

Finding Our Undamaged Ecological Self: Dolores LaChapelle as Reminder

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Deep Powder Snow, p. 94

I met Dolores LaChapelle before I met her. I met her work in *Earth Wisdom* before I met her in person. It was around 1985-86. I was just beginning on my own pathway into “environmental philosophy” when I somehow got my hands on her book. I had already had the good fortune of finding my passion and commitment in things philosophical, centered on the thinking of Martin Heidegger. Without being able to articulate it at the time, I sensed that Heidegger’s thinking attracted me because it called for engagement. Thinking is a *Handlung*, he would say, an action, something that you handle, take into your hands; an experience, something dealt with; what one has to do, deal with, be involved with.

Over the years Dolores often made me a little nervous with her interpretations of Heidegger. A little too quick and a little too literal, I would say to myself. Once in awhile she would ask me about Heidegger, and she would listen carefully as I tried to explain this or that notion. Whether or not she got the subtle nuances that I was trying to convey, she certainly had no trouble seeing Heidegger's thinking as a call to engagement, for action. I admired this in her, especially since I saw all around me academic philosophers not able to do this. She was willing to take the risk of maybe not getting Heidegger quite "right" and did not worry about backlash for her perhaps "too quick" reading of Heidegger. But the one thing that she did do, again and again, was to let Heidegger's thinking open to engagement, to the living connection with earth, sky, mortals, and the mysteries of divinities. I admired her for this and took courage from it.

One writer/skier describes her writing as "by turns lyrical, tedious, preachy, eloquent."¹ I am sometimes frustrated because I cannot follow her line of thinking as fast as she wants me to. Be that as it may—and whether that is about her or about me—in any case her work is always honest, creative, way-making, and engaged.

Heidegger often made a distinction between philosophy as scholarly research and philosophy as *engaged thinking*. Thinking that is underway, thinking that encounters things and the world, thinking that is about *doing* or *accomplishing*. Rather than taking the texts of philosophy into scholarship—denoting, objectifying, comparing to other texts for the sake of scholarly research, developing "theories"—Heidegger wanted to engage in a thinking that is always underway, that takes in what the world and the natural offer to it, and that sees itself as a *praxis* of tending and actively responding to how things self-show. The world of the natural is the emergent self-showing *par excellence* for this kind of thinking.

Whether or not Dolores always got Heidegger "right" in her interpretations, she always found in his thinking and languaging the voice and the dynamic of word-images that mirrored and benefited the kind of engagement with the natural that her own work called for. And she took up Heidegger's call for thinking to actively heed what manifests (the phenomenon) and to think-along-with in actively responding. As Dolores writes at the end of *Deep Powder Snow*, "the only way to live...[is to be] fully aware of the earth and the sky and the gods and you, the mortal, playing among them."² This playing included her own brand of doing philosophy, which in turn mirrored Heidegger's way.

This is how I got caught in Dolores's web.

Autobiographical

My personal relationship with Dolores LaChapelle began shortly after I found and read *Earth Wisdom*. At the time I was in a position to be able to invite her to give a presentation at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. We wrote a letter or two and then talked on the telephone. She agreed to come. When I picked her up at the La Crosse, Wisconsin, airport, as we were driving to my home, she suddenly burst out "Oh my! I have just crossed the Mississippi River!" She then explained that she had made a bioregionally-based promise to herself never to travel too far from home and had put the Mississippi as the eastern boundary. And now, without realizing it, she had violated that promise. Then she broke out into laughter—and I got the sense that she did not take herself too seriously.

Her lecture in the spring of 1987 was entitled "Merleau-Ponty's Flesh of the World and Buddhist Co-dependent Origination." She explained to me that she was working with a new way of viewing evolution, with the notion of affordance and cooperative interaction rather than the competitive survival of the fittest, individual members of a species that is implied in the traditional interpretation of evolution. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on perceptual consciousness and the intertwining of flesh of the body and flesh of the world mirrored that affordance-dynamic. This, in turn, mirrored and was mirrored by the Buddhist notion of co-emergence and mutual interactive dynamic at the core of the way things are.

We also had a discussion about words and language. We spoke of how, for Heidegger, there was a way to see words beyond dead, inert definitions (what we often call denotative words). Words carried another possibility, namely to show, make manifest, be engaged in the dynamic movement that draws us into enactive thinking (mirroring, though not the same as, what we often call connotative words). Some words are alive, they release fresh openings. Own to them is their capacity to bring on a rethinking and deepening of the connection to the world that they are "saying." And sometimes words take us over, touch us—or, as Heidegger would put it, this kind of language "says" us, claims us, draws us into the dynamic that is own to language's saying and showing the world. It is as if language gets us to do what *it* is called upon to do, that is, to enact the way things are in the world and our connection to earth. This is similar to what she describes in skiing, that

is, that she is not in control of her skiing, but “the snow skis me.” (Note that this question—Who is doing the skiing? The saying?—is not a dualistic either-or, but a dynamic both-and.)

She often told this story of the showing power of words in connection with the word *deep* in “deep ecology.” Arne Naess himself first thought that this fresh and new way of environmental philosophy might be called “ecosophy” (from the Greek *eco*=household and *sophia*=wisdom) but later realized that that word was too abstract and not connecting enough. LaChapelle had the sense that the word *deep* carried with it an own intensity and “hit at some deep unconscious level.” Or as she says at that place in the book, “I began to realize that the words themselves held some deep appeal . . .”³

In the spring of 1988, I had the opportunity to visit her in her home in Silverton, Colorado. I was driving with my family from California back to Wisconsin after a sabbatical stay in the San Francisco area. We spent an evening and a day in her simple and humble dwelling.

I remember walking with her to the post office that morning, through slushy snow. She bemoaned that she needed to say some things about Daoist sexual practices and techniques, but that she had taken a vow not to reveal what she had learned in this regard.⁴ These Daoist teachings were about sexual techniques for increasing the energy between sexual partners as well as for the “central nervous system tuning” that happens when the parasympathetic and the sympathetic nervous systems are so saturated that the one system “spills over” into the other system. When the stimulation is strong enough in both automatic nervous systems, there is a very pleasurable experience of sexual, erotic energy, but also, as she says in *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex*, “in especially profound cases, a sense of union or oneness with all.”⁵

So I made a seemingly straightforward comment that the Daoist master Mantak Chia had put these techniques in books, for all to read—whether they are prepared to handle the energy or not. She was happy to hear that, since that gave her some freedom in discussing these matters in *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex*. But the matter is not so easy; in her book there is a frank and open discussion of matters sexual, as well as a definite holding back of some “still secret” Daoist information.⁶

In the spring of 1989 she returned to the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse for a second lecture. This one she entitled “Living More Deeply in One’s Place.” Here she spoke of bioregionalism and Gary Snyder’s

dictum: “Find your place on the planet. Dig in, and take responsibility from there.”

In our conversations I quickly realized that I could not keep up with her mind and her explanations. First of all, her grasp of matters was so vast and so intricately intertwined—witness the utter complexity of *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex*. Second, her mind and speech moved so quickly and switched gears so smoothly—and so often!—that she sent me reeling. But third, the weaving of essential matters of environmental philosophy that she was so good at astounded me and left me speechless, again and again.

That was the last time that we met face to face. During the ensuing years we exchanged letters and spoke on the telephone. We both wanted to meet more often and to have more conversations, but it was not meant to be.

Her Gifts to Us

Dolores LaChapelle was so many things to so many people. She was a deep powder snow skier, a mountaineer, a wilderness scholar, an author, a leader of ceremony and ritual, a philosopher of deep ecology. In many of these things she was self-taught.

In so many areas, I found that, when I eventually discovered some treasure of writing that worked well for deep environmental thinking, LaChapelle had already found it. Among these finds were Paul Shepard and “our wild Pleistocene genome”; Matsuo Basho and his singing, in prose and poetry, of the “natural not separate from culture”; and James Gibson and the concept of “affordances.”

It took me a while to realize that her understanding of deep ecology was never dualistic or a put-down of the human. Basho’s haikus mirror this nondual intertwining of human and the non-human natural. An example of this is:

bleached bones
on my mind, the wind pierces
my body to the heart,⁷

a stark manifestation in words of that non-separability.

When, in an interview, Jonathan White quotes Al Gore from *Earth in the Balance* that deep ecology “defines human beings as inherently and contagiously destructive, the deadly carriers of a plague upon the earth” and then asks her to deal with this charge of deep ecology’s being antihuman, she says:

No, deep ecology is not antihuman. It’s larger than the human. It includes humans within the whole of life, not setting them apart from life or above life. There’s some talk that we humans need to become humble, artificially humble. But that’s not the point. As soon as you pay attention, you are at once humbled by what you do not know . . . Deep means going deeply into the human . . . The only way out is to relearn or just remember the technique that made us human in the first place. Those are the techniques that governed humankind and our relations with the earth for the past fifty thousand years.⁸

Each of her books tells this story of a system or dynamic that “includes humans within the whole of life,” in terms of (a) how we humans perceive the world, (b) how we are naturally more connected than our current civilization would allow, (c) how that natural connection with the natural “lies deeply inside each of us, still undamaged in spite of what our present culture tries to do to us,”⁹ (d) how her own thinking was unfolding in each of these stages/books, and finally (e) how she herself was *practicing* these connections and this thinking, that is enacting, all of her philosophy! Every book and every stage of her own development was wrapped in her insight (motivation, wish, longing) for the gathering onefold dynamic of intellectual grasping and intuitive knowing awareness action.

I deliberately keep each of these last words—intuitive knowing awareness action—because each one of them says uniquely: intuitive=nonrational; knowing=know-how wisdom; awareness=that simple and most profound moment when there is simply . . . awareness without anything that one is aware of; and action=enactment and engagement. All of these dynamics intermingle with the intellectual grasping, in a dynamic that is beyond concepts and enactive.

If I can say that her first gift is to always take deep ecology in the deeper sense of “including humans in all of the natural” and never exclusionary of humans, and if I can say that her second gift is her ongoing commitment to put into words the intellectual and the intuitive gathering wisdom of action (what is perhaps too glibly called left and right brain), then I might suggest that her third gift is that of ritual. We humans—and especially today—need to practice our deep ecology, that is, to have regular rituals that manifest and enact how we humans are naturally part of the natural relationship of all that is natural.

In her essay “Ritual is Essential,” she suggests that most indigenous societies around the world have three things in common: an intimate, aware relationship with the natural world *in* their place, a stable culture that was truly sustainable, and a rich life of ceremony and ritual. Ritual takes us out of our intellectual domain (left brain) and engages the nonrational intuitive (right brain), thus enacting that onefold dynamic of thinking/being/acting. And this happens *in place*. She writes:

The purpose of seasonal festivals is periodically to revive the *topocosm*. Gaster coined this word from the Greek *topos* for place and *cosmos* for world order. Topocosm means "the world order of a particular place." The topocosm is the entire complex of any given locality conceived as a living organism—not just the human community but the total community—the plants, animals and soils of the place. The topocosm is not only the actual and present living community but also that continuous entity of which the present community is but the current manifestation.

Seasonal festivals make use of myths, art, dance, and games. All of these aspects of ritual serve to connect—to keep open the essential connections within ourselves. Festivals connect the conscious with the unconscious, the right and left hemispheres of the brain, the cortex with the older three brains (this includes the Oriental *tan tien* four fingers below the navel), as well as connecting the human with the non-human—the earth, the sky, the animals and plants.¹⁰

At the end of that essay she gathers the various components of ritual and weaves them into a philosophy of nondual mind/mindfulness and the nondually natural:

Ritual is essential because it is truly the pattern that connects. It provides communication at all levels—communication among all the systems within the individual human organism; between people within groups; between one group and another in a city and throughout all these levels between the human and the non-human in the natural environment . . . Most important of all, perhaps, during rituals we have the experience, unique in our culture, of neither *opposing* nature or *trying* to be in communion with nature; but of *finding* ourselves within nature, and that is the key to sustainable culture.¹¹

These rituals do not have to be complicated or dramatic. They can be as simple as going outside each month to watch and encounter the full moon or sitting on our porch each morning to welcome the sun. I have often thought that our culture makes a big deal out of the rituals of Christmas and birthdays—I write this on Valentine’s Day, which has become a big deal in our culture (!)—but these rituals tend not to connect us with the natural, do nothing toward “including humans in all of the natural,” do not open us to “the original human self, which lies deeply inside each of us, still undamaged in spite of what our present culture tries to do to us.”

When I reflect on all that she has done and ponder the threads that gather all of her books and writings, these three threads stand out for me. In virtually everything that she wrote, these three threads—an inclusive deep ecology as abiding relationship, the conjoining of the intellectual/rational with the intuitive/emotive, and the role/place of ritual in place—are always at play, seamlessly intertwined.

Perhaps my reading is motivated by my awareness that the form of enactive nondual thinking, which is manifest in the intertwining of these three threads, is far from the profession of philosophy to which I belong. Perhaps it comes from my own sense and commitment to philosophy as engagement, to enactive thinking, or to philosophical thinking that is a *Handlung*: action, taking action, dealing with, handling, taking in hand, working with, movement in act, deed.

So, I want now to walk through her six books, using these three threads and their intertwining as the gathering and guiding principle for her work. All of this is necessary for growing our ecological self, which for Arne Naess means that we “‘identify’ our self with all living beings,” are “in, and of, nature from the very beginning of our selves,” and understand that the “ecological self of a person is that with which this person identifies”¹²—taken together, nondual abiding relationship, the onefold dynamic of reason-intuition-perception, and ritual in play—all together mirror the “essence” of Dolores LaChapelle.

Her first book, *Earth Festivals* (1973), is a guidebook for doing rituals—what she called “a manual for learning.” It gives very specific directions on how to do each ritual, including what crafts one needs and how to work with them. It is directed to everyone, but especially to children. The book’s thirty-six sessions walk us through the seasons with their rituals and games. It requires playfulness, that is, not so much moralism. She writes: “. . . living with children of various ages in true wilderness . . . I watched children relating to the rock and the water and the few plants in a total manner—the way ‘natural peoples’ have done for thousands of years.”¹³ So this book is about “bringing us into a living relationship with the earth.”¹⁴ This happens in our *particular* place. By celebrating rituals and seasonal festivals, we live out and enact the total relationship that we are, in our ecological self. The earth is a living being or dynamic, and ritual lets us encounter this dynamic. It allows the ecological self to grow and develop by embedding and embodying it in all that is natural.

In ritual, we gather and are gathered in a dynamic that moves beyond ourselves, even as it never leaves us—what she often calls “the

Powers.” Ritual sets up a kind of vibrating that opens up different ways of seeing and feeling. It brings us to what is own to us, namely the gathering of the natural in all its distinct movements.

Celebration, ceremony, ritual, festivals. In 1973, hardly anyone knew about mandalas, chanting, the medicine wheel, right/left brain, or trance dancing. For sure, she was on the cutting edge of this direction. The epigram from Black Elk with which the book opens—on the title page itself—mirrors this awareness:

Grandmother Earth, hear me! The two-legged, the four-leggeds, the wingeds, and all that move upon You are Your children. With all beings and all things we shall be as relatives; just as we are related to You, O Mother.

In her second book, *Earth Wisdom* (1978), Dolores LaChapelle “comes out” as a deep ecologist—of the holistic/inclusive kind. Beginning with a description of the New Natural Philosophy, Eco-philosophy, and Deep Ecology—all of them rather new to readers in 1978—she puts together an encompassing book that is part personal experience, part philosophy, part eco-psychology (where she uses the Plains Indians’ word-image of the “four hills of life”), and part a kind of guidebook or manual for “bringing us into a living relationship with the earth”—this time as a series of inspirational stories revealing options for reconnecting with the natural: how indigenous peoples kept a sense of place, how Wendell Berry decided to go back home and to “belong fully to this place,” how one can begin nature rituals, how seasonal festivals can be enacted, how to do your own tea ceremony, how to do a sweat lodge, how to create personal rituals of place and the natural, how to make the natural the kingpin for all education—and then stories of skiing, surfing, running, tai chi, and ritual dancing.

It is in this book that she first writes about Heidegger and how his words mirrored her own experience of getting into an abiding relationship with the natural. She takes Heidegger’s words as dynamic showings of the enactment of this relationship—primarily in what he says of the fourfold of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities, and in what he says about dwelling and inhabiting one’s place. Whatever Heidegger scholars make of her creative and applied interpretations of Heidegger, it is very clear that, for her, Heidegger’s philosophy hit the mark in terms of a *lived relationship* with the natural and the way of *dwelling* that is called for in deep ecology.

If the reader is taken by *Earth Wisdom*—by its complexity and by the way in which it jumps from one theme to another, by the way that it is at times truly mind-boggling—then her third book, *Sacred Land*,

Sacred Sex: Rapture of the Deep, Concerning Deep Ecology and Celebrating Life (1988), will blow the reader away. It is above all experiential deep ecology. It is a comprehensive compendium of (a) the history of our disconnection or “uprooting” in the emergence of the Greek language of signs and symbols, in the rise of agriculture and separation from the natural wild, and in the addiction to capitalism; (b) our roots of connectedness and abiding relationship in ethnology, animal-human relationships, the unconscious archetypes of human consciousness, primitive cultures, and Daoism; (c) the “sacred” in old European and Roman religions, childhood play and adult ritual, children’s experience of place, sacred rituals in the Americas and of the Australian aboriginals, the potlatch, place and bioregion, land rituals, tai chi, Etruscan and Japanese relationship to the sacred in nature, mountain Buddhism, the way of the medicine wheel, the Hako pattern for pilgrimages, sky-sun-moon rituals, seasonal festivals, sacred sex; and (d) the “seven ‘ways’ toward human/earth bonding,” boundary crossing between wilderness and civilization (the “way” of the gourd, the “way” of chant, the “way” of the drum, the “way” of the dance, the “way” of the talking staff, the “way” of the bard, and the tai chi “way”). All of this enormous amount of material is held in the embrace of stories, both personal and otherwise, and a myriad of pertinent quotations from others, quotations that exemplify and elucidate what her own words want to say.

Sacred Land, Sacred Sex is a book of philosophy, a history book, a reference work for many core themes of environmental philosophy, a book of quotations, and a manual for practicing “bringing us into a living relationship with the earth.” It is encyclopedic in breadth, far-reaching in its depth, and complex beyond compare. As I wrote in a review of this book, many years ago:

It is not an easy book to read or to teach from, for it goes in so many directions and crosses over so many lines that we normally keep uncrossed, both academically and non-academically. I have wondered whether there is a way to simplify the presentation and still maintain the book’s depth and truth. I have come to the conclusion that it is not possible.¹⁵

She plays with the number seven, and I have enjoyed meandering among the highways and byways of her various “sevens.” There are the “Seven Deadly Delusions” (ideas of metaphysics, the false dichotomy of spirit versus nature, Eurocentrism, *human* creation of mind/wisdom of the Earth, anthropocentrism, perfection, and tragic heroism). There are the “Seven Basic Points of the Platform of Deep Ecology” (intrinsic value in all life, diversity and symbiosis of the natural, human-being-in-nature, non-estrangement of humans from Earth, the search for a new

quality of life in self-realization that is not based on material accumulation, the call of change in society's basic structures, and the discovery of new ways of communication that encourage greater identification with Earth). There are the seven ways of "Following the 'Root Traces' of the Return" (the sacred, childhood play and adult ritual, forms and aspects of ritual, sacred land, bio-regionalism, sacred land, sacred sex). Finally, there are the already mentioned "seven 'Ways' toward Human/Earth Bonding." Oh, and then, in an appendix, she sneaks in "Seven essays on 'wilderness' and 'deep ecology'"!

There is a sense in which one can say that *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex* is a contemporary version of a Daoist text, responding to the industrial growth society in the same way as the classical Daoist texts were responding to an imperial China. I would not dare to call this book a Daoist book, but I would say that it is the Daoist thread that links the three threadings that we have been working with so far in this essay.

It was during the time of her writing this book that she and I had our personal, face-to-face time together. As already mentioned, she discussed a few aspects of this book with me. She also shared with me how much a toll it took on her physical health and how grueling it was to write the book. She indicated, however, that this was her life's work and she had no choice but to write it—to make this contribution, to benefit others and the earth itself. She also told me at that time that this would be her last book!

Her fourth book, *Deep Powder Snow: 40 Years of Ecstatic Skiing, Avalanches, and Earth Wisdom* (1993) is a beautiful little book, packed with stories and autobiographical philosophy. She tells in full detail her experience of being buried in an avalanche and ending up in a full-body cast—but in the experience liberated from her Catholic guilt regarding sex. She once again turns to Heidegger and the fourfold of earth-sky-mortals-divinities, to show how that word-image and thinking mirrors "exactly" her experience of powder snow and the mountain sky. She writes: "Just as in a flight of birds turning through the air, no one is the leader and none are the followers, yet all are together; so also the powder snow skiers are all together effortlessly, because they are appropriating, responsively conforming themselves to the earth and sky in their *world*, thus there are no collisions. Each human being is free in his own path."¹⁶

If anywhere, it is here that she puts into words her nondual thinking, quoting Gregory Bateson on how the mind is "immanent in the large biological system—the ecosystem" and noting that the "unit of survival

. . . is not the organism or the species, but the largest system or ‘power’ within which the creature lives.”¹⁷ And it is here that I read for the first time the idea that we still carry within us the potential for wholeness within the natural: what Paul Shepard calls “our wild Pleistocene genome” and what she might call “our undamaged ecological self.” She says: “What we experience in powder is the original human self, which lies deeply inside each of us, still undamaged in spite of what our present culture tries to do to us.”¹⁸

Her fifth book, *D. H. Lawrence: Future Primitive* (1996), was written much earlier, before both *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex* and *Deep Powder Snow*. She was taken by Lawrence’s deep, erotic connection to the natural and by how he took the natural so seriously. She wondered how a lower class Englishman, son of a coal-miner, could know what he knew.

When Lawrence finally abandoned Christianity, he embraced what I will call a “religion of the natural.” He spoke of the “inward soul” of the human being, which would help us to remember our primordial connectedness with the natural world. She quotes from his essay “New Mexico”:

For the whole life-effort of man was to get his life into direct contact with the elemental life of the cosmos, mountain-life, cloud-life, thunder-life, air-life, earth-life, sun-life. To come into immediate felt contact, and so derive energy, power, and a dark sort of joy. This effort into sheer naked contact, without an intermediary or mediator is the real meaning of religion.¹⁹

The philosophy of deep ecology provides a language and discourse by which to understand and think Lawrence’s experiences put into words. She shows how he was in touch with the “old ways,” how he *lived* in place. What brought joy to Dolores LaChapelle were Lawrence’s free expression of the erotic and his deep understanding of ritual. He mirrored for her that spontaneous awareness in joy, or joy in awareness, which comes from living fully within the natural.

She did not coin the phrase “future primitive,” but she did apply it to Lawrence. In our post-industrial epoch, he and she both had confidence that the “primitive mind” in its complexity and wholeness in the natural will re-emerge.²⁰ The merging of life, death, food, sex; living fully aware in place; nourished by the natural rather than being isolated from it; mind’s continuity with the natural, ecosystem; being informed by the nonhuman beings of which we are—all of this will return in the *future primitive*.

Here are some of the sentences from D. H. Lawrence with which she closes her book:

But the magnificent here and now of life in the flesh is ours, and ours alone, and ours only for a time. We ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and in the flesh, and part of the living, incarnate cosmos . . . I am part of the great whole, and I can never escape. But I can deny my connections, break them, and become a fragment. Then I am wretched.²¹

This book about Lawrence celebrates the sensuous and the earth, inviting us to be *captured by* nature and the wild rather than *captive to* civilization. Interweaving biographical details of his life with what humans and life have in common, she has awakened the primitive power of Lawrence's work. Her book is also an invitation for transformation in response to this awareness. She sings the praises of spirit of place, interweaving of male and female, harmonizing of body and mind with the natural, and spirituality of the inward soul. She lets him teach us about crossing over from being-civilized to primitive connections, about being deeply embedded in the earth and our solar plexus, about "fleshing" our rational mind, to go beyond the rational to a fleshly being-present with soil/earth/nature/wild.

On several occasions over the years, Dolores LaChapelle bemoaned how hard it was to get this book published. No one wanted it. At one point she even gave up on ever getting it published. In the late 1980s, she gave me a typed copy (no Xeroxed copy and no electronic copy!), to see if I could shepherd it to publication. I was not able to do it, and I am grateful to the people who did make it happen and to the University of North Texas Press for having the vision to see it through. This book is a sleeper.

Her sixth book, *Return to Mountain: Tai Chi Between Heaven & Earth* (2002) is also a sleeper. I believe it is her most precious and intimate book. Tai chi is what saved her when she could not ski or climb the mountains as she once could.

If any book interweaves the three threads—of holistic deep ecology, permeation of rational and body/intuitive, and ritual—this is the one. For those three threads run through the book, from start to finish. Tai chi *is* the ritual. Her careful rendering of Heidegger's notion of "reciprocal appropriation" is the way she names the coming together of all aspects of human and nonhuman, and the "intellectual" words of description slide again and again into the softness of each tai chi movement in the photographs. Even the words themselves dance among

these three threads, naming the flow of tai chi and the natural—where some of the words appearing on the page were made with brush strokes.

The many quotations, the description of each tai chi movement, and the photograph of Jodi Harper-Nute in each pose in the natural-wild—all move gently but powerfully together. These several rubrics of the book mirror the reciprocal appropriation of the human and the natural wild. One of her quotations is from Shih-T'ao (Ming Dynasty):

Mountains and rivers compel me to speak for them;
They are transformed through me and
I am transformed through them.²²

By teaching tai chi for over twenty-five years and by publishing this book on tai chi, she was determined to share and pass on what she had learned from her own teacher, Master Tchoung Ta Tchen, in the early 1970s in Seattle. The power of chi energy connects us to the natural, and we do not have to “invade the wilderness to feel the deep beauty of nature both without and within.” Why is this? “Deep inside, we humans are still natural and that registers for us with the old brain located in the lower abdomen, where the chi energy dwells.”²³

Thus ends my journey through her six books. With lighthearted humour, we wish for a seventh book—given her penchant for the number 7. And there is a seventh book, the first one that she wrote, *First Steps in Faith* (1969). But this book, if it still exists somewhere, is not part of her life-work as a thinker-writer-doer of deep environmental philosophy. I do not believe that she put much stock in the book in the years that I knew her. But she would enjoy the joke about completing the “seven”!

Sacred Land, Sacred Sex

In a kind of celebration of her work, I want now to focus in some detail on a philosophical theme that became central for her: the sacred. Let me draw out, distinguish, and gather the essential aspects of what “sacred” means in her writings, to show how the word *sacred* really also always says “holy” and “whole,” and to give expression to the human-nature dynamic in and as sacred/holy.²⁴

Three English words encompass, in some sense, the same phenomenon:

sacred, holy, whole. The Latin word *sacer* says “holy”; *sacrare*: “make holy”; *sanctus*: “made holy”—holy, sacred, inviolable, reverend, hallowed. *Sacrament* is the act of binding, making holy/sacred.

The Latin word *sacrum* gets translated into English as “holy.” German has only the word *heilig* to say “sacred” and “holy.” If Latin says “sacred” and “holy” with the same word and if German *has* only the word *heilig* to say what is sacred as well as what is holy, we get the sense that the two words say the same.

If we then turn our attention to the fact that the German for “holy,” “sacred,” and “whole” is the same word—*heil, heilig*—then we understand how the words sacred and holy also say “whole”: Whole-*heil-heilig*-health: unbroken, entire, nothing lacking, having all original elements, intact, sound, wholesome, full, “united” (not divided), by/in/on the whole—or: holy. The words tell us that the issue of the sacred is the issue of the holy is the issue of the whole.

First, there is the way by which things are sacred/holy. In working with the poetic saying of Hölderlin, Heidegger says that the holy is “nature that sways from within itself—*das Heilige... die aus sich wesende Natur.*”²⁵ Heidegger says this within the context of understanding that the word *nature* stems from the Greek word *physis*, which in its ordinary meaning says “birthing/emerging, coming forth.” If, then, nature is *physis* in this ordinary sense, then the holy is “the birthing/emerging that endures and holds sway from within itself.”

LaChapelle describes this core aspect of the sacred/holy as “the ongoing whole,”²⁶ connecting dynamic patterns that flow through everything, the continuous flowing inter-play (being, doing, enacting).

With the above considerations in hand, we can now draw up a list of aspects of the sacred/holy:

- the power that sustains
- something that comes and goes
- a welling-up itself—the emergent emerging
- ground that is abground (no substance-basis)
- “mysterious presence [dynamic], something not to be uttered”²⁷
- an “isness”—the “feel of impartiality”²⁸

Second, there is the way in which the sacred enjoins humans. This leads to the question of how to think humans in relationship with the holy/sacred, the permeation of human and the holy/sacred, a contact without mediation. There is here a curious circle of *being* the holy as well as *being-in* the holy: Using the image of the holy as “the emerging that endures and holds sway within itself” or the “continuous flowing interplay in enactment,” one can say:

- mind *is* all of that AND yields actively to it
- one’s connectedness *is* the sacred/holy *is* all of that AND “that” is that in which one is
- the holy grants the saying of this AND this itself emerges in the saying.

Heidegger says: The holy “compels us into saying—*fordert die Nennung*.”²⁹

Third, the holy itself is relationship. In *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex* LaChapelle writes: “The essence of ‘the sacred’ is relationship. It has to do with conforming to the patterns (Chinese, *li*) in nature because the patterns in nature are both within us (evolved through millennia) and without—in nature outside us.”³⁰ Letting go of cultural and cognitive mindsets, humans connect with these connecting dynamic patterns that flow through all things, the continuous flowing interplay in enactment. Humans are always already enjoined with the emergent emerging that endures and holds sway from within itself. LaChapelle says that we humans do not and cannot “put it together.” It is “all together all the time.” Humans do not make or create the holy. Rather, we feel the holy when we recognize the “on-going whole” by stilling “the rational hemisphere or conscious [cognitive] mind long enough.”³¹

Humans participate actively and mindfully in the connecting dynamic patterns that flow through everything, the continuous flowing interplay. This participation in the dynamic that is in movement or at work is a “non-mediated” participation, a dynamic connecting that is not mediated by cognitive thinking. Here we must hear and think the vast difference between cognitive thinking and the mindfulness of knowing awareness. To quote LaChapelle here: “The word we give, the label we give to our [mindful but not cognitive/mental] recognition of what is always going on, or on-going, always, is ‘the sacred’.”³²

Fourth, one seeks the holy by opening to it. LaChapelle has several names for how one opens to the holy. The Buddhist monk Saigyo

(1118–1190) experienced the holy by “giving, yielding, surrendering” to the “saving power of nature.”³³ Another way in which LaChapelle names this way of being with the way things are sacred is by “living fully with total attention to your place.”³⁴—giving yourself permission to be in the “sacred” state *in* one’s own engagement with the world.

Fifth, we receive the holy as it occupies “us.” *Rausch*-rapture rushes over us. In *D. H. Lawrence: Future Primitive*, she quotes Joseph Jastrab: “the need for beauty or the spiritual longing or wildness . . . are acts of nature.”³⁵ Humans do not cultivate it/them. It/they cultivate humans. As Jaime de Angulo says, “When you have become quite wild, then perhaps some of the wild things will come to take a look at you . . .”³⁶

This active receiving, or the aspect of receivedness, is crucial to an understanding of the holy/sacred. Humans attentively open to the sacred/holy, which they then actively and mindfully receive or participate in. Since this dynamic relationship is outside the duality of metaphysics, one can say that the opening and receiving of the sacred takes place where subject, object, and enaction are one.

Sixth, we respond to the receiving, enacting and “realizing” the holy, marking it. The enacting responding to the holy is a knowing awareness of it in human thinking response. It is a “sense of being part of the [ongoing] whole of life and realizing [enacting] it.”³⁷ Going back to what I said earlier, the holy/sacred is not a deity or even a quality, human or otherwise, but rather a dynamic of relationship, which humans enact in daily life. The holy is not removed or “transcendentally sacred.” And it is available to us by our “living fully with total attention to [our] place.”³⁸

Gathering the various aspects of what LaChapelle says on and from within the holy/sacred, we can say that the holy is the ongoing dynamic patterns that flow through all things including humans, an ongoing whole, received and enacted by humans in daily life, “right here.” She quotes the poet Kenneth Rexroth: “awareness, not a feeling, of timeless, spaceless, total bliss occupied me or I occupied it completely.” She adds: “Our natural birthright is to feel this way—most of the time.”³⁹ I interpret her here: Once that experience happens—and stays within emergence because of saying it (finding words for it)—then one moves into the “sacred” or “holy” mode within daily life.

Her answer of course is to set up “ritual structures in our lives where we can feel nature moving deeply within us.”⁴⁰ As she writes in her chapter

on “Sacred Land,” “In summary, to begin to heal the ‘split’ between us and nature, inflicted on us by our culture, the crucial action is daily rituals of ‘nurturance and greeting’ between us and the natural beings of our own place.”⁴¹

Starting with Japanese images of sacred land and emanating from them to a gathering/saying of “sacred land”—mountains cave tree rock water: sacred land—LaChapelle says that we need, like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, to leave social convention and to surrender to the saying power of nature, learning from its dynamic flow. Its impermanence is its power that does not hang on, that bends with the wind, affording humans the opportunity to accept impermanence. For example, water purifies and resides, and in so doing penetrates to the heart. This is why nature = the sacred, why the way things are is as holy/sacred. With this knowing awareness, one is called to learn to hear/respect/love the natural beings of one’s own place.

These enactments of thinking, this mindful and knowing awareness, leads to experiencing that the self is never in isolation but always already within the phenomenon, or nature. Here she quotes the Buddhist Genjokoan:

That the self advances and confirms the
myriad things is called delusion.

That the myriad things [of nature and its saving power]
advance and confirm the self is enlightenment.

This is the Buddhist notion of “codependent origination,” that “in no thing is there a trace of that being’s having its existence in and of itself alone.”⁴² The depth of that relationship, with the saving power of nature, with the myriad things of nature in participation, is *rapture*.

LaChapelle concludes this section on sacred land by quoting the Japanese poet Santoka:

The Green mountains . . .

Deeper, and still deeper . . .

and then writing: “This *is* ‘the way’—remain in your own place on the earth and go ‘deeper and still deeper.’ You will find it is truly ‘sacred land’.”⁴³

Let me offer some word-images that I have gathered from LaChapelle’s chapter on “Sacred Land.” This word-play plays with and enowns our thinking, as we hear and say the holy/sacred:

- Wendell Berry’s saying that land “is our deepest bond”⁴⁴
- Marjorie Rawling’s saying that “consciousness of land/water must lie deeper in our core [more deeply embedded within us] than any knowledge of our fellow human beings”⁴⁵
- relationship!⁴⁶
- health—ongoing whole—holy
- the need for receptivity
- “hush of the holy,” “experience in the wild”
- space becomes sacred from awakening to see the world as “sacred”
- inhabiting in one’s own place, celebrating natural locations and seasonal events
- rituals of nurturance and greeting
- Gary Snyder’s saying “Wildness is the state of complete awareness. That’s why we need it.”⁴⁷

One of the places where LaChapelle’s work shines in its frankness and all-encompassing wisdom, even as it provides a kind of manual for achieving the sacred, is in her chapter “Sacred Sex.” She quotes D.H. Lawrence:

Oh, what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love when it was made a personal, merely personal feeling, taken away from the rising and the setting of the sun, and cut off from magic connection of the solstice and equinox! This is what is the matter with us, we are bleeding at the roots, because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars, and love is a grinning mockery, because, poor blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the tree of Life, and expected it to keep on blooming in our civilized vase on the table.⁴⁸

Putting this together with LaChapelle’s writing on sacred sex, one can gather the essential aspects of sacred sex, as given us by LaChapelle:

- sex is not a thing or a substance but
- **relationship** with all of life in one’s own place is paramount
- the sexual act dare not become the “end” in itself but is about
- **bonding**, a universal interrelatedness beyond the egoic AND aware of taking life to live but also giving life back
- sacred sex includes “being in nature” in all of her examples (the Ute Bear Dance, the Eskimo game of “doused lights,” the

Odawa Indian sharing of sex, and the European anthropologists who themselves participated in these ritual acts of sacred sex). “Sex, then, becomes natural, inevitable and sacred because it’s part of the whole inter-relationship of humans and nature in that place.”⁴⁹

From the Sacred to Mind

If mindfulness of thinking and knowing awareness, which affords the emergence of the holy—including the way in which humans become holy within the holy—is within the sway of philosophy, then what can we say about the relationship of the holy to philosophical thinking? If there is a dynamic *specific to* humans as what is “own” to us, whether that is named “knowing awareness,” “thinking,” or languaging, how is this element a factor within the bonding that belongs to the holy? What does the human *mind* uniquely bring to this process? This is a dilemma that I am left with whenever I finish reading Paul Shepard and Dolores LaChapelle.

If daily rituals of nurturance and greeting are own to sacred land and one’s participating in it, what is the role of philosophy and knowing awareness in terms of that process? Are rituals only subliminal and meant for non-mediated non-rational experience? If so, what is the connection to the phenomenological way of keenness of observing and of interpreting/saying the way things are holy? How does the holy itself, in its emergent emerging, relationship, and abgrounding mystery, not get reduced to a merely social construction, available to the postmodernist and deconstructivist strategy? What if it *does* get reduced to such a construction? Where does the thinking that handles these questions come from and where does it land?

The communion with all life, outside duality, is what the holy is all about . . . the mystery of this communion is in daily life . . . the need for beauty, spiritual longing, wildness are *acts of nature* as well as human desires . . . the holy is participation in this communion of nature/*physis*.⁵⁰

Closing

Dolores LaChapelle shunned the bright lights of fame. She preferred to hide out in her small house in Silverton—and could even be called a hermit or a recluse. That is not to say that she did not speak in front of large crowds. She did. That is not to say that she did not want her writings to be known and used. She wanted that very much. Her calling, if you will, was to provide these insights and these connections or “answers” to the biggest questions facing our world today. She did this with humility. For as complex and interwoven and packed as her writings are, her own life was lived simply.

In *Earth Wisdom*, now over thirty years ago, she wrote about the stages of a life. In describing the fourth stage, in which one is preparing for the end of one’s life, she talks of mortality as a beneficial thing:

The advantage of mortality is that it permits ever new manifestations of Being to occur. For example, the components (atoms, cells, etc.), which go to make up the temporary organism, which is my self at this moment, have been contained in many other beings in the past and will be part of many new, as yet unknown, beings in the future.⁵¹

And a little later she quotes John Muir: “Birds, insects, bears die as cleanly and are disposed of as beautifully . . . The woods are full of dead and dying trees, yet needed for their beauty to complete the beauty of the living . . . How beautiful is all Death!” And finally, Annie Dillard: “And one day it occurs to you that you must not need life . . . I think that the dying pray at the last not ‘please,’ but ‘thank you,’ as a guest thanks his host at the door . . .”⁵²

I carry with me the image of Dolores LaChapelle walking through the veil of death with these word-images in mind . . . and chuckling to herself, as she had chuckled when she realized that she had crossed the “forbidden” Mississippi River. And I imagine that, at the end, she did not take herself too seriously.

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Notes

¹ B. Frank, "The Deceased: Dolores LaChapelle," *Mountain Gazette*, 131 (April 2007), 10.

² *Deep Powder Snow*, 94.

³ *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex*, 13.

⁴ LaChapelle always spelled the word with a "t": Taoist. I imagine that if she were writing today, she would have switched to a "d": Daoism. I will use "Daoism" in this writing.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁶ See in this regard the chapter "Sacred Sex," especially pages 261–4 and her Reference Notes to these pages at the back of the book.

⁷ Matsuo Basho, "Journal of Bleached Bones in a Field," 13.

⁸ "Mountains Constantly Walking," interview with Dolores LaChapelle in Jonathan White (ed.), *Talking on the Water: Conversations about Nature and Creativity*, 162.

⁹ See epigram at the top of this essay.

¹⁰ Dolores LaChapelle, "Ritual is Essential," in *In Context: A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture*, 39ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Arne Naess, "Self-realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World, 225–227.

¹³ *Earth Festivals*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ Kenneth Maly, Book Review of *Sacred Land Sacred Sex*, 276.

¹⁶ *Deep Powder Snow*, 47.

¹⁷ These words of Gregory Bateson appear *ibid.*, 38-9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 94. Paul Shepard says that the human genome today retains its full Pleistocene integrity, that the Pleistocene is accessible to us “because we have never left our genome and its authority,” and that we “can go back to nature...because we never left it...Possibilities lie within us.” Paul Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, 154 & 170.

¹⁹ D.H. Lawrence, “New Mexico,” 144.

²⁰ Did they really have this confidence? Or am I reading too much into their own joy for life and exuberant energy? At least it is true to say that both of them saw the re-emergence of the primitive mind as necessary for our survival and fullness of life.

²¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, 173–174.

²² *Return to Mountain: Tai Chi Between Heaven & Earth*, 56.

²³ Ibid., 10.

²⁴ Portions of what follows here appeared in an earlier version in my essay “Dwelling in the Holy: Dolores LaChapelle on the Sacred, *Call to Earth*, 24–27.

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, 65.

²⁶ See in this regard *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex*, 128.

²⁷ *Earth Wisdom*, 28.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Erläuterungen*, 58.

³⁰ *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex*, 127.

³¹ Ibid., 128.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 177.

³⁴ Ibid., 180.

³⁵ *D.H. Lawrence: Future Primitive*, 70.

³⁶ Ibid., 73.

³⁷ *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex*, 128.

³⁸ Ibid., 180.

³⁹ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 172.

⁴² Ibid., 178.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 167.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 127.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 180.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 253.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 260.

⁵⁰ This play of word-images draws from a quotation from Joseph Jastrab, *Sacred Manhood, Sacred Earth*, as quoted in *D.H. Lawrence*, 69–70.

⁵¹ *Earth Wisdom*, 128.

⁵² Ibid.