

Blue Lake

Stradbroke Island

Many years ago I visited Blue Lake on North Stradbroke Island. I remember it as a place of exquisite beauty and quiet tranquillity. Later I read about the Aboriginal rituals of the dead that used to be conducted at the lake. According to Oodgeroo Noonuccal, one of the indigenous elders of the island, Blue Lake is the spirit lake of the Noonuccal tribe, where the bodies of the dead would be placed on rafts of paper bark, set fire to and pushed out into the middle of the lake, to sleep forever in the arms of the lake's water spirit.

I have always wanted to revisit Stradbroke Island and spend more time absorbing the atmosphere at the lake. This autumn - at long last - I returned with my family. The first time I went to Blue Lake it was possible to drive four wheel drive vehicles right to the edge of the lake. This is no longer permitted, so we had to walk from the car park. A huge scribbly gum stood at the entry to the path, wordlessly challenging the visitor to decipher the mysterious writing covering its trunk. The rugged track then wove its way through hills of sand, where banksias, fox tail ferns and native shrubs with tiny lemon and purple flowers grew profusely.

The lake sat in a circle of reeds and overhanging branches, edged by banks which fell steeply to the water. The white sand on the floor of the lake highlighted the brilliant turquoise of the water above. A soft breeze ruffled the surface, creating a shimmering pattern of silver, blue and green. We settled as comfortably as we could on the steep sandy bank, enjoying the serenity of the scene before us.

Our view of the lake was framed and interrupted by trees, so it was some minutes before we became aware of a disturbance in the water about ten or twelve metres from the bank. It was a small animal, a wallaby - we could see its snout and ears - struggling to stay afloat. It was too far out, and the water much too cold, for us to be able to help. We could but watch, helplessly, as it thrashed about, valiantly fighting to reach the shore, yet disoriented and moving farther away with each stroke. It submerged; we held our breath. It resurfaced; we breathed again. It grew weaker, slower; each time it sank it took longer to reappear until, finally, after an unbearably long wait, we had to accept that it was gone. The place where it had been was marked only by widening circles of faint ripples.

We were all silent, overcome by conflicting images and emotions: of beauty and serenity, of fear and death. Eventually we broke our silence, trying to give voice to our feelings, and to understand what had happened. Why was the little wallaby in the lake? Had it come to drink and slipped on the steep bank? How long had it been in the water? Was there anything we could have done to save it?

As the shock faded we were also able to marvel at the synchronicity of our being in that place, at that time. Did it help the wallaby that we were present? I don't know. But it was important to us that we had been there to witness its death and thus, also, to acknowledge its life. Moreover, it seemed significant that this had happened in a place where, for millennia, indigenous people had held rituals for their dead.

On that morning the lake was, paradoxically, restful and nurturing for the human visitors, and the medium of death for the tiny wallaby. Even knowing its power and its dangerous potential, I have always loved fresh water. As a child the local creeks and

waterholes were places to which I could escape if life became too stressful. As an adult, with a developing earth-consciousness and a more scientific understanding of the role of water in the life of the planet, my respect and reverence for it has grown further.

I have developed a personal ritual which I do whenever I visit any natural water site that is significant for me. I have a length of ribbon which I call my ritual ribbon. I hold this ribbon beneath the water, moving it gently until it is wet through, saying softly "I offer you the spirit of the waters that infuse this ribbon". As I continue to swirl the ribbon in the water I say "I ask you to infuse this ribbon with your spirit, and stay with me wherever I go." I tie the wet ribbon to my wrist until it dries, and then return it to its embroidered pouch in my handbag, so I have with me always the essence of those special watery places.

The first time I immersed this ribbon was in the small stream in Well Lane, Staverton in England, from whence my maternal ancestors emigrated to Australia. Since then I have dipped it in wells, streams, wetlands, rivers, lakes and oceans throughout Australia, Europe and Asia. Hundreds of places. I don't keep a written record of each place; for me this is about ritual rather than about history, geography or tourism.

In this tradition, last weekend I immersed my ritual ribbon in the cold clear water of Blue Lake, just after we had watched the death of the wallaby. I whispered my usual refrain, but I also heard myself say, almost without conscious volition, and with no intellectual rationale, "Blessed was this life; She blessed this life. Blessed was this death; She blessed this death." As I grieved for the wallaby, I had unconsciously drawn on one of my favourite medieval lyrics, itself set by water, to express my shock and sadness.

Maiden in the mor lay with its repetitive, melodic question-and-answer structure readily lends itself to adaptation for ritual or song; the lilting words beg to be spoken or chanted aloud. "Welle was hire mete. What was hire mete? The primerole and the violet."; "Welle was hire dring. What was hire dring? The chelde water of the welle-spring."; "Welle was hire bour. What was hire bour? The rede rose an the lilye flour." The storyline is very simple: a maiden alone on a moor for seven days - in a bower enclosed by roses and lilies - eating only primroses and violets, drinking only cold well water.

This lyric appeals to me on many levels. I love it simply because it's in Middle English. I am also attracted to it for its poetry, because the protagonist is female and because, like so many other medieval maidens, she is nameless and thus strangely elusive, which contributes to the sense of mystery and poetic possibility that enthalls me. And, most significantly, the maiden is alone with nature - water - by herself on the moor.

Despite this solitude, the image conveyed by the lyric, and especially by the bower with its roses and lilies, is not of loneliness, anxiety or fear, but rather of security, containment and quietude. In this hidden moorland world the maiden is alone, independent and self sufficient. She demonstrates an active passivity; she minimally, but purposefully, engages with her surrounds, taking only water and a few selected flowers for her personal needs; she demonstrates little overt concern for her security, yet creates an environment which holds her safely and gently. The place where she "lay" on the moor is not a place of frenetic activity, but of focused restfulness and intentional inner reflection.

In this lyric the moor seems to lie somewhere between an actual, physical location and an ethereal spirit land; the maiden exists outside of time, within the mysterious,

mystical parameters of seven nights and a day. It is impossible to know why she was there, but I hazard a guess that it was a time of ritual, or of preparation for ritual. The seven nights and a day seem significant, and contain echoes of other ritual times: of the preparation for the initiation of a knight; of the duration of a quest; of time spent in fairyland. I wonder about the rituals in honour of the dead observed at Blue Lake by the Aboriginal people. Were they also held over seven nights and a day?

Ritual is one way that humans attempt to tap into the physical and the tangible as well as into the intangible. They provide a structure through which we can respond to mystery: of life, of death, of birth, of transition. They are designed to move us into a wider realm of mystery, different - but not intrinsically distinct - from the mystery encountered in everyday life.

A deep interconnection with earth is at the heart of my personal rituals. Some, like my ribbon ritual, honour the elements and the all-sustaining power of the earth. Others are responses to the daily or seasonal cycles of the earth: a handful of golden leaves placed on my table in autumn; a vase of bright flowers at the beginning of spring; a cluster of red candles at midwinter; a walk in the full moon; and, each day, my regular morning meditation.

Or they are very simple and spontaneous, my response to a "tap on the shoulder" that reminds me of the mystery of life: a whispered prayer when a breeze caresses my cheek, a beautiful flower dances in the sunlight, a fire illuminates the darkness, or rain falls in a sudden shower of blessings.

Some of my personal rituals, like that of my ribbon, have a core of familiar words. As I meditatively finger my elemental meditation beads, I say repetitively "Spirit of the water (or air, or earth, or fire) I honour you." I frequently adapt words from much loved medieval manuscripts as texts for meditation. Thus, *Maiden in the mor lay* was the inspiration for the prayer of thanksgiving that I repeat each evening: "Blessed was my day. How was I blessed? With health and happiness this day." The third line may change, depending on my mood, or the shape of my day. Last night I prayed "With friends and family this day." After my experience at Blue Lake I whispered "With life and death and life this day." And always, a recurring motif in my prayers and meditations, as in my life, is "With water and earth and spirit this day."

- Patricia Rose -