

## Every Act a Ceremony by Charles Eisenstein

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I met a woman a few weeks ago who works with a Kogi mama, or shaman, from the Sierra Nevada of Colombia. He came to California a few years ago and performed extensive ceremonies on a particular spot of land. He said, "You'd better do a ceremony here regularly, or there will be serious fires." No one did the ceremonies, and the next year there were forest fires. He came back afterward and repeated his warning. "If you don't do the ceremonies, the fires will be even worse." The next year, the fires were worse. He came again and issued his warning a third time: "Do the ceremonies or the fires in this part of the world will be worse still." Soon after that, the Camp Fire devastated the region.

Later the woman found out that the spot the Kogi shaman identified was the site of a genocidal massacre of the indigenous people who lived there. He was somehow able to perceive that. In his understanding, a horrifying trauma like that affects the land in addition to human beings. It will be angry, out of balance, unable to maintain harmony until it is healed through ceremony.

Two years ago I met some Dogon priests and asked them about their views on climate change. Like the Kogi, the Dogon have kept ceremonial practices intact for thousands of years. The men said, "It isn't what you people think. The biggest reason that the climate is going crazy is that you have removed sacred artifacts from the places where they belong, the places where they were placed with great deliberation and care, and removed them to museums in New York and London." In their understanding, these artifacts and the ceremonies that surrounded them maintain a covenant between humans and the Earth. In exchange for the payment of beauty and attention, Earth provides an environment fit for human habitation.

My friend Cynthia Jurs has been holding ceremonies for a couple decades now in which she buries Earth Treasure Vases, Tibetan religious vessels made in a monastery in Nepal according to a specific ritual procedure. She learned the practice from - this sounds like a cliché but it actually happened - a 106-year-old Lama in a Himalayan cave. She had asked him, "How can I best serve the healing of the world?" He told her, "Well, any time you gather people to meditate, that has a healing effect, but if you want to do more you can bury Earth Treasure Vases." Initially, Cynthia was disappointed with this suggestion. She was a devotee of Tibetan Buddhism and quite sure that it was a beautiful ceremony and all, but come on, there is real social and ecological damage that needs healing. People need to be organized. Systems have to change. What good will a ceremony do?

Nonetheless, she accepted the gift of a batch of vases that the Lama instructed be made in a nearby monastery. Five years later she began traveling the world to places where land and people had suffered great trauma to bury the vases according to the ceremonial

instructions. In some of those places, miracles large and small would occur, including the mundane sort of social miracle such as the founding of peace centers. From what she can observe, the ceremonies work.

## Ritual, Ceremony, and Materiality

How are we to understand such stories? The politically correct modern mind wants to respect other cultures, but hesitates to seriously adopt the radically different view of causality they hold. The ceremonies I speak of are in a different category from what the modern mind considers to be practical action in the world. Thus, a climate conference might begin by inviting an indigenous person to invoke the four directions, before moving on to the serious business of metrics, models, and policy.

In this essay I will explore another view of what modern people can draw from the ceremonial approach to life, as practiced by what Orland Bishop calls “cultures of memory” - traditional, indigenous, and place-based peoples, as well as esoteric lineages within the dominant culture.

This alternative is not a substitute for the rational, pragmatic approach to solving personal or social problems. Nor does it stand alongside but separate from the pragmatic approach. Nor is it a borrowing or importation of the ceremonies of other people.

It is a reunion of the ceremonial with the pragmatic built upon a profoundly different way of seeing the world.

Let’s start with a provisional distinction between ceremony and ritual. Though we may not recognize them, modern life is replete with rituals. Swiping a credit card is a ritual. Standing in line is a ritual. Medical procedures are rituals. Signing a contract is a ritual. Clicking “I agree” to the “terms and conditions” is a ritual. Filing taxes is a complicated ritual that for many people requires the aid of a priest - initiated in arcane rites and rules, fluent in a special language that the layperson can barely understand, and distinguished by the addition of honorific letters to his or her name - to properly complete. The CPA helps you execute this ritual that allows you to remain a member in good standing of society. Rituals involve the manipulation of symbols in a prescribed manner or sequence in order to maintain relationships with the social and material world.

By this definition, ritual is neither good nor bad, but merely a way that humans and other beings hold their reality together.

A ceremony, then, is a special kind of ritual. It is a ritual done in the knowledge that one is in the presence of the sacred, that holy beings are watching you, or that God is your witness.

Those whose worldview has no place for the sacred, holy beings, or God will see ceremony as superstitious nonsense or, at best, a psychological trick, useful maybe to calm the mind and focus the attention.

Now hold on. In a worldview that does have a place for the sacred, holy beings, or God isn’t it true that He or She or They are always watching us, watching everything we do? Wouldn’t that make everything a ceremony?

Yes it would - if you were constantly in the felt presence of the sacred. How often is that? And how often would you, if asked, merely profess to know holy beings are watching,

without actually in the moment knowing it through and through? With vanishingly few exceptions, the religious people I know don't seem to act most of the time as if they thought God were watching and listening. The exceptions transcend any specific faith. One recognizes them through a kind of gravity they carry. Everything they say and do carries a kind of moment, a weight. Their gravitas permeates beyond solemn occasions to their laughter, their warmth, their anger, and their ordinary moments. And when such a person performs a ceremony, it is as if the gravity changes in the room.

Ceremony is not an escape from the messy world of matter into a hocus-pocus realm of spirituality. It is a fuller embrace of the material. It is practice in paying due respect to materiality, whether as sacred in and of itself, or sacred because it is God's masterwork. At the altar, one places the candles just so. I have an image in my mind of a man from whom I learned the meaning of ceremony. He is deliberate and precise; not rigid yet neither sloppy. Paying attention to the necessity of the moment and the place, he makes an art of each movement.

In a ceremony, one attends fully to the task at hand, performing each action just as it should be. A ceremony is therefore a practice for all of life, a practice in doing everything just as it should be done. An earnest ceremonial practice is like a magnet that aligns more and more of life to its field; it is a prayer that asks, "May everything I do be a ceremony. May I do everything with full attention, full care, and full respect for what it serves."

### Practicality and Reverence

Clearly then, the complaint that all those days in ceremony would have been better spent planting trees or campaigning against the logging industry misses something important. Steeped in ceremony, the tree planter will attend to the proper placement of each tree and the right choice of tree for each microclimate and ecological niche. She will take care to plant it at the right depth and to ensure that it will receive the proper protection and care thereafter. She will strive to do it just right. Similarly, the campaigner will distinguish what really needs to be done to stop the logging project, and what might instead gratify his crusader's ego, martyr complex, or self-righteousness. He will not forget what he serves.

It is nonsense to say of an indigenous culture, "The reason they have lived sustainably on the land for five thousand years has nothing to do with their superstitious ceremonies. It is because they are astute observers of nature who think seven generations in the future." Their reverence for and attention to the subtle needs of a place is part and parcel of their ceremonial approach to life. The mindset that calls us to ceremony is the same mindset that calls us to ask, "What does the land want? What does the river want? What does the wolf want? What does the forest want?" and then pays close attention to the clues. It holds land, river, wolf, and forest in a status of beingness - counting them among the holy beings that are always watching, and who have needs and interests entwined with our own.

What I am saying might seem contrary to theistic teachings, so for those who believe in a creator God, I will offer a translation. God is peeking out from every tree, wolf, river, and forest. Nothing was created without purpose and intent. And so we ask, How may we participate in the fulfillment of that purpose? The result will be the same as asking, What does the forest want? I will leave it to the reader to translate the rest of this essay into theistic language.

I personally cannot claim to be someone who knows that holy beings are always watching

him. In my upbringing, holy beings such as the sky, the sun, the moon, the wind, the trees, and the ancestors were not holy beings at all. The sky was a collection of gas particles petering out into the void of space. The sun was a ball of fusing hydrogen. The moon was a chunk of rock (and a rock an agglomeration of minerals, and a mineral a bunch of unliving molecules...). The wind was molecules in motion, driven by geomechanical forces. The trees were columns of biochemistry and the ancestors were corpses in the ground. The world outside ourselves was mute and dead, an arbitrary melee of force and mass. There was nothing out there, no intelligence to witness me, and no reason to do anything better than its rationally predictable consequences could justify.

Why should I keep the candle on my altar positioned just right? It is just wax that oxidizes around the wick. Its placement exercises no force on the world. Why should I make my bed when I'll just sleep in it again the next night? Why should I do anything better than it has to be done for the grade, the boss, or the market? Why should I ever exert any effort to make something more beautiful than it needs to be? I'll just cut some corners - no one will know. In my childish imagination, the sun and wind and grass may see me, but come on, they aren't really seeing me, they don't have eyes, they don't have a central nervous system, they are not beings like I am. That is the ideology I grew up in.

The ceremonial view does not deny that one can usefully see the sky as a bunch of gas particles or the stone as a composite of minerals. It just doesn't limit the sky or the stone to that. It holds as true and useful other ways of seeing them, not privileging their reductionistic composition to be what they "actually" are. Therefore, the alternative to the worldview of my upbringing is not to abandon practicality for some kind of ceremonial aesthetic. The divide between practicality and aesthetics is a falsity. It stands only in a causal account of life that denies its mysterious and elegant intelligence. Reality is not as we have been told. There are intelligences at work in the world beyond the human, and causal principles besides those of force. Synchronicity, morphic resonance, and autopoiesis, while not antithetical to force-based causality, can expand our horizons of possibility. Accordingly, it is not that a ceremony will "make" different things happen in the world; it is that it tugs and molds reality into a form where different things happen.

Living a life devoid of ceremony leaves us without allies. Shut out of our reality, they abandon us to a world without intelligence - the very image of modernist ideology. The mechanistic worldview becomes its own self-fulfilling prophecy, and we are indeed left with nothing but force by which to affect the world.

The transition that traditional people like the Kogi or Dogon offer is not to adopt or imitate their ceremonies; it is to a world view that holds us humans companioned in the world, participating in a colloquy of intelligences in a universe bursting with beings. A ceremony declares a choice to live in such a universe and to participate in its reality-formation.

### Ceremony in Environmental Healing

Practically speaking - wait! Everything I have said is eminently practical already. Instead let me speak of extending the ceremonial mind to the realm of environmental policy and practice. That means to do right by each place on Earth, to understand it as a being, and to know that if we treat each place and species and ecosystem as sacred that we will invite the planet into sacred wholeness as well.

Sometimes, the actions arising from seeing each place as sacred fit easily into the logic of carbon sequestration and climate change, such as when we stop a pipeline to protect the sacred waters. Other times, the logic of the carbon budget seems to run contrary to the

instincts of the ceremonial mind. Today forests are being removed to make way for solar mega-arrays, and birds are being killed by gargantuan wind turbines that tower over the landscape. Furthermore, anything that doesn't easily exhibit an influence on greenhouse gases is becoming invisible to environmental policymakers. What is the practical contribution of a sea turtle? An elephant? What does it matter if I place my candle sloppily on the altar?

In a ceremony, everything matters and we attend to every detail. As we approach ecological healing with a ceremonial mind, more and more becomes visible for our attention. As science reveals the importance of formerly invisible or trivialized beings, the scope of the ceremony expands. Soil, mycelia, bacteria, the forms of waterways... each demands its place on the altar of our agricultural practices, forestry practices, and all relationships with the rest of life. As the subtlety of our causal reckoning deepens, we see for example that butterflies or frogs or sea turtles are crucial for a healthy biosphere. In the end we realize that the ceremonial eye is accurate: that environmental health cannot be reduced to a few measurable quantities.

I am not suggesting here to abandon remediation projects that might be based on a coarser understanding of the beingness of the world; i.e., that might be mechanistic in their conception of nature. We have to recognize the next step forward in the deepening of a ceremonial relationship. Recently I've been corresponding with Ravi Shah, a young man in India who is doing breathtaking work regenerating ponds and their surrounding land. Following the example of Masanobu Fukuoka, he exercises the most delicate attention, placing some reeds here, removing an invasive tree there, trusting in the innate regenerative powers of nature. The more he minimizes his interference, the greater its effect. That is not to imply zero interference would be the most powerful of all. It is that the finer and more precise his understanding, the better able he is to align with and serve nature's movement, and the less he needs to interfere to accomplish that. The result is that he has created - or more accurately, served the creation of - a lush and verdant oasis in a deteriorating landscape; a living altar.

Ravi is understandably impatient with large scale water restoration projects like those I described in my book: Rajendra Singh's work in India and the loess plateau restoration in China, which come nowhere near to his degree of reverence and attention to micro-local detail. Those projects arise from a more conventional, mechanistic understanding of hydrology. Where is the sacredness? he asks. Where is the humbling to the exquisite wisdom of interdependent ecosystems unique to each place? They're just building ponds. Maybe so, I said, but we must meet people where they are, and celebrate each step in the right direction. These mechanistic hydrological projects also carry within them a reverence for water. Ravi's project can offer a glimpse of what might be, without indicting the work that represents the first of many steps to get there.

I would add to that, that for land to heal it needs an example of health, a reservoir of health from which to learn. The oasis of ecological health he has established can radiate outward through the social and ecological surroundings, transmitting health to nearby places (for example, by providing refuge and spawning grounds for plants and animals) and transmitting inspiration to other earth healers. That is why the Amazon is so crucial, especially its headwaters region, which is possibly the largest intact reservoir and font of ecological health in the world. It is where Gaia's memory of health, of a past and future healed world, still resides intact.

Ravi's earth repair work functions exactly as a ceremony. One could say, "Don't make special ceremonies - every act should be a ceremony. Why single out those ten minutes

as special.” In the same way, one could insist that every place on Earth be immediately treated as Ravi treats his. Most of us though, like society as a whole, are not ready for such a step. The chasm is too great. We cannot expect to undo our techno-industrial systems, social systems, or our deeply programmed psychology overnight. What works for most of us is to establish one oasis of perfection – the ceremony – as best we are able, and then to allow it to ripple out across our lifescape, progressively bringing more attention, beauty, and power into every act. To make every act a ceremony begins with making one act a ceremony.

## Ceremony From First Principles

Bringing some part of life into ceremony does not cast the rest into the category of the mundane or unceremonious. In performing the ceremony, we intend that it radiate through our day or week. It is a touchstone amidst life’s sturm and drang. So also, we are not to merely preserve a few wild places, sanctuaries, or national parks, or restore a few places to pristine condition; rather, these places are lodestars: examples and reminders of what is possible. As people like Ravi steward such places, we are called to bring a bit of them, and then more and more of them, to all places. As we establish a tiny moment of ceremony in our lives, we are called to bring a bit of it, and then more and more of it, to all moments.

How do we reintroduce ceremony in a society from which it is nearly absent? I said already that it is not to imitate or import the ceremonies of other cultures. Nor is it necessarily to resuscitate the ceremonies of one’s own bloodline, an endeavor that, while avoiding the appearance of cultural appropriation, risks the appropriation of one’s own culture. Ceremonies are alive though; attempts to imitate or preserve them bring us just their effigy.

What option is left then? Is to create our own ceremonies? Strictly speaking, no. Ceremonies are not created, they are discovered.

Here is how it might work. You start with a rudimentary ceremony, perhaps lighting a candle each morning and taking a moment to meditate on who you want to be today. But how do you light the candle perfectly? Maybe you pick it up and tilt it over the match. The where do you put the match? On a little plate perhaps, kept off to the side. And you put the candle back down just right. Then maybe you ring a chime three times. How long between rings? Are you in a hurry? No, you wait until each tone fades into silence? Yes, that is how to do it....

I’m not saying that these rules and procedures should govern your ceremony. To discover a ceremony, follow the thread of “Yes, that is how to do it,” that mindfulness reveals. Watching, listening, concentrating the attention, we discover what to do, what to say, and how to participate. It is no different than how people like Fukuoka learn right relationship with the land.

The candle may grow into a small altar and its lighting into a longer ceremony of caring for that altar. Then it radiates outward. Maybe soon you organize your desk with the same care. And your home. And then you put that same care and intentionality into you workplace, your relationships, and the food you put into your body. Over time, the ceremony becomes an anchor point for a shift in the reality that you inhabit. You may find that life organizes itself around the intention behind the ceremony. You might experience synchronicity that seems to confirm that indeed, a larger intelligence is at work here.

As that happens, the feeling swells that numberless beings accompany us here. The ceremony, which only makes sense if holy beings are watching, draws us into an experiential reality in which holy beings are indeed present. The more present they are, the deeper the invitation to make more acts, indeed every act, a ceremony done with full attention and integrity. What would life be then? What would the world be then?

Full attention and integrity takes different forms in different circumstances. In a ritual it means something quite different than it does in a game, a conversation, or cooking dinner. In one situation it might demand precision and order; in another, spontaneity, daring, or improvisation. Ceremony sets the tone for each act and word being aligned with what one truly is, what one wants to be, and the world in which one wants to live.

Ceremony offers a glimpse of a sacred destination, the destination of:

Every act a ceremony.

Every word a prayer.

Every walk a pilgrimage.

Every place a shrine.

A shrine connects us with the sacred that transcends any shrine and includes every shrine. A ceremony can make a place into a shrine, offering a lifeline to a reality in which everything is sacred; it is the outpost of that reality or that world-story. In the same way, a healed piece of ground is an outpost of those remaining oases of Earth's original vitality, such as the Amazon, the Congo, and a scattering of undisturbed coral reefs, mangrove swamps, and so on. We look with despair at the new Brazilian government's plan to pillage the Amazon and wonder what we can do to save it. Political and economic action is surely necessary to do that, but we can simultaneously operate at another depth. Each place of earth healing also feeds the Amazon and draws us nearer to a world in which it remains intact. And, strengthening our relationship to such places, we call upon unknowable powers to fortify our resolve and coordinate our alliances.

The beings we have excluded from our reality, the beings we have diminished in our perception into non-beings, they are still there waiting for us. Even with all my inherited disbelief (my inner cynic, educated in science, mathematics, and analytic philosophy, is at least as strident as yours), if I allow myself a few moments of attentive quiet, I can feel those beings gathering. Ever hopeful, they draw close to the attentiveness. Can you feel them too? Amid the doubt, maybe, and without wishful thinking, can you feel them? It is the same feeling as being in a forest and suddenly realizing as if for the first time: the forest is alive. The sun is watching me. And I am not alone.