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Environmental Community Arts: Refinding Natural Connections

A Personal History

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In the spring of 1990, newly back in Australia from a stay in the U.S., I became involved in a community arts performance at Terrigal on the central coast. Called "Homage to the Environment", it was part of a series of such events that were being coordinated by a group of dedicated community artists every two years. While away, I had heard from friends about the 1988 Homage, and so I was eager to be part of this one.

Participants could choose their way of becoming involved: as dancers, as musicians, making costumes and props, masks and puppets, developing the story line... Over a series of workshops spanning a few weeks, we would create a performance that would take place on the natural amphitheatre formed by cliffs, rocks and beach. I chose to be a dancer, and gradually with each exploratory rehearsal, I got to know the rocks on that beach in a very physical way - crawling over them, lying on them, dancing between them. I started to feel a part of this landscape rather than something separate moving on top of it.

The evening of the performance was cold. Several thousand people had come to watch. Even with several layers of mud-stained clothing, I shivered on my rock while last minute preparations were finalised. But when the music began to envelope the site, I merged with my rock's surface; gradually, just as we'd rehearsed, I evolved into the lizard on the rock; I found my primate legs and stood upright looking around at all the other newly emerged beings on their rocks. I was no longer performing for an audience. I was experiencing my own natural connection with the rocks, the creatures, and the vast dark sky. That evening with its dancing, drumming and fireworks, I had been initiated into the magic of environmental community art.

Over the next two Homages, my involvement grew to becoming assistant musical director, leading drumming workshops and co-ordinating the live music. The themes of these Homages were "Pacific Dreaming" and "Homage to Unity". Although these turned out to be the last Homage events, they remain with me as powerful examples of people connecting with each other and their natural landscape through the arts.

In 1994, I discovered the deep ecology workshops of John Seed from Lismore, called the Council of All Beings, and I later became part of a group which facilitates such Councils. As part of these workshops, we connect with our evolutionary history by moving our bodies like sea anemones... fish... monkeys... We each make a mask which is inspired by an aspect of our environment: tree... wind... possum... Donning our masks in a ritual, we then speak as if from the perspective of that mask-Being about the current state of our world. We discover the special gifts that each different perspective offers us. I have found the Councils to be a source of renewal and inspiration at times when I have felt burnt out.

Living and working in the city, it has been all too easy for me to lose touch with nature and become cynical about the capacity we all have to make positive changes. Fortunately, I have found others in Sydney who love to dance and drum under the trees. We aren't trying to imitate

indigenous peoples; rather, we are helping each other to recreate the sense of community that so easily vanishes from urban living. As the daughter of immigrants to Australia, I am gradually finding my own connections to this land.

Now, as an Expressive Arts Therapist, my work is to support people to allow their own creative spirit to emerge in the way they used to as children; and, through environmental community art, to use the arts to strengthen their bond with the natural environment.

See also the report by Rosemary Faire and Dianne Langan, published in the current issue of *Voices*: "**Expressive Music Therapy: Empowering Engaged Citizens and Communities**"

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