

# Confluence of Matter and Spirit: Place & Fields, a Transdisciplinary Approach

Interview with Dr. Michael Conforti

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Patio Gathering Place in Assisi, Italy

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RL: Michael, you have been working in so many arenas – psychology, archetypes, patterns, fields, and more. What do place and space have to do with these?

MC: Everything. Let's begin with my own place. I grew up in Brooklyn, New York. My grandparents were immigrants from southern Italy. There was nothing better than going into their home. You knew that you had entered a different world. The building is still there and I go back occasionally. The smell, the feel, it was like nothing else. We grew up two miles away. We'd go there Sundays and weeknights. I was so taken with the language, the Sicilian dialect. Almost everything about my upbringing was Italian and I loved it - the neighborhoods, the food, the culture, and the people. And I was deeply affected by it. To this day it affects how I live my life. In fact, following in the tradition of my grandfather. I too made up to four hundred gallons of wine at my home every year. I'd get the grapes from California and crush them with my feet.

I love nothing more than dinner with a lot people. At one of the Assisi conferences here in Vermont, I invited people to dinner at my house. The best memories of my childhood are being together with people in a simple room at the table. There wasn't a lot of money but there was always another pound of macaroni to add to the pot, and more boards to put between the chairs to make room for the ongoing flow of cousins, aunts and uncles coming for dinner. It was just about being together. To this day I find myself

drawn to the kinds of neighborhoods I grew up in. Whenever I fly out of the Hartford, Connecticut airport, I always stop in Springfield, Massachusetts for a visit to the Italian neighborhood, to get an espresso just to hear the people and the language, to smell and taste the pastries, and hear the sounds of it all. The place...

### *Place as Home is an Emotional and Sensual Experience*

RL: So place, in the context of home, has to do with people and the emotional attachment as well as the sensory part – the sounds and sights and smells?

MC: Yes, all of it.

RL: Is there anything else?

MC: Well, in terms of fields, New York is the place where so many of the immigrant people arrived when coming to America. I went back to Ellis Island and saw my grandfather's name and it sent chills down my spine. For me, that is a place of collective resonance. The people who landed there are heroes. Can you imagine arriving young, with no money, and not knowing the language or anyone in the new place? There's something about the history of a place like Ellis Island, and New York, that just touches you in a way you can feel.

RL: What else about place do you consider part of your work?

MC: I believe the future is embedded in the present moment. I have a personal story that illustrates this. I went to Assisi, in Italy, for the first time when I was 24 or 25, combining a pilgrimage to the place of

my patron saint with a visit to see my family in Palermo, Sicily for the first time. I was going for spiritual reasons and a desire to connect with my homeland, but look how it influenced my life! I've been making my annual return to Italy now for the past 25 years and when I'm there, I'm told I come alive. Marian Woodman, who came to one of my conferences, said Michael, "You definitely talk like an Italian. You're more comfortable, more animated. When you speak Italian, you're a different person. Something different comes out of you in Italian."

At one time on that trip I was sitting on a wall in Assisi overlooking the Umbria valley. It was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen in my life. I was thunderstruck. I said I had to come back here and do a program with people I really respect. Now, where did that come from? I don't like organizing conferences. They say the Holy Ghost comes as sudden inspiration. Wow, why did you think about that? It was just popping. I went walking one day and I was spoken to by the environment.

### *Enantiodromia: When Something Falls Into its Opposite ... Matter into Spirit; Spirit into Matter*

RL:        So it was the physical place that inspired the Assisi Institute?

MC:        No question. St. Francis' life was about the confluence of matter and spirit. He struggled. The first part of his life was like most of ours. You flirt around, date, imagine yourself a bon vivant. Then he got sick on his way to the crusades. He was going to be a great warrior but he got very sick, had a series of visions, and almost died. And then he did a 180-degree turn. Jungian psychology calls that *enantiodromia*, when something falls into its opposite. You don't want to deal with the matter anymore. It's not about money, not about sex, not about outer world pursuits. It's all about the inner world and God. His life was a struggle between matter and spirit.

What better place in the world to house our conferences about the confluence of matter and spirit than Assisi, Italy? It's one of the sacred sites of the world although it's not listed as one of the seven. You go there and you feel brought into the field of Assisi and all that it represents. You can't go there without being deeply affected. I've given a lot of talks about this over there. I've said it's literally the place - the spirit of the archetype imbuing this place with such significance and spiritual meaning - that is working on you. Once at such a sacred site, there is an opening, a crossing into a world replete with its own meaning and its own unique feelings and sensibilities that we begin to feel. Here we share in the universal, archetypal experiences of place and spirit, and our feelings and experiences are not so much personal as they are the outpourings of the field itself, whispering to us something about the nature of place and spirit. Here we cross the threshold of a world, a pre-existent field that has been part of the human experience since the beginning of time and now allows us to hear what it has been telling others since the beginning of time.

### *What Does the Field Feel Like to You When You're in It?*

RL:       What does that field feel like to you when you're in it?

MC:       I feel peaceful, I feel the sky opening in a way I have never seen or felt before, and I feel hunger. I want to take it all in, the wine, the bread, the pasta the people, the constant ringing of the bells. There's a sense that I'm literally taking Assisi in. It's so powerful. While I travel to Assisi for our annual conference in July, I actually begin to have a felt sense of Assisi a few months before the actual trip. Suddenly the sights, sounds and aromas of Assisi reappear and in some strange way, I have already begun my return. Is it the field of Assisi calling? It's a very deep, sensual, sensorial series of impressions that get me.

St. Francis didn't like the big church of the Basilica. He preferred a tiny church that was in ruins that he wanted to rebuild. After St. Francis' death, they literally took the building and put it inside a giant

cathedral in the lower part of Assisi. Today, when you go into that place, you feel his energy there. And the same is true in another place, the hermitage of St. Francis, where he went to talk to the birds and other creatures. He literally dug an altar into the caves, a bed to sleep in, and a little confessional, and in time they put in a little monastery. Now there is a cathedral there. One of the people in our community is a Father John Malecky. He's now 90. I've never met a more peaceful man in my life. He's been a Catholic priest for more than 60 (sixty) years and he is a Jungian analyst. He entered this space, the one St. Francis created, and served mass there. Everybody -- old people, kids, Jews, Muslims, and Catholics -- everyone was crying like a baby. I've been saying it's the field. It's the place that's literally shaking people to their roots.

RL: Do you think the fact that it's a grotto and carved out of rock -- a natural element -- has anything to do with people's experience there?

MC: That's a part of it. There is something sacred about that kind of environment. A grotto is a sacred site. It's a cave-like area totally encased in stone. Maybe we're diamonds.

RL: Or could it be its shape, experienced as an archetypal womb?

### *Physical Manifestations of Field – Each Affects You Differently*

MC: Could be. I think there are physical manifestations of a field, an incarnation and embodiment of the transcendent in space and time. And certain environments -- like an ocean, an island, the mountains -- have very specific qualities. The same is true of a grotto as opposed to a pine grove, or a pine grove versus

a grove of weeping willows. I've been working on this kind of thing for a long time. Each of these environments affects you differently.

Let's say there is an image of a grotto in your dream, or one of the other natural environments, like a lake, a pine grove, or an ocean. There is something called *patterning*, where you look at the image as a field. The image is the threshold at the beginning of the dream. So if there's a grotto, there is an archetypal or historical sense about what these represent. There are some immutable qualities to these places. There are also some immutable qualities inherent in one's culture, race, and gender as well. These are qualities that affect us regardless of our conscious understanding and awareness of them. Rarely do we capture the archetypal and spiritual significance of a place. For instance, let's imagine one dreams of being in a pine grove. There is rich history of the importance of pine groves, as found in mythology, folklore and in the Bible. They are sacred sites. Regardless of the individual's personal relationship to the image or place, he or we will nevertheless be affected by the objective and the archetypal, universal meaning of this image, and if one was to actually be in a pine grove, of that location.

Beverly Rubik, a biochemist, came up with the concept of the *biofield*, where every organism is part and parcel of the field and emits and receives information all the time. It's the same with environment, in my opinion. These environments have their own inherent meaning and traditions and are accessible to all who cross the thresholds into these domains. Why do you go to an Italian neighborhood and suddenly feel like singing? Or crave a slice of pizza, whether you're Italian or not? Or for some unknown reason start speaking really loudly and gesticulating in a grand manner?

### *Places Store Emotional Issues and Desires*

RL: So you think that places store emotional issues and desires?

MC: Yes, I do.

RL: So then would everyone experience those things in the same way?

ML: You're really trying to ground this, aren't you Renee? What is it, you're asking, is there really something in the field that's doing it?

RL: Well, yes. I'm wondering if it's actually stored in the place or in the relationship between the person and the place. In other words, is the field -- with its issue -- stored in the physical place or in the "space between" (to quote Martin Buber) the person and the place they are in? Or both?

### *There are Immutable Qualities to Fields: Temporal Events Connect to the Eternal*

MC: I believe there are immutable qualities to spaces and to fields. The field of death, for example. If you go into a funeral parlor you will experience a very different field than if you go into a room where a wedding is taking place. Or if you go into a home where there is a break up of a long-term marriage, there is a field that just devastates everybody and feels very different than going into a home where there is a new marriage and the joy that goes with it. We can all feel the difference, can't we? What I'm saying is that these are real fields. It's not that the temporal creates the emotions, it's that the temporal event connects you to the eternal field. That's how I look at it.

RL: If you didn't know that a couple was newly married and you walked into their home, do you think you would feel the joy in the space?

MC: I do. I've heard enough stories and had enough experiences of my own to believe this. Years before I began looking to buy a home, I had some dreams of places I was going to look at. I'd literally have a dream of that place and the dream showed me that place as it really was. I have a psychic background. I



think when you go into a room you're going to feel what's there regardless of whether the people are there. Someone I knew from Washington, DC was looking to buy a house. They loved the house, but dreaded being in the study. There was nothing logical about it. They only knew that they got really bad vibes in that one room. Later, the woman learned that the study was the room where the former owner lived during a long, tragic and terminal illness.

RL: Michael, do you think a negative field, such as the one in the room with that kind of bad energy, can be shifted so that it becomes more of a positive field?

MC: I don't think we change fields. Many years ago I talked about misalignment between people and fields. You get involved in a relationship, for example, and it's not right. You could say you're misaligned, that it's not a good field. Or professionally, you find yourself with a person who is unhealthy, like a new president of the college if you're a professor. I used to think it was about misalignment of fields, but I learned from my own research that it's not. Everything is aligned to something. It is much more compelling to determine what field an individual is aligned with. Say a college president is unsuccessful at four different schools. That's not generative, nor speaks well for his current situation. But there is an alignment that needs to be understood about the individual's life and archetypal alignment. That needs to be understood if there is to be a shift from a non-generative to a generative field.

Awhile back I was also talking about this issue of changing fields. If we meet a person who is a Holocaust survivor, it would be pure illusion to think that we are going to make his life different. You can't just say, "Change your attitude". It's field and form, and the properties of the field which determine not only form by the movement and emotions occurring within a given situation.

## *Place is not a Metaphor or Mentation. It is a Psychical Expression of Something in the Field*

It's like having iron filings and a magnet nearby. You tell the iron filings not to respond to that magnet, but it just doesn't work. This reference to magnetic properties is not simply metaphoric but descriptive of the properties of psyche and nature. There are some immutables in the natural world and the psyche that is not to be muted by human will. Place is not a metaphor, it's not a mentation. Nor is it simply an issue of physicality. Physicality is a living and vibrant expression of a field. The physical captures something that is in the field. That's why different physical environments, like mountains or islands, affect the kind of people who live there. Mountain people are very different from island people.

RL:       What about memory fields, Michael?

## *The Sensorial is the Trigger to Reactivate the Field that is Ever Present*

MC:       I think that the sensorial is literally the trigger to reactivate the field that is ever present. I write about memory in one of my books. While I was writing my most recent book, a friend, who is a Vietnam veteran, calls one day and tells me the following story. He was taking his eight-year-old son home from school and arrives at their home. As they look around the yard, he suddenly notices something tragic has occurred. He sees a body with a chain around its neck dangling from a tree. He panics, and tells his son to run into the house, quickly. "Run, run," he says. He then reaches for his knife, which because he is a carpenter he has in the truck. Then he reaches for the machine gun he believes he has next to him. No machine gun. The panic worsens. Here he is, in southern Vermont, at home with his son, yet he knows he is in terrible danger. Running to the top of the mountain for cover, he secures himself and watches for what must have been hours as he kept watch over the enemy- the Vietnamese. He said Mike, "no one can ever tell me that this never happened, I was there". I said you were back in Nam and he said thank you, Mike.

It's been proven now that there is something called "*kindling effects*" which exist as memory traces in the brain and stand ready for activation. When energized by an event which mirrors in some way the original trauma, these kindlings work like kindling wood in a woodstove to re-start the fire of memory, and the individual suddenly has this deep, felt sense that they are back in the original trauma, or worse yet, that the experience of the trauma has never ended. I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that there might well be yet another dimension to the activation of such kindling effects. These kindling effects are not scientifically provable, but at the moment they do seem to capture a set of experiences that occur in life. They may not only re-activate the feeling toned impressions of the field, but actually re-activate and re-energize the field, with sensorial, psychological and physical characteristics. Through the confluence of these factors, we find an incarnation of the field, so real, that the actual physical components of the field become re-enlivened at that moment and may be -- more than an imaginal reality.

RL:        So this field will always be there? And if that's true, and it's true that we can't shift fields, then how do we help someone like your friend avoid these fields?

MC:        I hope that my work and understanding of the powers of these fields help my clients struggling with painful, life altering traumatic experiences. Many therapists say take a deep breath, or meditate, whereas I may tell the person that I can't imagine what it's like to have lived through what they have endured. The acknowledgement of the reality of that is so powerful and profound to people because collectively we deny this. I asked Dr. Elie Wiesel about this once. I told him I feel that therapists and human relations workers have done such an injustice to humanity when it comes to dealing with the unimaginables of life. I'll never forget his answer. He said that he agreed 100%. He said it is not an issue of therapy. It's a moral issue. The moral thing to do when dealing with the unimagineables and the

unspeakables in life and in human experience is just to be present for the person. Oh man, I couldn't stop crying hearing that from him. This is a man whose every contour, every line in his face speaks of his experiences in the Holocaust.

RL: Michael, I'm just fascinated by your work and we could go on for hours exploring it, but I want to thank you for your time today and for the new frontiers you are opening up for us.

MC: Well, as you can see, I really do believe places are alive, as you do. Please invite me into any study you're doing. I'm ready to take this to the next level. There aren't many people looking at place and fields in this way, especially taking a trans-disciplinary approach as you are. Thank you, Renee, I've enjoyed this conversation very much.

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**Michael Conforti, Ph.D.** Founder & Director of the Assisi Institute, Brattleboro, VT , USA

Dr. Conforti is a Jungian Analyst, and is the founder and director of the Assisi Institute. His work has resulted not only in a training institute based on his discoveries, but also the development of a new discipline, Archetypal Pattern Analysis. He has been a faculty member at the C.G. Jung Institute - Boston, the C.G Jung Foundation of New York, and for many years served as a Senior Associate faculty member in the Doctoral and Master's Programs in Clinical Psychology at Antioch New England.

A pioneer in the field of matter-psyche studies, Dr. Conforti is actively investigating the workings of archetypal fields and the relationship between Jungian psychology and the New Sciences. He has presented his work to a wide range of national and international audiences, including the C.G. Jung Institute - Zurich and Jungian organizations in Venezuela, Denmark, Italy and Canada. He is the author of *Threshold Experiences: The Archetype of Beginnings* (2007) and *Field, Form and Fate: Patterns in Mind, Nature and Psyche*. His articles have appeared in *Psychological Perspectives*, *San Francisco Jung Library Journal*, *Roundtable Press*, *World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution*, and *Spring*.

Dr. Conforti maintains a private practice in Vermont, where he also serves as a state-appointed advisor to the Board of Psychoanalysts. He provides his insights as a sought-after consultant to businesses, government institutions, and the film industry. He has served as script consultant on the recently released film, *Pride and Glory*. He has also been asked to consult on the application of field theory to the understanding and resolution of international border disputes. He was selected by The Club of Budapest and the University of Potsdam to be part of a 20 member international team of physicists, biologists, and dynamical systems theorists to examine the role and influence of informational fields. He is a recipient of the Vision Award presented by the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis.



Dr. Conforti is a Senior Fellow of the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland. He is currently working on a new book, *Hidden Presence: Archetypes, Spells, Possessions and the Complex*.