

**RITUAL AND HEALING: ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY TRANSFORMATIONS**  
**Sample Chapters**

**From How to Ritualize Life**

***How to Ritualize Life***

**Excerpted from *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community* By Malidoma Somé**

I am called Malidoma, he who is to “be friends with the stranger/enemy.” (The word “doma” is used to refer to both meanings. The idea is that a stranger can become an enemy, and so a stranger is sacred because it is the task of him who is not a stranger to turn the potential enemy in the stranger into a friend.) In my many years since the passing of Grandfather, I have suffered greatly and learned greatly in the pursuance of what I see as my calling. Today, I wonder whether my life in exile makes me more of a stranger/enemy than one who would or should be friend, or should it be the other way round? The quest constantly imposing itself upon me has been more a quest for a home in the hearts of people — a thing that I take as a yardstick by which to measure the level of my own comfort — than a desire to efface myself behind the commonality of mechanistic standardization. And the constant questions ghostly looming in my consciousness are what can I tell my brothers and sisters across the great sea? How relevant is a small village in the wilds of Western Africa to the hustle and bustle of Western society? The West is crowded with people who want healing — this much I have been able to notice. There are people who know that somewhere deep within is a living being in serious longing for a peaceful and serene life. These are people who are so dissatisfied with the existing system that they will embrace anything that promises to rescue them from a sense of entrapment. Without real ritual there is only illness. Such illness cannot be healed with pills or drugs or alcohol, or shopping at the mall, or being tranced out many hours a day in front of the TV screen.

I started out in this book with a concern: where does this trouble in modern people come from? Being modern or Western does not mean being devoid of trouble. I have come

to suspect that in the absence of ritual, the soul runs out of its real nourishment, and all kinds of social problems then ensue. I do not want to pretend that I can provide a model for fixing the ills of Western civilization. My intentions are much more modest. They are the results of my observations and experiences as a person caught in this culture and alienated by it. From the echoes of my ancestors, I feel I can give some clue as to how to improve that which is in constant decay in this culture. The truth is, I am also trying to make myself feel good by doing that which my own elders commissioned me to do. If my elders have deplored the sweeping effect of modernity, they have also lived in admiration of how effective news from the Otherworld, the primitive world, can help others understand and appreciate themselves better.

I suggest that the road to correcting ills goes through the challenging path of ritual. I suggest that ritual not be simply copied from one civilization to another but simply inspired by some culture still in touch with it. The soul of any man or woman craves for this touchstone to the inner self that puts us back in touch with our primal selves. In Western culture, the closest thing to ritual I have seen is liturgical ceremony, always charged with boredom, and in any case incomplete in what it seeks to accomplish — an intimacy with the Divine. Ceremony is only a component of ritual. Ritual is not just an elegant procession or music that lifts the soul or words that ordain.

To ritualize life, we need to learn how to invoke the spirits or things spiritual into our ceremonies. This means being able to pray out loud, alone. Invocation suggests that we accept the fact that we ourselves don't know how to make things happen the way they should. And thus we seek strength from the spirits or Spirit by recognizing and embracing our weakness. This way, before getting started with any aspect of our lives — travel, a project, a meeting — we first bring the task at hand to the attention of the gods or God, our allies in the Otherworld. We openly admit to them what we are facing and how overwhelming it is. By ritually putting what we do in the hands of the gods, we make it possible for things to be done better (because more than we are involved in its getting done). Also, willingness to surrender the credit of our accomplishments to Spirit puts us in greater alignment with the Universe.

From an aboriginal point of view, no one can accomplish anything who is not in alignment with the gods or with a God. Anything created without the blessings of the gods

or God comes loaded with ills. It does not take much time to send a little invocation at the start and at the end of the day. This way everything in between is sanctified or sacred and safer because it has been thrown into the hands of the spirit world. A person's life is ritualized who accepts the fact that everything he or she does is the work of the hands of the Divine. Everyone can do this. Anyone can, before going out in the morning, send a little prayer to the ancestors on the hills or in the river. It takes a word or two, or at most a few sentences. It is private and effective.

Modern communities can benefit from a good sense of ritual if they begin by experimenting with it emotionally. I don't think it is possible to be fully into ritual while one is carrying a load of undelivered emotions. The way you know that your rituals are having a positive effect on you begins with the discovery of how much emotion is pushing you from the inside like a volcano. Those who are able to express their emotions have been, at some point in their lives, in alignment with their own spirits, saints, guides or guardians.

Modernism means unemotionalism, or that which owes emotion to the world. It also means loss of memory of that way of acting that encompasses both the body and the soul. To cleanse the modern world from its unresolved problems of the soul, there ought not to be a Memorial Day but a massive funeral day when everyone is expected to shed tears for the titanic loss wrecked by Progress on people's souls. I have seen and or participated in some aspects of funerals or burial rites on a minuscule scale in this culture. What I saw was how difficult it is for the modern man to shed tears at length, and how everything that is done to encourage tears degenerates into some kind of strange liturgical solemnity that smells of repression or unwillingness to actually do that which is needed for release of deep grief.

I was once part of a grief ritual for Vietnam veterans. I went there bracing myself to face a flood of weeping eyes. A lot of people were there, more than I could count. But instead of an occasion for grieving, it was a ceremony almost similar to that which happens at Arlington Cemetery on Memorial Day. People showed up thinking this was going to be a good idea. They did not come out of a desire to mourn. The setting was beautiful, the lights blinding, the electronic sound system deafening. It felt as if there were an edge of sensationalism, or solemnity, but no communal grief. The candle procession that followed on the wet road leading to the wharf was beautiful and elevating, not mournful. I remember

seeing a repressed tear here and there and wondering why people behave as if it is illegal to cry their guts out. The grief ritual for Vietnam vets was in its intent a noble initiative that fell short of being able to pull the vets back home.

This experience led me to wonder whether it was possible to propose giving a Dagara-style funeral. Michael Meade, one of today's leading voices in men's consciousness and awareness — teacher of wisdom, artisan of symbols, metaphors and myth in the stories of humans — has always been in favor of rituals. He encouraged such a ritual at a men's conference. Of course lot of the details in Dagara funerals were dropped due to the impossibility of applying them. Since nobody was supposed to be dead at the conference, death was symbolized. It was an innovation that worked just the same. What happened was that we contented ourselves with dividing the participants into three groups: the containers, the mourners or grievers, and the singers. The zeal with which people involved themselves was baffling.

Led by a master drummer, the singers were in ritual preparation long before the actual beginning of the ritual. Over the course of several days, they prayed, rehearsed and prayed again. The grievers were in real grief long before they got the permission to let loose. For three afternoons we gathered, prayed to the waters, the tears of Mother Earth shed so we might live in her lap. We told each other stories of loss, pain and frustration. The sincerity of the tellers authorized the grief of the group. Meanwhile, the containers busied themselves like ants, and with unparalleled dedication, erected one of the most startling edifices which was to serve as the shrine and the border between this world and the next. In fact it was not an expensive-looking shrine, just a creative artifact brought to existence by the dedicated wit of its builders. It looked like an arch, or a dome, with half of its size being an opening delineating this world and the next. It was made with the elements of nature: dry wood, leaves, grass. There was at the door a little space where, later on, people brought bundles symbolizing their losses. A few feet from it was a line separating the tribe of men from the Otherworld. Twenty feet away, there was a space specifically designated as the village where the grief was supposed to be held. The space in between constituted the road of grief, the place of chaos and commotion. It was made clear that anyone charged with grief should pull away from the village and carry his grief to the threshold and throw it in there, then come back to the village. People had the option to rush

to the shrine, walk there or dance their way to it. The speed was a function of the emotional intensity. They were to be assisted by others who were instructed to stop them gently as they reached the line, wait for them to drop their grief into the Otherworld, then return to the village together. Every expression of emotion was supposed to be done facing the shrine.

When the ritual actually began, there was genuineness everywhere. The genuineness quickly translated into an appalling chaos everywhere. First, there were more mourners than helpers. Loads of them packed themselves up at the shrine. Fascinated by the sight of the Otherworld, they were unwilling to return to the village. Worse, some of them, mesmerized by the beyond, wanted to throw themselves into it as if in serious need to join the dead.

Second, it was impossible to trust that the line of demarcation was going to be observed. The pull of the Otherworld was powerfully visible. The interdiction to cross the line was enforced by guards. They used their fists at times to bounce contorted grieving bodies back to the village. Some people who were asked to return to the village felt hurt. They thought it meant that once again it was not okay to grieve. So they turned around and mourned their way back to the village. I was appalled. Normally, from an indigenous point of view, if you want to know where a funeral shrine is, follow a griever. This time it did not work. How did it happen that the village was turned into a shrine? The implications were so heavy I could barely believe my eyes. Michael and I ran everywhere, like men from the fire department battling a blaze. Someone had to explain in gentle terms to these sincere people the need to avoid throwing their grief at the living. Meanwhile, griever, torn by a flood of unleashed grief and mortally attracted by the beyond, symbolized by the shrine, attacked the guards who were posted at the threshold to prevent them from jumping into the Great Beyond. They could not resist the pull from the beyond. Honest screaming souls leapt toward the shrine — they had become the bundle. They were recuperated by strong hands and sent back to the village side. As if feeling defied, they gathered their forces together and leapt back only to find themselves reminded in an equal way that they did not belong to the Otherworld yet, and that the village needed them. Other griever were angry; they ejaculated some insanities at the shrine, screaming at the tops of their voices and ending with a torrential weeping that would break the heart of the toughest CEO. It was no

longer a Dagara grief ritual, but a ritual — period. People leapt out of the village in single line and danced their way to the shrine, turned around and came back home to the village. It was beautiful to see. The space between the village and the shrine was busy. The cleansing was happening. So much grief surfaced that the shrine was jam-packed with a crowd of men who did not quite register that they were only supposed to go to the shrine and drop their grief and return to the village where the drumming and the chanting was going on. The containers' job had to be edited a little bit to clean it of its therapist-like influence. Besides these little cultural infiltrations, it was a small success. I saw hot tears flowing from wet eyes. That felt good. I heard sincere groans and yells and screams that almost made me feel like I was home again. The ritual was working.

Even though it was just scratching the surface, the scratch was at least opening something. In a way, there was an invitation to unleash grief. The experience left people empty, light, and — above all — miraculously prone to celebrate. I understood why, in the village, life rotates around grief and celebration. People celebrate because they have paid their dues to the dead. The other side of real grief is real joy. Unfinished grief translates into petty joy and silly amusement. The experience taught me a great deal. Without ritual, humans live in nostalgia.

When there is an opportunity for people to mourn their losses, the horizon for rites that heal will be pure and bright, and healing will come pouring into the souls in a great moment of reunion.

Can I impart to the modern world that which is rooted in the ancestral world? Only time will tell. I offer the tales of Grandfather and Guisso to serve as a testament to what rests in the aboriginal soul. Are we not of a common soul, as proposed by modern thinkers such as Jung? If so, then what serves the soul of the Dagara may well prove to resonate in the soul of modern peoples also. And so I offer the prayer to our common ancestors on behalf of those seeking to recover themselves from the rubble of modernity as they seek to work their way toward being elders of the new post-modern tribal order.

*May the spirits of every pertinent direction take notice of their hearts' desire.  
May the forces below pump strength into their feet — that they walk the walk of their  
life, the walk that heals the wounded truth of their bellies and keeps the eyes of  
their memory open so they can grow niyang maru.*

*May the ancestral fuel burn in their spiritual veins and animate their souls with vision  
so they can hold hands niyang maru.  
As they walk toward their future,  
May they wake up fast to the dialogue between the soul and the spirit.  
And may they labor to clean the world from its paralyzing epidemic of soul-barrenness  
so that tomorrow our children can sing together in peace.*

## **From Personal Healing and Ritual**

### ***Digging My Grave: An Encounter with Mother Earth***

**By Beto Hescamilla**

Digging our graves took us the better part of the day. The earth we dug into had been used for ritual burials by others so it was fairly soft. But in addition to the digging, we had to haul all of the gravesite materials from the storage shed to the graves, a distance of about one hundred yards. We also took time for several walks over the rocky terrain that surrounded the burial grounds. After a few hours of digging, it was impossible to ignore my whining and complaining lower back. The more I dug, the louder it cried. In my everyday world, I work seated in front of a lap top computer, in what must be the most ergonomically incorrect posture possible. It's also been a few years since I stopped regularly practicing Yoga, but I've made it a habit to do some of the stretches, to jog or walk, and keep a garden. So I am not a complete stranger to physical activity. But the strenuous walks, the digging, and sleeping on the ground brought my physical sensations to the forefront, pulling my attention out of the clouds -- where it resides most of the time -- and into my tired arms, sore back, and overloaded legs.

We were situating our graves around a central fire pit. The diameter of the burial site was about 20 to 25 yards. There were only six of us, and we were well distributed around the circle, with at least 5 yards between one person and the next. I wanted an undisturbed night, so I deliberately sought as much distance as possible from my companions.

We had each taken a few minutes to find our "own spot." I chose one on the west side of the fire, not through feeling, but reason. I have learned through attending sweat lodge and other Native American ceremonies that the west is the direction of introspection. In various traditions, this direction is associated with the thunderbird, the black bear, darkness and women. It is the place where the Sun meets Mother Earth after its daily trek



across the heavens. I thought facing west would be an appropriate way to spend a night in the ground.<sup>1</sup>

Each one of us shoveled the earth out of our own graves, but we gathered as a group to inspect and add the finishing touches to each. My grave was about 3 feet deep, its length leaving about 6 inches above my head. We left 4 to 6 inches of space between my body and each side. The final opening left very little room for movement. The finished rectangular hole measured approximately about 4 feet wide by 6 and half feet long and 3 feet deep.

We constructed the grave's covering with similar attention to detail, also doing most of the work independently, but coming together for the final touches. To seal the grave, we laid slats of wood across the entire opening to the grave. The wooden pieces were about an inch thick or thinner and no more than three or four inches wide. The wooden slats were just sturdy enough to support the synthetic tarp that completely covered the opening. At the end that was to cover our heads, we pulled back the tarp and set aside three or four of the underlying slats; leaving just enough of an opening to crawl into the grave. We finished the grave by shoveling about 6 inches of dirt on to the tarp. The first few shovelfuls of dirt on the tarp resonated eerily from inside the empty grave; like drumbeats. I paused to listen for a few minutes. Then for the last few minutes, my companions and I shoveled to a steady drum beat of earth falling on the tarps.

In the early evening, we gathered in a circle around the fire for final preparations. I like the fire's warmth. The smell of smoke fills my head with memories that I should tell you about some day, but not today. The last major task before entering the grave was to confess ourselves. This was not my first confession to *Tatewari*<sup>2</sup>, but it seems that each time, the anticipation causes me more anxiety and apprehension. At this point in my life, the "purpose" of confession has become frustratingly elusive and at the same time, the "need" more, critical. Webster's defines confession as the act of "*acknowledging or avowing by way of revelation.*" It is the process of making something that already exists known. This

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<sup>1</sup> A few years ago, I was discussing the concept of directions with a Jesuit priest. I was very surprised to learn that in the early days of the Christian church, people faced west for confession and then east when they accepted the Eucharist. So the symbolism associated with the directions is not exclusive to America. I still struggle with the notion of directions possessing human "qualities" My Wirrarika friends say that when they pray to the four directions, they are acknowledging that they are praying in all directions, for everyone and not just for themselves. I like that way of thinking about directions.

<sup>2</sup> Tatewari is the name used by the Wirrarika (Huichol) to address Grandfather Fire

definition carries no association to shame, guilt, pain or suffering. But when asked to confess, those are the images that emerge for me. I suspect that growing up as the oldest boy in a Mexican household, it was impossible for me not to inherit a somewhat bleak attitude toward life and responsibility. And even though I was not heavily indoctrinated into Catholicism, I have always seen confession as speaking out a thought, feeling or behavior that has offended an all-knowing God. Its purpose has always been to avoid retribution and punishment.

I am beginning to suspect that in the beginning, our ancestors saw the act confession differently. In my mind, I “sense” that it points to a way of living among companions, and not something one does periodically to a person or deity. My Wirrarika friends tell me that they confess *completely and publicly* during their ceremonies. From what I gather, it is a central part of their lives. At this point in my life, what makes the most sense is that being “impeccable” -- as Castañeda writes -- or “without sin” -- as the biblical Jesus was often described -- means living a life of continual confession. That is, always revealed, transparent or “authentic.” The impeccable person, I suspect, expresses life freely, never holding back or holding on. What an expectation!

So what was my confession?

I confessed making a burden out of the life that people share with me. I confessed to not honoring that creative spark inside of me and inside of others. I judge people and resent them for not living as I believe they should. I assume to know how they should live. I hold on to my words a lot, fearing how others might respond to them. I willfully hold on to the burden that I consciously make out of the life I am granted. I confessed this to Grandfather Fire and to my companions around the circle. My companions each took a turn asking the Grandfather for help in cleaning themselves of the burdens they had created and carried. By the end of the round, I definitely needed and asked for a group hug.

After a few last minute instructions, we walked to the burial sites. I don't recall the exact order of the burials. I believe that Jennifer, who was to my left and with her feet oriented toward the fire, was first. To her right, we planted Rusty, a close friend that I met at my first retreat. Alexey, the systematic and methodological man from the Ukraine, came next. He and Rusty were oriented toward the north. Joy, another close friend from my first retreat, was next. I recall that her head was toward the center of the site, toward

Grandfather Fire. Gloria was next, with her feet pointed toward the South. We gathered as a group to bury each other. As we moved counterclockwise around the circle, the group grew smaller. Victor buried me last.

I carefully stepped into the grave, feet first until they touched the bottom of my old burgundy-colored sleeping bag. I'm not sure what I expected to feel. The thought that I should be afraid crossed my mind. As my head came to rest on the pillow, the smell of dirt and damp air quickly filled my awareness. I calmly accepted the tarp as it snuffed out what last threads of light were offered by the night. I remember feeling my body respond to the sound of the dirt as it hit the tarp above me. Hearing the dirt drop unto the tarp, from inside the grave, disturbed me even more than it had earlier in the day. "Victor must do that on purpose," I thought to myself, "He throws the dirt on a little harder than necessary for dramatic effect." But I had already been on the other side; I'd thrown dirt on my companions so I knew that was not true. The dirt was thrown carefully, ceremoniously, covering all possible sources of light. But when it hit the tarp, it sounded very loud and unnerving.

In the darkness, I could hear Victor walking around the site. I heard him kneel down over my grave as he assured that the breathing hole that was immediately behind my head was properly functioning. I heard muffled words of encouragement through the dirt and tarp.

I entered my grave that night with the intention of lying on my back and talking to Mother Earth, just talking without stopping until I could not talk anymore. And since the notion of Mother Earth forms in my mind images of growth, of trees and plants, it seemed logical to me that I should begin with my experience with this aspect of my life. I intended to build my connection with Mother Earth as I had done with Grandfather Fire, by talking about my relationships without stopping, just pouring the words out of my body, "*de Corazon*" as we say in Spanish. I was not sure what to expect.

I also took a concern into the grave. Sleep has never come easy. As silly as it may sound, sleep on my back has been impossible for as long as I remember. I will lie there, not really conscious of any worries, simply unable to sleep. If I focus on relaxing my body, I can sometimes fall asleep, but will inevitably have nightmares and awaken within a few minutes. The nightmares have always been about being chased by what can best be

described as an “evil presence.” I wanted to use this opportunity to rid myself of this chronic problem. In fact -- let me confess a little further -- I wanted to face this “evil presence” once and for all and fall asleep peacefully on my back. That was my “real” intention.

As Victor’s footsteps faded into the darkness, leaving me with the damp smell of Mother Earth, the first thought to cross my mind was “when do I get out of here?” I felt anxiety and the fleeting touch of fear. In the group discussions that followed, it became evident to me that this attitude toward life was very disrespectful. Imagine the unforgivable act of greeting someone and immediately thinking about leaving.

That night, I simply noted my response without further reflection and set about the task that I had intended. I proceeded to tell Mother Earth everything that came into my awareness. I told her about my first five years in Mexico, growing up the orange groves and cornfields of Nuevo Leon. Memories of that time have always been vague images. I often wonder if they are in fact memories, or simply nostalgic creations. I told her about the prickly pear spines that my aunt meticulously pulled out of the fingers and palm of my hands. I told her about my experience with the land, the hot days, the *chicharras*<sup>3</sup>, and the smell of wet dirt during the rain. I described what it was like walking alongside my grandfather Gustavo as he cared for the oxen; as his *machete* cleanly sliced the corn stalks; or the crunching sounds the goats made when their teeth slowly ground the yellow shoots. I told Mother Earth of the walks to and from my *abuelito’s*<sup>4</sup> adobe and straw *jakal*<sup>5</sup> and his cornfields. I described my *abuelita’s* smoke-filled kitchen and watching her grind corn into *masa*<sup>6</sup>. I told her about her leaving this world behind in January of 1958.

My legs were sweating and itchy. I wanted to take my blue jeans off. Unbuckling my belt, I pulled them down as best I could, careful not to brush up against the walls of my grave. The dirt was loose so any contact would bring little streams of finely ground dirt trickling onto my head or the sleeping bag. I managed to push my jeans into a crumpled ball at my feet. I unzipped my sleeping bag. The air, even as it grew cold, felt good.

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<sup>3</sup> Spanish word for Cicadas

<sup>4</sup> Abuelo is Spanish for Grandfather and abuela for grandmother

<sup>5</sup> Basically a small hut, made of wood packed with adobe and dirt floors. In rural areas of Mexico, a home can consist of one such structure serving as a bedroom and a second detached kitchen.

<sup>6</sup> Corn meal

I continued my conversation with Mother Earth, telling her about the big pecan tree in our backyard, a tree that suffered through my home made darts, makeshift arrows, sand-filled kicking bags and other expression of childish fantasies. Every fall, the tree's dark gray arms dropped tons of pecans on the grass below. It continued to do so even after Carla's harsh winds amputated half of her limbs. The monologue was still rehearsed. I had thought about what I wanted to say for much of the day.

I confessed to Mother Earth how I gradually separated myself from the corn, the pecan trees and my mother's geraniums. The words started to drag a little. There are only so many words that one can prepare in advance. Expressing words, while searching for what to say next, became a challenge. My heart was not pouring out the repressed memories or previously unconscious insights that I had envisioned. No demons yet. My mind would wander on a regular basis, I wondered about the time. I thought of my wife and children back home. Thoughts of my work and projects also meandered through consciousness, sometimes drawing my attention for a few seconds. It's amazing how much goes through our minds, often undetected.

I recounted my adolescent years. My attention shifted away from plants and to schoolwork, thinking about girls and watching a lot of television. I continued to talk.

I felt a resurgence of energy as I told the earth about my wife, Yolanda. When I met her in 1978, I had been practicing yoga and meditating regularly. But I really wasn't healthy. In fact I was down from my high school weight of 160 to about 98 pounds. I find it hard to believe sometimes, but it was true. In addition to the weight, I had forgotten a lot. I couldn't understand the attention my wife gave her plants. I told Mother Earth about the giant Dieffenbachia, Fiddle Leaf Fig Tree and Corn plants that have traveled with us from home to home, for almost 30 years now. I'm looking at them right now, as I write these lines.

I told Mother Earth about my first garden on Kingsley Street. We planted the seeds in a 20' by 20' foot patch of dirt in the backyard. On the following day, the Houston skies opened up and didn't close for a month. The seedlings never saw the sun, and I forgot about gardening for a few years. I confessed to Mother Earth my lifelong habit of starting but never finishing projects.

I told Mother Earth of all the other gardens that I have planted since. I found a place on Montclair and Nile Streets of San Diego. I'd plant once, maybe twice, and then simply forget. I confessed to Mother Earth my tendency to forget. My *Wirrarika* friends tell me that we live in a very distracted way. Remembering in our environment takes conscious and deliberate effort. I told her about the corn, beans, tomatoes and squash that I had abandoned.

I can't say how long it took for me to talk about the plants, trees and the gardens I had planted. All the while I was speaking, I was very much aware of my body and the constricted space that contained it. Every once in a while, I would feel a bug -- or perhaps what I imagined to be a bug -- crawling on me. My legs itched. The grave was completely dark and the night was still. From time to time I caught a muffled sound or two that I attributed to one of my companions. But mostly my imagination and reason filled the void. I looked up and saw dark hooded images peering down at me in the grave. I "saw" snakes slithering in the darkness. The grave would fill with shadows for a few moments then reason would quickly inform me that the neurons in my brain must have continued firing, even in the darkness, creating images in my awareness. I "perceived" a soft voice speaking barely audible but indistinguishable words. After a few seconds of listening, reason told me that the breath entering and exiting my nostrils created a sound that my mind converted into words. My awareness was now consistently slipping back and forth between a world explained by reason and one that continually challenged my capacity to understand.

I started talking about my human relationships, my grandparents, mother, father, brothers, sisters, children, grandchildren and close friends. One by one, I described them, telling her about my connection to each. With each relation, I started acknowledging as best I could, what it was that connected me.

I found, acknowledged, and *confessed* a lot of resentment. I confessed appreciation, gratitude, affection, but mostly it was my resentment that kept oozing into awareness.

As I talked, images of snakes and caves kept emerging. Sometimes, I allowed my attention to drop down into the caves until they vanished. I followed the serpents as they slithered in and out of the holes in the walls of my grave. They too disappeared<sup>7</sup>.

I was talking about my son, Felipe and the car accident we had in 1986. We were speeding along Interstate 8 on our way to a potluck at FrogFarm, when the beige Nova in front of us screeched to a stop. I veered to the right and was almost stopped when the car behind knocked the tiny 3-cylinder Sprint onto the ice plants that border Southern California freeways. When the little red Sprint came to a stop, there was a moment of silence as everyone gathered their wits. I looked into the back seat and saw my daughter's car seat upside down in the space between the seats. I felt relieved when I heard her cry, no doubt terrified but alive. My son Felipe was terrified, but alive. Suddenly animated, he screamed out, "I love everybody, I love everybody." They say that under stress, we speak the truth and that is my Son's truth, he loves everybody. I told Mother Earth about my Son and how good he makes me feel.

Having run out of my prepared speech, I was now "ad libbing." I asked Mother Earth what I should do to enjoy life more. The response was not immediate. I kept talking.

The neurons in my brain were really ramping up. I was no longer seeing dark and vague images of snakes or caves, but colorful and complete landscapes. The first was a field of yellow flowers. I was looking at a mound of green, covered with bright yellow flowers. The second scene was a dark, misty swamp. From here, I "traveled" to a mountainous region. My "reason" told me it was "Tibet," but as I have never been there, I am not sure how it came to that conclusion. More importantly, my reason was not talking me out of what I saw, but simply offering explanations. I stayed here the longest, among the tall green mountains and nestled among the trees, bushes, and stone structures that I chose to call temples. As I sit here and write, it's not too hard to recreate the scenes because in these moments the scenery was real. I saw the vivid colors and my senses could feel the bright

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<sup>7</sup> I must confess that my lifetime of "searching" has taken me through many of "spiritual" experiences such as rebirthing, both in and out of the water, several religious denominations, vision quests and others... I am always concerned that what I experience is not "authentic," but simply my own mind creating something from what I have read or heard. For example, the fact that I was seeing "snakes" and "caves" is very consistent with Meso-American associations between the earth and these images. In fact, to the Meso-Americans such as the Tolteca or Azteca, the earth was Coatlique, or woman with skirt made of serpents. On the other hand, it is also entirely possible that I was putting myself in the same "space" that lead our ancestors to make those associations in the first place?

sun that graced the flowers, the marsh's moist air and the peaceful energy that enveloped the old temples

Eventually my body grew fatigued. So I rolled over onto my left side and resigned myself to sleep. Immediately after doing this, it occurred to me that "giving up" hurt Mother Earth. I completely understood that the Earth "forgives" absolutely everything, but she does hurt, and I was hurting her by giving up. Without a second thought, I rolled back onto my back, asked for forgiveness, and continued offering my awareness.

A night in total darkness and with no distraction is endless. I found myself feeling restless, but sleepy. Without a conscious decision, I suddenly found myself observing my breath<sup>8</sup>. As I focused on the air gently entering and leaving my body, I continued talking out loud. The words that I spoke to Mother Earth gradually assumed a life of their own. They imposed themselves and took on a rhythm<sup>9</sup>. A song began welling up inside of me. It was not a spontaneous or easy flow of words and rhythm, but a repetitive process whereby each repetition became more rhythmic and coherent. After a few minutes, I was singing to the present. I let go of the past for a while, disengaged from plans for the future, and just sang to the present. I greeted the stillness of the night, embraced the emptiness that I felt in my heart. It took a while to get the tune and all the words.

*There were no places to see, nowhere to go, no fear,  
No guilt, no shame to bow  
My head down low  
No fear in the place right here<sup>10</sup>.*

I sang that song a few times.

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<sup>8 8</sup> As I mentioned earlier, I began practicing Yoga and Meditation in my early 20's. For almost 20 years, I practiced in an erratic manner. I would practice religiously for a few months, discontinue for no other reason than loss of interest, only to take it up at a later time. In all that time, I focused almost exclusively on achieving the particular asana (posture) I was attempting. I compulsively did some of the prescribed breathing exercises, but also sporadically and with no real sense of purpose. I never discovered the value of "appropriate breathing." I've noticed that the impulse to focus on my breath this night and on other occasions simply occurs naturally, without effort. Perhaps, I accomplished more than I am aware of in those years? Like many others have noted, the value is that "watching" our breath somehow disengages reason, that little "voice" that has to comment on everything. Disengaging this internal dialogue, even for short periods of time, allows more direct "experience."

<sup>9</sup> This in and of itself is a huge accomplishment. I am Mexican, but a very compulsive and punctual one. I should not perpetuate stereotypes. I am simply a very punctual person that has always struggled with spontaneity. I dance like a stiff board and one day, I will learn to drum, or at the very least write about my experience trying to learn. I must confess absolutely no sense of rhythm.

<sup>10</sup> The actual song was longer, with several verses. I tried to recall and record later during the retreat, but was not able to capture it again.



As the song faded, I became aware of a sensation an inch or two below my navel, but inside, situated perhaps halfway between my lower back and abdomen. At first, I experienced it as an “itch,” a sensation that needed scratching but given its placement, I could not. Instead, I simply focused my attention and my breath on the spot. The sensation grew in intensity, as things do when we pay attention to them. I was not sure what to “do” with the sensation, how to interpret it, or how breathing in this situation might be useful. It simply was a sensation that grew more intense with my concentration, I found myself intuitively focusing on my breath. I gently focused on the air as it entered the spot and as it slowly escaped through my nostrils. After a few minutes, the sensation grew into an impulse to move. The thought of kicking my legs crossed my mind. I quickly realized that doing so might dislodge a slat or two and that I might find myself really buried with dirt.

Perhaps out of the frustration out of not being able to kick or thrash about, I began to experience the sensation as pain. Unable to contain myself, I began to rock my pelvis in an up and down motion. I continued this rhythmic (obviously sexually suggestive) motion for a few moments, all the while listening to and dismissing the possible explanations, judgments and commentary offered up by the voice of reason.

I latched on to what at the time seemed to be the most plausible explanation. I was experiencing the pain of disconnection. I became aware that if I turned my attention inward, on the sensation and then my breath, I stopped talking. It was an effort to continue talking, but I did. Between the sensations of pain and tears, I started telling Mother Earth about the pain that I was feeling. As I did, it occurred to me that I no longer wanted to carry or hold on to the pain that I was feeling. My voice -- like the original sensation -- was growing with each breath. As my “intent” grew clearer to me. I offered the pain of separation to Mother Earth. In a loud voice, I screamed out to Mother Earth that I intended to leave my pain in the grave.

After screaming out loud, I focused on my breath for a while longer. I could see light finally filtering through the breathing hole. I heard my companions rustling. Feeling finished for the night, I rolled over on my left side and slept for a few minutes<sup>11</sup>. After

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<sup>11</sup> I slept very little this night, maybe an hour. In fact in all similar retreats or other times connecting to the *poderios*, I seem to enter a state of being that is quite distinct from “normal” consciousness. I simply do not sleep much

awakening, I laid there for a few minutes more, simply listening to the sounds of the morning, the birds, the crackle of the fire. I left my grave when I felt ready.

In the group discussion with my companions that followed, I realized that my experience of speaking with the Earth differed significantly from that of the Fire. Victor noted that this difference was common. Males in general seemed to have a much easier time with the Fire. I like the fire. It feels natural. Making a commitment to the Fire seemed to come much easier than surrendering to Mother Earth.

Mother Earth never spoke to me in the conventional sense. I did not hear any words emanating from outside of my head. I think many of us today hold to this very narrow definition of communication, that we connect only through words. And even though in our own language, we acknowledge the “power” or “energy” of the wind, the “gravity” or “electro-magnetic” energy of the earth, perhaps our inability to connect through words renders these “entities” which are not connected to us. My Wirrarika friends remind me regularly that the Earth is always talking to us; we have simply forgotten how to listen. I know this is true. When I turned on my side to sleep, I “knew” this act hurt Mother Earth. I didn’t debate it, consider or reflect. I immediately acted.

And more importantly, this truth -- along with similar ones that I have learned from the *poderios*<sup>12</sup> -- has motivated me to continue meditation. Actually it’s more like praying, or simply talking to the *poderios*, like the close friends and companions that they are, consistently every day. While the *poderios* no doubt support our life, it is ultimately through interactions with other humans that we live most of our lives. So the ritual of prayer is accompanied by a reexamination of my relationships with real people, especially my capacity to surrender, to give myself more freely. Mother Earth’s essence is to give unconditionally!

For most of my adult life, I have privately held on to the notion that I emerged from my childhood with a hole in my heart, a sense that something was missing. I had, through the years, reified this vague feeling into a firm belief that my schizophrenic Mother’s inability to adequately nurture and connect to me had left me a permanently damaged

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<sup>12</sup> Poderio in Spanish translates into “lesser or smaller force or power. In this context, the term refers to the earth, wind, sun, water and fire, the most prominent “natural forces. Deep respect for these “entities” as manifestations of a universal creative spirit or force is a central characteristic of Native American worldviews.

being -- one who in turn was also incapable of “attaching,” “connecting” to others. The encounter with Mother brought this belief, and what I believe to be its physical basis, into sharper focus. After my encounter with her, I’ve accepted this notion as simply another “belief,” and not an irreversible “truth.”

In San Diego, near the old mission dam, there is a place where the native people once ground their acorns into meal. The area is called Grinding Rocks. If you ever visit, you will see massive trees oak trees that at first sight, appear to be growing out of the boulders. It’s an awesome sight. In fact, these trees began as tiny acorns underneath the boulders. They were little seeds that broke thorough the massive stones, with the sole purpose of expressing live, of living. That is how I know life works. I know that my mother gave me absolutely everything that I needed and it was in fact my own resentments that disconnected me. It was not a “hole” that I felt all this years, but the weight of my own judgments and resentments that I desperately held on to. I was the one that separated; I make a burden out of the life that flows though this body. In my relationships with people, I acknowledge, better said *confess, how I make a burden out of life.*

## **From Transformative Experiences with Ritual**

### ***The Alcove of Death***

**Excerpted from *Nature and the Human Soul* by Bill Plotkin, Ph.D., New World Library, in press, [www.newworldlibrary.com](http://www.newworldlibrary.com).**

In the Wild Orchard, soul-rooted individuation, including integration of the four dimensions of the Self, is often catalyzed or amplified by numinous experiences. For me more than once, this has happened through encounters with Death.

Sometimes we're granted the chance to meet with Death as a perceptible presence in addition to confronting the inevitability of our own mortality. The first time I spoke directly and tangibly to Death was in a redrock canyon in southern Utah not long after entering the Wild Orchard.

Some years earlier, Steve Zeller and I took our first hike down Grotto Canyon<sup>13</sup> to look for basecamps for future vision fast groups. We came to the mouth of one of its tributaries and decided to have a look. A minute up the side canyon, Steve sat down without explanation and said he'd wait there. He waved me on with an odd smile. As I continued, the chasm began to feel a bit creepy, but nothing I could identify specifically. A sense of foreboding. Deciding it didn't feel so good up there, I turned back and told Steve what happened. He said, "No kidding. There was no way *I* was going up there." We didn't speak about it further.

A few years later, another friend, Dave, returned from a solo hike in Grotto Canyon. He told me he ventured into a side canyon and up a steep south-facing slope to a giant alcove in the upper wall. He said he'd felt strongly pulled by something. He peered into the dark interior of the alcove. When his eyes adjusted, he recoiled. He wouldn't tell me exactly what he saw but said, with wide eyes, that his name for that place was Death Alcove. He did not go in.

I found the topographic map of Grotto and asked Dave to identify the alcove's location. He pointed to the north wall of the same side canyon that Steve and I had entered.

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<sup>13</sup> Not the name you'll find on any maps.

Within a year, Judy, another friend (who does not know Dave) took a winter hike down Grotto Canyon with her dog, Lucky. She said there was one place in particular that really got her attention. It had scared her — no, terrified her. It was an alcove high on the wall of one of the many side canyons. The hair on the back of my neck stirred. I asked her what was frightening about it. She said there was something odd on the back wall but emphasized that it was really the whole *feeling* of the place. Lucky wouldn't go any nearer the alcove and barked wildly when Judy did. Judy, standing at the alcove's mouth, soon grew frightened and she and Lucky fled. She told me that she came to think of that place as "the Alcove of Death." I pulled out my topo. Same place.

Two years later, in May, I was in the lower end of Grotto Canyon leading an eight-day soulcraft program. There were twelve of us. We had not planned to be in that canyon that week, but my intended destination, a place I call the Cemetery, was unreachable that spring due to heavy winter snows still blocking the access road. I had planned a group exercise in the Cemetery that involved a ritual encounter with Death. I told the group my aborted plans. They wanted to enact the ceremony anyway and asked if there wasn't an appropriate location in Grotto? I said no, it needed to be done in the Cemetery. They insisted I must know a spot that would work.

Then I remembered the Alcove. I told them I knew of a place that might work but that it was too far and I had never actually been there and, for that matter, I wasn't sure I could even find it. Besides, it would take half a day to hike that far up the main canyon and another half to return by nightfall. To my chagrin, they all wanted to go and wouldn't hear otherwise.

The real reason I didn't want to go was because of what I had promised myself I would do in the Cemetery ceremony. For several months, I had been feeling a need to commit myself more fully to my soul work. Any of my friends, if asked, would have said that that was ludicrous, but on some level I really believed I was still holding back. So it came to me that the thing to do was to return to the Cemetery — a place where the presence of Death was, for me, quite palpable — and to make a sacred vow in Death's presence. Given how I intended to frame that vow, the prospect of actually doing it was rather intimidating.

As soon as I remembered the Alcove of Death, I realized it would be a location at least as fitting as the Cemetery. Maybe more so.

The next day we arose before dawn, packed for a full day, and headed upstream. I grew more anxious by the step. After five tiring hours, we reached the mouth of the side canyon. Looking high on its north wall, I immediately saw the alcove with its dark entrance yawning into the bright day. There were also two smaller alcoves on the same wall further to the east, lower and closer to where we stood. I turned around to the man behind me, a very intuitive and compassionate person. I pointed to the alcove furthest to the east, and said, unconvincingly, that that must be our destination. Michael laughed, put his arm around me, and said he knew I knew otherwise and that there was no way of getting out of this.

Resigned, I told the group that we'd hike up the slope until we found the right spot to prepare ourselves, a place where we'd ask each person two very poignant and difficult questions. When the ceremony had come to me several weeks earlier, I only knew that this staging area would be known as the Place of the Questions. There we would enact a ceremonial group-consensus process to determine who was and who was not psychologically prepared to enter the alcove — based upon each person's answers to the two questions. Only those who received unanimous consent would go the rest of the way, and they would go alone, one at a time.

Ascending the narrow chasm of stream-polished red sandstone, we climbed steeply, threading our way through a massive tumble of boulders on petrified sand dunes until we came to the base of a house-sized rock. Climbing left around the shadowed base and then to the top of the rock, we found that it had a flat roof just large enough for the twelve of us to gather in a circle. Only a few feet from where we stood, in the direction of the alcove high above, was a giant yucca — a “century plant” that sends up a twelve-foot stalk of blossoms. This particular yucca stalk had grown and then dried into the exact shape of a giant question mark. With a wry smile, I remarked that we had apparently found the place to ask the questions.

It was mid-day, the sky was flawlessly blue, and it was hot on that jumbled slope of baking rocks. When I was granted permission to go, I pulled off my T-shirt and scrambled full speed, hands and feet, up the incline as the others drummed below. The aerobic effort briefly kept my fear in check. My primary objective was to look Death in the eye — if he

was really there — and make a solemn declaration of my soul work, and ask him to take my life anytime my commitment should falter.

Reaching the alcove, I stopped, heart beating wildly and feeling very small on the edge of such an immense space. The shadowed cavern was about 100 feet deep and at least that high and twice as wide at its mouth. An undisturbed slope of pure tan sand ran steeply up from my feet toward the back wall. A single large clump of sacred datura, whose large white flowers are sometimes used as a hallucinogen and can be lethal, once grew in the center of the sand slope, but it was long dead, its gray branches now a mass of desiccated bones two feet high. There were no other signs of previous life or habitation in this place.

Then I saw, on the back wall, a thin, ten-foot tall humanoid figure in high-relief, apparently formed from minerals leaching from water seeps in the soft sandstone. Dressed in a long emerald, gold, and black flowing robe, he gazed down at me with hollow eyes and a terrible aura of omniscience. Involuntarily I dropped to my knees in the sand. If I were really going to do it, this was the moment. Trembling, breathless, I began to describe my soul work, my commitment to it, and my request that he be my most fierce ally by holding my life as surety for my vow.

As I spoke, Death nodded, but with what seemed like an air of impatience and indifference, perhaps some amusement. Uncertain, I kept speaking. He began pointing to his left without ever shifting his gaze from me. When I finished, he said, “You can make whatever promises you want, but they’re of no interest to me until you make a commitment to *her*.” He gestured again to his left.

Only then did I see her, a similarly robed figure, not quite as tall, standing next to him, his left arm embracing her shoulders. Dumbfounded, I looked back at him and he said, “This is my wife, Joy.”

In that moment, my understanding of Death and of my own life shattered. It was as if a cathedral had crumbled around me and I stood in billowing dust. This was the last thing I could have imagined hearing from Death. Abruptly, the old symbols were gone, there were no scriptures to consult, no questions to ask, and the only possible actions meaningless.

“She is as much a presence in eternity as me,” Death continued. “You have some awareness of mortality and a beginning relationship with me, but you have little affiliation

with Joy. Your soul work will not progress further until you surrender to *her*. Don't come back until you have."

As he spoke, my perceptual experience of the alcove was shifting radically. Upon arrival, it felt like I had imagined it would — a foreboding place that only heroes or fools would visit. Now it emanated a sweet aura, a sanctified glow something like I'd expect of a honeymoon cottage. The Alcove now felt more like a marital abode for Death and Joy, a playground for their eternal romance.

Overwhelmed and disoriented, I turned and staggered slowly down the slope. I felt both ruined and gifted by an encounter I would not have known how to imagine. On that day, I began my apprenticeship to Joy — a teacher who stands partnered with Death.

An embrace of joy had indeed not been my strong point. I tend to be overly earnest. I had expected Death to help me become even more assiduous, but, in fact, he directed me toward what I now see was my least developed faculty — light-heartedness, playfulness, simplicity, and my capacity to surrender to joy. These things are not just needed to round out my personality and humanity; they're also essential ingredients for growing deeper into my soul work.

Since that visit to the Alcove of Death, I have come to think of that place as the Alcove of Love, a celebration of the alchemy between Death and Joy who, joined, exist as Love. A dark and foreboding place becomes a doorway to our true home. We are irrevocably altered by walking, ceremonially, toward what we most fear.



## **From Healing Rituals in Practice**

### ***Surgery as Ritual***

**by Judith J. Petry, MD, FACS**

*As the High Priest performs his ablutions in the temple anteroom, the victim is prepared by assistants. Having fasted and cleansed herself, she is gently placed on an altar in the center of the temple where sacred herbs are administered to calm her and place her in a trance state. A special priest positions himself at her seventh chakra where he maintains the state of deep trance with inhaled vapours. Her clothing has been removed and replaced with specially designed and sanctified robes that outline the sacrificial site. This site is ceremonially cleansed and painted with holy oils. A bright light is focused on the site and the instruments of sacrifice are prepared in a traditional pattern by a priestess to one side of the victim.*

*Music that resonates with the spirit of the high priest fills the temple. When he has finished with his preparations, he enters the temple backwards with his hands outstretched before him, deterring any evil energy from entering unseen. A helper places his ceremonial robes on him, secures them and covers his hands with gloves. He places himself at the side of the victim and asks the assistant priest if the trance is deep enough to begin the ritual. The answer is yes and the high priest extends his right hand palm up and is handed the instrument of sacrifice by the assistant.*

*He carefully cuts open the victim's body, layer upon layer, respecting meridians and energy fields, entering her sacred center. His hands probe the physical home of her soul and find the object of sacrifice. It is separated from her life force and removed to a sacred bowl and taken from the temple. There is a feeling of jubilation in the room as the High Priest repairs the sacrificial site and calls in the energies of healing, stabilizing her life force and renewing her soul.*

*As the last layers of her body are reapproximated in the manner in which the gods created her, the final binding threads are placed and the site is blessed with herbs and oils, and covered with holy cloths. She is awakened from her trance and taken to an anteroom where she will recover her consciousness and begin her new life, sanctified by her sacrifice, renewed and reborn to new possibilities.*

Modern surgery, a Mayan sacrifice, or a time-traveler's view of Asclepius at work?

The human body has long been considered a sacred and mysterious object: the physical manifestation of divinity, a hallowed vessel of God consciousness. We do not know what makes a body alive. We think we know when it is dead. But we have no definition of life. Is it any surprise then that surgery -- the specialty that violently invades the temple of the soul -- remains a stronghold of myth, superstition and mystery? There is, even in this evidence-based world of modern medicine, an underlying uneasiness about what it is that surgeons do every day: the invasion of the confines of the human body, the subjugation of human consciousness, of spirit, that we take for granted, but not completely. It is just possible that we are overstepping our bounds as ordinary mortals, invading the territory of the gods.

There remains in modern surgery a mythology of surgeon as God, of procedure as sacrificial, of process as sacred ritual. What is most unclear is how we get away with it, if indeed we do. With no conscious concept of where the life force resides, or where the energy field begins and ends, we take a leap, as surgeons, into a completely uncharted territory. We skillfully fumble about with scalpels and scissors, clamps and retractors, never knowing if we are harming some unseen force that may affect our patient in unimagined ways for the rest of their lives. We rely on the cellular, humoral, mechanical repair processes of the physical body to return our patient to health. We plan for healed incisions and functioning physiology, wondering what other considerations of spirit, awareness, or energy flow we have left unaddressed. Like any other ceremony, surgery is anticipated to proceed in a prescribed manner. When it does not, serious consequences are expected -- and I suspect secretly accepted. They confirm the necessity of preserving the ritual.

What is it about surgery that requires this almost sacramental ritualism? It may be because we still know so little about what happens during surgery: how anesthesia really works; what happens to consciousness and the soul while one is under anesthesia; why some do not awaken from anesthesia; why anyone heals from the trauma of the scalpel in the first place. Are there really energy fields about which we know nothing, but which we invade with every procedure? And who is to know when the unexpected and deadly will

occur. Is it any wonder that we invoke superstition and prayer to improve our odds of success?

Surgeons are known, among their peers, as unusually superstitious practitioners. For scientists, they have a lot of irrational behaviors. Many will only operate wearing a favored piece of apparel, a scrub hat for instance, or carrying a special amulet. Some must always scrub at the same sink, open the soap in the same way, or scrub for precisely the same number of minutes. Some require a special music in their OR, a particular scrub nurse, a personal pair of scissors. Without these totems, they become anxious, irritable, or even violent. Though most would never admit their small acquiescence to the gods of healing, they are real, and they are considered essential to the outcome of surgery.

Surgeons all know of colleagues who are referred to quietly as “unlucky surgeons.” They are almost shunned. They are professional pariahs and rarely receive referrals of importance. Most practice alone because no one wants to catch their unluckiness. It is perceived that something is wrong with them energetically, though I doubt that most surgeons would verbalize their feelings about those ill-fated colleagues in such terms. No matter how smart or technically proficient, they are not true High Priests in the surgical clergy. Like much of what happens in surgery, we don’t know why these surgeons are so fated.

Omens are of particular significance to surgeons. A patient who feels certain they will die during surgery risks cancellation of their operation by a spooked surgeon or anesthesiologist. Wise surgeons listen carefully to their patient’s wishes around surgery, believing on some level that the patient has an uncommon insight into the future. Full moons are dreaded, as portents that unusually violent surgical cases will appear in the ER. These actions suggest a degree of primitive spirituality reminiscent of witch doctors and voodoo, concepts that no modern surgeon would confess to honoring.

I am not suggesting that the unscientific behavior of surgeons is bad, or unnecessary. On the contrary, our rituals keep us on the side of the gods, the descendants of Asclepius, whose rod our societies proudly display. We bow to them and ask their assistance in every case that we do, whether consciously or not. Without them, we aren’t really sure what would happen in that temple of surgery, the operating room.

As for me, if I need an operation, I'll make sure my surgeon is wearing her lucky scrub cap.