

# Environment & Space for Collective Transformation

## Interview with Sheryl Erickson By Renee Levi, Ph.D.

Sheryl Erickson has convened many gatherings that have been described as transformational. In this interview, Sheryl reflects on and shares some of the components of such gatherings, particularly related to place, space and environment. Through the lens of one particularly powerful meeting at Monhonk Mountain House in New Paltz, New York, Sheryl incorporates and synthesizes elements of experiences she has had in other settings as well.

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RL: Sheryl, you've hosted many gatherings that might be described as transformative. Can you think of one where the place was an important part of what happened there?

SE: Place has been integral to most of the gatherings I've convened. I would like to share one that comes to mind, an event in 1996 at the Mohonk Mountain House. I recall my first discovery of this

special place, located in rural upstate New York. I'd asked for some help from a meeting manager to help me find an extraordinary place to gather people. I wanted to have a place where a large group could come together and where we would have the chance for something quite profound to happen; to have insights and discoveries, be touched personally, and perhaps even experience the transpersonal or transcendent. So the place we would choose to convene our gathering needed to be powerful energetically— different, distinct.

### *Driving Up the Mountain*

Brendon and I drove to Mohonk and arrived there in the fog. It took us a long time to get there because we drove over to New Paltz, New York from Boston. I remember the first time we arrived at the Mountain House, and each time I go back, I have the same experience.

We drove up the mountainside to get to the meeting facility, the Mohonk Mountain House itself. While driving up this single car wide pavement, it struck me how quiet and calming it was, how much slowing down was happening just driving up this single lane paved strip. It was one way only, no cars were coming down the hill toward us, which gave me a feeling of going to a private intimate place. It struck me that there was no downhill on this road to the house, only uphill. I loved going through the trees that created little openings to the sky, having a sense of winding through the forest. That brought great relaxation to me.

Then when we got to the top and saw the entrance to the Mountain House - a very large facility - I was surprised by how small the entrance was. It was like entering somebody's home, in this hotel that must have 250 bedrooms. We drove under this little portico, left our car and walked up a few steps through two wide doors into a small lobby. That was all. It felt very comfortable to me to

have this tiny entrance and it felt like things would feel like home inside. Which is just what happened.

### *Mystical Quality*

The other thing that struck me—because we were there in the fog—was this mystical quality. You couldn't really see very much. You could see off the porches and out the many windows on the side where the large lake and cliffs are. It almost felt like being in another reality. It was really wonderful. It was also windy. Despite the cold weather during our visit, they still had some of their rocking chairs on the porch. The rocking chairs, without people, were rocking. I thought, "Oh my, this place is just so full of spirit and energies." There was a real sense of life-giving presence about it. I strongly connected with the land and built environment the first time visiting. It was so unlike anything else I had seen in the USA. It felt like visiting a well-kept and aesthetically beautiful place in Europe that was steeped in history.

### *Round Rooms and Fireplaces*

RL: It's a large stone Tudor style building, with lots of gables, isn't it?

SE: Lots of gables. I don't know what the style is, maybe Tudor. Part is stone and a lot is of original wood. I was also taken by the shapes of the rooms. There were meeting rooms that were round, that had been small sitting rooms as part of larger hotel suites. Each had windows on two sides with natural light. I've had numbers of meetings in those small round rooms. They almost always have a cozy working fireplace. The rooms where you sleep are small in an old fashioned way and

often have fireplaces too. Most of the rooms have balconies, each with a private and spectacular view. I had a sense of small enclosed spaces, of gables and parapets, and of the roundness of the roof.

The round shapes were really impressive to me, because I was looking at it in terms of what could take place with a large group of people clustered at times into small circles. We then could have a time to feel intimacy and privacy while still being a part of the larger group. There were many little spaces, even in the public areas, where you might sit with two easy chairs or by a crackling fireplace on a small couch, or like a hall where you'd have these nooks and crannies where you could sit informally. There were lots of small intimate spaces with many fireplaces. And the large meeting room had a huge fireplace almost person high and in which you could burn wood for a roaring fire.

RL: When your meeting happened, were the fireplaces lit?

SE: They were. We insisted on them being lit. Even in the little meetings we had in the small round rooms we had the fireplaces going the whole time. The hotel let us stoke the fires ourselves. Anyone in the group could do it when they thought it was time for more wood to add to make it quiet or noisy, any way they wanted the fire to be. Each of us, if we chose, could invite and add the voice and aliveness of fire.

### *The Presence of Elders*

I convened three small gatherings and three large meetings at Mohonk. One large meeting was around 100 people, the other was close to 160. We used the large meeting room and many small rooms as cluster gathering spaces. I recall just feeling delighted each time I re-experienced being in their largest meeting room. The second meeting at Mohonk was convened by a group of eight to ten

of us. This one had some very creative elements as part of an intentionally emergent process design. This intention was well supported by our gathering in the physical space and environment of the Mohonk Mountain House. We invited four elders. One of them was Anne Doshier. We asked Anne if she would help us bring an elder energy with the elders present and coming together throughout the time of the gathering. They could do whatever they wanted. They often quietly came together as a foursome; they were mostly a silent presence but very reassuring in the face of the mystery and improvisation of it all.

### *Creating Sacred Space*

We opened the gathering of our group in the largest meeting space. It was not an auditorium; it had carpeting and individual chairs that you could easily move around. We had the chairs arranged in concentric circles with the large fireplace roaring to one side. Before we started, elder Anne Doshier came into the room for ritual and blessing the meeting space using the Medicine Wheel and the four directions with a few people she had asked to join her to prepare it as a sacred place for gathering.

She later opened the meeting of all of our guests with a ceremony. This was a ritual ceremony of honoring the four directions again but with all of the guests participating. There was an invitation given for anyone who wanted to invite people by name into this room, people who were important to them such as relatives, ancestors or someone who was currently dear to them. I was sitting in the back, and was very aware of ancestors being present in spirit. The room was lined with portrait paintings all around, hung high on the walls, of members of the Smiley family who owned and cared for the Mountain House for generations. A microphone was extended to anyone in the group who wanted to honor and invite in ones that were dear to them. That lasted quite a long while, although it didn't seem very long. It was heartfelt and respectful. We were filling the room with more than

ourselves. We invited in the spirits of the ancestors and loved ones to be with us in our exploration and discoveries.

### *Provocative Topics*

RL: What was the purpose of this gathering?

SE: We had four authors to catalyze and stimulate deeper reflective conversations and dialogue. We had with us Joe Jaworski, author of the book *Synchronicity*, poet John O'Donohue who wrote *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, Alan Briskin, author of *Stirring of the Soul in the Workplace*, and Carol Frenier author of *The Feminine Principle in Business*. And, as had been the agreement with the elders, it was up to the four authors to decide how they wanted to bring forth and catalyze conversations. They appeared every once in awhile to bring points of focus for the group. Sometimes they appeared as a foursome, sometimes just two or three people. They would present a few ideas, have a small informal conversation among themselves or offer questions and openings to seed conversations within the larger group. People came to the gathering expecting to be experimental and expecting different kinds of things to be happening than at typical meetings. There was an expectation of exploration, reflection and discovery.

For the end of the gathering, our co-convening group thought that it would be appropriate if I, as initial convener, had some part in the closing. I puzzled for four days at what I might say to close what had felt to me to be such a transformational experience for individuals and also for the group. At the last minute what came to me intuitively was that I would read a particular quote and I said to myself, "Yes, this is it!" I knew it was the right thing to do. The quote I read was from Christopher Alexander's book, *A Timeless Way of Building*. It is a description of artfully building a bonfire with

pieces of carefully placed pieces of wood. Our “pieces of wood” were the presence of elders, seeding provocative conversations, structures that encouraged presence and intimate moments, a comfortable setting, pleasant meals, a wide variety of ever-changing activities being offered, movement inside and outside of the built environment and a sense of earth, wind, fire and water that were continually present and immediately surrounding us ... outside in and inside out.

An image of carefully placed logs and blazing fire was very vivid in Alexander’s quote. I knew I would be able to simply read the quote and that it would say all that needed to be said as a closing for this group at this time. The essence of the message was that, when you have developed a kind of artistry around laying a fire with carefully placed pieces of wood, if you lay each piece together “just right”, the fire will burn hot and burn itself out completely. It will burn to the smallest amount of ash. There was this sense that “burning to a small amount of ash” was metaphorically what we had done in those four days together. There was also a sense that the closing message was that we were to hold in mind as we left that what we had done together had burned hot and had burned completely. We had tried to lay the pieces as sensitively as we could for timing, congruent with this environment and with reverence for the energetic social field that was forming. These pieces, when completely consumed, had enabled a transformation, leaving the smallest amount of residue when it was time for us to leave. The parting message was that we were not to try to hang onto the experience, to continue it longer or try to repeat it, but rather we were to carry the transforming experience with its shift of consciousness in our bodies like an “anchor experience” as we returned to our every day lives back home.

## *The Paradox of Fire*

RL: Sheryl, fire is a theme that repeats throughout your descriptions. What is it about fire that is so important?

SE: I love fires, campfires, bonfires, and fireplaces. I build bonfires outside at our cabin in Vermont, even in the summer. There is something about burning campfires, bonfires and fireplaces that feels alive. They always make noise. They have a voice, and for me a sense of the non-human present, evidenced by the life and energy present in the fire. Fires offer a supreme contradiction or paradox: we can be naturally comforted and warmed by fire, while fire can also be dangerous ... so very dangerous. I think about that every once in awhile—the dangers there can be from one spark or getting too close to fire or flame. Fire is exciting and comforting at the same time. So if there is the chance of having the presence of a fire or bonfire around, I want it. It generates energy and to me, opens the Soul.

All the gatherings I've had at Mohonk Mountain House have always had a bonfire outside as part of the gathering and fireplaces burning continually inside. There is something about a number of people standing by a fire who are warmed by it, excited by it or engaged with it. To me bonfires, campfires and fireplaces take you away from needing to have words. Such a burning fire can be uniting, enabling us to feel connected at a deeper level.

RL: I know what you mean. Even without active engagement between the people, there is some invisible connection. It seems that we quiet down around a fire. Even if we're talking, the tone is different. The pace is slower.

SE: Yes, we can more easily get down to intimacy. You can have long periods of time around a fire with no talking.

### *Dining Space and Meals Together*

There are some other features of the Mountain House that influenced the outcomes we have intended for our gatherings there. One is the dining space where people are brought together to eat. It may seem like a contradiction, but where you eat at Mohonk is in a large dining room with easy access to an extensive and elaborate buffet, and at the same time, you can experience an amazing sense of intimacy. The room has a high ceiling but you feel safe, relaxed and grounded within it. Literally hundreds of people convene for this buffet dining for all three meals. You hear quiet background sounds of food preparation and the comforting buzz of staff taking care of offerings at the buffet and serving special items table to table.

When we've convened meetings at Mohonk, we've always asked for our group to be located together at many small tables, some for two or four or six ... no large tables for eight or ten where it can be difficult to hear or talk with the persons across the table. I always liked being in this very alive, sensual place with all these sounds and smells and choices for food—beautifully prepared and presented. Within this large room setting you can choose a table for two or four and have a very intimate experience. It is a great combination of intimacy while relaxing and feeling somehow connected with hundreds of people. The opportunity to eat together at small tables is very important.

In this setting of people eating, being taken care of, and being happy with the food, my personality shifted to feeling like being the hostess. (This I consider for me was transformational.) Being the hostess felt very personal and natural for me, like I had 200 relatives and close friends who were gathering for meals. It was a very good feeling. It's kind of funny because I don't normally do

that. I'm usually mostly quiet and on the shy side. It is not my natural inclination as an introvert. But in this setting I did a lot of mixing and engaging and at the same time feeling nurtured myself.

RL: You're caring for them and were part of setting it up, holding it, seeing the results. Holding this happy, bustling, sensual place. Just like the dining room, the walls and the tables were holding it; you were also holding it when you shifted into feeling like the hostess.

SE: Yes, I wasn't real conscious of my role. Because the tables were small, you'd see small groups of two or four people vibrant, talking, leaning in, happy and engaged with each other. No strain, no reserve, people were delighted and engaged with each other. When I am around that kind of energy and spirit and feel that I've contributed to it in some way, it is so enlivening.

RL: What effect do you think the high ceilings of the place had? Did they positively or a negatively affect the group energy?

SE: I think they were a net plus, maybe because what was at floor level was so homey—the large comfortable meeting room, many carpets on hardwood floors, the living room style furniture and the dining room with white cloths covering small tables. It felt like the large ceilings were needed, because there was so much intensity in what was happening at floor level. My sense was that a low ceiling would have made us feel uncomfortable, because there would be no place for the energy to go and the high spirit among us to settle down.

There was something significant as well about the presence of wood and carpentry throughout the hotel. Wood paneling, wooden floors, handcrafted wooden furniture and the fabrics used were

vibrant and softening. I think what happened individually, and what could happen among people, is that we all felt safe, homey and comfortable inside. And the windows, so many of them built into the design of the Mountain House, have a significant influence. Wherever you looked you saw views of Nature — trees, rocky cliffs and long panoramas of the surrounding landscape. In the dining area, one end has windows that look out on the lake and the other end is rounded and it looks out over the flat lands of New Paltz. These are very low and large windows. And in the meeting space—very unusual—there are essentially large low windows on three sides of that big room. Natural light was ever present and always changing throughout each day.

RL: So you are looking out in all directions and you're seeing green.

SE: I've been there in snow and spring, glimpsing the forest and the rocks or the long view of panorama of the valley. Anyone of us might be talking with someone and over his or her shoulder you can simultaneously look out onto the greens of Nature. Wherever we looked, it was out onto trees. I believe this makes a person happy, reassured and somehow uplifted.

### *Handcrafted Wooden Benches*

Another feature I want to mention that I believe supports transformational experience are their many wooden benches throughout the property. Many were within small open air gazebos; all were positioned ever so carefully. These benches are distinct and unique to Mohonk Mountain House. They are handcrafted, one-of-a-kind, simple with charm and character, aesthetically pleasing and designed to be integral to their surroundings. They offer rest and shelter in open spaces, on the rocky cliffs and along the many miles of forest trails on the property. Most of the benches are built with a

conical roof over the top. People can stop and stay at these benches in different kinds of weather having shelter from the sun, or mist, or rain. Most benches are made for two people; some accommodate up to five or six people. Their design and positioning communicate a sense of wholeness because they are so integral to the environment - built environments growing out of natural settings.

One of the things that we did at this gathering was to take an hour for our guests to go with someone else to find a place together that they both felt energetically connected with. The pair would locate a bench and reflect together on why they individually had been drawn to that spot. They were asked to then have a conversation about a question or topic that came from the larger group. This was not just an exercise to go out and get fresh air. The benches did something to energetically support the reflections and deeper conversations. In these settings of wholeness, our thinking could change; we felt a part of the Earth very easily. These small handcrafted benches, I am convinced, were instrumental in supporting the transformational experiences people were having.

RL: I remember the lake at Mohonk. It's a very big lake.

SE: Yes, the lake is a deep glacial lake that is very still and quiet. There is something for me, a natural felt-sense of reverence being present with the power and serenity of the cliffs surrounding the lake ... all the landscape so graphically shaped by the forces of Nature. It is awe inspiring being around these huge crevices formed by the immense power of glaciers and then naturally filling with water to make this deep serene lake. Rocky cliffs are present and easily accessible to those visiting the Mountain House. You can climb around; you can go completely around the lake and up on the

rocky crags. There is this awareness of it all being created naturally by tremendous forces of Nature and of this property and meeting place being well grounded, life-giving and to be revered.

RL: This is beautiful, Sheryl, what a powerful description.

### *Rocking Chairs*

SE: I described earlier that when we first visited Mohonk Mountain House, I noticed the rocking chairs rocking in the wind with nobody in them. I thought how thoughtful to design and build these wide porches and to line them with all these wooden rocking chairs. The chairs invite people to sit together and look out over the lake. It's almost like the feeling one can experience at a campfire or fireplace. You can just rock and you don't have to talk a lot. There is something about moving, things happen when you can be moving.

RL: It *is* like fire in that sense. It moves. It's alive. The movement of water has the same affect. Fire, rocking chairs and water bring people together in the same way. They enable an invisible connection. I hadn't thought of the dynamism of the two forces, the energy of aliveness with the quality of calm, of connecting people without language and earlier you mentioned another seeming paradox, that the fire is inviting but dangerous. You mentioned getting too close to the edge. There is a theme emerging here that includes a combination of safety, familiarity, and hominess – what you felt when you first walked into the building – and elements of mystery, awe, danger, and the powers of Nature. They may seem to be opposing forces, but they can be co-existent.

## *Historical Connections*

SE: At Mohonk, part of their sense of place is this felt quality of hominess. They have a lot of pictures of the olden days, black and white pictures of the people who have gathered there. There is a large collection of these photographs, some labeled some not. The experience is not like going through a museum, it's more like being in someone's home. I remember the feeling of having the photographs all around and then hearing some of what had transpired at the Mountain House in the early days. What most caught my attention was that the Smiley family had been known for convening many large gatherings for what I would call noble causes. For example, one of the main topics for conversation and deliberation were the difficulties and needs of indigenous people across the USA and what might be done to help them. These were large meetings like our gathering. You can see old black and white photographs of people in the same meeting room we were in.

The Smiley family had supported these meetings. Knowing this and seeing the pictures, I felt the history of important conversations that must have taken place there at Mohonk and in the very room we were meeting. It felt like this history and the intentions for these early gatherings were supporting what we were doing as we were convening large groups at Mohonk decades later. You had so many reminders of groups over time coming together there and knowing that many of these gatherings were for worthy conversations.

One of the Smiley family came in and spoke to us about the history of the Mountain House, including some of their philosophy as a Quaker family, for example, why they don't serve alcohol or have a bar on the property. It made us realize the meaning the place has had over time. It had been this gorgeous untouched natural setting with its glacial lake when some of the Smiley family discovered it as hikers and naturalists. When they bought the property, it first served as a simple but much needed carriage stop.

## *Impact of Place on Transformation*

RL: To summarize, Sheryl, what do you think was the role of place, space, and environment at Monhonk to create conditions where individual and collective transformation could occur.

SE: The influence of place was that, although we met at a large hotel and property, this environment designed and laid out as it was didn't separate us from each other. It provided calm, comfortable, intimate places to be and at the same time allowed all of us to be together. This occurred through the structure of the rooms, the many alcoves in larger rooms and in other parts of the hotel, even on the porch sitting side by side. The structure encouraged intimacy and at the same time public presence, easy presence with lots of other people.

There was something fundamental about the influence of structure on experiences that were reflective and I would say transcendent. The awareness of the windows, presence of natural light and being able to see out for a distance with Nature close at hand evoked a lot of metaphorical images in what we were considering and in the language we were using. Metaphors from Nature can be immensely informing as they serve to enable a group to feel at one with one another. It was natural to see things in a larger schema. We felt we were connected with and part of a larger design. We were not just little units each standing in isolation. I believed that if I lifted my thoughts to the forest or the deep glacial lake, someone else might do the same thing and meet me there. It's a funny thing to say but that's what just came to my mind.

When in Nature or with water or expanse of sky, I feel energy. It's very alive for me. It energizes. It's very comforting to me. I think there is something in an environment or space where there is a kind of calmness that you can feel even when there are a lot of people around. There is a

kind of calmness that enables dropping into a deeper feeling state. It enables being more intuitive. It enables relaxation.

RL: I'm imagining those people in the course of the process opening to themselves and to each other, and then to the larger environment. It's being connected in a way that allows your whole being to open up to listen in a bigger way than just your ears. There is a listening that is an opening for people to come together. It's a dropping of barriers too. The barrier can be listening with judgment, inner chatter. But if you're listening that deeply, you really are in an altered state.

So this was happening in the group. There was a sense of the whole and wholeness. That is transformational itself. In that process people were changed both individually and collectively.

### *Transformation and The Future*

RL: I wonder what happened when this group of people went back to their own lives, their own environments.

SE: If you lined up all the people and took a picture or video of the group, you would see that we were extremely different from one another. We had an experience with people we thought were so different - appearance, personality, and background. But as we had such a profound experience, it told us that despite all the differences, we were not separate. We were awakened to our common humanity with a felt-sense that something transcendent had happened. This was an anchor experience to carry home with us.

RL: I think a key word you used was “felt-sense.” It’s like an immersion experience. Your body gets dipped in it. Then it rearranges the cells or energy so that you know it. You know it’s possible. That has to forever change you.

SE: Now that you bring up the experience of connection and oneness, it *is* a familiar experience and we can return to it at every stage of our lives, in groups or when seemingly alone.

RL: Yes...indeed. Thank you, Sheryl, for sharing these remarkable experiences with me.

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This interview was conducted by Renee Levi as part of her research for the Powers of Place Initiative. The full report, [\*The Powers of Place: An Inquiry Into the Influence of Place, Space, and Environment on Collective Transformation\*](#) (2008) is at the Powers of Place Initiative [website](#). For the study, eight in-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed to discern underlying themes and patterns about qualities of transformative meeting places and spaces. To give the reader a fuller picture of what was shared in the interviews themselves, we present the full text from the conversations. We see these interviews as a resource, part of a growing database and source of information for further research and individual learning. Any one interview can be seen for its unique set of ideas and as part of a whole.

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Sheryl Erickson was originator of the series of Bretton Woods and Mohonk Gatherings that were instrumental in launch of the field of organizational learning. She is known for convening groups to explore alternative modes of learning for collective insight and offering groups experiences for individual & collective transformation & co-creation. Since 2000 she has been Director of the Fetzer Institute Collective Wisdom Initiative (CWI), articulating a field of study & practice around developing capacities for collective wisdom, [www.collectivewisdominitiative.org](http://www.collectivewisdominitiative.org) and Co-director of the Powers of Place Initiative (POPI) a research and action initiative focused on the relationship of place, space and environment and collective transformation, <http://www.powersofplace.com> She is co-author of *The Power of Collective Wisdom and the Trap of Collective Folly* (2009) with Alan Briskin, John Ott and Tom Callanan.