



# The Spirit of Place and the Healing of History

*Myron Eshowsky*

*Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes  
Beside you are not lost.  
Wherever you are is called here  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger:  
Must ask permission to know it and be known  
The forest breathes, listen. It answers.  
I have made this place around you.  
If you leave it you may come back again,  
Saying "here".  
No two trees are the same to Raven  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or bush does is lost on you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The  
forest knows where you are. You  
must let it find you.*

"Lost"--David Wagoner

Many years ago I heard a story being told by Caroline Myss. She spoke of a village in the Ukraine where the Nazis had gathered up all the Jews in the area and herded them into the local synagogue. Once the building was filled, they set it on fire. All the people perished in the fire. Years later, a major nuclear electrical power plant facility was built on this land. This place is Chernobyl. The very spot where the synagogue had been burned down is where the nuclear reactor meltdown occurred. It is of interest to me that of all the reactors there, this is the one that melted down.

One of my early teachings from my great aunt Soshie, a self-proclaimed dreamer and Russian Jew, was how a place holds the history of all that has happened there. She used to say that often it takes the form of

elemental energy. To use her description, Chernobyl was a place of too much fire. When they brought more fire to this place, it led to its own logical conclusion, a nuclear meltdown. As spiritual beings, we sometimes forget that we are influenced by what is in the spiritual field around us. What is in the spiritual field brings out what is within us that calls for healing, and if not addressed, may lead to imbalances which create spiritual illness. What I am writing about speaks as much to what needs to be healed in "place" as well as the power of "place" to heal and guide us. Specifically, I am writing about how we as humans influence the space around us. It is my desire to share some of the stories of "place" where what has occurred in the past affects the present. When we heal the history that has been created by humans of the past, we heal the place and restore the power inherent in that place. When we heal the past, we bring healing to the present and those yet to come.

Whenever I work in any sort of community healing situation, I always begin by journeying to the guardian spirits of the place. I ask for permission to be there and ask how I can be of service to the guardian spirits before asking for their help. I learn what has occurred there and what is calling for help. It has always been interesting to me that all of the prisons and mental hospitals where I have been invited to do shamanic work were built on sacred land. Here in Wisconsin where I live, the state psychiatric hospital is built on burial mounds and other sacred ceremonial sites. I consistently find that the history of place influences the issues addressed in

these facilities. How I respond to what is needed varies. It may be doing traditional psychopomp work, it may be rituals and ceremonies prescribed by Spirit, it may be soul retrieval for “place,” it may be addressing the elemental imbalances of that place, or it may simply be maintaining relationship with the helping spirits of that place.

My great aunt used to focus on how the excess of elemental energies in a place would bring out that same quality in people who had too much of that imbalance as well. I liken it to how people will say they act differently in a crowd than they would on their own. It is a way we can accept that we are influenced. Interestingly, similar teachings of elemental imbalances can be found in the work of Rebbe Nachman (1772-1810) of Bratslav, a renowned Jewish mystic.<sup>1</sup> When there is too much of an element, it may manifest itself in people in one of the following ways:

**Fire** causes heat to rise. It is the source of arrogance, of one regarding oneself over others. It is the source of anger. Anger and arrogance often manifest as irritability and the desire for power/honor.

**Air** is the source of idle chatter. The person may speak about worthless subjects, be prone to falsehoods/flattery/slander and be mocking in his/her speech. It is the source of excessive boasting.

**Water** brings a desire for pleasure. It is the source for cravings and lusting. It causes jealousy and envy and leads to dishonest behavior such as theft.

**Earth** is the heaviest element. It brings about laziness and depression. There is a tendency to focus on the material aspects of earth life and the feeling of never having enough.

The spirit of “place,” as James Swan<sup>2</sup> likes to remind us, is “one tool in the shaman’s medicine bag.” The spirit of “place” communicates to us in a different way. Its language speaks to us in rhythm and vibration. When we are there, we are moved and we are stirred in a language without words. The spirit of “place” is the power manifested in it, and it remembers all that has happened here. In China, for centuries, a special kind of Wu shaman, the *feng shui*, would divine the spirit of

each place to ascertain the right actions/rituals to undertake in order to restore and preserve harmony.

In many traditions, including the Persian Magi, the Freemasons, the Druids, the Hawaiian Kahunas, and the African Voodoo priests, we find a similar art of divining place. Usually this includes reading land forms, assessing local energies and biological features, consulting spirits, and reading the patterns of the heavens above.<sup>3</sup>

It is my hope to share some stories to illustrate the interconnectivity of “place” and healing as well as to give a sense of how my work evolved.

### Locked Psychiatric Unit

In the early 1980s, the economic recession in the United States led me to leave private psychotherapy practice and find a job. The job I found at that time was as “Treatment Director” for a locked psychiatric unit in a county hospital. An old institution, it had been what used to be called “the poor house.” Set in the country, patients in the 1800s would live, work, and die there. Remnants of the old farm were still there from the days when it was a total institution. It was understood that many former residents were buried there, though there were no obvious demarcations for the grave sites.

A 28-bed unit, the locked ward had not discharged anyone to a less-restrictive setting in more than four years. The waiting list was very long and the county mental health system was frustrated by the high cost of using state-run facilities for people they could not serve. In communicating with my spirit helpers, I found disembodied spirits wandering throughout the facility complex. In many ways, the patients were living in a ghost town.

I was told by Spirit that there was more life in the soil than in the building; in other words, too much earth. My guidance clearly said it would take great ceremonies to clear out the facility. My concern as the new Director was how to do this at a time when I would be scrutinized by staff who were wary of the “new kid on the block.” The staff was tired, embittered, depressed, and clearly stuck. They viewed change as a threat to the status quo they at least knew how to manage.

Interestingly, my guidance was to use boasting humor (air element) to distract from the greater purpose of what I was doing. I performed the ceremonies as I had been shown to do them. On the designated day, I walked in wearing long robes over my clothes. I walked up to the nursing station where all the staff and patients were gathered and proclaimed, "I am God and a miracle is going to happen today!" Waving my arms, I touched the back of the heads of many of the patients and staff and yelled, "With the power of God, I heal you! Let the miracle begin!" Each time I did this, I was removing the attached disembodied ghostly spirits and sending them to the other side. Interestingly, one of the patients remarked to the staff in a psychotic banter, "He's healing the dead, he's healing the dead!" I responded whimsically, "The Grateful Dead, The Grateful Dead." Because I was so whimsical in the ritual, the staff thought I was being playful and humorous. In fact, I was saying that the only way to heal craziness is to be crazy. I said it was much too serious there and we needed to make our work more enjoyable.

What this story suggests is that staff and patients alike were affected by the history of the place and the ones left behind. When I first started there, I was struck by how depressed the staff was. They felt as stuck as the patients they were caring for and the ones they did not even know they were caring for. In a few short months, the vast majority of the patients were removed to lesser restrictive settings. I did virtually no direct patient care. Instead, I focused on healing the place and shifting the vibrations in the air. This created a ripple effect which continued from that point on. Staff members worked to move people out and patients responded to seeing others leaving.

### The Penthouse Suite

I received a call from a young couple with a newborn baby, complaining that their place was haunted. The young mother was frightened for the well-being of her child. She told me of two specific events that frightened them both. In the first instance, the mirror in the entryway flew several feet in the air and smashed itself against the wall. In the other instance, her husband woke up in the middle of the night and felt hands on his neck. He proceeded to fight with what he called a

ghost. I agreed to come and see if there was anything I could do.

When I came to their building, I was struck by the beauty of its location along a lake, and its sheer wealth. They lived on the top floor, surrounded by windows. You could see for miles in every direction. The rooms were huge. Each of the six bedrooms had its own full bath. This was no ordinary place for a young couple. It turned out they had won some money and put it into this place.

As I moved from room to room, I let myself notice where I felt uncomfortable or uneasy. In one bathroom, plates started to move. Here, as I shifted consciousness, I found two spirits who needed my help. One was an angry Native American and the other a deranged, out of control, older man. Both were difficult to help move on, but once I did so the place never had problems again. But, another situation many months later brought me back and led me to learn the real source of problems with this place.

A good friend of mine who was staying at her father's place, called, saying she was feeling "spooked out" and asked if I could come and check it out. Much to my surprise, it was the same building. When I worked in her father's place, I had the same experience of meeting an angry Native American ghost and a deranged, out of control young man.

Further exploration of the history of the place brought me new understanding of the power of this land. My friend reported that her stepmother had experienced a psychotic breakdown after they had moved into this building. Her father decided they needed a vacation once his wife was discharged from the hospital. What I learned was shocking to me at the time. The building had been a state mental hospital for the criminally insane. Built in the 1880s, it had been closed in the 1970s with the advent of deinstitutionalization. Since it was on a beautiful peninsula in the lake, developers had bought the building and turned it into posh condominiums. I also learned that the institution had been built on burial mounds and was surrounded by a variety of "eagle" and "bear" mounds.

In working with the guardian spirits of the place over time, I was able to involve a number of building residents in honoring rituals and ceremonies. The

guardian spirits were vocal about not wanting tobacco or sage, for they felt the people would think they did not have to do much to honor their relationship to the spirits. The rituals were to be done in the spring and fall and involved building altars to honor the dead and leaving offerings of food to the ancestors. More importantly, there was to be a “peace bowl,” filled with water, which needed to be maintained. Over the years, as people have come and gone from the building, I have been called in a number of times to address the hauntings. But with more consistent owner involvement in the ceremonies and rituals, a gradual peacefulness has been restored. Each year, I return to the land there to do a ceremony to honor the land and the ones who are buried there. I promise in my prayers to not forget and my role remains one of mediation between the local spirits and the people in the building.

### Community Healing Ritual

In Spring, 2000, I was asked to participate in an ecumenical healing ritual for the place in Milwaukee where Jeffrey Dahmer, a famed serial killer, had lived. The building where he had murdered young men had been torn down and nothing had gone up there since. The neighborhood felt considerable shame about what had occurred in their midst. It was hoped that some sort of spiritual service could help restore vitality and bring healing to the area. The neighborhood association at first was embracing, but later asked that the service not be performed as a public event. There was fear that the attention would bring more shame to their area.

In my preparatory journeys, I was told there was too much fire and that I was to bring as much water as possible to bless the land. I saw many dead there, but did not think much of it, given how many people Jeffrey Dahmer had killed. When the time for the ceremony came, none of the ministers who were expected to come did so, except for one Catholic priest. He and I were left to orchestrate the ritual. Because of the call for water, I asked him if he would be willing to bless the land. He agreed to do this as he did not know what else to offer.

When we first arrived, I was overwhelmed by the sense of death at the place where the building had stood. The lot was devoid of any plant life. It was surrounded by a locked fence. The land was filled with rubble,

stones, and a dead tree. Nothing there was alive, and as I looked at the lot, I saw hundreds of ghosts standing there. Many were Native Americans who kept saying “Bring us peace, bring us peace!” Neighborhood people, family members who had lost loved ones to murder by Jeffrey Dahmer, and other community people had gathered to bring healing to this place. As I invoked the circle, I asked all to speak from their hearts. Many tears flowed. This, too, was the water of healing for this land. As people shared their grief, their shame, and their prayers for healing, I began to realize that others were coming out to watch. They came up and thanked us for what we were doing. After Father Paul blessed the land with water, each person was given water and seeds to offer as healing for this place. In the midst of all this, a neighborhood person shared a story with me that revealed a different slant to the reason we were there.

This place in Milwaukee is the highest point in the city. In the old days, the native people of the area would meet there to hold peace councils when there were conflicts. For them, this was the power of this place. In the early 1800s, during one of these peace councils, U.S. troops massacred those who had gathered. It thus was the site of a mass killing. Later, an apartment building was built there--the building that Jeffrey Dahmer was to live in and the site of his murders. From what I know of his personal history, Dahmer had done some bizarre animal killings earlier in his life. When he came to this place of mass human killing, it may have brought these urges within him even more to the forefront. All of the healing work we did on that day had been to heal what had occurred there long ago. Water is often called the element of peace. And water is what was offered.

The city of Milwaukee owns the land there and refuses to do anything to bring healing and restoration to this spot. Efforts continue to express the wishes of the guardian spirits there, to continue the process of healing of the land, and to support community involvement in the healing process.

### Mediation

The following account is by Don Cochran, a professor of Archeology.<sup>4</sup>

One of the first sites that I worked with shamanically was a local burial mound that had been dug into by collectors. The excavations had continued over a number of years, but a new law had stopped further digging without a permit from the state. A large hole in the mound had been open for several years and there was no movement toward getting it refilled. As the excavation of the mound was the direct cause for passage of the state law protecting archaeological sites on private property, this site was a hot political issue. The parties involved included the property owner, the excavators, state government, concerned citizens, and native peoples. At the time we began working with the site, we had formed a small drumming circle chiefly composed of archaeology graduate students. Initially, we were not exploring archaeological issues, but were learning to work in non-ordinary reality through journeying on common themes and problems. We decided to journey to the open mound, as we were concerned about its lack of protection. During the journeys, members of the group encountered spirits associated with the site and several of us saw energy streaming out of the mound like blood from an open wound. We were in a quandary about getting involved, but with guidance from our allies were able to mediate between the various parties. Working with a local avocational archaeology group, we obtained a permit and held a raffle to raise money to backfill the mound and obtained the blessing of the landowner. The gaping hole in the site was refilled and we no longer saw energy streaming out of it. At the time we were amazed at how easily and smoothly the problem was resolved. And while that is generally the case, not all efforts at mediation of the destruction of archaeological sites go so smoothly.

The most challenging mediation that we have engaged in involved a large prehistoric shell mound that had been damaged by mining. Considerable controversy surrounded the mining operation. The importance of the archaeological site was used as a tool in the legal battle by each of the opposing parties, which included the mine owner, several agencies of state government, and citizens' organizations seeking to close the mine. When I journeyed for help with the project,

I was told that we had been chosen for the work and that spirit would help us. Our work was being monitored by all of the opposing parties and we worked under constant pressure. I could feel the hostility that was being directed toward the project and our work. One day, while asking the spirits for support, I noticed numerous swallows darting and swooping over the site. I was told they were catching the negative energy that was being directed toward us. The project was eventually completed, but not without many difficulties. Without the help of the swallows, I am sure it would have been far more difficult.<sup>5</sup>

### Healing Communities Project

When I first started doing work with "youths at risk" in the Allied Drive area of Madison, Wisconsin, I was fully aware that this area has always been a source of problems to the community. Since I first came to Madison in 1975, there has been ongoing mayoral concern that something needed to be done with Allied Drive. It is one of a few pocket areas of poverty and high crime in Madison. Currently, the population there is primarily African-American; secondarily Southeast Asian. Many of the African-American families I have met there left the projects in Chicago in hopes of leaving street violence behind. Unfortunately, many of these problems came with them.

The neighborhood center where I meet with the kids has its own history of in-fighting and embattlement. It reflects the tone of the area. One of the first issues that came up with staff as I explained what I would be doing with the kids, was their own spiritual curiosity. They spoke of all the conflict that had occurred in meetings held in the board room. One of the staff members spoke of seeing ghosts in that room "that gave me such a chill that I don't like to go there." As we talked about this issue, they themselves asked if "place" could make people act so angry. They asked if I would work spiritually to clear ghosts out of the building. I agreed to see if that was needed.

The staff told the kids I was going to do "ghostbusting." Many of the kids asked if they could come and watch. We went into the board room and I asked them to close their eyes and notice how they felt. I spoke of how every place has a feel, every place has its

own energy, and told them to let the place speak to them. Interestingly, several of them reported feeling cold and some said they saw a Native American-like spirit who was angry and some dead people they knew from either Madison or Chicago. In one of the first journeys they did, we met the guardian spirit of the land. Many of them met the aforementioned Native American, who said that this had been a land of peace and healing and that its soul had been cut out. Almost universally, they were asked to bring their ways to the land in the form of dance and music. The guardian spirit stated that the land missed the drum, that the land missed the songs, and the land missed the dancing and laughter. In my own journey to the guardian spirit, I was shown that all the trauma of all the people who had come there to live was in the land and that no healing had been done. It was presented to me as a huge pile of bloody images of history piled on top of each other.

Then I did psychopomp work to help the departed ones in the building. Some of the kids saw a light from the sky come down. They asked the guardian spirit in journeys how to clear the anger and got the message to “air out the building.” We smudged and we sang some songs.

Since clearing the space, board meetings, which had a long history of contentiousness, have shifted to a level of productive cooperation not previously seen. And due to some journey work done by the kids, a community healing ritual utilizing African drumming and dancing, extraction, and feasting is planned for the spring/summer of 2001.

## Summary and Conclusion

Throughout all the community work I have been doing, the spirits of “place” have been the central factor. Inherent in the restoration of the role of the shaman in community life is working to bring balance and harmony to the places we live. It is my belief that a part of the work of healing the historic inheritance we share is in the work with “place.” The practice of mediating between the spirits of “place” and the ordinary world is a natural aspect of shamanic practice. My intention in presenting the case stories above is for them to give the reader a

sense of the complexity of the questions and the healing responses that are called for. There is no single methodology that can be used.<sup>6</sup>

Once I went on a healing walk on some sacred land with Corbin Harney, a Shoshone Medicine Man, and others. At one point, Corbin stopped and began to sing a beautiful song over and over. When done, he turned and said to all of us, “The trees are dying. The plants are dying. This place is dying. No one sings for the trees anymore. No one sings for the plants anymore. No one sings for this place anymore. You must remember to sing!” It is a reminder that our relationship to “place” is, in fact, relational. The spirits of “place” are there for us as much as they need us to be there for them.

## Notes

1. Kramer 1998
2. Swan 1988
3. *Ibid.*: 158; Fuan 1979
4. Cochran 1999
5. Permission to include this story by Don Cochran is gratefully acknowledged.
6. For related perspectives on contemporary community healing see Eshowsky 1998 and 1999.

## References Cited

- Cochran, Donald R.  
1999 “Archaeology and Shamanic Practice.” *Community Shamanism*, vol.1.
- Eshowsky, Myron  
1998 “Community Shamanism: Youth, Violence, and Healing.” *Shamanism* 11, no.1, Spring/Summer.
- Eshowsky, Myron  
1999 “Shamanism and Peacemaking.” *Shamanism*: 12, no.2, Fall/Winter.
- Kramer, Chaim  
1998 *Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav: Anatomy of the Soul*. New York: Bratslav Research Institute.
- Swan, James  
1988 “Sacred Places in Nature: One Tool in the Shaman’s Medicine Bag.” In *Shaman’s Path: Healing, Personal Growth and Empowerment* (Gary Doore, ed). Boston: Shambhala.
- Fuan, Yi-Fi  
1979 *Landscapes of Fear*. New York: Pantheon Books.