilden park, the whine of jets passing overhead. I became aware of light streaming through the Redwood needles in the Redwood perimeter ring, the indescribable aroma of Redwood, and how the boundary of the Redwoods made a sudden transition as I came suddenly into the open grass. I noticed the intensity of sunlight in the open grass, and became aware of a strange sense of the artificiality of the irrigated grassy field. I noticed also how the new growth candles on one of the Redwoods were brown and dying, but the other trees did not seem affected.

I discovered trash left next to the Bay Laurel scrub along the path leading from the parking lot to the picnic area. Walking along a ridge that went down a steep slope down to the creek, I discovered a wildly dancing tangle of branches of California Live Oak catching the light. The light of the sun was moving down in the sky, so the branches caught the late afternoon sun at just the right angle to be illuminated and highlighted underneath the overarching canopy of trees.

I noticed how they reached down and touched the earth. Some of the branches even thrust down into the earth. I remained at this spot for the remainder of the time, taking in the feeling of movement of the Live Oak as its branches undulated and twisted outward from the trunk parallel to the ground, and then down to the ground. I refer to the movement of the Live Oaks very intentionally. Looking at the branches I realized that what I was looking at was the very slow pattern of growth of limbs and branches of the trees. As I looked, I was aware of a feeling of movement in myself. My arms reached out and undulated in a rhythmic pattern mimicking the shape of the limbs. What I was experiencing was a form of kinesthetic identification normally experienced between animals. As I perceived a particular feeling of movement in the tree, albeit a movement “frozen” in the structure of the tree, I then recapitulated that movement feeling in my own moving body. In essence, I was dancing with the trees in an experience essentially identical to my experience on Mt. Tamalpais during the “Embodying Nature” workshop described earlier. Whereas my dances lasted only a few minutes, the dance of the trees lasted for several decades, and continues long after I left the area. Finally the gong sounded, and I returned to the circle.

Group Sharing

The group returned to the circle in the Open Field. Some had brought artifacts from their wanderings, but others of us brought back only descriptions. We shared these one by one. Not having brought back a particular artifact, I instead danced mimetically the movement I had experienced in the Live Oaks. Others shared feathers or leaves.

In Dyads, Sharing of Special Spots with One Another in a Blind Trust Walk

We then went off in groups of two utilizing the blind trust walk exercise described above in section 3.2.1.2 of this chapter. I was led by my partner up a narrow and uneven path to a particular spot. I took off my blindfold to behold a massive Bay Laurel whose several trunks arched in various directions out of the hillside and high above the path. After several minutes of marveling at this sight, I then blindfolded my partner and led him to the spot I had discovered.

Return to Circle and Group Sharing

The sound of David’s gong bade us to return to the circle, where we once again shared our experiences of being led to these different spots.

Dinner

We then broke for dinner. We actually had dinner all together, seated on one of the picnic tables. We engaged in casual human community building – talking together, even sharing food. During dinner I talked with Lisa Faithorn, who has conducted approximately 25 Councils of All Beings in the 15 years since John Seed and Joanna Macy designed the basic ritual. We spoke about the Council of All Beings as being an experience in biocentrism, or more to the point, as a process of experiencing biocentrism in the body. As indicated earlier, biocentrism is one of the basic ideas or points of Deep Ecology. The

idea of a Council of All Beings is to experientially shift the frame of reference for the participant from an anthropocentric way of being and perceiving the world to a mode of perceiving and being in which the rest of the natural world is considered to be as significant and valuable as the human world. Indeed, the shift of viewpoint is away from a hierarchy of being, with humans at the apex of the hierarchy, to a circular web of interconnected relationships in which the needs, concerns, gifts and benefits of each being connects with and affects every other being.

The Council of All Beings often facilitates this shift in frame by placing participants in direct contact with the natural world, and then creating the ritual structure in which participants allow another being to speak through them. I say “often,” because there have been some Councils of All Beings which have been done in motel rooms with profound results.¹⁵ What is central to the Council, then, is the engagement of the imagination. This process involves the use of the imagination in which the participants try to “see through the eyes” of another being, as it were, and to imagine what the needs and concerns, gifts and benefits of that being might be. If that being could speak in human language to the human community, what would it say?

Gathering at Stone Shelter for Sharing of Eco-stories

We then broke from dinner and clean-up and went down to the stone shelter with a fireplace in it. Lisa began the time by talking about the significance of stories in the environmental movement. Trained herself as an anthropologist, she has noticed in her environmental work that people have stories and that they want to share these stories. She described four categories of eco-stories – and as she described the four categories she in-

vited us to think about how we might have a story. The four categories she has identified are:

1. Stories from our early life as children, deeply imprinted experiences.
2. Stories of other people as a guide or gateway to a larger sense of connectedness.
3. Terrifying encounters with the natural world – or stories in which the natural world served as messengers.
4. Stories of loss and grief, especially in terms of the loss of natural places.

The first category of stories we shared in pairs with one another, the second and third categories we shared out loud, and the fourth category we shared in pairs again. I was paired with Lisa Faithorn, and for the first category, stories from our life as children, I recalled experiences as a Boy Scout in Boise, Idaho. These experiences formed part of the background for what I have come to refer to in recent years as an ecological epistemology. In talking with Lisa, I related a story which I also described in a paper I delivered at a recent panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (Strobel, 1999). I quote the relevant section here:

I experience this ecological epistemology in a particular forest in the foothills of the Boise range, a small spur of mountains mediating the rise of landscape from the broad, high desert flatness of the Snake river plateau in southern Idaho to the Sawtooth mountains in Central Eastern Idaho. I am lying on my back, temporarily alone while on a weekend campout with my Boy Scout troop. There is grass, pine needles, and myriads of unnamed plants cushioning my back from the sandy and rocky soil beneath me. A breeze is blowing through the mixture of fir and pine trees around me. It is a sound like no other in the world. The trees actually whisper a long sustained sotto voce moan. There is a soft, gentle interplay between wind and conifer needles which flows in long drawn-out arias which is quite different from the brook-like sound of the wind slapping, clapping and tripping over the leaves of aspens or maples. As I lay there, I listen for these subtleties, and I become aware of how I am an accidental bystander witnessing an ancient interchange between other citizens of this earthly realm. I don't yet know such terms as anthropomorphism and so on. Rather, what I am aware of is the desire for the reverse:

to pattern myself after this wild and intricately natural world around me. Increasingly I come to feel the wild of nature to be kin. I go into the wild not so much for solitude as for companionship and familiarity. This is an ecological epistemology at work. It is an epistemology which insists that there is no knowledge out there, separate and distinct from myself, or from a Self which I can designate as “mine”, which is disconnectable from the world around me. It is an epistemology that insists that all knowledge is connected knowledge, or better yet, interconnected knowledge.(Strobel, 1999).

I related this story to Lisa as one of the deep imprinting experiences from my childhood. Indeed, it was formative to my own understanding of biocentrism and Deep Ecology. In part, it is experiences such as that described in this story that have compelled me to pursue the work I have undertaken in this dissertation. And so, in this storytelling time, I experienced the power of telling stories as a means for enabling persons to reconnect with their sense of purpose in life.

Chakra Work at Stone Shelter to Open up to Power Animal Visitation

We then took a short break during which I drank in the chorus of crickets around us. When we returned to the stone shelter, David Graves proceeded to instruct us in how we would utilize four of the body’s seven chakras in order to encourage contact with another creature.

Work with chakras is not necessarily part of Deep Ecology nor is it necessarily part of a Council of All Beings. Rather, it is a particular interest of Graves which he brings to Council work. This is a hallmark of Council of All Beings work -- each facilitator is free to modify the format somewhat.

David’s work with chakras is based upon traditional Hindu and yoga teachings. “Chakra” literally means “wheel,” and refers to seven centers in the body which are considered to be nodes of energy, and points in which particular psychosomatic¹⁶ functions are affected. Work with chakras is found throughout the literature and yogic practices of

the religious and philosophical systems of India. It has passed into the North American cultural mix primarily through the work of the Theosophical Society, the contact of British and North Americans with gurus and yogis in and from India, and the more recent New Age movement. David did not offer any detailed explanation of the history or philosophy behind the chakras. Rather he acted upon the presumption that most of us were conversant with the idea. As the majority of the participants were from the Bay Area, his presumption was not unfounded.

We paired up, with one person as the facilitator/recorder and the other person as the subject. The subject was to lay on their back with their eyes closed. The facilitator rubbed their hands together and then placed one hand over each of the four chakras emphasized in this work (stomach, heart, throat and head). Whatever image arose or creature presented itself to the subject was recorded on a piece of paper by the facilitator. David described the process as follows:

When you place your hand down, feel the energy... we're going to place a hand over the chakra and then ask the question of the person, "What is the creature that presents itself to you?" and then ask that creature, "What is it you want to tell me?" Then whatever occurs to you, say it, and the person who is assisting writes it down. The chakras we will focus on are the stomach, the heart, the throat and the head.... At the end I want you to give the paper to the person, and they can take it and put under their pillow as they sleep tonight. . . . And we'll see if any creature presents itself to us in our dreams tonight.¹⁷

I had no particular image for the stomach chakra, but for the heart chakra I received the impression of a daisy-like flower or sunflower. For the neck I experienced the sound of the wind outside, and the message which came to me was "the wind carries the song of the crickets." For the head I received the impression of a chameleon, and the message had to do with remaining hidden, blending in, adjusting to the environment.

Free-time/Bedtime

We then broke from this activity. As the time was 10:00, people either headed off to bed or gathered in small groups and continued their conversations from before.

Second Day: Wake-up and Optional Meditation in the Stone Shelter

Around 7:00 the next morning, David walked through camp again, sounding the walking gong. Some persons exercised the option of gathering for silent sitting and walking meditation in the stone shelter.

Breakfast

Breakfast was eaten at a picnic table outside the stone shelter or taken into the shelter. As soon as everyone had finished eating, we all gathered again in the shelter.

Prayer Stick Exercise in the Stone Shelter

The morning experience began with everyone getting in a circle. We took a stick Lisa had found when she came into camp. It and several pieces of yarn were laying in the middle of the circle on a tarp. We were all invited when we were moved -- Quaker style -- to speak aloud a concern, or a fear or a stress or whatever and wrap some yarn around the stick as a prayer. The stick would then be placed somewhere to rot, to decay. Each person came up one by one, as they were moved, and spoke their concerns or prayers. Lisa had brought several rattles and gourd shakers for us to use if we wished. After each person shared, we shook our rattles as a symbol of our witnessing and recognition of what had been said.

One of the things that occurred to me as one person was sharing about breast cancer in her sister was the view that diseases such as cancer are an example of our interconnectedness. That is, they are produced as a result of our pumping things into the atmos-

phere and also as a result of the society we have created in which everyone has certain lifestyles which affect their physical health directly or indirectly through environmental pollution. Therefore, one can say from an interconnected point of view that it is not this person or that person who gets cancer but rather *we all* get cancer *in* this or that person. It is a localization of something that we have all caused and we all experience in some way.

This prayer stick experience was Lisa’s form of expressing grief. In the format designed by Joanna Macy and John Seed, there is a ritual designated for grieving and mourning. Macy and Seed explain the purpose of the mourning thus:

Deep Ecology remains a concept without power to transform our awareness; and behavior unless we allow ourselves to feel -- which means feeling the pain within us over what is happening to our world. The workshop serves as safe place where this pain can be acknowledged, plumbed, released. Often it arises as a deep sense of loss over what is slipping away -- ancient forests and clean river, birdsong and breatheable [*sic*] air. *It is appropriate then to mourn -- for once, at least -- to speak our sorrow and, when appropriate, to say goodbye to what is disappearing from our lives.* As participants let this happen in the whole group or in small clusters, anger and fear and hopelessness arise, too -- and something more, a passionate caring.

Caring, and the interconnectedness from which it springs, emerge as the ground of this anger and grief. It is an important part of the workshop leaders’ role to point that out. Why else do we weep for other beings and for those not yet born? Deep ecology serves as explanatory principle both for the pain we experience on behalf of our planet and its beings and for the sense of belonging that arises when we stop repressing that pain and let it reconnect us with our world.

This stage is very similar to the Despairwork [of Joanna Macy], and it is preliminary to the other stages for several reasons. It erodes the culturally conditioned defenses of the separate ego, the fictions that “I” am or should be in control. That I can hold aloof from what befalls others. Secondly, mourning lends authority to notions of our interconnectedness or deep ecology. And, thirdly, it deepens trust between members of the group for all the work that follows (Seed, *et al.*, 1988:101-2).

Solo Time in Surrounding Area

Following the prayer stick ritual, we had about an hour and a half of solo time to go and experience the natural world in the area around the camp and be open to what might come to us. I moved through the camp and found myself at the entrance to camp. Sitting at the entrance, I heard a squealing caw-cry – almost like a seagull’s cry. I determined that it was the red-shouldered hawk that David had talked about earlier. (Subsequent conversations with my wife, who is an avid birder and former crew member of the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory, confirmed my identification.) So I looked and sure enough, there was a hawk. I couldn’t positively identify it visually one way or the other – but it did not make a red-tail cry. It made its caw-cry as it circled above a hill nearby. It called out several times as it circled. I also saw dragonflies circling. The wind carried the song of the hawk just as it carried the dragonflies.

Further on down the trail I found an old Bay Laurel tree with several branches about 20 inches in diameter spreading out across this stretch of creek. I left the trail and crawled naked out upon several of the branches suspended there above the ground. I spent about thirty minutes there at that spot, listening, feeling the cool roughness of the dried-moss-covered bark against my skin and felt the wind move in warm and cool breaths up and down the creek gully. At the end of this time, I started to pick up several leaves to use in the mask-making. I asked the ground if it was all right for me to take these leaves, and as I asked the question, I heard once again the call of the hawk which I had not heard the entire time of being on the trail. I took that cry as a reply – a call -- a cry to me as if to say “yes.” The time on the trail had been bracketed by the cry of the red-shouldered hawk.

As I picked up the leaves, I reflected upon what it meant to consider that the hawk’s cry might be some sort of reply to me concerning the picking up of leaves. I spoke those reflections into a hand-held tape recorder:

So is this red-shouldered hawk really answering me, talking to me – this solitary human being – as if all these things exist to answer my questions? What difference is there from then saying that the red-shouldered hawk was crying as it spies something, in reply to the ground – and to the animals in it -- that the aroma from the ground of Bay and decaying leaves has risen on the warmth of the rising air to its nostrils and it cries out and it sings its song as I move in through these Bay leaves, and pick up these leaves, and the leaves have heard my question and are lifting it up through the smells wafting on the breeze? But it has stopped its cry now. So I will stop picking up the leaves. And I hear now the soft sound of the gong being carried also on the wind to me.¹⁸

The sound of the gong passing along the path signaled a call to return to the camp and begin the mask-making and have lunch. Leaves in hand, I returned up the path. But the time on the trail and on the Bay Laurel branches had been fruitful: I realized that the wind wished to speak through me.

Return and Lunch/Mask-making in the Picnic Area

People returned one-by-one to the picnic area, and in a more pensive frame of mind, began to eat lunch and make their masks. Conversation was subdued. Following this period, we all gathered back out in the open field for the Council of All Beings proper.

Council of All Beings in the Open Field

The Council proceeded with explanation. The instructions were simple and straightforward. When we put on the masks, we were not to consider ourselves as humans, but would speak as the creatures our masks represented. When each creature had spoken, the other Council members would respond with “We hear you.” Then the crea-

ture who had spoken would put off the mask, and resume their identity as a human in the center of the circle. As humans sitting in the center of the circle, our role was strictly to listen, and then respond with “We hear you.”

John Seed and Eshana (Elizabeth Bragg) explain that people might experience different things at a Council of All Beings:

Try not to create unrealistic expectations for people. While allowing the possibility of amazing shamanic experiences to occur (feeling the human self disappear and the spirit of the ally speaking through them), also allow people to see it as a ‘role play’, an ‘exercise in moral imagination,’ simply practising [*sic*] what it would feel like to see the world from another creature’s perspective. Assure people that it’s okay if they feel themselves coming in and out of their human selves during the council. It’s important that participants are not distracted by anxiety that they’re “not doing it right!”(Seed and Eshana, 2000a).

This Council proceeded much more in the vein of role-playing. We put on the masks. And each person spoke. There were two persons as dragonflies, one person as a butterfly, I was the wind, and so on. It is more proper to say that the wind spoke through me, and a buck spoke through another person. Indeed, perhaps the more correct expression would be “Buck came to Council.” In that case, two dragonflies came to Council, Hawk came to Council, Falling Leaves came to Council, wind came to Council, skunk came to Council, Bay Meadow came to Council, and people spoke whatever they were moved to speak. Then each was to put down their mask and sit in the middle of the circle as humans, not responding or talking back other than replying, “We hear you.”

The first being to speak was Falling Leaves. After Falling Leaves spoke, the mask was put to the outside of the circle, and the mask-bearer came in to the center. The next being to speak was Wind.

I am Wind. I carry the song of the crickets. I lift hawk high above the hills and gently caress dragonfly as she chases insects. I have come because I

have a bone to pick with humans. It’s about a phrase, a saying you have. How does it go? Oh yes, “to break wind,” meaning to fart. I use to take offense at this phrase, until I started to smell what you are pumping into the air. You are right. The wind does smell foul now. What are you doing to me? Stop it now.

Then Wind offered its gifts to humans to help them change.

I offer you joy. Maybe if humans had more joy in life and enjoyment of the world they wouldn’t want to hurt it. So, I offer you joy. The joy of blowing high and low, of running your airy fingers through everyone’s hair, the joy of picking up Falling Leaves and tossing them about, the joy flowing underneath the feathers of hawk as you lift him up and up, the joy of rolling warm and cool down gullies and canyons. Joy. Yes, I offer you my joy. The joy of being Wind.

After Wind spoke, the mask was removed, set to the outside of the circle, and the mask-bearer (in this instance, me) came in to the center of the circle. Hummingbird with his long stick-for-a-beak spoke next. At first he hummed and hovered and flitted around the circle, as if going from flower to flower.

I am Hummingbird. Hmmmmmmmmm. I bring messages. Hmmmmmmm. I take messages from flower to flower. Hmmmmm mmmmmmm. I bring you messages from the flowers. Hmmm mmm hmmm. Take care of the land they say. Keep the land healthy so we can grow. Hmmmmm hmmm. Like Wind, I offer you joy, too. Hmmm mmmm.

Then Hummingbird’s mask was laid aside and the mask-bearer entered the circle. Dragonfly (one of two who came) then spoke and was glad to see brother dragonfly also at the circle.

I came today because I heard about this council and I wanted to see if there was any hope for humans. But I am glad to be here. Maybe there is hope.

Buck spoke.

I am tired of being shot by humans. Please let me live.

Skunk spoke.

I am Skunk. I move around at night in the dark. You may see me and may be surprised. I have come to tell you to face your fears. Do not be afraid. Many of you act afraid of me. But I will not harm you. So you must face those things that are in your darkness, that make you afraid to act. Face your fears. Do not be afraid.

The other Dragonfly spoke. Bay Meadow spoke. Forest of Trees spoke. Hawk spoke. Each time, when the being had finished speaking, the mask was laid aside outside of the circle, and the mask-bearer came in to the center and sat. After each being spoke, the humans in the center of the circle acknowledge their speaking with “We hear you.”

The Council ended with everyone sitting in the center of the circle as humans, facing outward. After a brief silence, the Council was dismissed. People were invited either to burn their masks as a way of releasing the energy of the experience back into the environment or to take the masks home as a reminder of the event and what each had learned. People then went to their tents, packed their gear and broke camp.

Closing Circle in the Open Field

We regathered at the site of the Council in the open field. The prayer stick we had earlier was passed around, and each person was invited to reflect very briefly upon what the weekend had meant to them, or what they would take away with them. At the end of this sharing, we all stood and closed out time off with a group hug. The prayer stick went home with one of the participants. The time was 3:00 in the afternoon.

Departure

I was surprised at how quickly people dispersed following the group hug. My family did not arrive for another 45 minutes to pick me up, so I had time to move around the campsite and reflect upon things. I recorded the following comments:

After the closing circle and group hug, everybody quickly disbanded and left – gone! Making it a somewhat curious reflection of what we learned about

place, when we humans come into a place and then so quickly leave it. Somewhat ceremoniously, somewhat unceremoniously. So what's the value of these experiences, these rituals, these events for tying us into place? Re-connecting us? The basic point of Bioregionalism, the basic point of a lot of Deep Ecology work is coming to know our place and loving our place. What does it mean for these events to take us out of our places and then send us back to them? So here is the question: How does an experience like this remain with people and enable them to connect deeper with the place in which they find themselves or in which they live? Does an experience like this change their bodily perception and relationship with a landscape, with a place, a *topos*? So these are the questions. And how could experiences like this be utilized by ongoing communities to deepen their commitment and to listen to what the other citizens, the other beings in their place might also be saying?

As the ravens crock behind me, I am also reflecting upon the fact that I came farthest of anyone to this event, so I am not returning immediately to home. So at the moment this is my place as I am, as much as any other place. So I am having a strong feeling of not needing to hurry off. So some of my preceding reflections are colored by the fact that I have traveled a distance to get here. But this place is also a significant place for me. I have left my current place of residence to return to a previous place of residence, a place that has been significant at some very important changing points in my life. But it is also a place in which my family roots run deep here in the Bay Area. Several generations in fact. It is a place in which, when I breathe the air, I am breathing in some ways ancestry. And when I walk these hills, I am walking places where, perhaps, my ancestors at one time walked or have been. And so it is a returning home for me. So I am not in a hurry to leave this particular place, because the whole area is in some ways my particular place.

Reflections Upon the Council of All Beings Weekend

Each Council of All Beings bears the imprint of its facilitator. John Seed and Joanna Macy identify three basic stages to a Council of All Beings in their work: mourning, remembering and speaking from the standpoint of other beings (Seed, *et al.*, 1988: 101). *The Council of All Beings Workshop Manual* found on John Seed and Eshana's website describes the workshop format as consisting of the following parts: Introductory Processes, Milling, Mourning, Council of All Beings, Grounding (Seed and Eshana, 2000b).

This particular Council was the first time David Graves and Lisa Faithorn had worked together in a Council setting. Leadership was shared evenly, with each facilitat-

ing whatever part reflected their own specialty or creative input. I pointed out in conversation with Lisa that I noticed that specific time had not been set aside for mourning. She explained that the mourning was an important part of Joanna Macy’s facilitation of a Council and came out of her earlier despair and empowerment work. Lisa, on the other hand, stated that her own stress is upon encouraging people to approach a Council from within their “heart space,” to get in touch with their heart connection with the natural world. The telling of stories and the use of the prayer stick is the way she has devised to bring people into contact with that heart dimension of their awareness.

It was curious to me that neither Lisa nor David gave much history of the history of the Council of All Beings. There is great value in placing oneself within an historical lineage. This was all the more curious, considering Lisa’s interest in the telling of stories. Establishing the historical lineage of one’s ritual practice reflects the building of tradition, and connects participants with the fact that the sort of things they experienced is being done other places, and that these rituals arose out of specific experiences, as creative responses to situations. One of the points of the Council of All Beings is to evoke creative responses in people, to utilize their connectedness, the resources of their connectedness to other beings and their four billion year-old history. The retelling of an historical lineage can bring that to people’s attention – that they come to a Council of All Beings not just because it is an interesting thing to do on a Saturday afternoon, but because there is a developing community of people who are engaged in interacting with the natural world in a non-dominating way and who are seeking to change their relationship with one another and with the rest of creation. The Council of All Beings is one means by which they come together.¹⁹

The fields of liturgical studies and the practice and study of Christian ritual pose interesting questions to juxtapose with the Council of All Beings experience. One is a question that frequently arises in the discussion of liturgy and ritual: how does the weekly worship service qualitatively change or transform people? How does that one to two hour experience once a week affect who they are, how they live, and how they perceive things? What are the effects? What are the results? Does it make a difference? What is the relationship between what happens in that experience and what happens after they walk out the door? That same question applies here. And it also applies to people who go away on weekend retreats and experience deep intentional community of some sort that has a spiritual and life-transformative component to it: how do they integrate that back into their life, particularly in a culture such as ours that does not have a lot of ritual and ceremonies for reincorporating people back in and acknowledging and recognizing when they leave. It is those liminal experiences of the leaving and the return, the things Victor Turner and van Gennep talk about – liminal moments – that we basically ignore. My recorded notes reflect my own ponderings as I awaited the arrival of my family:

And so here I am right now, sitting here, talking into this tape recorder in one such liminal moment as everyone else has left, awaiting the arrival of my family. How am I to be reintegrated and reincorporated into the life of my family? How do we do that? So these people who have left, gotten in their cars and have left the park (some have gone down to Lake Anza, are maintaining their connection to this larger space) others will be instantly back into traffic, on the freeways, jockeying for position, battling cars, revving their bodies up to 60 mph. No real transition.

I wait here. I am feeling almost torn between wanting to go back in and walk back through the area, and yet am hesitant to do so. At the same time I want to show the area to my family and let them walk around with me. So perhaps that is part of the leave-taking, transitional experience.

My family soon arrived, and got out of the car. I indeed allowed them to wander around the camp, and we sat around on the grass or ran in the open field together. My

wife rested on the grass while my daughters and I ate some snacks at a picnic table. One of my daughters ran around the camp pretending to be a cougar or acting like a talking signpost at the entrance to the restrooms. Another daughter sat in the shade and read a book, while my youngest daughter took me by the hand and explored the Redwood perimeter. So it was that I was reincorporated back into my family, and I shared with them a small taste of what I had just experienced in the preceding 24 hours.

5. Comments and Conclusions

At its core, a Council of All Beings can be said to create a world in which emotional and inwardly felt connections between humans and the rest of the natural world are allowed to be expressed. Emotions and feelings reside at a deeper and evolutionarily earlier (i.e., more “primitive”) portion of the brain. It is this portion of the brain that we share with many other animal species. And it is this level of consciousness, the level of feeling and emotion, which developed in our evolution as a result of our interaction with our environment. Thus, this level of consciousness is particularly suited for ritual and performative work that intends to reconnect human beings with the natural world. For example, John Seed poignantly describes how his own work on behalf of the rainforest catalyzed a deeper understanding of his own evolutionary history.

In Australia in the mid ‘70’s, the rainforest was referred to, rather disparagingly, as “the scrub,” and viewed as if it was slightly un-Australian. It was thought to be a recent intruder, probably came across a land bridge from Asia during the last ice age or something. It wasn’t like eucalyptus or the REAL Aussie bush. Anyway, in 1979 I and other members of our community were invited by our neighbors to help protect this rainforest at Terania Creek.

They had been struggling for five years to prevent the logging of that little piece of remaining rainforest. I think it was about 1/10 of 1 percent of The Big Scrub remaining, and the Forestry Commission of New South Wales wanted to log it. There was a non-violent direct action in defence [*sic*] of that forest and somehow I found myself a part of it. We stood in front of the trees, laid down in front of bulldozers, and did what we had to do, and I have never

been the same since. All that meditation must have made me ripe, and I think the rainforest decided “I’ll have him” and She did!

At the time it was totally bewildering to me. Within the conceptual framework that I was living in, it didn’t really make any sense to me, how was it that I could hear the forest screaming? How was it that I could feel something so strongly as this? The whole of my Buddhist training was to remain cool and somewhat aloof and just to watch things come and go, to rise and pass away, not to become embroiled this way in passions. But, it was undeniable.

In later years as I studied the rainforest it emerged that, far from being a recent invader, this rainforest was the original flora of Australia. 130,000,000 years ago Australia was part of the mighty super-continent Gondwanaland, joined to South America and Antarctica. Gondwanaland was covered in rainforest. As the continents drifted apart and Australia moved thru [*sic*] drier times, the rainforests retreated to the east and the north of Australia, and threw out the eucalyptus, acacia, grevillea and all the flora that we think about to-day as being uniquely Australian. I also learnt that I as a human being had evolved within these very same rainforests during nearly all of that time, and that it is only during the last few million years that I have sought my fortunes outside the forests. So it became less surprising that some kind of psychological or spiritual contact with the rainforest was possible, and it became rather more surprising that many other people didn’t seem to be experiencing it (Rainforest Information Centre 2000b).

It is this process of graphic interpretation and representation that is evidence of a human propensity to analyze and codify in some manner what it is that has been experienced. The Council of All Beings draws upon this propensity through the creation of masks and the telling of stories. Language is used in a certain codified and specifically structured (i.e., ritual) manner. But it arises out of the felt experience, as a means to come to terms with what has been experienced through direct contact with the natural world in a heightened emotionally connective state.

My study of the Council of All Beings and other workshops and retreats sponsored by the Institute for Deep Ecology leads me to postulate that these are the nascent stages of the process of giving expression to and codification of experiences of deeply felt connections by participants and facilitators with the natural world. It is significant

that this process is a performative process. For many people in the environmental movement and others in contemporary society, these deeply felt connections are no longer being suppressed by a worldview that asserts the primacy of the human species and the divine right of an intellectual process which exercises a hegemony over other forms of consciousness. Predominantly, the people I came in contact with at these rituals and workshops were beginning to make cognitive and paradigmatic shifts in their way of thinking about the world around them and the way in which they engaged and interacted with that world. But this paradigmatic world-shifting occurred as a response to earlier contacts and connections with the natural world. What the workshops provided was a container, a new worldview, a new world-picture and way of seeing, a new way of being that validated these feelings of connection.

There is a process of reciprocity at work in which a group of people has a certain experience of the natural world. Their culturally-constructed view of reality does not validate or reinforce their felt experience. So they begin to seek out a new view of reality that will validate their experience. This new view of reality codifies experience in specific ways, and certain practices are developed which recapitulate and facilitate these felt connections with the natural world. Further reflection upon these experiences, which are repeated and recurring, gives rise to more intellectually and rationally articulated codification, as well as poetic and artistic expressions. The basic pattern is one in which felt experience precedes codification, and in which codification serves to reinforce and validate felt experience. Rituals and performative practices are developed out of the codification process and serve to reinforce the codification, as well as to create the conditions in which the foundational experiences are recapitulated.

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Endnotes

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² It is not the place of this essay to debate whether there is an environmental crisis or not. There is widespread consensus from scientists to the “layperson on the street” that human industrialization has had deleterious effects upon the earth. This paper begins with that assumption. For discussion concerning environmental philosophies and ethics, see the journal *Environmental Ethics*.

³ Bron Taylor has extensively documented the spiritualities associated with *Earth First!* See Taylor, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 2001a, 2001b.

⁴ Rainforest Information Centre, “Council of All Beings,” Internet, <http://forests.org/ric/deep-eco/council.htm>. Accessed January 23, 2000.

⁵ The full results of that research is discussed in my doctoral dissertation (Strobel, 2001). That dissertation is available online at <http://conspiritu.org/craig/dissertation/DissHome.htm>.

⁶ When I refer to Deep Ecology as the general environmental movement, I shall capitalize it. Naess in his writings did not capitalize it.

⁷ “Pagan” refers in this instance to any of a number of nature based religions which pertain either to indigenous cultures or to a variety of movements in the industrialized nations which identify themselves as “pagan.” The list of religions given as examples are my own.

⁸ Emphasis in the original.

⁹ Even though Macy and Seed refer to this section as “speaking for other life-forms,” other features of the natural world occasionally show up, such as the air or wind, water, soil, rocks and so on. the Council is thus not reserved exclusively for living beings.

¹⁰ David Graves passed away suddenly about two years after this Council of All Beings. He will be greatly missed by his colleagues and friends throughout the Deep Ecology movement, especially in California.

¹¹ A RealAudio recording of the discussion was available from New Dimensions Radio on the Internet at <http://www.newdimensions.org/html/earthwisdom.html> as of August 7, 2000.

¹² Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute defines a sustainable society as “one that satisfies its needs without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations” (Macy and Brown, 1998:16).

¹³ The whole tone of the workshop was that of invitation. We were told specifically that if we did not feel comfortable with any particular activity that we were not required to participate. We could simply observe, pass, or even remove ourselves from the circle. No one exercised these options.

¹⁴ “Humanization” is my substitute term for “civilization,” which, in certain cynical moments I have asserted is rarely civil.

¹⁵ Personal conversation with Joanna Macy.

¹⁶ I use the term “psychosomatic” in the sense of referring to a continuity between the physical and mental and spiritual processes of the body.

¹⁷ David Graves, transcribed field notes, August 5, 2000.

¹⁸ Transcribed field notes, August 6, 2000.

¹⁹ These comments are a reworking of comments made in the field.