The Taste of The Air
Creative Leadership and The Significance of Place
Michael Jones

(To listen to Michael’s recording of After The Rain - a composition inspired by the story he shares below please visit http://www.pianoscapes.com/listen.html)

My dad could name one hundred miles of coastline by the taste of the air
From Annie Proulx, The Shipping News

The Power of Place - Background Story

The summer following my graduation from studies in music and psychology at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick I was preparing to continue with graduate studies at The University of Toronto.

I had found a comfortable small apartment near the campus and used my free time looking for part time employment preferably as a pianist in the local area of downtown Toronto.

My first stop was a contemporary dance school that a friend had recommended to me. They thought this studio would interest me because it was experimental and based on the ground breaking and innovative work of dance choreographer and visionary Martha Graham in New York City.

I walked up a long flight of stairs to a studio on the second floor of an old building with an auto body shop on the street level. My first impressions were not promising.

But then I looked past the reception desk to a beautiful dance studio flooded with light from the wide and generous row of floor to ceiling windows. The light also reflected the finish of a beautifully burnished nine-foot concert grand Steinway piano that sat just inside the doorway to the studio.

Feeling both excited and apprehensive, I met with the director who stepped out of her office to greet me. “Have you accompanied a dance class before?” She asked.

“No” I wanted to be honest with her and at the same time I wanted to put my hands on that piano at the earliest opportunity.

“What leads you to think you could do it?” She probed

My music tends to be atmospheric and has an improvisational feel to it” I replied. “I thought it might be a good fit for accompanying a dance class.”
“Well… it may be challenging for you but one of our accompanists has left the city to study in Europe and so we do need an immediate replacement for Cynthia’s class in the morning. Please come by tomorrow before 10:00AM” she said. “Let’s try it out to see how it works for you and for us.”

The next day I arrived promptly at 9:45 AM with a box of sheet music tucked tightly under my arm. I was a little nervous and didn’t know what would be expected of me so I wanted to be sure that I had sufficient musical scores on hand.

Cynthia opened the class - there were 30 students gathered around her in the far corner of the studio –

“Welcome Michael” she said, looking over to where I sat waiting expectantly at the piano.

“I would like to warm up the class up with some improvisational movement- could you play some music with the feeling of rain for us please”

There was a pause…

“Rain … how do I play rain?” I thought to myself. I had studied and tried to master the works of Chopin, Beethoven and Debussy but I had never played rain.

I turned to the box of music I had carefully placed on the hardwood floor under the piano hoping to find some music with ‘rain’ in the title… something perhaps like…. Raindrops Falling on My Head…

Cynthia, impatient now, walked quickly to the piano

“No no Michael, not music, nothing formal just something with the feeling of rain… like this!” She said demonstrating by playing a cluster of notes lightly in the upper register of the piano.

I watched her closely and as soon as she had finished I placed my fingers on exactly the same keys she had just played and imitated her actions as closely as possible.

“Perfect!” she said. Slowly the dancers, following her lead, spread out across the studio floor moving to the rhythm of the music - their motions light and fluid – like rain. Now I was inspired. I had never before experienced seeing others move so freely and improvisationally to the impressions I was creating at the piano.

Feeling more relaxed now, I became immersed in the moment and started to add other notes and phrasings to the music in response to what I was seeing and feeling around me.

Then Cynthia call out – Now play wind!
“Wind!! I thought – how do I play wind - I am just getting good at playing rain.

I looked to her with some misgiving – and as we caught each other’s eye she said; “Like this Michael” And she demonstrated by swinging her left arm to give the impression of the broad sweeping movement of wind.

I followed her lead- playing now with a left hand pattern with a repeating rhythm that evoked the feeling of wind.

Now the dancers met my shift in playing with their own spontaneous movement making broad leaps in the air with their arms outstretched – the entire class now moving freely and expressively as both rain and wind.

“Now thunder!” Cynthia called out, building on the momentum of the creative energy in the room. She was guiding us towards a grand crescendo of movement and sound.

And in that moment – I remembered. “ Of course!” I said to myself. I know this place – I know what it is to be rain, to be wind, to be thunder…

Years before, in my youth, I had attended a summer camp in the near wilderness of Ontario’s Georgian Bay. The primal atmosphere and poetry of light and wind reflected off the sparse granite rock, bent jack pines and subtle movement of light on water was a powerful inspiration to my own musical imagination.

During those long hot summer days, the air heavy with humidity the portent of something ominous stirring in the dark clouds on the far horizon caused a shiver of anticipation in my own musical soul. I could sense, almost feel, the deep vibration in the rock underfoot that accompanied the rumble of thunder far off. I remembered how once first heard, the rumble would be quickly followed by another as dark clouds scudded and lightening flashed overhead.

This was my call – while the other campers quickly left their outdoor programs and ran to their cabins for shelter and to dig into their collection of comic books – I was summoned to the camp lodge and the old upright piano that stood by a large screen window there.

Then I would open the screen wide and play to the storm as it grew in intensity and raged overhead - the wind, the rain, the thunder and lightening all played through my fingers. In the midst the storm, I was not only playing to the ferment – in the fullness of that one moment’s surrender - filled with a sense of exhilaration and terror - and with the opening of the wildness raging all around and about me – I was also being played.

The years passed and with the intensity and focus on classical piano studies my senses atrophied - separating me from those early memories. But following the dance class, and the many more followed, I reconnected to the power and significance of place. In my search to locate a home for the inspiration that animated the music the memories and language of Georgian Bay came alive again— not in a biographical way – but as a deep
visceral love and cellular memory of those long summers and how the Bay with its varied and subtle language, once liberated, flowed unimpeded through my fingers again. 

.... The whisper of winds through the pines boughs, the water washing over the rocks, the sunlight dancing on the ripples of the water’s surface, the cry of the loon carried aloft on still air echoing across the inland lakes on a moonlit night … a symphony from long ago but as fresh in my imagination now as then - – a living soundtrack - something I cannot return to – the Bay has changed much in recent years- but as a place to grow out from so that I can learn to love and bring forth the beauty of other experiences and impressions as the gift that place brings us to when we let it speak through us again.

The storm passed… the wind stopped - the dancers dropped to the floor – a stillness filled the room – held with single notes from the piano – each like a raindrop causing gentle ripples to radiate outward on a summer pond.

I was home again

The Powers of Place

Session Commentary:

To celebrate community is to also celebrate the significance and love of place. The experience of place is nourishment to the imagination. Leaders who connect with their first relationship with place find in this story the roots of their own aliveness and commitment as leaders. It offers a home for their gifts and illuminates a way forward so that they may share their gifts, unique talents and capabilities with the world.

A shared sense of place is also the building block of community. It is the one of the most important factors in creating healthy neighborhoods and working relationships and helping them grow.

We each have a place that is a home for the heart - a place that provides the fertile soil that seeds our creativity, our way of leading, our gifts and sense of connectedness and well-being in our community and the world. It does so by instructing us in the language of atmosphere, tone, nuance, and beauty, ways of seeing that help us read the subtle field and its emergent possibilities.

Unfortunately too often we come to learn about the power and significance of a place only through its absence. Like all experiences of beauty it can be fleeting. So our work as the stewards of place is to be vigilant – to be apprentices in the art of seeing, in order to make visible the power and beauty of place and lift it up through the imagination so that it may uplift the spirit in all that we say and do.

In this session we will explore as leaders a framework for engaging communities around the theme of place. We will do so by inviting you to consider the following questions for personal reflection as Michael performs a musical composition inspired by his summers
Questions for Consideration

1. Share a story of your connection to place, describe it in detail and explore how this relationship to a place has inspired your leadership, creativity and well being?

2. Identify the qualities of this place that has lead to you more feeling vital and alive?

3. Explore how the stories and the language of place contribute to creating a field of possibility and strengthen our collective sense of community identity, purpose and well being?

4. Through exploring our local environment ask;
   How does what I see speak to the aliveness and significance of place and;
   How can we make more visible to others the power and beauty of place and the significance it holds for our leadership, our communities and our lives?

Session Leader – Michael Jones

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Michael Jones is the author of Leading Artfully, Awakening the Commons of the Imagination and has composed and produced a catalogue of original solo piano recordings that have all been inspired by his relationship with place. He is also a dialogue facilitator, leadership educator and speaker as well as a faculty member with the Leadership Development programs at the Banff Centre and a Thinking Partner and Steward with the Powers of Place Initiative.

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