

## **Loss, Healing, and the Power of Place**

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**Abstract:** Human beings have a tendency to transform geographical spaces into dwelling places which assume significance in terms of their social, cultural and personal identities. The authors describe the ways in which this occurs, how it is disrupted by a natural disaster - an Australian bushfire - and how the reciprocal relationship between place and person can contribute to personal and communal healing. The discussion draws on a doctoral thesis conducted by the principal author, and is illuminated by excerpts from narratives provided by those who experienced the bushfire. The discussion is informed by insights from phenomenological geography and ecological philosophy.

## **Introduction**

Disruption to one's chosen dwelling place may occur in countless ways, usually connected with other people or uncontrollable events. In a recent study which examined the experiences of a particular community of people who survived a major bushfire in Australia (Cox, 1996), the disruption was not unexpected, but was sudden and devastating; more than seven hundred homes were destroyed and three people were killed (Baxter 1984; Oliver 1984). An important aspect of the study concerned people's experiences of their dwelling place, both in terms of its everyday taken-for-grantedness and its coming into sharp relief with major disruption. One of the key questions concerned why people who have a choice about where to be, choose to remain in a place where they have experienced great trauma, and which remains just as vulnerable on a hot summer's day as it was at the time of that terrible fire. The answer appears to lie in the relationship that these people had and have with their chosen environment, both in terms of their built and natural environments - the bushland, the flora and fauna, and the ocean. The study suggests that within their chosen place, they found healing, and that their relationship to their chosen place was instrumental in that process.

### **1. Places and the Human Spirit**

Place has dramatic effects on the human spirit. Simply driving down the spectacular coastal road in the area of the study, one is struck by oddly shaped homes in almost inaccessible locations: half way up a steep hill, for example, with a winding vertical driveway and all but hidden in dense scrubland, or down a steep winding track that appears to drop over the edge of the cliff to the ocean below. There is something mysteriously compelling about these half hidden homes. Because homes on these cliffs can command at least a 180

degree vista of the sea, many of the homes are built in fascinating structural arrangements aimed at capitalising on the spectacular views.

These ecological home owners go to great lengths to immerse themselves in the environment. Unusually designed homes draw the eye and like the mysterious half hidden homes, give a sense of deep pleasure and an urge to move beyond the barriers imposed by gates and doors to explore the nooks and crannies. Every one of these homes is engulfed by thick bushland and is patently vulnerable to bush fire: many of the oddly shaped ones have been built and rebuilt over the years following repeated destruction. It is a remarkable testimony to environmental connectedness and the sense of what is really important to people that they remain, and that passers-by who see them, love them, despite seeing very clearly their vulnerability. Perhaps we have become more accepting, or even blasé, toward the risk associated with living in a known bushfire area since risk has itself become thematic of postmodern society, and its role in environmental contexts is all too familiar (Beck 1992, 1995a, 1995b).

The place of which we speak here incorporates a rural community which, in Olwig's words, "provides a natural antidote to the celestial extremes of unnatural imperial urbanism" (1993: 327), and as he points out, citing Raymond Williams:

Much of the ideological power of the landscape and country must be understood in terms of their opposition to city and state, and so related terms, such as culture and community, must also be understood as being 'counter', in the sense that they are 'more direct, more total, and therefore more significant relationships', to 'the more formal, more abstract and more instrumental relationships of state, or of society' (Williams, 1976: 66).

For Olwig, there is a clear polarization between rural and urban places, and when we understand the power of structural architecture on ourselves in terms

of the effect of beauty and ugliness we can but grieve for the modern world, with its dedication to geometric technical excellence, expediency, functionality, and practicality. The design of buildings in the bushfire area constituted an attempt to redress this by reflecting the natural aesthetic of the environment, incorporating the nooks, crannies, and irregularities which harmonize with the liveliness, randomness and unpredictability of the local landscape. The towering office blocks, unyielding concrete edifices, high density living, and super highways transecting the cities and pouring out choking exhaust fumes, sap the human spirit and force us to seek respite, searching for oceans and rivers, forests and mountains, where the energy and the spirit can be restored and renewed. It was a rebellion against the geometry, density, closed-in-ness, and pollution, that had led the residents here, intermittently accompanied by the vast crowds of short-term escapees which flock to the coast at weekends and during holiday periods. It is an irony that this movement, in turn, is in danger of further degrading the very environment in which they are seeking refuge and renewal.

## **2. Making Ones-Self at Home in the Australian Landscape**

Morphy (1993: 206) points out that the colonization of Australia by Europeans has traditionally involved the transformation of the landscape and a radical break from the history of the land almost amounting to a denial that the land had any history at all. In this context, it is significant that Australia is commonly called "the timeless land", and that its history was denied in its official legal status as "*terra nullius*". More recently, settlement in many rural areas of Australia has been predicated on a desire to maintain the existing landscape, to adapt to it, and to appreciate and share in its continuing history.

Latter-day settlers are unlikely to develop the same type of complex spiritual and religious ties with the landscape that characterise Aboriginal communities,

but instead will develop their own particular contemporary alternatives. Some who would consider themselves to have an 'enlightened' approach toward the environment may actually harbour quite antithetical European attitudes, such as a belief that the environment has to be mastered, either by dint of strength of personality or technically through scientific knowledge and the application of appropriate technology, or that one is simply helpless in the face of it as an enemy which cannot be mastered (**Bedford 19??**). Nevertheless, they remain susceptible to the complex reflexive interactions that occur between human beings and their environment, which eventually transform their initial western sense of separateness into a more or less spiritual sense of connectedness. Of course, the western interloper can never assume the position of the Aborigine, and the magico-religious relationship with the environment that this implies, but this transformation does call up its own array of western myths, and its own cast of gods and goddesses. For the Buddhist scholar, Codiga (1990: 109), it is not that the newcomer aims to replicate the traditional ways of knowing as a result of interacting with and interpreting the local environment, but that they should nevertheless strive to see their surroundings with the same timeless eyes.

The significance of myth in the human shaping of the physical world, according to Cosgrove (1993: 281), is increasingly recognised among cultural geographers, while anthropologists and other social scientists acknowledge the importance of space, place and landscape in the constitution of social life:

Myths may both shape and be shaped by landscapes, not only those localised and specific landscapes visible on the ground, but equally by archetypal landscapes imaginatively constituted from human experiences in the material world and represented in spoken and written words, poetry, painting, theatre or film. (1993: 281-2)

Tuan (1989: 404) goes so far as to describe “felt spaces” as “mythical-conceptual” and argues that they are a direct product of human subjectivity and imagination. The mythologies evident in this study are drawn from traditional European understandings, incorporating scientific and technological concepts, and their associated images of control and exploitation, and popular beliefs about risk, justice and so forth. Increasingly, however, emerging western mythologies draw upon new age physics and esoteric cosmologies, tempered by elements of Eastern philosophy, a variety of quasi-religious and animistic beliefs, an emerging respect for the non-human world, and a growing concern about the ecological harm being caused by western industry and life styles.

The generation of such myths transform ‘environment’ into ‘dwelling’, through the creation of a sense of understanding, belonging and ‘at-homeness’. A vast literature exists which indicates the directions that this return to myth can take (Campbell 1972). Mythologization is one process by which the geographical area in this study has been settled, and transformed into a dwelling place. Let us now turn to what this process of settlement and in-dwelling creates, and consider how our understanding of ‘place’, and its relationship to other terms such as ‘space’, ‘environment’, ‘community’ and ‘dwelling’, is informed by this study of the Australian bushfire experience.

### **3. Terminology and the Study of Place**

The study of place and region is known as “chorology”, and has, in tandem with the modernist ethos, sought unsuccessfully to justify and elaborate these in terms of positivist science (Entrikin, 1989: 30). In fact, ‘place’ has been trivialized and marginalized in traditional social sciences (Agnew & Duncan, 1989), but is enjoying a resurgence in contemporary social theory through the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, and Giddens. Despite the the work of Relph,

Buttimer, and Seamon, which emerged throughout the 1980s, it does not appear to us to be a major theme in phenomenological writing. Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* refers to the 'geographical' meaning, of 'place' as "a portion of space in which people dwell together". We refer to this 'non-phenomenological' source not only because it pays due respect to etymology, but also because to have an 'everyday' definition of 'place' which entails human dwelling is, we think, surprising, and secondly because that is precisely how it is used in this paper. More technically, Agnew and Duncan (1989) identify three strands to geographers' descriptions of 'place', emphasizing in turn "location" or space, "locale", and "sense of place". Whilst the latter captures our concern in this paper - that is the relationship which arises between individuals and the place in which they live - the three elements are perhaps best viewed, Agnew and Duncan suggest, as complementary dimensions rather than competing accounts. No single element can be understood, in respect of a particular place, without reference to the others. Finally, it is worth noting that in both classical and contemporary sociology, 'place' has been mistakenly identified with 'community', an omnibus term which encompasses and transcends place (Agnew, 1989).

Tuan (1989: 389) raises the question as to how a 'location' becomes a 'place', and the concomitant question as to how a 'sense of place' arises. Berdoulay (1989) frames the question in terms of how places generate and interact with the meanings that arise in the minds of those who dwell within them, and goes on to offer a personal account. He suggests that "the study of place has a strong narrative component [which] has to reflect the actual interweaving of the relationships among those people, objects, and messages, which produces place and which may be viewed as a discourse" (1989: 134). Such a discourse is a particular story, which employs a variety of literary devices, which serve the purpose of conceptualizing place and expressing its meaning: as he says, "a place comes explicitly into being in the discourse of its inhabitants, and

particularly in the rhetoric it promotes" (1989: 135). In the present study, it was the discourses that local dwellers developed around their dwelling places and the impact that the bushfires had upon them that are the 'raw data' upon which the present limited observations are based.

#### **4. Human Dwelling**

The 'sense of place' is related to what Relph (1976: 141) calls "insiderness", that is the extent to which humans feel associated with important centres of their immediate experience of the world, where there is a fusion of both the human and the natural order. Sense of place entails that an individual feels 'inside' a place, in other words safe, enclosed, and protected. Seamon (1979) calls this "at-homeness", and when experienced at the deepest level, constitutes an "existential insiderness" in which the home, as Lang writes, is "incorporated and assimilated into the fabric of embodied existence" (1985: 201). "Existential outsiderness", on the other hand, is being homeless and alienated from people and place, there is no sense of attachment to wherever they are. Notions of at-homeness, insiderness and outsiderness take on deep meaning when examined from the perspective of the bushfire study.

This notion of at-homeness has multiple components, one of which is rootedness, which Seamon describes as "the power of home to organise the habitual, bodily stratum of the person's lived space" (1979: 79). The home is the place to which one is bound by being the base for departure and return in an unconscious familiarity. Rootedness, for Godkin (1980), concerns a sense of belonging in safe environments, a sense that contributes to feelings of self worth. This is not always about one's primary dwelling place, however, since some people experience this as unhappy, unsafe and cold; rather, it may be associated with a place of temporary refuge. The sense of rootedness may well have developed for some people in this study long before they came to the area

to live, since it was their place of temporary refuge from the stress of urban living as described earlier. Godkin's work suggests that it is not uncommon to find that when one's primary dwelling places are filled with pain, the natural environment becomes the place of refuge: the freedom of wild places where the spirit can roam and be whatever it wants to be; the quiet gentle places where the spirit and the self are nourished so that the difficult journey still has an element of hope for something better.

The remaining components of Seamon's "at-homeness" are

- appropriation and territoriality, involving notions of possession, control and protection;
- regeneration, concerning the restorative powers of the home, usually one's dwelling place and its environs where one can find peace and rest;
- at-easeness, about the freedom to be whatever one wishes with no need for a public facade, for performance, or for maintenance of an image; and,
- warmth, the atmosphere of happiness, companionship and concern that radiates from certain homes.

Warm places are where at-easeness is maximised, where individuals have their deep roots and may rest and heal from violations to place that leave them recognising their powerlessness. The 'hearth' of a home was the warm 'heart' of the home, the focus around which 'at-homeness' revolved. The fire which sat at the heart of the home was the same force which engulfed and destroyed the homes in this study. Those who lost their at-home place in the bushfire lost their place of warmth, their place of at-easeness for recovery, and had to manage uprootedness in a place of existential outsidership for a considerable length of time. This relates not only to those whose homes were destroyed in the fire, but to all of those for whom the natural environment is intrinsic to their existential insiderness.

Buttimer (1980) upholds notions of at-homeness and rootedness, and adds a further component: the notion of home and "horizons-of-reach". She describes these as like breathing in and out: breathing in represents "bringing home",

breathing out represents a reaching out to beyond the home. "Reach" may be considered in terms of movement in and out of a place to regions beyond, by thought and imagination, by communication in passive ways, such as by telephone or the various methods of mail, or by physical movement out of the dwelling place. The degree to which one reaches may be a mark of how strongly one identifies with at-homeness, and how much one requires nourishment from elsewhere. Buttimer considers that personal identity and health require a balance of this dwelling and reaching; the location of one's self in a restful and spirit-nourishing dwelling place, alongside the creation of a regional identity that reaching would strengthen. Strong links are generally more noticeable in smaller rural communities than in cities and, indeed, the very notion of community is anachronistic in large towns where property is securely bordered and residents guard their anonymity. The strength that the community of the bushfire study had to regroup itself and move forward stemmed from what was already in place and was directly related to people's sense of place, with its belongingness, deep care for their own place, and reaching out into the community. The sense of place was instrumental in their connecting with others and growing the relationships and organisations that were intrinsic to the recovery of this place and its people. This is not to suggest, however, that in this community relationships are always harmonious and many examples of conflict and discontent were present in the study.

## **5. An Ecology of Loss**

The study of the experience of bushfire in Australia referred to here is a study of suffering: it had heartbreaking consequences for large numbers of people (Cox 1996). Cassell's (1991) description of suffering as a severe disruption, a loss of intactness of one's life poignantly captures their experience. Something has occurred which prevents the maintenance of personal cohesiveness and

undermines the meanings that were essential to the sense of place and self-identity. Suffering is inevitably connected to the disruption of meaning, and whilst the bushfire itself did not create suffering - a bushfire simply is - it was the cascade of human events that arose from the bushfire, and the meaning they had for individuals, that created suffering. Since meanings are idiosyncratic, so is the importance attached to what is lost. For some people, meaning was embedded in the possessions that gave them a past, a sense of their own history. For these people, loss of photographs and other memorabilia created great and continuing suffering.

How does one reconcile a special dwelling place, filled with a lifetime of memories, with the inert ash that remains after the fire? One man shook his head in amazement as he said "two scoops of a front-end loader; that's all that was left - two scoops was this entire house and contents". Having judged this place as vulnerable, some people had attempted to build homes that would be bushfire-proof. One family built an aluminium house. A neighbour explained how it had melted and run down the drive in little rivulets and solidified, and when the owner came back he just "sort of picked up his house, like garden stakes and stacked them in the corner of the block". Other people were not concerned at all about 'things', in terms of their own home or possessions, but were and remain deeply attached to a place which, for them, is identified with the local flora and fauna. This is consistent with Riegner's observation that, "the plants of a place [are] a collective expression of landscape character" (1993:194), and that the flora and fauna and the environment are in a reflexive relationship. They are inevitably, therefore, a significant component of the human-place connection. All of the people interviewed for the study spoke of the pain of the loss of the pets and wildlife that were intrinsic to their dwelling place. A woman who lost her studio and all of her art works, said she felt:

... a terrible heaviness, a sadness for the bush and the birds. We used to go up the back and take bread and green stuff for the birds and

anything that was left living...I found lots of 'roos crouched, like parchment, just as they'd died and a flock of wild geese in a hollow where they'd sheltered.

Grief for her own losses came later, but was never as profound as her grief for the losses in the environment, and these aspects of deep grief for animals and for the natural environment hinted at a belief in a universe where humans are part of, rather than superior to, nature, which appears throughout this study.

There are at least two broad ways of interpreting this attachment to place. Firstly, it can be framed in terms of a resort to the mythologies about the relationship between humans and nature, which sometimes retain a kind of Cartesian combination of duality and interaction. The mythologies of the western traditions, such as those of Cartesian dualism, continue to exert their influence as ways of reading nature and of understanding the place of human beings in the scheme of things and we invoke a series of archetypes to make sense of our experiences of the relationship between humans and nature (Campbell 1972; Jordan 1993). Even our terminology is revealing - we refer, perhaps problematically, to 'Mother' nature (Plumwood 1993; Kinsley 1996), we gender and anthropomorphize nature, the seasons, the weather, the flora and fauna, and the landscape itself. Secondly, it can be interpreted as expressive of a monistic philosophy which sees human beings and nature as ontologically, and perhaps physically, coterminus. This has, of course, been expressed in a variety of formal philosophical positions, such as pantheism, panpsychism, and strict materialism. In either case, the apparent destruction of the environment creates deep suffering. In this particular Australian disaster, suffering tended to create a sense of personal isolation, and a desire to withdraw from public view, as if to 'lick one's wounds' in private. The retreat is to a place of hibernation, where there is a pause in life: a 'time out' space where one takes some deep breaths before commencing the journey to healing (Relph 1976; Seamon 1979; Cox 1996). The pause may absorb a great deal of

time or it might be quite short, depending on the sense that a person makes of what has happened, the resources that are available, and the motivation one has to recover which stems from the task of meaning-making. Those admitted to this place of hibernation are those who share the experience of deep suffering or those who are trusted 'existential insiders', that is family, close friends, sometimes local doctors or community health nurses.

The community involved in the bushfire study was no different, and their recovery work was mostly done in private. The townsfolk wanted to put a zone between themselves and the rest of the world, to narrow their boundaries so that they could manage their healing together quietly, gently and with as little visibility as possible. They sought to make their dwelling place a place of hibernation and healing. Most of the disaster relief workers understood the desire of the townsfolk to care for themselves, and to be allowed to "just get on with it". They understood that people wanted to have the so-called outsiders, those relief workers who came in to help, leave the area as quickly as possible, although this did cause some of them some confusion and hurt. For those outsiders, the hardest part was not feeling able to immerse themselves in the community without the constant awareness of alienation. They felt keenly that they were able to go home at the end of the day, to a dwelling place that was untouched by the devastation of their day-time location and in that respect they could never really share uprootedness, the loss of at-homeness of those for whom they were caring.

Godkin (1980) writes that there seems to be a powerful affective response accompanying discussions of places, and that defence mechanisms inhibiting the expression of negative feelings are circumvented when one focuses on place rather than on people. This is born out in the bushfire study, where residents were deeply distressed about the loss of human life but generally spoke more of the loss of animals and the bushland than of human life. Some explained this by suggesting that those people killed, in the main, had chosen

not to capitalize upon opportunities to escape. Indeed, there was some feeling of anger at what was perceived as the poor decision making and unnecessary risks taken by those who died. It may well be, however, that it was much 'safer' to speak of losses of place than to bare the pain connected to loss of persons. There was also a sense, in their brief conversations about those humans who were killed, that danger "goes with the territory" and that it could have been any one of them who died. This signalled a construction of fire as intrinsic to the land, and of humans as not at all the "all powerful" beings that their behaviour would sometimes indicate. This reminds us that the word 'nature' has a powerful normative component, exemplified in the denotation 'natural'. Thus, Lovejoy (1927: 444) regards it as the most powerful normative concept in western thought.

## **6. Moving Toward Healing**

Concepts gleaned from the work of Relph, Buttimer, Godkin, and Seamon outlined above, illuminate the ways in which people reconstruct their lived space following a disaster. With respect to nature, the notions of appropriation and territoriality caused a rift in the community subsequent to the fire. The belief that an individual, having appropriated a place, will protect that place, meant in the eyes of some, particularly those who fought the fire, that individuals should make their place safe for human dwelling. For others however, it meant protecting the place from those who would destroy nature for mere human protection. There is for the latter group a sense in which humans are privileged to live in this place and they must fit in with nature rather than attempt to mould nature to their own whims. The very notion that a place can be protected infers power and control and in this situation it became very clear quite quickly that this fire was not controllable and all that could be done was to move people away from its path and let it wear itself out.

There was almost a sense of understanding that humans rather than being powerful masters of all that they survey, are but a part of the whole, and a fairly small and insignificant part at that, compared to the might of nature.

A comment frequently made by the majority of participants concerned the ways in which they understood and made sense of bushfire, loss and suffering, and it was generally expressed in terms of “being Australian”. Bushfires happen in Australia and the task, as they see it, is to learn to live with them, see nature as intrinsic to themselves, and to accept that paradoxically this is why they chose to live where they do, despite the risk. One person in the study said, “there is an invincibility of nature and this bush environment. When a fire happens, it happens. We don't have to manage the fire, we have to manage ourselves and the things that are dear to us. You take the right precautions, you insure the house and then that is that. If you burn you burn”. The cosmological understanding about dwelling in their place with all other things of the environment led them to expect no favours from nature, and they did not perceive their personal loss as more tragic than the devastation of their environment. Most decisions to remain in the towns had to do with this personal cosmology. In the bushfire narratives, the pain at the devastation of nature, and the joy in the re-greening are some of the most powerful themes. Bushfire is of course, not unique to Australia - bushfires happen in a large number of locations around the world. No doubt others who experience patterns of nature’s upheavals also share this cosmology. What seems clear in this study, however, is that this cosmology provided a transition between the fire, its sequelae and the healing that was needed. The perspective that many people held gave them the ability to comprehend the event and to feel motivated to move forward with the healing process.

## 7. Healing: An Ecology of Place

Skolimowski (1993) seems sympathetic to the notion of humans coming to live with nature whilst letting it be. In his latest book he suggests that we develop a sense of the world as a sanctuary, because this immediately alters the role of anyone who dwells there to that of guardian or in his words “a shepherd, a responsible priest who maintains the sanctuary” (1993: 6). In addition, it creates a sense that the world is then a caring and spiritual place, and if this is deeply felt then the only possible way to act in the world is with reverence.

Skolimowski goes further, suggesting that the universe will become whatever the guardians determine. He argues:

Treat it like a machine and it becomes a machine. Treat it like a divine place and it becomes a divine place. Treat it indifferently and ruthlessly and it becomes an indifferent ruthless place. Treat it with love and care and it becomes a loving and caring place.

This argument clearly indicates that living in 'right relations' in the universe is to live in reverence, or in Skolimowski's (1993: 7) words “empathy fused with reverence”. Living with reverence on the earth is to watch, notice, and live in heightened contact. In the present study, an unequivocal turning point came with the re-greening of the bush and the return of birds and animals. When this occurred people in the community started to believe that reconstruction was really possible. The study strongly suggests that the heightened contact that occurred once people noticed the regenerating environment, was intrinsic to the repatterning that enabled them to begin relocating spirit in the new place, that is re-establishing their sense of place.

If we took Skolimowski's position we would accept suffering as inevitable to the human condition, and that through suffering we have opportunities to develop wisdom. Suffering is not therefore to be avoided, but to be embraced as a necessary component of our lives and our evolutionary development.

Suffering should be minimised, but it is through suffering that humans come to know the meaning of an individual life, gain a sense of the human condition, and develop compassion.

Compassion in the ecological postmodern thought of those such as Birch (1993) and Griffin (1988), comes from knowing suffering, but not only the suffering of one or more humans: it engages with the suffering of all things. From the Skolimowskian perspective, human suffering is not seen as more nor less significant than the suffering of any other creature or indeed the universe, in its present state of human induced devastation. The task of humans is to live in wisdom, in right relations, in harmony and balance, with all else in the cosmos. There is this ecological sense of deep spiritual connection, sometimes overtly expressed, sometimes unspoken but clearly significant for all the people interviewed in this study. These people, who chose to remain after the fires destroyed so much that was dear in their lives, did so out of a love of the environment. Most spoke of their love of the ocean and the bushland, the flora and the fauna of the area: the heath, the wattle, and the native birds. There is a clear sense of nature affecting some deep essence, what we might call an individual soul. For one woman, a spiritual connection with the universe was clear when she said:

I can always remember as a child a connection with the sea. I like the horizon in particular. I feel very much at home by ocean beaches, I know them, I feel confident around them. That would be my connection...the ocean, the sand, the tranquillity. I always felt a certain freedom down here and also... I knew my place. I always feel humble when I'm walking on the beach and with the sea coming in it always reminds me of where you are in the world and not to...I suppose to think of yourself as over important.

Not unexpectedly then, was the discovery that by far the most significant factor to which people attributed their recovery was the return of the environment.

The claims of Skolimowski, out lined above, recall the relationship between person and place that is emerging in a wide range of Christian (Dowd 1991; McFague 1993; Green 1994; Oelschlaeger 1994; Derr, Nash & Neuhaus 1997), Jewish (Bernstein 1998) Asian and other religious writings (Rockefeller & Elder 1992; Kinsley 1996). Indeed, it has been a traditional feature of a number of Asian religions, notably Buddhism. Addressing Zen Buddhists, Codiga (1990) agrees that contemporary disequilibrium can be ameliorated through the rediscovery of a deeply felt sense of place, and suggests that Zen practice simultaneously develops a quintessential sense of place. He believes that, this sense of place, “the feeling that you have for where you live, is ultimately a recognition of selflessness in the local ecology”, and adds that “it is our relationship with the local ecology that desperately needs rehabilitating” (1990: 106-7). Furthermore, “A sense of place has practical, metaphysical, and political implications”, and the aim should be to live “a life that is congruent with the local ecology” (Codiga, 1990: 107).

In other words, developing and regaining a sense of place is intrinsically healing, and we are forced to return to our earlier question: how do we cultivate a sense of place? The advice Codiga (1990: 109-110) gives is that we are cultivating a sense of place when we study the local history, language, customs, and farming methods of those who dwelt there long ago, when we collect specimens of leaves and flowers, follow local politics, and recycle papers and cans, when we learn where our tap water come from and where the garbage goes, when we know where the sun first appears on the horizon in June and how it is different in December, and when we drive into the city and learn to discern which way is north. He recognizes the reflexive nature of the relationship, and adds that one’s place cultivates one’s self too. This realisation is missing from Tuan’s (1979: 385) otherwise finely drawn description of place as “a unique entity, a ‘special ensemble’ [with] a history and meaning.... incarnat[ing] the experiences and aspirations of a people ... a reality to be

clarified and understood from the perspective of the people who give it meaning”.

Celebration of nature as a healing force was evident in this study, in the ways in which people went into the bushland, walking through the burnt forests and feeling deep joy in the first traces of re-greening, in the rare orchids that germinated through the intense heat of the fire, at the wild heath and fragrant freesias that bloomed everywhere. People photographed such images, often enlarging and framing them, hanging them on their walls where years later they still hang as a testimony to resilience. One woman in particular used the framed picture that she hung over her piano as inspiration to create what she called her ‘Lyric Suite’, a melody that she played over and over, committing it to memory as a symbol of this place that she loved. Perhaps there is a trace of defiance in her action, a feeling that something committed to memory is not at the mercy of a whim of nature. And the memories are beautiful, although perhaps bittersweet.

The power of nature, and the sense that they was caught up in a vast cosmic cycle of decay and regeneration, contributed to the healing process. A woman spoke of seeing the first green shoot: she was sitting in her home, the only one left in her area, looking out at all the black.

I went out there for some reason and looked across and saw a piece of green leaf coming through on a dead tree and that was when I said, 'Right, that's it, I'm just going to get on now, nature's taken over and starting to all come back, there's nothing to worry about, just go and get on'. And that's what I did.

This woman spoke of going over to touch this new green shoot and of hugging the tree and weeping with the joy of nature coming back. She had never thought deeply about, let alone articulated, such a sense of connectedness prior to the fire. Since the fire she has come to know and understand the deep meanings that nature has for her.

## Concluding Comments

Returning to the insights offered by Buddhism, Lama Anagarika Govinda teaches that one cannot “moralise about nature or ... extrapolate our notion of ethics to the natural world” (in Weber, 1986: 41). Bushfires are not a matter of justice, and have nothing to do with Karma. Natural forces are neither good nor bad, and neither just nor unjust. Like Skolimowski, Lama Govinda reminds us that suffering is the lot of humanity and that to live a life free of suffering would rob one of the opportunity to learn about compassion.

In the study to which we have referred in this paper (Cox 1996), where such a profound disruption to the dwelling place occurred, healing was found to be contingent upon, and coterminus with, the healing of the local environment, or ‘place’. It was found in this study that the healing of the ‘place’ was in a symbiotic relationship with the healing of the people who dwelt in it. The beauty of this place in Australia did not disappear with the devastation but took on a new appearance. Some residents saw the beauty that exists in nature regardless of human aesthetic ascriptions, and so even the burned bushland had restorative power.

Whenever things got too much for one of the relief Social Workers in the period after Ash Wednesday, she would lock her caravan, get in the car take a brief drive around the forest, drinking in the peacefulness, which would nourish her spirit enough to go on with her work. Similarly, a Red Cross manager described going to the top of a mountain after the fire, when it was completely burnt out. She said:

It was very eerie but there was great strength to be there, like the trees are so insignificant to the earth, they will grow again. It was the earth: still there; still strong; still under your feet. And the paths were still there, the road was still there. That was magnificent. And I went up there when it was brilliant sunshine and I could hear the crack of the blackened trees as the timber had heated and expanded, I could

hear these enormous cracks on a very quiet day, just sitting there listening to it. There was no rustling of leaves because there weren't any leaves. And then to go there when the fog was in and it was very eerie, very ethereal being there with that lovely fog in amongst the trees, that really ... I was really captured by that; it was fabulous.

Even in this scarred place, peace and healing could be found.

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