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Of time, patience, and ceremony

Dawn Hill Adams, Stuart Barlo, and Jo L. Belasco

Trusting in the larger process is hard. The ever-shifting kaleidoscope of connections and intentions that slowly balances and rebalances the web of relations moves in ways we don't always understand. This was one of those times, and I was scared.

An invitation to write about environmental evaluation in a time of natural disasters had made me think our experience with wildfire might help the forests. But it turned out it wasn't what I'd learnt from the fire that most wanted to speak. It was Stuart's story of the kangaroo mountain ceremony.

Stuart Barlo is a Yuin man, Dean of Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples at Southern Cross University. He and Shawn Wilson and I had been collaborating on a project via the internet, and Stuart had recently shared a powerful story about how ceremony had initiated healing for a land and people devastated by open-pit mining. That was the story that wanted to speak now, but it would mean I'd have to write about ceremony. I couldn't imagine how. So I asked Stuart and Shawn what they thought. Shawn pointed out that ceremony had been emerging in all our Indigenous Knowledge work lately. And Stuart thought it likely the story wished to speak to people in environmental evaluation.

He said he thought the Elders would give permission for sharing it, which they did.

So now I faced the prospect of finding a way to tell the story that would let non-Indigenous evaluators receive the Knowledge it wanted to give them about human–nature relationship. The problem was, Indigenous scholars trying to share this knowledge were being blocked by a cultural communication gap. So I did ceremony to ask how to help Stuart's story speak.

The path shown me wasn't what I expected: *Build a bridge over the gap*. But if you're not going to trust the process, it's pointless to do ceremony. So I began to study the literature to find out exactly what had been said and how it had been heard, mapping communication gaps to understand how to bridge them. To my surprise, these gaps showed up in misunderstandings about complexity theory and resilience ecology too. Slowly, I realised that the powerful system of scholarly writing that permits us to communicate across space and time also happens to be inherently *linear*—whereas complexity theory, ecosystems, and Indigenous worldview are all *non-linear*. So the problem is one of *methodology*: we're using a linear method (expository writing) to address non-linear subjects.

Of course, now I faced the same problem. The only solution I could see was to engage the self-organising processes of complexity itself—to weave enough internal connections between linear elements that a non-linear perception could *emerge* in the reader's mind. At first, as I laid out basic principles of complexity theory and resilience ecology, the strategy seemed promising. But as I got to Indigenous worldview, especially ceremony, things bogged down. The manuscript grew to 15,000 words, then 25,000. I could (and did) print much of this in our organisation's *Occasional Papers*, but there was nothing that could stand alone as a submission to the journal, nothing that let Stuart's ceremony story speak. Fear overwhelmed me. I did ceremony

again and again, desperate: "Is this *really* the right thing to do?!" The deep current was calming: *Stay with the process. Let it play out.* But the night I emailed the draft to my outside readers, I wept in misery and shame. I had stayed the course, I had honoured the process, and it had taken me right to the gory end. Only 2 of the 10 weeks I'd had for the project remained, and all I had to show for it was a bloated manuscript that couldn't possibly be published in the journal. I went out to my garden, heavy-hearted, to seek comfort . . . and suddenly felt everything that had been moving for 2 months come full stop.

The immense landscape of the prairie can be dwarfed by the black base of a supercell in a green sky. Lightning pulses in silent strobes and the air hangs still and breathless. When the Land is deciding what it's going to do, you wait. The next move is not yours to make.

Next morning, the second day, I had an email. One of the readers, a scientist friend, wrote that he was enjoying the paper. I was surprised, but happy someone had even opened it. Robin has always been highly intuitive, and the last few decades he's integrated this with his biomechanics expertise to become a powerful healer. So I wondered if his email was an act of compassion. The next afternoon, Robin emailed more encouragement and asked if he could call. This was like a rumble of distant thunder. We've talked by phone once in 5 years. I stared at the incoming notification when my phone rang the morning of the fourth day, and took a deep breath. I could feel the wind rising. The Land was moving again. I answered.

We chatted a few moments. Then: "I could see where you intended to go with that paper," Robin said suddenly. "You wrote me right up to it. So why didn't you go there?"

Lightning hit so close it showered me with dirt. I wanted to run. *Stay with it.*

"The problem," he continued, "is that we White people don't know what Indigenous people mean by the term *ceremony*."

Somehow I croaked out the most common example of ceremony we use: a feast. Robin refused it. "'Feast' doesn't tell me why ceremony at the strip-mined mountain healed so many things. What is *ceremony*? I really want to know. This matters."

I floundered as the storm broke in earnest. How could I explain a thing I had never put into words? "Shawn Wilson says it's being in liminal space, at the edge between two states or places, like the surf zone where land and sea come together. There's a lot of power there."

"That's where it *happens*. But what *is* it?"

I began to repeat things I knew were in the paper. "Ceremony is a process of giving back in the value system of reciprocity. It renews the relational accountability that is the root of sustainability." These are meaningful statements to Indigenous people. Not so to Robin.

"Dawn. Stuart's ceremony did something. This matters in a world where so many terrible things are happening. What is ceremony?"

Suddenly an image: tobacco in my hands. "I could tell you about putting down tobacco," I realise. "That's a really simple ceremony. Different people do it different ways. I can tell you how I do it as long as you understand it's not universal."

"Yes. Please. Start with why tobacco."

"Tobacco was given to people specifically so they would have something to give back to the Land. I mean, what can you give the Land, really? It's everything, all by itself. But reciprocity is an ethic of giving back. Tobacco is a gift we can give it. There are ceremonies where people give other gifts. But tobacco is a common one."

The image of tobacco in my hands widens out and I live the remembering. "When I take tobacco in my hand, I get very, very present. I can feel its texture on my skin, and smell its fragrance. I become more aware of where the wind is blowing from, and how strongly; where the sun or moon is; what the sky is like right then. I feel the ground under me and I can see it between the plants."

"That's very sensorial."

"Yes. You are fully present when you do ceremony. You get more and more present, more and more open to the Land all around you, to the sky. All of it." I pause.

I explain that I turn to face each of the directions. First I face east and hold out the tobacco to offer it. I think about what this direction means and how that part of reality threads through my life right now, regrounding my own experience in the Land. Then I do this facing south, then west, then north. These days, facing west is always especially profound. It's the direction thunderstorms come from. You get that interface between warm air from the Gulf, and cold air wheeling around from the west, and they meet along their edge in power that can be very destructive but is, at the same time, absolutely essential for life. Thunderstorms bring the rain. This is such a turbulent time we're in. It always grounds me to face the west and remember the generative power in turbulence. Even the flames of wildfire are destructive and regenerative *together*. The Phoenix Bird myth expresses this wisdom and wildfire ecologists hear it: "disturbances are not catastrophes". They're just not what we *want*. This is the liminal space of the edges Shawn talks about.

"After the directions, I hold the tobacco up. I let the immense love I feel for the Land, for life in this world, come up out of me. It's so beautiful really—all the amazing things in life. And reciprocity is giving back with that same sense of joy and love. So I let my gratitude and love well up out of me. Then I put the tobacco down on the ground in front of me. If there is a decision I must make, or a thing I must do, I ask to understand what is right. And in the silence, I open to Knowledge, to knowing what is the right thing to do, the right way to live, as opposed to what I think should happen or what I want to do."

"That's very different from our ceremonies." Robin's voice is

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thoughtful. "I've been to a number of old European ceremonies. Also church ceremonies. The intention is different. Opposite."

"There doesn't have to be just one way." I was 26 years old before American Indians got the legal right to do our ceremonies again, after more than a century of federal prohibitions. Difference can be dangerous in a system where people think only one way of doing things can be right.

"We start with a circle that closes out everything but humans," Robin explains. "In Celtic and Norse ceremonies where people face the four directions, it's to establish *guardians*. It's about sealing things off, not opening up. And then we pray to a god—or goddess—for things we want to have happen: for reality to change the way we want it to change. It seems to me your process is about opening up as much as you possibly can to everything in this real world, to the ground under your feet—to accept reality as it is, rather than trying to change it to suit yourself. To align yourself with it. That's what I hear you saying you pray for, is to align better. I really think," he said pausing, "it's wanting to change things so they are the way we want them to be that makes us want to control nature."

Suddenly I remember an ancient Eleusinian Mysteries ritual a European woman told me about years ago. A man and a woman in a group that sealed out the world the way Robin described would have sexual relations with a bit of grain in their presence, to make the crops good. The *humans* determined what happened in nature. They had the power. I tell Robin this and he says he sees now that European rituals are anthropocentric but ours are centred on the earth instead. He sees that we change *ourselves* in ceremony, not the world, aligning ourselves more closely with the natural world so we can understand how to behave properly. "I think," he adds, "that White people outlawed your ceremonies because they thought it was religion like what they do. But you aren't praying to a god are you?"

"We are talking to our brothers and sisters, our Elders: the animals and plants, the rivers and winds, the land. We are asking how to behave wisely, for the good of all our relations. We are all connected, so harm to any is harm to all. We want to do no harm."

"Because if too many connections break . . . " He is thinking of complexity now.

". . . the system falls below threshold," I say, code-switching.

There was a mountain sacred to kangaroo, but the Aboriginal people were driven off the Land by mining. So much was blasted out of the ground and hauled away that there was a great hole where the mountain had been, as deep as it had been high. The land was shattered by explosives and earth-moving equipment. Not a green leaf grew anywhere. The people suffered many diseases whose roots lie in trauma. Birth weights were low, death came for people in middle age, and no child could complete an education. Everything comes from the Land: food and water, dreams and knowledge, hope and love. All of it had been shattered.

Stuart and the Elders sat down to plan and dream on it all. They got permission to do ceremony for the kangaroo mountain. They gathered broken stones scattered far and wide from its core and brought them home, piling them in the hole. It was a small thing but also large. Then they did ceremony. The kangaroo mountain, shimmering in the dream time, its broken roots returned with love to its breast, was woven back into the web of relations.

It takes 4 to 5 years for UN land restoration projects to have a noticeable impact, and in places without electricity and technology it takes longer. Eighteen months after ceremony for the kangaroo mountain, plants began to grow back in the mining area. They grew where the earthmovers were still driving. They grew on the inverted kangaroo mountain. Then animals began to return. Among the people, birth weights began to go up and death came later. Their health began to improve. And 4 years after the ceremony, the first of these people graduated from high

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school. Stuart attended the 2-week celebration of joy. Now more and more young people finish high school every year.

There was no electricity involved, no technology. Reweaving the healthy web of the Land's shattered relationships restores the health of bodies and societies that are part of that land. This is true for everyone, not just Indigenous people. It is how the world is put together.

"How are those people and their land doing now?" Robin asks. He is a healer.

"Stuart says the people continue to strengthen as the land heals. You know, there's been so much damage done, everywhere. But the hard work of time, patience, and ceremony are medicine that people in your culture have a hard time understanding."

"The world doesn't work the way we think it does."

"I'm glad you already knew that, Robin. Thank you for listening, for reading that long paper, for calling me." I am flooded with gratitude.

"I wondered why I had to call you. I didn't even know what I would say."

We laugh, together. I hang up and walk outside. Jo is reading a law book. "I have to share the story I just read," she says. Given the timing, I know before she speaks it's a coda.

A young attorney named Zygmunt Plater could sense the important part that every nation or species of living thing plays in the great web. A White man, he didn't know the Land was alive. But in 1975, he heard its voice and responded. The Tennessee Valley Authority was preparing to dam the last stretch of wild river, which would cause a tiny nation of snail darter fish to wink out of existence. Zygmunt heard them. He put on his White man suit armour and fought for this fish nation all the way to the Supreme Court. When he argued before them in 1978, he wore a t-shirt with the snail darter's image on it beneath his shirt and tie and coat. We see ceremony here. He won. In a 6–3 decision, the court ruled that 'The plain

intent of congress in enacting [the Endangered Species Act] was to halt and reverse the trend toward species extinction, whatever the cost.' The TVA ignored the Supreme Court's ruling. They tried to secure an exemption and failed twice even as they were already building the dam. Finally they got an exemption attached to an appropriations bill as a rider. The president then, Jimmy Carter, planned to veto the bill that would permit this. But at the last moment, he called the young attorney from Air Force One and told him he couldn't do it. Devastated, Zygmunt Plater wept. He thought he had failed. But this was not the end of the story.

The Supreme Court's ruling that species must be protected 'whatever the cost' established a legal precedent that prioritised the life of a non-human species over human objectives. No other environmental law in the US or any other nation has that kind of power. Interestingly, the snail darters had the last word in this case. While biologists transplanted them into creeks in Alabama and Tennessee in a last-ditch effort to save the species, darters started appearing as 'new or relict populations' miles from those transplants. Since then, the snail darter has continued to show up in new, widely-separated areas and may soon be taken off the Endangered Species List.

Scientists have tried to explain the darters' amazing comeback. But they can't explain why fish showed up inexplicably in so many places, so far apart. If you read what happened as a linear story of cause-and-effect, you can't.

Read the story as ceremony instead.

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The authors

Dawn Hill Adams (corresponding author)**:** Tapestry Institute
Email: dawn@tapestryinstitute.org

Stuart Barlo: Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples, Southern Cross University

Jo L. Belasco: Tapestry Institute
Correspondence: Dawn Hill Adams, Tapestry Institute, PO Box 1156, Chadron Nebraska 69337