

The Eros of Earth: Exploring the Spirit of Place from an Australian Perspective

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In his book *Anam Cara*, John O'Donohue ends his chapter on the spirituality of the senses with a blessing. The final line of the blessing is, "May the Eros of the Earth bless you" (p. 77). This is a most unusual blessing and seems to imply an active, loving presence rather than an inert ground that is only acted upon. This sense of presence or spirit of place begins to name my experience of living within the Australian landscape. I would like to explore this experience of the earth through three lenses, namely: as guide, as friend, and as sacred other.

As I began this exploration, my intuitive knowing has been informed by the wisdom of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, who have lived with our land for millennia. The indigenous people of Australia understand the land as owning them rather than them owning the land. They have a responsibility to keep the land alive through particular customs and rituals that have evolved over thousands of years. Their relationship to the land is deeply spiritual, one that informs every aspect of their life. This is articulated in the stories of the Dreamtime, which say, "The mystery of human life is that it is lived in two dimensions...time and eternity. Every symbol on the land holds some deeper revelation. If we see only a tree, and nothing more, we do not really see the tree. But the Sacred is behind and beyond all symbols" (Cameron, p. 95). "Aboriginal mysticism seeks oneness with the environment. All parts of the land, including the inhabitants, are thought to be alive, conscious and alert to all other parts" (Stockton, p. 14). This very ancient tradition in Australia relates to the earth as active, loving presence.

However, as Eugene Stockton says, "There is no question of appropriating the Dreaming but rather taking the cue from Aborigines themselves that the Law be read from the landscape" (ibid.). It becomes the responsibility of more recent Australians and me, in particular, to learn from the Aboriginal experience and find my own expression. Celtic spirituality gave me some insights as I began to articulate my experience. In a 2004 interview, John O'Donohue asserts, "I really believe the landscape is alive.... [It] is the first scripture. It is *the* wisest text, because we're not alien to it.... I'm not arguing for a landscape as just a benign presence which is the source of relentless epiphany. I'm arguing for it as a primal companion that has all the dexterity

and multiplicity of a huge kind of presence” (“Reasons,” p. 16). O’Donohue and others present an understanding similar to indigenous Australians but in words, concepts, and stories that I can relate to more readily because of my Celtic heritage. As I read more of Celtic spirituality, I found a resonance within. I, too, know the land as a “primal companion” and am beginning to find ways of naming that for myself. Thus I come to the Earth as guide, friend, and sacred other.

Earth as Guide

My first lens is that of the earth as guide. The Australian landscape and Australian exploration are the embodiment of living within the experience of a giant labyrinth. If we are willing to make the journey there is much that the land can teach us. In a labyrinth we are invited to move from the edge to the center, follow the path and move with awareness. The invitation of the guide is to stay true to the path even when it seems we are going the wrong way.

The labyrinth is mirrored in Australia, where the majority of the population inhabits the coastal fringe, living on the edge both physically and spiritually. The call of the earth, as guide, is to go deeper, to move to the center, to the heart of the land.

Peter Malone catches the spirit of this new symbolic appreciation of the land:

Australia is blessed with a symbolic heart, the great red monolith in the center, Uluru. It stands in a motionless, timeless landscape, imaging eternity...with majestic strength, a centering place for all.

Searching for the center, knowing it is there, finding it, journeying back to the periphery, are all aspects of any pilgrimage through the local and spiritual landscape (Kelly, p. 123).

In Australia, we cluster at the edge but are called, lured, enticed to the center. However, the journey to the center of Australia is not to be made carelessly. There are many dangers: heat; lack of water, food and shelter; no clearly marked tracks. Without attending to the land as our guide by learning its language and reverencing it, we will die, as many early explorers did. So with our own journey inward; we must attend to our own interior, know the right time to travel, be prepared for difficulties, recognize the places of nourishment, and know the pace we can sustain. In Australia, the landscape itself becomes our guide as we

take up the invitation to journey from the edge to the center, to the throbbing red heart. The exterior journey to the center of Australia echoes the interior journey to the center of ourselves. There are many parallels between these two journeys—they are journeys made through complex landscape, there are dangers and trials, they are not comfortable, and they require sacrifice and commitment.

In the Celtic tradition, the exterior journey was often to isolated corners, remote islands, and places where the landscape was harsh in order to encounter God more deeply in the emptiness and barrenness of the landscape. Their exterior journey facilitated the inner journey of self-emptying so that in the stillness and silence within there was room for God to be welcomed. In Australia, our land, as a giant labyrinth, offers itself to us as path and guide. We are guided into a process of surrender and self-emptying by the lure and power of the landscape itself. In our journeying we have the opportunity to experience death and resurrection both psychologically and spiritually. Tony Kelly expresses the invitation like this: “Dare we expose ourselves to the vastness, the silence, even the menace of the land? The land stands there in the extent of its coasts and in its interior, as a symbol of the journey that all Australians must make: ‘around Australia’ to have some sense of the continent of our experience; ‘to the interior’, to the center, away from the noise and business of the periphery, to the silence and dispossession of the desert” (ibid., p. 31). As we take up the land’s invitation, we embrace transformation and nourish our souls.

In many traditions, when we go on a pilgrimage, whether physically journeying or walking a labyrinth, we have a guide to accompany us, someone to direct, draw attention, and help us recognize what is. The journey through the outer landscape guides us in the recognition of parallel places in our inner landscape. In Australia, the power of the outer landscape demands that we be present in the “now” moment; thus, the first expression of the eros of earth is as both guide and path, inviting us to surrender and self-emptying so that we might be open and receptive, ready to enter more deeply into life.

Earth as Friend

My next lens of experience is the earth as friend or *anam cara* (Irish, *soul friend*) and perhaps even lover. As I reflect on my experience of living with the Australian landscape, I realize that I know the land as friend and

have met God profoundly within this experience. As Teilhard de Chardin said: “There is a communion with God and there is a communion with the earth and there is a communion with God through the earth” (P 14).

This experience of meeting God in the land, particularly in the desert or wilderness, is a constant motif in the Bible. It is a place of testing, of transformation, and often holds the promise of salvation when showered with rain. Within the biblical tradition there is a promise of a deeper, more intimate relationship with God that is often found in the harsh environment of the desert, as in Hosea (2:14–15a, 16, 19–20):

“Therefore, I will now allure her, / and bring her into the wilderness, / and speak tenderly to her. / From there I will give her her vineyards, / and make the Valley of A'chor a door of hope.... On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My Ba'al.”... And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.”

Similar to the landscape of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Australian environment is a challenging companion. As I consider my friendship with the land, I hold within me a range of emotions. Early in my childhood the landscape comforted me. When life was particularly difficult for me, I often sought consolation in the sunset. Watching the panorama of color and light as the day slipped into night gave me a sense of peace and oneness. Somehow I felt “things would be okay.” I had what I needed for another day.

The landscape figured in many of my childhood adventures. I felt a tingle of excitement as well as a feeling of intimidation as I cycled out of town into the vast nothingness of the desert. I was very small under the huge, blindingly blue sky. Then there was the exhilaration of spending summers floating down the river, feeling carried in the soft, lukewarm, muddy water of the Murrumbidgee River. However, this is an environment that will not be domesticated. It is too big and too hot, with bushfires, no rain, and countless creatures like snakes and spiders that could kill you. So it is also wise to approach the relationship with proper respect.

As I grew older, I recognized my feeling of connection to the land but knew I wasn't aboriginal and so felt I wasn't supposed to have these feelings. My formal understanding of God had no connection to the landscape, and I carried my experience of each as separate and unrelated. I journaled over the years that this sense of connection to the landscape wasn't something that I developed; it was as if the land drew it from me. The land was an active partner in the relationship. In recent years, my experience was illuminated by the following reflection of David Tacey:

Jung does speculate that the "earth" seems to exert a power over "mind", and in his own terms this has something to do with the direct link between the deep unconscious and the world of nature. The deep world of the psyche, which is really "nature" inside us, is directly influenced by the forces of nature "outside" us. In Australia, where land and Aboriginality are fused, this means that white Australians, virtually in spite of themselves, are slowly aboriginalised in their unconscious. (P. 135)

This has been my experience—faltering and clumsy but nevertheless sensing within my being "the direct link between the deep unconscious and the world of nature." I have selected two particular experiences of the land to reflect on, one with desert and the other with bushfire. In each I had a profound sense of the connection between "nature" inside me and the presence of "nature" outside me. In both, the land was my *anam cara*, caring for and healing my soul.

The Desert: The first experience has matured over many years. For a long time, I identified with the words "desert" and "barren". My childhood felt lonely and empty. As an adult, my dreams of marriage and family evaded me, and so I felt barren, exiled from my desires. I didn't like this experience, but it was familiar and felt like home. I knew it. I had lived in a very barren place, and although in some ways I didn't like it, it was home and I knew how to live in it. My exterior environment mirrored my interior experience, and even though I left my hometown many years ago, this interior experience of "desert or barren one" stayed with me.

In recent years, as I have revisited my home country in my imagination, I have recognized the gifts I received from this landscape, such as resilience and emotional toughness, and I have taken in the totality of

that landscape. The barren earth is only half the picture—there is also the vast, magnificently charged, and constantly changing sky. The invitation is to look up, expand my vision. The words of Is 35:5, “the eyes of the blind shall be opened,” and Is 54:2 to “enlarge the site of your tent,” were directly mediated to me through the imaginal vision of the landscape. I experienced the transforming power of the “good news”; my interior desert blossomed.

The Bushfire: The second experience of the land accompanying me came as I struggled to embrace the transition to midlife. Shortly after a devastating bushfire in the area where I lived, I went for a walk along one of the bush tracks. While walking, I reflected on images for midlife, and it was as if the flora itself began to speak to me.

The landscape copes with a bushfire in so many different ways. Some trees burn black on the outside, shed that bark, and fairly quickly send out new leaves and look fresh and new again. Others are burnt and die, but the intense heat releases their seeds, and eventually new plants grow. However, the rain forest is completely destroyed and in its place another kind of ecosystem grows. The rain forest is gone forever! The grasses and wildflowers burn, their seeds fall and quickly rejuvenate, boldly proclaiming life—they seem irrepressible. As I walked through the bush that day, I felt surrounded by a caring wisdom, a friend who had suffered loss and knew the despair I was feeling but who could also offer me the hope that she had survived, although changed, and so would I.

As friend, the eros of the earth has offered me solace, companionship, and hope. The earth became my *anam cara* or soul friend, the one who has gone before and carries faith and hope for me. In the experience of *anam cara*, there is a surrendering and poignancy in the relationship that adds depth and texture to my life and models a relationship with the divine.

Earth as Sacred Other

The final lens I am using to reflect on my experience is the land as sacred other. Tacey suggests that “the land is, or seems to be, the sacred that bursts in upon our lives, which demands to be recognized and valued.

As George Johnston wrote, ‘nothing human has yet happened in Australia which stands out above the continent itself’” (p. 7). This land has an essential wildness and otherness that will not be tamed.

The history of European settlement in Australia records many failed attempts to domesticate the land, and the art and poetry of the time reveal the settlers’ discomfit with the landscape. They endeavored to “make it like home” by representing the land as “cosy and...exorcised of threat” (Carroll, p 43). However the essential “otherness” of the land remained, and in more recent times this is being represented in the arts. Sidney Nolan, describes it like this: “I wanted to know the true nature of the ‘otherness’ I had been born into. It was not a European thing. I wanted to paint the purity and implacability of the landscape. I wanted a visual form of the ‘otherness’, of the thing not seen”(Lynn & Nolan P 13) Poet Les Murray captures this new vision of the landscape when he says, “In Australia, God is a vast blue and pale-gold and red-brown landscape” (Tacey, p. 7).

One of the gifts we have to offer as Australians is our land and the lessons we have learnt living in it. The Australian experience of living within our landscape is a metaphor, perhaps more than a metaphor, for living with and in the presence of the sacred other. The ways that we have learnt to be in our land, or the ways the land has taught us to be, echo the texts of many spiritual writers. As Tacey says,

One of the central paradoxes of the Australian experience [is] that what seems a defeat to the ego is also a liberation and release for the soul. The otherness of the land both “enraptures and defeats us”, it both “stuns and spurs us”: our rationality is stunned but our yearning for contact with the soul of the world is spurred onward... [T]his...will always involve robust commitment, physical discomfort and egoic sacrifice.... An Australian spirituality can never become a sentimental or pallid thing, but will always remain existential, experiential, testing. (P 169)

As I learn to live within the land, I have discovered some ways to cultivate a spirit of place or to be mindful of the eros, the active, loving presence of the earth. Firstly, there is the surrendering of the ego in allowing the land to lead me, being attentive to the land and my own interior shifts. Secondly, I am invited to notice what captures my attention, accepting whatever comes without judgment. Thirdly, the invitation is to stay

with it, allowing the wisdom to unfold. The Aboriginals describe this prayerful state as “dadirri—an inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness” (Ungunmerr-Baumann p 1). Often the extraordinary comes disguised as the ordinary, and finally we discover that the ordinary and the extraordinary are one.

I have one final story to illustrate this. I was on retreat in a remote Aboriginal community in Central Australia. My spiritual director invited me to allow the land to guide me. On the first day I reflected on the sunset and drew a mandala with my heart at the center of a swirling mass of color. The next day I walked out on the ridge and a twisted dead tree caught my eye. I liked it. There was an austere beauty about it silhouetted against the blue sky. I then noticed a living version of the same tree and I didn’t like it. It was boring, ordinary looking, but it was alive and the other was dead. The question seemed to be, “Am I prepared to choose the ordinary as the path to life?” Over the next few days I walked out in the land, sat with my trees, and struggled with this commitment to the ordinary.

On the last day of my retreat, I climbed over a distant ridge and then sat prayerfully, committing myself to God once more. At this moment I turned and there was a little shrub with heart-shaped leaves. I picked one as a symbol of the commitment I had just made. When I shared this with my spiritual director, she reminded me of my earlier drawing. Miracle of miracles, the little leaf fit exactly into the drawing of my heart. It was as if I had traced around it. I felt met by the whole creation. The synchronicity of events, so that this heart of creation and my own heart found each other, required such orchestration, I was overwhelmed by God’s love, the creation’s love. In this encounter I had a palpable experience of incarnation. In this moment I glimpsed God in everything.

My experience of the land culminates in this experience of otherness. Living within the eros of the Australian landscape constantly calls me to a place of surrender that paradoxically leads to the release and in-filling of the soul. This ultimately brings me to the place of wonder. The blessing of the land as sacred other is that it ushers me into the mysterious presence of the divine.

My experience of the landscape directly mediates my relationship with God. Although I try to understand God, define God, domesticate God, control God, I cannot, just as I cannot control the landscape. I am invited

to surrender myself to God, to realize that my destiny is to be grasped by God. This is similar to the journey of explorers and early settlers, who set out to conquer the land but after all their striving came to the realization that it was not possible to domesticate or control their environment. Instead they could surrender to it and live in tune with it. Since the earth is the primal revelation of God, it is no surprise that our relationship with the earth offers a mirror to our relationship with its creator.

Conclusion

Experiencing the landscape as guide, friend, and sacred other invites me into a relationship of growing trust and surrender. In the journey of surrendering myself to another, my deepest self is allowed to be who I am, my deepest desires are uncovered, and that eros—the desire for communion—brings me into unity with another, the earth, and God. I close with a few lines from Mary Oliver’s poem “Wild Geese,”

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely
The world offers itself to your imagination,
Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
Over and over announcing your place
In the family of things. (P. 110)

As I respond to the harsh and exciting call of the land I find my place of belonging; I come home to myself, the world, and the Divine. For me, this is the blessing that “the Eros of the Earth” offers me.

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