

Place and Leadership

Lessons from Presence Walkabouts 2005-09



How do different places influence individual and collective awareness and the practices of listening, discernment, and tapping collective intelligence in the service of effective whole system decision-making? The Presence Walkabouts provide a field of opportunity for people to experience the transformational impact of visiting and practicing reflective disciplines in different locations of Northern New Mexico. This paper offers observations and reflections from Presence Walkabout participants, hypotheses and lessons for application to the discipline of leadership today.

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by
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“It is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities...to shut ourselves off from these ... is to rob our own senses of their integrity; and to rob our minds of their coherence.”

- David Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*



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There are many others I have never met yet who in some way, consciously or not, have contributed to my thinking and this inquiry.

To all the people from a long, long time ago up until the present who have held a knowing that we are all in relationship with the entire community of life on this planet and that it is not only right but smart to invite All Our Relations into the listening circle when we are seeking collective wisdom. Thank you.

To all who during my lifetime have shared their stories, their wandering and wondering, their questions and their learning about what it means to be in relationship with Place. Thank you.

To all who work every day to create opportunities for others to experience the shift from reactive unconscious response to respectful listening and generative co-evolution with all beings. Thank you.

G.G.

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INTRODUCTION



This paper is about the role that physical environs or Places play in the lives of individuals and groups. In particular it is about how we can intentionally choose to partner with different Places to become more fully present and resilient, to clarify and inspire our thinking, and to make wise choices in the service of ourselves, our families, our organizations and our communities. Engaging in reciprocal partnership with Place(s) is a powerful way to awaken and fully embody the recognition of our human interdependence with all Life, or as the indigenous peoples say “All Our Relations.” This is a privilege, gift, and the responsibility of leadership in our time. And, I believe, the great hope of a fulfilling future for our children, grandchildren, and the next seven generations.

My own journey with Place began early. As a child and adolescent there were Places to sled in the winter, build forts, catch a pass and even get tackled in a summer game of football. Places with leaves that could be raked into piles for jumping into. Places to study. Places to visit where chickens laid eggs and cows were milked early in the morning. I didn’t think much, if at all, about these Places, yet in retrospect I realize they were an integral part of my happiness.

As a young adult I experienced my first camping trip. I became a rock-climber and in my twenties there was scarcely a weekend that I was not to be found on the walls of Yosemite Valley. On those walls I became aware of the power of Place to focus my attention and presence. There was no more powerful a meditation or experience more capable of shifting my perspective. And still, I did not think much about my relationship with Place. That would not happen until I was in my 40s.

In 1992, there were big changes occurring in my personal and professional life. I took a three-week road trip, hiking solo and driving back roads with no agenda or preplanned route. It was sunset on the shore of a lake in Glacier National Park. I had been camped there for a week, hiking a different trail every day. As I sat on the shore among the rocks I had a sensation of myself “shedding the masks” I wore for all the different roles in my life. One by one they fell away until there were no more to set aside and I was wholly and only me, naked, not-separate. In that moment I knew my place. I did not need to think about who I was, nor about whom I should be or what I should do. I needed to only breathe and live into each moment and I would be and do whatever was right in that moment. If you had been looking from close by you would have seen nothing, except perhaps a sigh and a relaxing that permeated every cell in my body. Nothing had happened; yet everything had happened. In the words of Juan Ramon Jimenez,

*I have a feeling that my boat
has struck, down there in the depths,
against a great thing.
And nothing happens!
Nothing...Silence...Waves...
Nothing happens?
Or has everything happened
And are we standing now, quietly,
in the new life?*

Since that day, when I am confused, forgetful, stressed, uncertain, seeking inspiration, I seek out the Places where I am reminded of who I am. I have come to know many Places and discovered that they all possess different qualities that can help me become a more present and resourceful human being.

As a professional, in the 1990s I was fully engaged in the work of developing dialogue as a communication discipline within organizations. When I convened a dialogue program or facilitated a gathering or a meeting, I would pay special attention to the Place, the environment. I was deeply touched by the work of Christopher Alexander, an architect whose work is grounded in the nature of human interdependence with physical spatial configurations. In his book *A Timeless Way of Building* (1979) I found an inspirational approach to designing environments and processes that supported creativity, meaningful engagement and resilient, vital outcomes.

One of my primary working hypotheses had become: *The work of an individual or group is influenced in positive ways by the natural environment, or if within a man-made structure, by the spatial environment I create with quotes on the walls, table set-ups, lighting, etc.* And indeed, this hypothesis was validated regularly by my experience.

Conversations were more productive. Trust and relationships and results were enhanced.

Still it had not occurred to me that I was missing something important in my work with Place. I had been engaging Place as a container within which work occurred. In 2002 I realized I could partner with certain Places in a more active way and this would facilitate specific kinds of experiences and shifts in perspective within both individuals and groups. This was the beginning of the Presence Walkabout work.

In the pages that follow I offer you my observations, hypotheses, and lessons learned from this Presence Walkabout work; and, suggest implications and possibilities for all of us and more specifically for leaders today.

I hope, dear reader, that you will find what follows informative, useful to you in your life and work, and hopefully, just a little provocative of inquiry and new possibilities. And I very much look forward to hearing from you regarding your experience as you read these words and experiences that you have had with the Power of Place.

"I walked into the forest...until I came to a small glade that opened onto the sandy path. I narrowed the world down to the span of a few meters...In a twist my mind came free and I was aware of the hard workings of the natural world beyond the periphery of ordinary attention...It seemed to me that something extraordinary in the forest was very close to where I stood, moving to the surface and discovery."

- Edward O. Wilson, Biophilia. 1984.

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"What has really left an impression are two concepts...the unfolding of Purpose and the sense of one's Place."

- Walkabout participant

A FEW DEFINITIONS



Before proceeding further I would like to define a few terms I have been and will continue to use in these pages. I do not claim that any definition is the one and only, rather I offer each as a way to indicate the meaning that I am using, so that we may have a shared understanding of the word within the context of this exploration.

- ✚ **Facilitate** – from the root “facil”, to make easy...to facilitate an individual and/or group in and through a process, generally with some purpose and desired outcome in mind
- ✚ **Collective Intelligence** – insights and thinking that become available through group interaction and the ability to integrate and build upon individual resources in order to gain perspective and generate new possibilities
- ✚ **Discernment** – process of perceiving distinctions; in the service of informing wise choices
- ✚ **I-IT relationship** (from the work of Martin Buber) – in this form of relationship the beings do not truly meet one another. Instead, the "I" confronts and qualifies an idea, or conceptualization, of the being in its presence and treats that being as an object. All such objects are considered merely mental representations, created and sustained by the individual mind. Therefore an I-It relationship is a form of monologue. Regardless of what you may say, I am primarily engaged in a conversation with myself and my assumptions and presuppositions.

- ✚ ***I-THOU (or I-You) relationship*** (from the work of Martin Buber) – a relationship that stresses the mutual, holistic existence of two beings. It is an encounter of substance, because these beings meet one another in their authentic existence, without qualification or objectification of one another. Here two beings meet one another. Therefore an I-Thou relationship is a dialogue.
- ✚ ***Leadership*** – function of influencing movement, guiding, providing vision, inspiration, and direction; exercised in many ways, i.e. through command, collaboration, engagement, etc.; effectiveness based on pre-set criteria, goals, etc.
- ✚ ***Listening*** – focusing of attention in such a way as to hear in order to generate understanding so that wise choices may be made in service of the wellbeing of an individual and/or group and the system(s) to which they belong
- ✚ ***Place*** – a physical environment with landscape specific to itself
- ✚ ***Power*** – agency, ability to act by virtue of which a change is produced; a telling force or effect
- ✚ ***Power of Place*** – ability of a Place to generate a shift in awareness, perception, discernment, and thus inform choices and behavior
- ✚ ***Presence*** – quality of bringing all of one’s self into engagement with the current moment
- ✚ ***Presence Walkabout****– a week-long experiential program designed to invite people into relationship with a variety of specially selected Places, in such a way as to catalyze an internal shift towards silence, deep listening, discernment, and the embodied knowing of systemic interdependence, so that individuals and collectives expand their capacity and skill for making more powerful, innovative and wise choices for themselves and the system(s) to which they belong.
- ✚ ***Reciprocal Partnership*** – a relationship within which each partner listens, discerns and acts in accordance with the interests of all partners
- ✚ ***Reflective Practices*** – specific processes used to foster enhanced awareness of both inner and external realities, e.g. writing, breathing and walking exercises, meditation, pattern recognition, and many more.
- ✚ ***System*** – a set of interdependent relationships that constitute a natural whole as defined and ordered by a function and/or set of principles
- ✚ ****Walkabout*** – aborigine tradition of connecting with Place and with the Songlines of the land to which you belong; one may “go walkabout” in search of clarity of purpose, right-action, and insight.

RESEARCH METHOD



My research, both for the body of work I call Presence Walkabouts, and more specifically for this paper, is grounded in “stringing the beads” of reading, reflecting on books and articles, observation, qualitative surveys and anecdotal reflections of people who have participated in the Presence Walkabouts between 2005 and 2009.

Although my interests have led me to read many books related to this inquiry over the years, I have not performed an exhaustive literature search for this paper. For an in-depth literature review I refer you to *The Powers of Place: An Inquiry into the Influence of Place, Space and Environment on Collective Transformation*, by Renee Levi, 2008.

My primary interest is in peoples’ direct experience of a specific set of Places in Northern New Mexico and the reports of those who visit them during the Presence Walkabouts. I do, however, want to acknowledge that the Power of Place is not a new topic of interest and much has been written about it in journals and books. Occasionally I will mention an author who has inspired me, and been provocative to my thinking.

I begin by describing observations and hypotheses that inspired me to create the Presence Walkabouts and enter a more focused exploration of the Power of Place(s). Experiences of participants in the Presence Walkabouts are captured in three different surveys. All of the descriptions are anecdotal in nature. From these I have identified themes, drawn conclusions and in turn hypothesized as to possible implications and applications for leadership in today’s world.

MAINSTREAM RELATIONSHIP WITH PLACE



Depending on where people grew up, the culture to which they belong, and choices they have made as adults, there is a full continuum of relationship with Place from “what!?!@?” to a statement made by a Taos Pueblo Indian Man “*The story of my people and the story of this place are one single story. No man can think of us without thinking of this place. We are always joined together.*” Perhaps the vast majority of us would locate ourselves somewhere in between.

When I reflect on the literature I’ve read and the learning experiences I’ve participated in over the years, as a leader and facilitator, I’m struck by how often an awareness of the significance and influence of Place is missing. Many books and programs propose to help facilitators and leaders become more effective. Yet, only a few of these explore in any depth the creation of a physical environment, as a primary factor influencing the experience of people and the quality of results generated. Such mentions generally refer to the importance of room or cubicle arrangements, natural lighting, traffic flow, sound control, or natural outdoor settings where people can walk or sit during breaks.

It is true that many conveners and event organizers search for locations like conference and retreat centers for gatherings and organizational “off-sites” in beautiful natural settings where people can spend at least some time outdoors. Some facilitators intentionally integrate activities that include some form of being in, and interacting with, the natural environment. Examples are activities like walking meditation or reflection; locating a ‘listening place’ for reflection and journaling around a question or issue of interest; even, certain ceremonies associated with change work - letting go of the old and welcoming in the new.

Leadership development has explored experiences like those created over the years by organizations like Outward Bound. People participate in a range of outdoor activities designed to bring them face to face with their leadership habits and fears: the goal -

enhanced self awareness that will hopefully inform different and more effective leadership behaviors moving forward.

Ecopsychology is an emerging field. The journal **Ecopsychology** (first published in 2009) states that the field “places psychology and mental health disciplines in an ecological context and recognizes the links between human health, culture, and the health of the planet.”

The Journal of **Environment and Behavior** analyzes and records the influence of environment on individuals, groups and institutions. They have published many articles investigating the relationship between Place and human behavior, many of which explore the ability of different places to help us regulate emotional states and restore attention capacity. [A few examples: *Towards a Social Psychology of Place* (Stedman 2002); *Seeking Restorative Experiences: Elementary School Teachers' Choices for Places That Enable Coping With Stress* (Gulwadi 2006); and, *Negative Mood and Adult Place Preference* (Korpela 2003)]

In summary, it is becoming easier to find varying degrees of recognition and acknowledgement of the role of Place in contributing to human wellbeing. Even so, I rarely see mention of intentionally incorporating Place in designs in order to help people build specific reflective and thinking skills. Nor do I often find mention of engaging Place in an I-Thou relationship and tapping the potential Power of Place to heighten discernment and inform our strategic thinking in the service of making wise choices for our families, businesses, and the larger communities of which we are members.

Even when intentionally sought out, Place is generally engaged in a unidirectional manner to serve human needs rather than with the mindset and behaviors that characterize reciprocal partnership. As always, the exceptions to this are found in the work and lives of people grounded in the land-based traditions and practices, either through cultural legacy or life study, for whom it would be impossible not to engage with Place in the spirit of partnership.

I-THOU PARTNERSHIP WITH PLACE



As you know from the Introduction, a growing recognition of the influence of Place and my explicit intention to incorporate this into my work has been an important part of my life journey. However, it is the shift in, and expansion of, my perception and understanding of Place, from a factor to be considered in designing an experience, to a living relationship to be cultivated, that I wish to focus on here. There are two reasons for my passion for this particular exploration.

- First, I hypothesize that Places are able to contribute more fully when invoked as partners and active facilitators of individual and group discernment and intelligence. While for many indigenous cultures this statement would be obvious, for cultures where the connection with the land has been minimized by urban life this recognition represents a significant potential for enhancing wellbeing and effectiveness – for ourselves, our organizations, our communities and the Places we inhabit.
- Second, as Martin Buber reminds us, when we shift our relationship from I-It to I-Thou, our perception, engagement and the choices we make all change to reflect the reciprocity and mutuality of the relationship. Our thinking changes from “part-centric” to a more holistic systems mindset. It seems to me that at this time in our history one of the major evolutionary steps for us as humans is the integration and full embodiment of our interdependence within a global system of life, and the vast array of perspectives this offers. Partnering with Place is one powerful doorway for shifting from intellectual awareness to a more fully embodied knowing of this reality, thus opening the potential for Human and Place to be intentional resources for one another in the co-evolution of our species and the planet.

INSPIRATION



The experience that would foreshadow my active exploration of the specific qualities and resonances that different Places hold and offer to us occurred during a business trip to New Mexico in 2000. I had a weekend between engagements and a friend had told me to contact a couple that lives in Abiquiu, NM; saying, “you should definitely meet them”. So, I arranged a visit.

It was afternoon. The setting - a home atop a mesa in the Abiquiu, NM area with magnificent views in all directions. After tea and conversation, the man asked me if I would like to go for a short drive to a place nearby. It would be my first of many visits to Plaza Blanca.

Plaza Blanca is beautiful, even stunning. But it is more than that. As I returned to this Place again and again over the next 2 years I observed that each time I visited I quickly became very, very still and quiet inside. There was a quality of silence that permeated the atmosphere. Palpable – like a shimmering vibration in the air. Occasionally a plane would fly overhead. I heard the engines and yet the sound did not penetrate the strong field of silence and stillness that enveloped me. To this day, whenever I visit Plaza Blanca, any confusion and anxiety dissolves and my inner conversation falls quiet; replaced by silence and a feeling of interior spaciousness and listening – not for a specific answer – simply for whatever perception and knowing will arise in the moment.

It had begun. Now when I walked in specific Places I would intentionally open myself to experience what qualities of energy were present to me, what thoughts arose, what reflections presented themselves for consideration, what became clearer. In short, I was paying more attention to the quality of my experience and how it was directly connected to the Place. I discovered that different Places offered me different perspectives, literally and metaphorically. I noticed that even though there was

inspirational beauty everywhere there seemed to be specific qualities that were associated with different Places.

As I reflected on this shift in my relationship with the land, images of “going walkabout” continued to surface from past reading.

In Australia there is a saying that “he/she has gone walkabout”. It means a person has left her usual daily life and routines and has gone to walk upon and be with the land to which she belongs.

In this tradition there are Songlines that traverse the Earth and sustain it. Each person inherits a portion of a Songline from the place of his birth and is responsible for keeping it strong. Within this worldview there is no question that there is a fundamental mutuality of connection between humans and the Land.



Walkabout became a potent reminder for me of the power of walking about not just on, but with, the Places I visited.

In early 2002 my experience of walkabout with the land here in New Mexico remained primarily personal and solitary. I had not created the Presence Walkabouts and brought this exploration into my work with others. That would be the next step and the beginning of a journey that continues to expand and deepen today as I develop new programs and offerings that are grounded in Place as resource and partner.

ANECDOTAL REFLECTIONS ON PRESENCE WALKABOUTS 2005 –09



“I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.”

– John Muir, JOURNAL. 1913.

“While human culture seems to be acquiring the role of a substitute for nature, I suspect we also learn from whatever reaches are left inside us to match the earth’s, and whatever of its sensual message we innately receive. Otherwise, why should we roll in the first snow, or rejoice all over again at...white blossoms...in early spring?”

-John Hay, Homing. 1982. Words from the Land.

I conducted three different surveys with graduates of the Presence Walkabouts between 2005 and 2009.

The first survey was created to gather information on the nature of peoples’ experiences with the walkabout, with the goal of better understanding how to make the walkabout available to more people and to enhance its value. People who attended walkabouts in 2005 through 2007 were invited to volunteer their participation.

The second survey was specifically designed to collect reflections for this paper. It focused on three questions regarding the influence of Place on individual and collective experience and how the experience might contribute to life and work in the future. Participants from two Presence Walkabouts in 2009 offered their written reflections at the conclusion of each walkabout experience.

The third survey was an invitation via e-mail to a sampling of walkabout participants from 2005 – 2009. The request was to reflect on the influence on Place as regards:

1. their capacity for listening and discernment;
2. the collective experience; and,
3. the role the experience has played in their leadership and how they make decisions in their life and work following the walkabout.

I summarize the results of the three surveys and my hypotheses below.

Among the first group of respondents, it was of interest that:

- The land was not among the top three reasons people attended a presence walkabout and yet...
- Time alone on the land was listed as the most important activity during the walkabouts, and...
- The “ability to be still and listen” was the top response to a question about “what one strength within you was particularly fed or kindled?”

The aspects of the walkabout experience that have continued to resonate and serve people in terms of their personal growth, in order of importance were:

- the power of the land to attune me to my own ground and nature
- honing my capacity to choose how to presence myself

In response to a similar question focused on “serving professional life” the top two responses were the same. However, the order was reversed, i.e., “presencing self” was listed first and “attuning to one’s own ground and nature” second.

In responses from two later walkabout groups, when asked how the experience might impact their work common themes referred to the increased presence of:

- openness,
- calm
- confidence
- connection with inner self and lessons that emerge from within

Below are responses from the third e-mail survey where people were asked how the Places visited during the walkabout affected their listening and discernment:

- Allowed me to focus on the moment, be much more connected to who I am and get clear on what I truly want
- Heightened my capacity to see and hold paradox and the tension of “both/and” long enough to open to what is emerging
- Some Places were catalytic and supported reflecting
- Relieved anxiety of day-to-day living and allowed for integration of one’s feeling, imagination and objective knowledge

Hypothesis: *Places have the ability to create internal shifts for people in terms of their own presence and attunement to self.*

It seems clear to me that Place has a powerful impact at the individual level. But what about how people experienced the collective dimension of the walkabout?

In the initial survey (2005-2007) of walkabout participants “belief in the power of collective presence and intention” was followed by “grounding and attunement to self” in importance.

In response to questions about what has continued to resonate in both personal and professional life “collective listening and understanding ways collective knowing emerges” was the third most common response, following “the power of the land to ground and attune with self”.

In the second survey (2009), when asked to reflect on the influence of Place on the interaction of the group, responses were remarkably similar: “commonality; common focus; connection and shared experiences” and the way these “created an easy entry into dialogue and collective consciousness.”

The third set of reflections (2009) yielded the following descriptions for influence of Place on the collective:

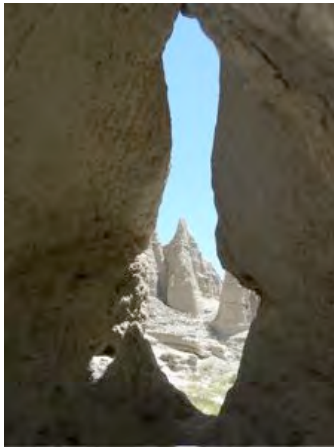
- Synergy and rapid, precise (intelligent) response was remarkable.
- One Place helped making a twist in thought that would otherwise not happen; ...contributing to an ability to think, feel and sense in expansive ways, different from day to day.
- We became more open each day...and it became clearer to us what we wanted...and what was holding us back.
- Bringing experiences of Places to the group allowed for using discipline of non-attachment that leads to quality relationships...and sharing a universal experience that is yet unique [for each] in meaning.
- Bringing spaciousness to the collective encourages BIG thoughts and collective resonance.

In one group there was an additional condition present: all the people knew one another: they live and work in the same city. In this instance the deepening of the collective experience has carried over to an ongoing commitment to help one another remain connected to, and build on, the benefits derived from the walkabout. This has important implications for the Power Place as a resource for intact groups who are working together towards a common purpose.

Hypothesis. *The Power of Place facilitates shifts in internal states of silence, listening and attunement to self, resulting in creation of a field where collective conversation and exploration become easier and more powerful. Personal presence creates conditions for collective presence and intelligence.*

Hypothesis: *Experiencing Place collectively, as well as individually, opens the door for evoking this as a resource for collaboration around a common purpose.*

There was one more area of exploration that was unique to the second survey. This involved gathering individuals' perceptions about the differing qualities of experiences in the specific Places with which they engaged. This has been particularly interesting to me because I intentionally design the Presence Walkabouts in alignment with the hypothesis that different Places will attune people to different aspects of themselves and when visited in a specific sequence will create an experience yielding reliable and replicable outcomes. While the sampling to date has been very limited, I am encouraged and excited by the implications and possible applications. More here are some examples of words used to characterize different Places.



For Plaza Blanca: “stillness; stillness; power – wisdom - stillness; quiet; slowing down – deep silence; diversity”.



For The Ojo Land: “deep care; calm-center-healing; caring-generosity-trust; blessings – belonging – openness”.



For Tsankawi: “paradox; prioritizing importance; harmony and balance; paradox; power – paradoxical; reverential.”



For the River Trip: “leader and followership – being part of a system; trust and leadership; flow – allowing vs forcing”.



For The Big Wonderful: “spaciousness – generosity; awe – power; creative – flow; collective conversations”

Hypothesis: *Different Places evoke specific, and consistent, kinds of inner shifts in people.*

Hypothesis: *When visits to specific Places are paired with reflective practices learning and skill building is available that can be translated to daily life and work.*

I feel it is important to add a note about these reflections on specific Places. The Presence Walkabout is designed to offer people opportunities to be in relationship with specific Places in a given order, interwoven with other individual and collective activities. I give people an introduction to each Place we visit along with a set of suggested activities and questions to deepen their inquiry and exploration. The activities have been created in accordance with my experience of the different Places and a growing body of anecdotal reflections from Presence Walkabout participants.

I do not doubt the materials and activities given may result in a predisposition as to how people experience a given Place. My intention is to aid each person in opening to and gaining the most from his/her time with and within a given Place. While some might argue that this prejudices the “experiment”, I can only say “yes, perhaps”. I readily admit that my focus is not on creating a double blind study, rather an intentional design to help participants build a coherent and powerful experience of listening, discernment and intelligence for themselves individually and for the collective as a whole.

LESSONS FROM THE PRESENCE WALKABOUTS



Below are summarized lessons from my continuing experience with the Power of Place and the Presence Walkabouts in particular.

It feels important to say that I do not believe that something “new” has emerged from this work that has not always been present in the world. Rather, I propose that the significance of this exploration lies in the potential for us to re-member, and to literally experience a re-connection with the larger systems to which we belong. When this happens not only do we know, in a fully embodied vs. solely intellectual way, what it is to be interdependent, we become capable of integrating this expanded awareness in our daily leadership practices and decision making. We move from being enmeshed in the experience of overwhelm and increasing complexity to the ability to lift ourselves to a viewing point and perspective that transforms our understanding of our challenges. Here, no longer “at the level at which the problem was created” (Einstein) it becomes clear what is most important and what action is needed: new perspective generates new insight and possibilities. In this way, Place can be an incredibly powerful ally in all aspects of life, personal, professional, local and global.

Therefore, my invitation to you is to use this short summary of lessons as an opportunity to reflect on how you might intentionally apply this knowledge to enrich your own presence and leadership, and in doing so serve as an inspiration and mentor for others within your organizations and communities.

Different Places evoke different kinds of resonances within us. Akin to tuning forks these Places appear to tune us to specific internal states. This shows up in the anecdotal reflections of walkabout participants over and over again. One of the most striking and consistent experiences is the almost immediate shift to internal stillness and

silence in Plaza Blanca accompanied by a deeper listening, clarity and heightened sense of personal presence, which ripples into the collective experience as well.

How might the ability to enter the stillness at will enhance your leadership, the way you presence yourself in different contexts, and the decisions you make?

It is possible to intentionally create experiential designs that invite the Power of Place to catalyze shifts in perspective, which result in entirely different thinking and possible choices when working with challenges and change. In the third survey, a number of people spoke to the way their experience with Place has shifted the way they lead in their organizations. Descriptions included:

- knowing when to slow down and the ability to “get still” in order to gain clarity on important decisions
- the ability to remain calm and hold ambiguity for longer periods of time
- sensing what is present and important in the moment without a predetermined agenda
- involving other people more effectively to make better choices
- enhanced honesty with self which has had a positive impact on work relationships

As a result of this exploration, I am expanding the way in which I utilize land-based practices and invite in the Power of Place to increase individual and collective resilience; tap clarity, collective intelligence and collaboration; enhance ability to live in ambiguity and think and act strategically; even to engage more effectively through virtual technology.

What about how you intentionally hone your leadership? How might you more intentionally invite in the Power of Place as an ally in tough situations? What practices might you integrate into your day to enhance your effectiveness?

Engaging with the Power of Place creates a more embodied awareness of interdependence with a corresponding change in both the process we use to make decisions as well as the actual choices made. One participant said, “I am not worried about the ‘politically correct’ thing to do, but much more interested in what the best decision may be for the situation.”

“...paradoxically, it in such broad, spacious settings...that a man [woman] feels least alone. The more he allies himself to some varied and interdependent whole, the less he is subject to sudden and wholesale bereavement by chance. His heart rests at the bottom of things; anchored there, he may cast about and never be at sea.”

- Robert Finch, *Scratching*.1983. Words from the Land.

Another woman described how the “attention to the actual place as a starting point invites an immediacy and presence...the greater the distance of decision makers [from the actual place] the more inadequate or inappropriate their decisions...” There is something important here about being able to invoke our knowing of connection and interdependence in making decisions that will influence both local and more global populations that deserves our attention as leaders and decision makers in all areas of our lives.

In *Blackfoot Physics* (2002), David Peat, offers the mental model of “All My Relations” as embodied systems thinking which “...means that The People have entered into alliances and contracts, have obligations to fulfill, and must at times make sacrifices. Harmony is present when everyone, human, animal, plant and the planet, fulfills their obligations and goes about their proper business.”

What might be the equivalent of embodying [versus intellectually apprehending] systems thinking in your decision-making processes and what positive impacts might this generate for your organization or community today?

How easy or challenging is it for you to be fully present to both the local and the more far-reaching considerations of the system(s) to which you belong?

Inviting an I-Thou relationship or reciprocal partnership with Place potentiates the Power of the Place to be a resource to us and vice versa. I suppose this is obvious if you come from a background that assumes relationship is based on engaging from a place of presence in each unfolding moment, without preconceptions or mental constructs about the Other. However, most of us inhabit our own assumptions about other people and environments with which we interact. This limits our availability to listen with another in each present moment, open to hearing something new and different.

In the Presence Walkabout experience we engage in reflective practices that are designed to help individuals and groups bring themselves fully to the present moment and adopt a stance of ‘not knowing’; to be able to listen without preconceptions and with a willingness to hear, an openness to be influenced by what emerges in each moment.

My observation from the Presence Walkabouts is that the possibilities available for learning and benefiting in each Place we visit are directly proportional to the amount of attention I devote to designing specific processes for entering and engaging with the Place. The more experience I gather in my own relationships with the distinct Places, the more I am able to refine this process in two important ways:

- 1) by honing the questions and practices for entering and engagement
- 2) by listening in each moment as the walkabout unfolds and responding with additional questions and/or practices for a given individual, group and/or Place

APPLIED VALUE FOR LEADERS TODAY



Leadership – function of influencing movement, guiding, providing vision, inspiration, and direction; exercised in many ways, i.e. through command, collaboration, engagement, etc.; effectiveness based on pre-set criteria, goals, etc.

There are monarchs, dictators, elected leaders, hired leaders, facilitative and collaborative leaders, servant leaders, etc. Each of these is defined by different criteria in terms of to whom they are responsible and how they fulfill their leadership role. What they all share is an acknowledged responsibility for helping to guide a system in service of a specified purpose. In this section I focus on leaders whose aim it is to cultivate a field of collaboration and partnership in service of the vision, purpose/mission and wellbeing of the whole system(s).

The Power of Place, Presence and Leadership

Presence – the quality of, and ability to, bring all of one's self and one's attention into engagement with the current moment

One caveat. Like leadership, Presence may derive from many sources: sheer physical size or emotional energy, authority taken by force or conferred voluntarily, or from an inner peace and strength. Presence may invoke joy, trust, fear, hatred, love, and more.

Here we focus on Presence derived from a solid and openhearted grounding in one's self and a simultaneous connection with the interests and wellbeing of the system(s) the

leader inhabits. When you think of this kind of presence as an attribute of leadership, how important would you say it is? Very. Somewhat. Not at all. Yes, this is a rhetorical question.

Otto Scharmer describes the “single most important leadership challenge of our time” as:

“On all four levels—personal, group, institutional, and global—shifting from reactive responses and quick fixes on a symptoms level to generative responses that address the systemic root issues.” - Theory U. (2007)

All the traditional leadership competencies (vision, direction, communication, strategic thinking, etc) rely on a leader’s Presence; on her/his ability to show up powerfully in a variety of contexts in ways that inspire, bridge and connect people across geographies and roles within a larger system, and bring out the best in all for the good of all, whether in a community, organization or nation. Even the ability to make sense of financial data *in a way that permits wise systemic decisions* depends on more than just being able to read a P&L or Balance Sheet.

Presence requires inner stillness and silence.

What differentiates a great leader is the ability to shift his/her internal state from reactive to generative, from knee-jerk to deep listening in each moment to discover what is needed; the thought, word, and/or action that will facilitate the co-evolution and wellbeing of the system and its members.

Scharmer (2007) coined the word “Presencing” to define the combination of “presence” and “sensing”, signifying “a heightened state of attention that allows individuals and groups to shift the inner place from which they function.” I believe this shift is the most fundamental one that is facilitated by the Power of Place in the Presence Walkabout. From it derive other capacities important for leaders: the ability to hold paradox, gain expanded and lifted perspective on complex situations, and operate from an embodied knowing of the interdependence of all parts of the system when making decisions.

There are a number of ways to develop the inner stillness and silence required for Presence: meditative and contemplative practices, yoga, walking, running, chanting/singing, reading inspirational literature, prayers, and the list goes on.

As you may recall, the Place that walkabout participants consistently named for the “stillness, silence, quiet” that it offered them, was Plaza Blanca. This is where I start all the walkabout experiences because once people have shifted from the busyness and “noise” of their daily lives into the inner stillness and silence that Plaza Blanca invites the way is made clear for many other possibilities. For example, according to walkabout participants, inner stillness and silence facilitate the attunement and internal grounding that was reported as a key outcome of engaging with specific Places.

The inner silence and stillness required for Presence provide a portal into other important leadership capacities including:

- making sense of complexity and gaining the perspective to participate in the steady stream of choices it takes to navigate successfully from one point to another,
- simultaneously holding the parts and the entirety of not one but many nested systems in discerning wise action, and
- I-Thou engagement with others, from which flow trust, commitment, and the energy and creativity of authenticity; all fundamental for long term accountability, execution and strong relationships.

Presence brings an enhanced ability to think systemically and strategically.

“Direct sensuous reality, in all its more-than-human mystery, remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically-generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us.”

- David Abrams, 1996. Spell of the Sensuous.

My observation is that when combined with specific reflective practices the Power of Place literally creates a more “grounded” experience of self and, more importantly, of self in relationship with system.

Today the complexity of doing business has vastly expanded because in some very real sense the global world is now local. The distances and boundaries that previously allowed for doing business regionally without experiencing directly the impact of actions taken across the ocean, on different continents, have quite literally “virtually disappeared”. Vastly different cultures and ways of seeing the world and making decisions operate within a single project team. Something more than just cultural awareness is needed.

Ken Wilbur talks about nested Holons: each expanded whole containing and extending beyond the whole nested within it. From the perspective of the next larger Holon, the interdependent relationships between the parts within the contained Holon(s) become apparent. Patterns replace perceptions of independent and often competing parts. From this viewing point, decisions may be completely transformed as options that were not even visible earlier come sharply into view.

This is what Einstein must have meant when he said “you cannot solve the problem at the level at which it was created”. You often cannot even see a solution that is more than a band-aid or a mere “rearrangement of the furniture”; first you must lift your

perception out of the paradigm that may be holding it hostage. You must “get outside the box”, change your viewing point.

I propose that only when we are able to bring ourselves fully present can we shift and expand our viewing point(s) and gain the perspective essential to think innovatively.

Presence enables us to hold the paradoxes and ambiguities inherent in diverse systems.

I am remembering a 4-day Introduction to Dialogue program in the 1990s. It was the afternoon of the second day and reliably the “conflict” between those who wanted to slow the pace down and those who were comfortable with a faster pace had become “a problem to be solved”. If you have ever facilitated or participated in many groups you may be nodding your head in recognition.

Someone in the group suggested different ways that members could compromise, creating times for quicker conversation, interspersed with periods of a slower rhythm. We could create dedicated periods of silence. We could use a talking stick. We could just let it go and see where we ended up. People could just “speak up more”. And so on.

It began to look like we would have to create a formal set of guidelines. Neither “side” liked it but people were willing to compromise so they could move on. I suggested that rather than create another set of “rules” for how we would talk with each other we would create an experiment. We would continue and focus our intention and attention on being fully present and on deepening and expanding the conversation rather than the pace. What happened is hard to describe. Without any more talk of “fast”, “slow”, “interruption”, “can’t find my way in”, etc., over the next 30 minutes, the group found its own rhythm, everyone relaxed and the dialogue continued like a spontaneous and beautiful dance. The group was experiencing a collective resonance that allows for diversity and alignment simultaneously; a paradox had been bridged and a new way of collaborating and conversing given life. This newly co-created collective rhythm continued throughout the rest of the program.

In the face of the paradox of “fast and slow needs” the ability to be present and the commitment to remain present without prescribing the first easy solution created the conditions for another way through to show up. But, paradox and ambiguity are uncomfortable for those of us raised in an “either/or” culture where productivity and “doing something” reign. It is no simple to shift this mindset with which most of us grew up.

We must create alternative neural pathways that reinforce new ways of being with paradox and an ability to hold a stance of “both/and”. Improv artists use a practice called “yes, *and*” to create unimaginable connections. We’ve probably all experienced being amazed by this capacity. Yet these connections spring forward spontaneously

when the mind is opened with “yes, *and*”, and becomes available to see in new ways. We too can create these innovative connections if we practice laying down the neural pathways associated with this ability, giving ourselves an alternative to the current reactive either/or thinking.

Certain Places offer us the experience of holding paradox and ambiguity with a “yes, and” stance. In one of these Places walkabout participants experience what it is to connect with the “extremes” of the paradox existing simultaneously in the same Place. At the level of the paradox or the “problem” there is no resolution. Only through the lens we attain when we lift to the next “Holon” is the paradox resolved, both aspects seen as interdependent parts of a larger whole. This ability to hold paradox and shift perspective opens our eyes to see what was an “unimaginable” possibility only moments before.

All leaders experience the pull of paradox and the discomfort of ambiguity occurring simultaneously with the need to make wise choices so that a system does not become gridlocked. When analysis paralysis threatens, rather than doing anything just for the sake of doing something, being able to shift into inner stillness and hold the paradox and ambiguity with others is essential to bring forward the “unimaginable” possibilities. Creating a partnership with specific Places can help build and ground this capacity.

To summarize this first section on Applied Value, among the gifts associated with Presence, which Place holds for leaders are:

- An inner place of stillness and silence from which to operate
- Clarity and discernment
- An embodied sense of systemic interdependence that confers the ability to think and act systemically and strategically as well as to foster trust and collaboration
- The ability to tap collective intelligence and wisdom and build resilience
- An expanded and lifted perspective that reveals patterns and relationships
- The ability to hold paradox and ambiguity and create openings for imagination and possibility

Leading in Reciprocal Partnership with Your Local Environment

“How can I invite the heart of mountains and streams into myself? How can I carry the forest into the city? I know from my own life this is a matter of survival, not aesthetics.”

- Kim Stafford, *Entering the Grove*. 1990. *Words from the Land*.

For at least 20 years now we've been exhorted to “think globally and act locally”, to let our local actions be informed by the needs of the larger system(s) to which we belong. My observations with the Power of Place suggest to me that it may also be of great advantage for leaders to “listen locally” as an entry point to the system that allows for more effective “global thinking” and “local action”.

“When you pick up something in the woods it is not only connected to everything else by virtue of its being a set piece in an ecosystem, but it's connected to everything else by virtue of the fact that you have an imagination.”

- Barry Lopez, *The Country of the Mind*. 1986. *Words from the Land*.

By engaging with our local environment as a Place with spirit, with interests, and with intelligence, we open the door for a new kind of collective knowing and wisdom to emerge.

At this point it will come as no surprise to you to hear that for many of the indigenous peoples of the world it is a given that one listens in partnership with the Place to which one belongs before making any important decisions that will impact the people and/or the environment.

I am not advocating that we “return to our roots”. I do not believe this is a serious option. We are a different people, with different technology, and infrastructure that span the globe.

I do, however, believe one of the most important things leaders can do today is to pursue any and all means of creating a shift within themselves that provides for an expanded and lifted perspective and connects them intimately with the system(s) to which they belong; that such a shift will open doors for new ways of listening, imagining and meeting challenges. I believe that this may be our greatest hope for discovering together, in partnership with “All Our Relations”, what the next most elegant steps are for co-evolving a planet and the human species that will be healthier and more resilient in 100, and 200, and 500 years than today.

I've spoken about the ability of Place to create a shift in both internal and external perspectives, lifting one to a place of seeing the whole system and the relationships within it differently. I'd like to close this section by coming full circle to the inner grounding and attunement that profoundly impact the way in which we as individuals, and leaders, locate ourselves within the systems we inhabit and help guide. When this inner shift happens, being fully present is all that is required to make wise choices. The

locus of our attention becomes simultaneously present in us and in the entire system of which we are members. What is life giving for us will contribute to the health of the system as well, and vice versa. Then, in Juan Ramon Jimenez's words, we will find ourselves 'standing in a new life'.

*“...a feeling that my boat
has struck, down there in the depths,
against a great thing.
And nothing happens!
Nothing...Silence...Waves...
Nothing happens?
Or has everything happened
And are we standing now, quietly,
in the new life?”*

In today's economic, social, ecological, and spiritual climate, this shift and the ability it confers upon us, to see differently and craft possibilities that are not about using resources to “repair” systems that have been overtaxed and overstressed, but rather to co-evolve a world that provides well for all peoples, for our families, our communities, our organizations, and for All Our Relations with whom we share this planet – this is a legacy worth devoting ourselves to.

So, dear reader, I invite you to seek out those Places in your local environs that may offer you the opportunity to go to an inner place of silence and stillness and expand the bandwidth of your listening. And when you arrive and go for your walk, or sit in a particular spot, remember to say hello to the Place and express your gratitude for being available to you at this time. Invite the Place to listen with you. Use your imagination. Breathe with the air, the earth, the Place. Open your heart and your senses to the insight that comes from fully experiencing yourself as a member of this community. Then bring to mind your question or challenge with life, family, or business, and offer it into the collective of the community of this Place and listen. You may be surprised by what you ‘hear’ and the insights you experience. Oh...and remember to say thank you.

CONTINUING THE INQUIRY



"We are still people of the planet, with all it's original directions waiting in our being."

-John Hay, Homing. 1982. Words from the Land.

In this paper I focused on the Power of Place to shine a light on the opportunity and the importance of inviting ourselves into a relationship with Place, with our local environs, as a way of grounding ourselves and empowering a shift from reactive to resilient generative response as we engage with the important questions of our times.

I feel as though my reflections on my experiences to date and my listening today for the next elegant steps in my inquiry and exploration of the Power of Place have merely cracked open of a door.

As I enter 2010 I have been the steward of 116 acres of land in Northern New Mexico on the Rio Ojo Caliente since 2006. Every day I remind myself that what Dave, my partner, and I do here is not just a matter of what we imagine and what we want – it is a matter of what will serve this land so that this land may in turn support us and the next expanding circle of All Our Relations, and the next, and the next. It is a matter of how what we DO and who we BE, here, in partnership with this Place, can contribute to the health and wellbeing of our local community. And, in ever widening circles, it is about what we contribute to the well being of our world through our work with the Power of Place and young people. Through the Walkabout work with leaders as they “put their ears to the ground and listen” for the pulse of today and the future.

I look forward, in this decade, to participating with others in the continued inquiry around the Power of Place. Some of the evocative questions I invite you to explore with us are:

- What do our findings so far in this inquiry around the Powers of Place suggest to us for application in our business, in education and in government?
- How might where we convene and locate important international dialogues impact the possibilities that are imagined by those who attend?
- What can we learn from practices that indigenous peoples have been preserving through time? What gifts do these bring to current contexts?
- How might we create practices for our times that attune us to our interdependence and help us lay down new neural pathways for presence, generative thinking and wise choices?
- What possibilities might arise if Place and Technology were held as partners rather than competing interests?
- What if rather than thinking about preserving or sustaining the status quo of our ecology, we asked “how do we work with Place to co-evolve this planet we call home in ways that are creative and life promoting?”
- What can we learn from Place about the cycles of life and death that could inform how we build communities and develop and run businesses, even whole economies, to create more resilience?
- How might the criteria for where we locate a business shift, if we consider the Place as an integral partner in the social and economic eco-system of the potential site(s)?
- What questions would you add?



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“My work is my art is my life is my play...”

Glenna pioneered the development of dialogue within organizations. Her book with Linda Ellinor entitled *DIALOGUE: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation* (1998), has been translated into Portuguese, German and Chinese. She has contributed articles to a variety of international publications. Glenna partners with consultants, leaders, individuals, and groups in the private and public sectors to develop ways to make the principles and practices of Dialogue more accessible and practical in both business and personal contexts.

In 2004 Glenna created the Presence Walkabouts, which integrate dialogue, reflective practices and strategic frameworks with the Power of Place. The programs are grounded in the time-honored aborigine tradition of “going walkabout”. Through them Glenna works with individual leaders and groups to deepen their capacity for Presence, which in turn brings the clarity and perspective needed to make wise choices in service of the systems to which they belong.

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