

# Foundations of Conduct: A Theory of Values and Its Implications for Environmentalism

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In their effort to emphasize the positive role of nature in our lives, environmental thinkers have tended to downplay or even to ignore the negative aspects of our experience with nature and, even when acknowledging them, have had little to offer by way of psychologically and spiritually productive ways of dealing with them. The idea that the experience of value begins with the experience of *existential shame*—arising from awareness of the limitations that define the self—needs to be explored. The primary purpose of the “technologies of the imagination”—myth, symbol, ritual and the arts—is to provide a passage through this shame to the experience of values such as community, meaning, beauty, and the sacred and, through these experiences, to inscribe them into conscience. The implications of this idea for environmental thinking and practice can be explored in two areas involving strong engagement with nature: ecological restoration and the production and eating of food. An environmentalism that fails to provide productive ways of dealing with existential shame may well prove inadequate to the task of providing means for achieving a healthy, sustainable relationship between humans and the rest of nature.

“No important change in ethics,” Aldo Leopold wrote more than sixty years ago, “was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct,” he continued, “lies in the fact that religion and philosophy have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial.”<sup>1</sup>

The question, of course, is just how to effect changes in loyalties, affections, and convictions, which we will call *values*. If, as Leopold acknowledged, values are

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<sup>1</sup> Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *A Sand County Almanac, with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), p. 246.

the indispensable foundation of conduct, without which any ethic, however skillfully formulated, is no more than a tinkling brass, it is crucial to know where they come from. How can a group of people change their values and then operationalize them by inscribing them into consciences? Leopold recognized the urgency of these questions, and addressed them in a number of his writings. His ideas about this crucial matter are perhaps best summed up in his “Conservation Esthetic,” in which he proposed that valuing of land develops more or less naturally through stages of sensibility, beginning with a desire to collect trophies and culminating in the deeper understanding and appreciation of land acquired through the practice of land husbandry.<sup>2</sup>

That was two-thirds of a century ago. Much of environmental thinking and practice since then have focused on the experience of nature as *a*—if not *the*—key to the formation of values friendly to environmental conservation.<sup>3</sup> This thinking, however, overlooks the difficulties and disincentives we might well suppose are inherent in the experience of any kind of value. Beauty, for example, is a fine thing. Pretty much everyone approves of it as a high-level good. So why doesn’t everyone organize their lives around it? Similarly, community, the other of the two higher values on which Leopold founded his land ethic, is widely regarded as a good thing. But actual communities are often hotbeds of rivalry, resentment, and dissension. They are also prone to—and often even defined by—exclusion, clannishness and hostility to outsiders.

This being the case, thinking of our environment, or of nature generally, as “a community to which we belong,” in no way resolves our problem. Rather, it is the problem or, more accurately, a way of framing the problem. Indeed, we might suppose that it is only in a society in which the institutions of community are much diminished, and the experience of community has become so attenuated that most have little sense of the irreducible, unavoidable emotional difficulties it entails, that the idea of the frictionless expansion of community to include ever widening circles of members as suggested by thinkers such as Leopold and, more recently, Peter Singer and Roderick Nash,<sup>4</sup> could be taken seriously as a way of solving our problems. That will require more than the expansion of community-light. It will have to go beyond a romantic embrace of Gaia, or the social equivalent of the accumulation of hundreds of “friends” on a Facebook page. It will require us to

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 180–95.

<sup>3</sup> An influential recent example is Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), p. 111; Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). In sociology and political philosophy the concept of community has a long and controversial history that belies its axiomatic status for environmental ethics. For a recent overview, see Gerard Delanty, *Community*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). For a critical response to Leopold’s idea of the extension of community to include the entire biotic community, see Simon Hailwood, *How to be a Green Liberal: Nature, Value, and Liberal Philosophy* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004). See especially p. 42.

come to terms with the trouble and emotional inconvenience that are inherent in any human relationship, and that, as the price we have to pay for the experience of values such as beauty, community, meaning, and the sacred are the real root of our difficulties.

All this raises some important questions: what does a value such as community or beauty actually mean in concrete, practical terms? How are such values achieved? And at what cost?

In this article we propose that the basis for community with nonhuman nature is not simply a heightened appreciation of its abundant goodness or intrinsic value—though that is no doubt important—but rather a deliberate, mindful confrontation with the morally and emotionally troubling aspects of our relationship with it. What we have in mind are negative aspects of experience that lie outside the domain of morality and ethics and that can neither be avoided nor alleviated by right behavior. Through art, ritual, and other technologies of the imagination, however, these experiences can be transmuted into complex images that reveal the beauty of life as inseparable from—indeed, integral to—its tragic contradictions and limitations. Thus, almost paradoxically, we believe that the widespread realization of positive values of community and beauty may depend on finding ways to deal more openly and productively with negative emotions such as shame and disgust. We are aware that this proposal runs against the grain of modern society in two important respects: first, it highlights emotions that are frequently dismissed or disparaged as primitive or unhealthy; and second, it calls for increased public engagement with ritual and art forms that have been systematically devalued and even derided. But for these very reasons we believe that it offers a fresh perspective on problems that have long frustrated the environmental movement.

From this perspective, the sentimental idea of community (and values generally) that environmental thinkers have by and large taken for granted is simply inadequate to the task of actually creating value or extending valuing beyond mere love of self. Shame, elicited by awareness of the other, takes us out of ourselves, revealing us to ourselves as objects in the gaze of that other. It is, Sartre writes “. . . shame of self; it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging.”<sup>5</sup> This troubled realization, then, is the beginning of relationship, including one’s relationship with oneself, as well as one’s most immediate human relationships, which naturally entail “negative” as well as “positive” emotions. The purpose of etiquette, myth, fairy tale, and ritual is to provide ways of dealing with these emotions productively, the “product” being the experience of value.

Our idea is that this issue pertains to our relationships with other species and with the environment as well. And if that is the case, then the activities associated with the production and use of resources and the various modes of apprehension and appreciation that define that relationship ought to be undertaken not merely as technical and economic processes, or even as merely personal experiences, but as

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Citadel Press, 1966), p. 237.

performances—that is, works of art or rituals. These performances, moreover, may have a crucial role to play in negotiating a healthy relationship with the environment and generating the values that emerge from such a relationship.

We take these ideas principally from ideas the literary critics Frederick Turner and James Hans explored in the early 1990s.<sup>6</sup> These writings were not directed explicitly at environmental thinkers, and the ideas outlined in them have attracted little attention in environmental circles. Nevertheless, we find them both intriguing and relevant. We believe that they provide a valuable perspective on the environmental thinking of the past century or so and that they not only throw new light on a number of environmental problems but suggest practical ways of dealing with them. For this reason, we believe that they have important implications for the development of an environmentalism that is philosophically more coherent, psychologically and spiritually more productive, politically more robust and ecologically more effective.

We recognize that these ideas are inconsistent with ideas about relationship and about art—especially ritual—that have prevailed in the West over the past several centuries, and that this is especially so of the liberal, Protestant tradition that has played a leading role in the shaping of environmental thought.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, there are good reasons for taking them seriously.

Environmental thinking and rhetoric tend to emphasize the positive aspects of our experience of nature—delight, wonder, esthetic appreciation, curiosity, compassion, sympathy, and so forth. The idea of biophilia or the discovery of mirror neurons are suggested as the basis for a harmonious relationships with other creatures. These are interesting and important ideas, but experience gives us no reason to believe that they provide an adequate basis for a respectful, generous relationship with a nature composed of self-interested creatures defined by their limitations. Indeed, if relationships naturally entail irreducible contradictions and emotional difficulties, it is only reasonable to suppose that these, and not mere human indifference, willfulness, or transgression are the real roots of our environmental difficulties. Following Turner and Hans, we underline the emotionally and psychologically challenging way humans experience the world apart from—or prior to—ethical and moral considerations, and the necessary role ritual and the arts play in transforming these challenges into beneficial values.

Ritual and the arts are practical in a way that appeals to moral values or ethical principles are not because they offer a set of tools for actually creating the values

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<sup>6</sup> Frederick Turner, *Beauty: The Value of Values* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991) and *The Culture of Hope: A New Birth of the Classical Spirit* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), pp. 44–58; James S. Hans, *The Origins of the Gods* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). William Jordan III discusses these ideas and their relevance to the practice of ecological restoration in *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) esp. pp. 46–53.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Worster. “John Muir and the Roots of American Environmentalism,” in *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 184–202.

that underlie an ethic and, more generally, for negotiating the “internal change” that, as Leopold noted, necessarily underlies any change in ethics. By insisting on the importance of shared, corporate, and even structured behavior in getting to the experience of value, they offer an alternative to what essayist Kathleen Norris called “the tyranny of personal experience,” countering “our tendency to see individual experience as sufficient for formulating a vision of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Art—broadly understood to include myth, symbol, story, and ritual as well as the various fine arts—provides a way to negotiate relationships and shape human subjectivity in a mindful, participatory, deliberative way. For environmentalists rightly wary of authority and yet insistent on radical changes in ideas, values, and beliefs if modern societies are to become sustainable, the crucial importance of practicing what might be called the ecological arts is obvious.

Finally, since the arts are practical—that is, they are something that we do—we can explore their value as contexts for the creation of meaning and value, not just by arguing about them, but by trying them out in the context of activities that entail a strong engagement with nature—growing a crop, for example, sharing a meal or restoring a patch of prairie or woodland—as several of us and a number of our colleagues have already begun to do. This essay is the first of what we anticipate will be a series of publications reporting the results of this work.

### BEYOND KITSCH

Challenging—or exotic, or retrograde—as these ideas may seem in certain respects, there is a good deal of support for them in the literature reflecting the experience of a wide range of cultures. These include the traditional and pre-modern cultures that are often held up as exemplars of a healthy relationship with the environment. But we also find support for these ideas in the philosophy, art, and religion of a wide range of cultures, and in the work of environmental thinkers such as Emerson and Thoreau, Loren Eiseley, Annie Dillard, Holmes Rolston, III, Lisa Sideris, Delores LaChapelle, and Wendell Berry, all of whom have explored the experience of nature in ways that are consistent with the shame-and-performance theory of values elaborated here.

The theory of values we are proposing entails five assertions:

- (1) that human experience of the world is irreducibly problematic;
- (2) that this situation entails emotions such as fear, horror, disgust, and—centrally for Turner and Hans—shame;
- (3) that this shame is inextricably linked to the experience of value;
- (4) that though we may negotiate the passage “through shame to beauty” more or less spontaneously, ritual and the arts provide powerful tools for doing this safely, systematically, and in community with others; and

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<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p. 100.

- (5) that modern skepticism with respect to the arts (and in particular, ritual) limits our ability to achieve a sustainable, gracious, and value-rich relationship with the environment.

The basic idea here is that shame is a key element—a sort of leading voice—in a complex ensemble of emotional responses to life, that a successful, value-rich life depends on the productive management of these emotions, and that “art,” broadly understood, plays a crucial role in carrying out this work. As we have noted, these are not novel ideas. Both Hans and Turner present them as part of human inheritance, reflected in ideas, practices, and institutions that date back to the earliest records of human experience and are evident in varying degrees and various ways in all cultures. They do, however, raise compelling questions, not the least of which is this one: even supposing that these ideas are sound, what relevance do they have for post-modern, post-industrial, urban-oriented, culturally diverse, individualistic, wired, ritual-wary, and pluralistic societies? But first things first.

We reject the notion of an innocent nature set off against a corrupt species—or culture—that is peculiarly at odds with it. Our premise is that nature, being at odds with itself in the very act of creation, is saturated with contradictions and ambiguities that a self-conscious creature naturally finds deeply troubling. Turner points out, for example, that the mythology and rituals of traditional and pre-modern peoples are rich in depictions and reenactments of the troubling trade-offs, not between good and evil but between goods, that their authors rightly perceive as integral to creation.<sup>9</sup> Darwin’s account of a creation driven by accident and unthinking discrimination is no exception. A wide range of societies acknowledge these trade-offs through ritual sacrifice, experienced as a reenactment of the creative murder at the heart of creation. Eucharist is the prime example in the Christian tradition. In their Sundance, the Plains Indians also renew the world through a self-mutilation,<sup>10</sup> a ritual that early European observers likened to the reenactment of the Passion of Christ in the Mass.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Australian Aborigines understand the world to be in continual decline, subject to a sort of ontological entropy, dependent on humans for periodic renewal through rituals that entail killing and eating the totem species, an acknowledgement of membership in the land community—and so of complicity in the scandal of creation.<sup>12</sup> The Iglulik shaman insists that “. . . life’s greatest danger . . . lies in the fact that man’s food consists entirely of souls.”<sup>13</sup> And a school of

<sup>9</sup> Turner, *Beauty*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Eppes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).

<sup>11</sup> For additional examples from a wide range of traditional cultures, see Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God* (New York: Penguin, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965), p. 337.

<sup>13</sup> Kaj Birket-Smith, *The Eskimos* (London: Methuen, 1959), p. 166.

psychologists proposes that unease in response to the contradictions and paradoxes of life is part of the human condition from the moment of birth.<sup>14</sup>

The horror of a self-mutilating world arises not from evil—none of the experiences mentioned above entail moral wrongdoing—but from apprehension of nature itself. As a species, we are reluctant to confront this truth, to know things for what they are. Melville's Ahab, maddened by his awareness of this radical gap in apprehension, demands that we "strike through the mask" of appearances.<sup>15</sup> And Emily Dickinson reflects that

. . . nature is a stranger yet;  
The ones that cite her most  
Have never passed her haunted house,  
Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those who know her not  
Is helped by the regret  
That those who know her know her less  
The nearer her they get.<sup>16</sup>

"Had we the first intimation of the Definition of Life," she remarks elsewhere, "the calmest of us would be lunatics."<sup>17</sup> Neither Melville nor Dickinson contributed to what became the canon of environmental thinking—that is a mistake we believe should be corrected. But on the direct path to American environmental thinking, even the milder Emerson turns, in his second essay on "Nature," from a rhapsody on the charms of nature to a reflection on the "contention" and "overfaith" he finds not only in human relations, but also in nature. "In like manner," he writes, "there is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on, but arrives nowhere; keeps no faith with us. All promise outruns the performance."<sup>18</sup> More recently, we find similar acknowledgement of the more troubling aspects of nature in Annie Dillard's reflections on predation, injury, and death<sup>19</sup>; in Gary Snyder's reflections on killing and eating<sup>20</sup>; in Paul Shepard's reflections on—indeed

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<sup>14</sup> See relevant treatments in Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1973), esp. chap. 3, The recasting of some basic psychoanalytic ideas; Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 240.

<sup>15</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Norton, 1967), chap. 36, "The Quarter Deck," p. 144.

<sup>16</sup> Emily Dickinson, "What Mystery Pervades a Well!" in Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1960), pp. 599–600.

<sup>17</sup> Emily Dickinson, *Letters* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1958), vol. 2, p. 576. Cited in Northrop Frye, *Creation and Recreation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Essays: Second Series* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1883), p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Gary Snyder, "Survival and sacrament," in *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), pp. 175–85.

idealization of—hunting<sup>21</sup>; in Holmes Rolston, III’s reflections on the “cruciform” character of a creation in which life is not only accompanied by but depends on the suffering and death of innocent victims<sup>22</sup>; and in Lisa Sideris’s indictment of Christian ecological theologians for an overly positive view of evolutionary theory, stressing the role of cooperation, community and adaptation and downplaying struggle, suffering, disease and death.<sup>23</sup> Art and literature provide a rich record of these darker experiences.<sup>24</sup>

Milan Kundera argues that art that fails to take such experiences into account is mere kitsch, defined as “the absolute denial of shit in both literal and figurative senses”—that is, shit as feces, but also as an existential scandal, not a moral failing, but a trope for the untoward, troubling—and shameful—in nature.<sup>25</sup> Kitsch is, of course, bad art, and can be expected to do only very light work in the essential task of confronting and dealing productively with the untoward dimensions of our experience of nature. Since an environmentalism, like any serious work (or play) is most comprehensively understood—and most stringently evaluated—as an art, it is crucial to ask what our various environmentalisms are doing about the “shit” we experience in nature. The question is a crucial one. Why might we suppose we *could* achieve communion with nature—and membership in the land community—by way of selective attention to the appealing, emotionally convenient, and marketable aspects of our experience without coming to terms with those aspects of life that frighten, repel, or shame us?

From this perspective, the “apart from” vs. “a part of” nature dichotomy implicit both in Descartes’s thinking and in the reaction against it is not merely a Cartesian, or even a modern or Western preoccupation. If it were, then we could simply slough it off and invent a new one or adopt a perspective we like better from another of the world’s cultural traditions. If, however, humans have always had to negotiate the tension of experiencing themselves as *both* a part of nature and apart from it, this is not an option. If nature itself is fraught with conflict and contradictions and offers no condition free of emotional trouble, then there is nowhere we can go to live, as Barry Lopez puts it, “without regret.”<sup>26</sup> *We* are troubled because *nature* is troubled. Creation is the generation of differences—differences between species, between selves, and between the body and a consciousness that experiences itself as transcendent—and these differences make a difference, troubling consciousness at the deepest levels, evoking emotions such as fear, envy, resentment, disgust, and shame.

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Shepard, *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973).

<sup>22</sup> Holmes Rolston, III, *Genes, Genesis and God: Values and Their Origins in Natural and Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 306.

<sup>23</sup> Lisa Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Quoted by Hans, *Origins*, p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> Berry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 178.

## ASHAMED BEFORE THE EARTH

But why shame? The minute the question is asked, at least part of the answer is obvious. Consider your own experience. Surely everyone has had the experience of feeling shame on an occasion unrelated to transgression of any kind. Injury, sickness, and disability are common occasions for shame, as are nakedness, sex, death, ignorance, and ineptitude.

None of these experiences of shame can be attributed to wrongdoing. They are not guilt, the promptings of a conscience informed by moral precepts, but are the response of the self to awareness of its limits. We define shame as the painful awareness of shortcomings and limits that arises not from, or not primarily or necessarily from, wrongdoing, but from the human condition. That is why shame, as psychologist David Shapiro points out, is more likely to be experienced by the innocent victims of torture than by the sinning perpetrators.<sup>27</sup>

This is true of victims generally, including victims of exclusion, bullying, and sexual abuse. Psychologists have found that many of the children of victims of the September 11 attacks experienced intense shame as a result of the loss of a parent.<sup>28</sup> Soldiers report feeling what they call guilt in response to the death of comrades, even when they are not responsible—even when they were not present or in any way connected to the event.<sup>29</sup> Although these experiences are usually reported and discussed in terms of guilt, often qualified by words such as “pure” or “survivor’s,” or softened even further to “regret,” this is what we mean by shame.

What these experiences of injury, loss, and victimhood have in common is not the perpetration or apprehension of wrong, but consciousness of ourselves in a state of limitation, finitude, or exclusion. The soldier whose comrade was killed by artillery has done nothing wrong, but is made painfully aware of his or her limitations: “If only I had been there . . .” (but no one can be everywhere, and that is the shame). Likewise, of course, the September 11 children have done nothing wrong. On the contrary, they are the innocent victims of a wrong, shamed by the vulnerability, dependence, and difference dramatized by a parent’s death and their exclusion from the presumed happy lives of full families—an experience that has nothing to do with moral transgression. It is what happens when we see ourselves from the outside, as pitiful, limited objects. Legal philosopher Paul Kahn suggests that the biblical story of the Fall of humankind, though cast as the result of a transgression—an act of disobedience—is more fundamentally the realization of limits. After the Fall, he writes,

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<sup>27</sup> David Shapiro, “The Tortured, Not the Torturers, are Ashamed,” *Social Research* 70 (2003): 1131–48.

<sup>28</sup> Wanda P. Fremont, “Childhood Reactions to Terrorism-Induced Trauma: A Review of the Past Ten Years,” *Journal of the American Academy of Childhood and Adolescent Psychology* 43, no. 4 (2004): 381–92; Joy J. Burnham, “Children’s Fears: A Pre-9/11 and Post-9/11 Comparison Using the American Fear Survey Schedule for Children,” *Journal of Counseling and Development* 85 (2007): 461–66.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Sherman, “The Moral Logic of Survivor Guilt,” *New York Times Online*, 3 July 2011; and “Shame and Responsibility,” *New York Times Online*, 25 July 2011.

The subject experiences himself as already fallen because he always experiences himself as a project that is only partially accomplished and that has already partially failed. One never finds the self in a state of perfection to be maintained but always in a state of yearning, a state of dissatisfaction with the present. This is the existential condition of shame.<sup>30</sup>

This is what anthropologist Ernest Becker called “pure guilt”—that is, “guilt” without wrongdoing, which of course is not guilt at all, but a euphemism for shame.<sup>31</sup> The distinction is crucial, and if Turner and Hans are right, then blurring it handicaps, if it does not disable entirely, a society in the essential task of dealing productively with the shame that stands as both barrier and bridge to the formation of relationships and the creation of value.<sup>32</sup> To distinguish this shame more clearly from guilt, we are calling it “existential shame”—shame, that is, of being. “I am ashamed,” as Sartre wrote, of “what I am.”<sup>33</sup>

This existential dimension suggests why shame may be the key to communion with nature. Awareness of difference and otherness shames me simply because the other is different from me—that is, has attributes and capabilities I lack. Nature, whether construed by the author of Genesis or by Darwin, is nothing if not a fountain of difference and otherness. This being the case, why wouldn’t it shame us?<sup>34</sup> The “culprit,” as Emily Dickinson suggests, is “*life*.”<sup>35</sup> The Navajo priest goes even farther, confessing shame explicitly as he begins a recital of the story of creation with a veritable litany of shame:

I am ashamed before the earth;  
I am ashamed before the heavens;  
I am ashamed before the dawn;  
I am ashamed before the evening twilight. . . .<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Kahn, *Out of Eden: Adam and Eve and the Problem of Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 48.

<sup>31</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1973), p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret Atwood offers a fascinating discussion of the confusion of shame and guilt in the Biblical tradition in her book *Payback: Debt and The Shadow Side of Wealth* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2008) pp. 42.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Citadel Press, 1966), p. 197. Cited in Jordan, *Sunflower Forest*, p. 46.

<sup>34</sup> This need not be—indeed is not—a gloomy perspective. Comedy as well as tragedy are among the productive responses to the shame of creation. For a delightful riff on the account of creation in *Genesis*, see Paul Simms, “God’s Blog,” *The New Yorker*, 8 August 2011, p. 27. For a discussion of a traditional culture’s account, in a comic mode, of what Fred Turner has called the “amateurishness” of creation, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), pp. 80–81.

<sup>35</sup> In her poem, “Surgeons Must be Very Careful,” in Johnson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> Margot Astrov, ed., *American Indian Prose and Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1946), p. 3. Cited in David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), p. 70.

As we noted earlier, these are not isolated or idiosyncratic ideas, but are consistent with a wide range of cultural traditions and schools of thought. To take just a few conspicuous examples, the idea that humans' experience of creation is irreducibly — that is, naturally — shaming is consistent with the Buddhist idea that enlightenment begins with the acknowledgment of *dukkha* (often translated as “suffering,” but more accurately understood as awareness of “imperfection, impermanence, emptiness and insubstantiality”).<sup>37</sup> It is also consistent with the idea of “embarrassment” (arguably another euphemism for shame) that Abraham Heschel finds in Judaic thought. The fact that “We have no answer to ultimate problems,” and that “The root of any religious faith is a sense of embarrassment, of inadequacy,” gives rise to the ritual of *Yom Kippur*, the day of atonement for one's limitations and imperfections.<sup>38</sup> Despite feminism's general critique of the existentialists' emphasis on “the shame of being,” some feminist theologians (Serene Jones and Letty Russell, for example<sup>39</sup>) have recognized a troubling awareness of biological or created finitude as integral aspects of human experience.

Given a choice, people will always prefer guilt to shame because, while shame is unavoidable, they can control their guilt by behaving themselves, but this confusion of emotions may be a mistake, an emotional indulgence we can't afford. Shame is outside of our control. It is the price of entry to the human odyssey. To deny that we must pay this price if we are to lead full lives is to deserve C. S. Lewis indictment, leveled at modern Western societies as a whole, of emotional incompetence.<sup>40</sup> Turner and Hans suggest that the denial of shame and its confusion with guilt is an emotional error that limits our ability to build healthy relationships with each other, with our gods, and with the rest of nature, and to experience or generate the values that arise from these relationships.

Shame is often regarded as a “primitive” emotion, a kind of primal, pre-intellectual substitute for conscience that ancient societies used to control individuals, as indeed they sometimes did. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, for example, admits the reality of shame, but suggests that it is too dangerous to work with — a kind of emotional radioactivity.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in the view of thinkers like Turner, Hans, Kahn, and Becker, shame *is* like radioactivity in the sense that it is elemental, an ineradicable part of human experience arising from the apprehension of finitude, just as radiation

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<sup>37</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Susannah Heschel, ed., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 147. See also Heschel's “Depth Theology,” *Cross Currents* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1960): 317–25. Thanks to Michael Rosenzweig for providing these references.

<sup>39</sup> Serene Jones, *Cartographies of Grace: Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974).

<sup>40</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons and Co., 1978), p. 15.

<sup>41</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Cheshire Calhoun, “An Apology for Moral Shame,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12 (2004): 127–46.

arises from the death of atoms. That is precisely why it is better for a society to acknowledge shame so that it might be shaped and sublimated.

This, however, does not mean using shame to manipulate others, or as a motive for behavior. Guilt serves as a motive for right behavior because it is a bad feeling that we can avoid by right behavior, and shame can be used the same way, but only to the extent that it arises from apprehension of our moral failings and limitations and so accompanies guilt. Existential shame, however, is unavoidable, so that arousing it in another by calling attention to involuntary weaknesses, failings, or incompetences is at best unproductive, and at worst promotes bad feelings that may lead to the development of neuroses such as hypochondria or vices such as envy.<sup>42</sup> What we have in mind is not the manipulative use of shame to control behavior or even to inculcate an ethic. It is the recognition and exploitation of shame as a gateway to the values that *underlie* an ethic and inform a conscience, without which an ethic, however crafted, is a useless abstraction. Obviously, it is an unappealing gateway. What can make it appealing is the art or ritual that, as Turner writes, “can be a passport . . . that allows us to enter and to leave” the magic world in which the work of value creation takes place.<sup>43</sup>

### TECHNOLOGIES OF THE IMAGINATION

This leads to our second question: if the poet, the priest, and the shaman are attuned to the apprehension and management of shame, what role do the technologies of the imagination they deploy—ritual, myth, symbol, and art, which for convenience we call “art”—play in this psycho-spiritual craft?

Modernity, concomitant with its project of shame denial,<sup>44</sup> tends to regard ritual in particular, if not art generally, as a way of celebrating events, relationships, circumstances and other aspects of experience by drawing attention to and highlighting what is fundamentally a happy state of affairs. Aldo Leopold, for example, describes five steps on the pathway to higher valuation of nature as a form of “play,” reviving “a drama formerly inherent in daily life,”<sup>45</sup> but says nothing about

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<sup>42</sup> For insightful—and entertaining—reflections on the consequences of confusing guilt and shame, see George Orwell’s reflections on his experience at an English preparatory school, “Such, Such were the Joys . . .,” in *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), pp. 9–54, especially his opening account of the authorities’ response to bedwetting, which led him to the conviction that “. . . bed-wetting was (a) wicked and (b) outside my control” so that “. . . sin was not necessarily something that you did: it might be something that happened to you.”

<sup>43</sup> Frederick Turner, “Performed Being,” in *Natural Classicism: Essays on Literature and Science* (New York: Paragon House, 1985), p. 30.

<sup>44</sup> We do not mean to imply that this tendency to deny shame rather than confronting it and providing productive ways of dealing with it is unique to modernity. It may be that all complex, stratified societies tend to legitimate their power structures through institutions that obscure the experience of shame, which is beyond society’s control—and in this sense irremediably “wild”—by emphasizing moral systems that are amenable to regulation and policing.

<sup>45</sup> Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, p. 283.

the existential contradictions we encounter at each of these steps when we pursue them mindfully. Of course, such experiences entail delight and celebration. But they also involve encounters with existential difficulties, as the “peril” embedded in the word “experience” itself suggests. Even a birthday party, after all, marks the ineluctable passage of time and the celebrant’s progress toward death. Every form of land husbandry, from row-crop agriculture to the most altruistically conceived ecological restoration, is in large part the business of excluding—or killing—some members of a community of innocent, valuable creatures in favor of others.

Indeed, art, from high-church ritual to slap-stick comedy, commonly emerges from just those occasions on which humans encounter what we might call the “facts of life” in especially salient, troubling—and shameful—ways. A classic example is the business of killing for food and sharing the spoils with others. Hence, the admonition of the Iglulik Shaman we quoted earlier. Or Thoreau’s comment about the “fine lady” who indulges a taste for jelly made of a calf’s foot, and his own experience as an angler, reflecting that “The wonder is . . . how you and I, can live this slimy, beastly life, eating and drinking.”<sup>46</sup> Hence, there are sacrifice, Eucharist, and what Margaret Visser calls “the rituals of dinner,” as ways of dealing with the “beastly” aspects of life.<sup>47</sup>

While Thoreau’s comment reads like an expression of disgust, we see disgust itself as an inflection of a shame that arises not from—or not only from—the violence we perpetrate against our brother and sister creatures, or our sympathy for them, but from the way the whole process of getting, preparing, sharing, and eating food and disposing of the resulting waste—including shit—brings home in an especially poignant way our radical dependence both on each other and on the creatures whose bodies (and souls) compose our food. More abstractly, it dramatizes our limitations and the shameful necessity of choosing between goods in a cosmos experienced as filled with things of inherent value.

Similarly, both coming of age and death challenge the sovereignty of the self at the most fundamental level. The whole complex of occasions associated with reproduction, from courtship through birth and child rearing, bring home to us the inability of the self, whether male or female, to accomplish this essential function independently.

All of these are more or less universal occasions for the creation of ritual and art. The purpose of the art that grows out of these experiences is not merely (or not only) to celebrate them, since many of them, notably killing and death, hardly present themselves to a healthy imagination as occasions for celebration. Their purpose, rather, is to deal with an experience that is emotionally troubling in a way that can’t be managed in literal terms, but only in a way that, somehow—we might say magically—brings about what Robert Frost called the “momentary stay

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<sup>46</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1937), p. 196.

<sup>47</sup> Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).

against confusion” that is the aim of a certain kind of poem.<sup>48</sup> This is what Jung had in mind when he suggested that the unconscious struggles that harry our lives require transformation into symbols and symbol systems through art, mythology, ritual and the interpretation of dreams.<sup>49</sup>

In this view, then, ritual and the arts serve not just to celebrate, to entertain, or to distract us from the troubling aspects of experience, but more fundamentally to provide means of confronting and dealing with them—not by creating a new justificatory framework that smoothes over the jagged edges of limit and contingency but, on the contrary, by sharpening the participant’s awareness of them in a way that brings him or her to the experience of beauty understood as the “highest integrative level of understanding” of creation,<sup>50</sup> and perhaps as close as a human can come to knowing the truth of things and achieving communion with creation. Thus, art critic Jed Perl quotes historian Johan Huizinga’s comment that play, which for him characterizes the arts generally, “. . . creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection.”<sup>51</sup>

Art that is *not* kitsch, then, works not by prettifying experience, or by covering up or distracting us from the troubling elements in it, but just the opposite—by dramatizing them, bringing them into the foreground of consciousness. It does not hide or downplay the business of the barnyard, the kitchen, the bathroom, or the bedroom, but focuses on it, making public what is routinely carried on out of sight, so that we can experience it collectively and deal with it productively. Thus, Turner writes, referring to a classic example of ritual art:

Sacrifice transforms a shameful act, the public killing of a living being or its substitute, through collective acknowledgement of our condition and recognition of the nature of the universe, into an experience of beauty.<sup>52</sup>

Sacrifice, in this view, is not only a giving up or a paying back, but a way of focusing the shame that arises from the experience of otherness and dependence that relationships always entail. The getting and sharing of food, for example, dramatizes our shameful dependence on each other—the creatures we eat, of course, but also the people with whom we acquire and share it. It is also a daily, non-voluntary participation in the scandal of creation itself and the tragic irreversibility of time and change. If, as Emerson suggests, “The question of beauty takes us out of surfaces to

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. vi.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Rinda West, *Out of the Shadow: Ecopsychology, Story and Encounters with the Land* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> Turner, *Beauty*, p. 59.

<sup>51</sup> Jed Perl, “Playing for Keeps,” *The New Republic* 242, no. 4 (2011): 23; Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 29. See also chap. 10, “Play-Forms in Art,” pp. 182–97.

<sup>52</sup> Turner, *Culture of Hope*, p. 48.

thinking of the foundations of things,”<sup>53</sup> this is just the kind of occasion on which we would expect to find it. Hence, Wallace Stevens’s often quoted observation that “Death is the mother of beauty,”<sup>54</sup> or the Hispanic idea of *duende*—artistic inspiration in the presence of death,<sup>55</sup> the ultimate occasion for shame. If death is the mother of beauty, art is its midwife. Art delivers to us the beauty—the truth—dramatized by the killing that precedes every meal, spun out of shame by rituals such as the *Intichiuma* of the Australian Aborigines, the Christian’s Eucharist or—an even greater challenge to modern sentimentality—a well-performed bullfight. These rituals dramatize the killing of an innocent victim—innocent because the killing is neither punishment nor retribution.

This model is also consistent with our more everyday experiences of beauty, often represented by tropes such as flowers, sunsets, and tokens of youthful radiance and vitality. These may be beautiful in a more or less conventional, sentimental sense. But they are also emblems of transience and so evoke with special poignancy the essential link between limitation, shame, and beauty. To borrow from literary historian Robert Pogue Harrison, beauty is the experience of a freedom that emerges from “the knowledge that one has already lost what there is to lose and that life is therefore given, or for-given, gratuitously.”<sup>56</sup>

If beauty is ultimately the product of performance—the ritual in the temple, the display in the arena or the theater, the love song, sonnet, or haiku that springs from a meditation on transience and the “wastes of time”—it may be true for other values as well, values that Turner regards as inflections of the experience of beauty. Thus, he suggests that meaning emerges from what he calls the commutation that is inherent in art—the self-consciously generated distance between effective action (eating a hearty lunch) and an act that generates meaning—taking ritual bits of food to consummate a sacrifice, for example. Why not eat the whole thing? Because we are doing this not to satisfy hunger but to create meaning. What we are doing in a sacrifice is expressive, significant—meaningful—precisely because and to the extent that it is not instrumentally effective. Dance, to take another example, is an inefficient way of getting from one place to another, and that is itself a signal that it is not about locomotion, but about the creation of meaning and beauty.

Lacking a robust sense of the power of art to effect “internal change,” modern environmentalism has characteristically looked to education to bring change about. But education, as usually conceived, not only focuses on knowledge and reason,

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<sup>53</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Beauty,” in *Emerson’s Complete Works*, vol. 6 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1893), p. 274.

<sup>54</sup> Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” Stanza 6, in Oscar Williams, ed., *Master Poems of the English Language* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), p. 937.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Hirsch. *The Demon and the Angel: Searching for the Source of Artistic Inspiration*. (New York: Harcourt, 2002), pp. 8–12. Thanks to William R. Jordan IV.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 221.

and only secondarily if at all on emotional states, but is inherently authoritarian. Although modernism has cast ritual in particular as a tool of oppression in the service of authority and the status quo, there are good reasons to believe that this view is not only wrong, but is itself a way of depriving citizens of one of their most effective means of bringing about change in society as well as in the hearts and minds of individuals.

Anthropologist Victor Turner called the liminal experience that he saw as integral to the ritual process “the mother of invention.”<sup>57</sup> Theologian Tom Driver, drawing in part on Victor Turner’s work, argues that “the business of religions and their rituals . . . is to effect transformations, not only of persons’ individual subjectivities, but also transformations of society and the natural world,” so that “one way of guarding the status quo against change is to deny the rationality of any expectation that rituals can do much to alter it.”<sup>58</sup> Anthropologist Roy Rappaport argues that ritual represents a kind of authority that takes shape within an assembly of those who merely assent to participate, and so has no need for “superordinate human authorities.” “It is plausible,” he writes, “to suggest that ritual . . . was the primordial means by which men, divested of genetically determined order, established the conventions by which they order themselves.”<sup>59</sup>

To the extent this is true, ritual, rather than representing an authority imposed from above, constitutes the deepest form of democratic life. A technology that deals productively with the emotions, offering a vast, diverse, and inventive repertory of means for evoking and shaping feelings through word and gesture, rhythm and pattern, certainly ought to be of interest to a culture that has achieved a deepened sense of the emotional basis of cognition in recent years,<sup>60</sup> and is increasingly concerned about finding structures and containers to control and utilize this elemental force.

## RITUAL REDUX

What are we to make of all this? More specifically—and urgently—what might we *do* with it? Might art be useful to environmentalism in ways we have overlooked or underestimated? Might it even be necessary? There are reasons to think so. Certainly rituals play important roles in the land-use and consumption practices of many traditional and pre-modern peoples. Indeed, anthropologist E. N. Anderson argues that “All traditional societies that have succeeded in managing resources

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<sup>57</sup> Victor Turner, “Symbols and Social Experience in Religious Ritual,” *Studia Missionalia* 23 (1974): 1–21.

<sup>58</sup> Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform our Lives and Our Communities* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 172, 167.

<sup>59</sup> Roy A. Rappaport, “The Obvious Aspects of Ritual,” in *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1979), p. 197.

<sup>60</sup> A good example of this interest is David Brooks, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement* (New York: Random House, 2011).

well, over time, have done it in part through religious or ritual representation of resource management.”<sup>61</sup>

We maintain that art is indispensable—the key not only to regulating resource use but to creating the values that make a human life worth living. The skepticism about the efficacy of ritual that is characteristic of modernity, and the limited repertory of rituals modern societies provide for the serious business of negotiating relationships, underlie some of our most pressing—indeed, paradigmatic—environmental problems.

A conspicuous example is the disgrace—and ecological catastrophe—of the factory farm, which creates at the center of our economy a kind of expanding black hole of unacknowledged, unresolved, and unproductive shame. Another, at the other end of the food chain, is obesity. If, as the theory we are exploring suggests, we go to our meals seeking spiritual as well as bodily sustenance, transcendent values such as community, meaning, and beauty as well as a full stomach, and if that psychological and spiritual payoff depends on ritual, then the absence of the ritual in our “food systems” constitutes a fundamental failure. Lacking the wherewithal to metabolize shame into value, we go on stuffing ourselves—eating, we might say, “bread alone.” Doing so may well serve the interests of capitalism, with its insatiable demand for consumption and growth—but it decidedly does not serve the interests of human and planetary health.

Obviously, shame is problematic. Certainly no one wants to talk about it, and the notion that our experience of creation might naturally entail such a painful, unearned emotion is one that many find offensive and even dangerous, since societies have often used shame to define the status and control the behavior of individuals, especially women and low-status groups generally. But shame is a danger only in the absence of means of dealing with it productively.<sup>62</sup>

That may be the real challenge. Modernity has been defined in part by its skepticism regarding the power of ritual, construing it as “mere” symbol or gesture, and depriving it of the ontological power—the power to make real—that humans have endowed it with for most of their history. This skepticism may make it unavailable to us as a way of dealing productively—and humanely—with existential shame.

Certainly there is a wide range of opinion about the efficacy of ritual, not only

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<sup>61</sup> E. N. Anderson, *Ecologies of the Heart: Emotion, Belief and the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 166. Roy Rappaport provides a classic account of the role of ritual in the management of a resource in his *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

<sup>62</sup> This is not to overlook the complexity of this question. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, has recently argued, in *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), that a major motive for social change is a challenge to a society’s honor—clearly an occasion for shame. On the other hand, psychologists Joseph Henrich, Steven Heine, and Ara Norenzayan have argued (in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, no. 2–3 [2010]: 61–83) that this dynamic fails in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies. The question this raises for us is whether this, to the extent it is true, renders the shame/performance idea of value irrelevant in such a society.

between high- and low-church schools of thought, but among secular observers. Rappaport's studies of traditional societies, for example, led him to regard ritual as essential to establishing obligations and so ensuring healthy relationships both within a society and between a society and its environment, and he held out hope that it might serve the same role for contemporary societies such as those of the modern and post-modern West. Ritual scholar Ronald Grimes, on the other hand, questions Rappaport's faith in ritual, chides him for his "staggeringly complex" assertions regarding its power and uses, and writes that, while Rappaport "believes he is describing the 'obvious aspects of ritual' . . . I believe he is describing long shots."<sup>63</sup> In a different vein, the theologian Catherine Pickstock notes the challenge facing anyone who aims to make serious use of ritual in a modern setting, writing that to be effective, a new liturgy (the very word, with its implication of prescribed, public ritual is a turn-off for many) "would either have to overthrow our anti-ritual modernity, or, that being impossible, devise a liturgy that refused to be enculturated in our modern habits of thought and speech."<sup>64</sup>

However daunting the challenge of fully and wisely utilizing ritual, the need for it will not go away. When we don't deliberately make our own art, others will do it for us, making us its creatures rather than its creators.<sup>65</sup> Fortunately, there are several developments that reflect growing academic interest in various modes of artistic performance in negotiating relationships. One is the emphasis on the social construction of experience, which resonates in promising ways with the ancient idea of world making by way of the arts. Another is the growth of interest in performance as a distinctive mode of human action. This includes an interest in narrative as a context in which humans explore, define, and celebrate both identities and relationships, including their relationship with nonhuman nature. While this interest does not go as far as ritual in the direction of articulating experience in concrete terms—that is, action and symbol—it is a step in that direction and away from the abstract language of ethics and philosophy generally.<sup>66</sup> The idea, proposed by Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston, that the art of etiquette might provide a bottom-up alternative to reasoning from axioms as a way of shaping an environmental ethic represents a further step in this direction.<sup>67</sup> While these thinkers have not dealt with

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<sup>63</sup> Ronald J. Grimes, "Ritual Theory and the Environment," in *The Sociological Review*, ed. Bronislaw Szerszynski, Wallace Heim, and Claire Waterton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 39, 42.

<sup>64</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: The Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 176. Cited in Jordan, *Sunflower Forest*, pp. 186–87.

<sup>65</sup> There is a serious question here about the uses of the technologies of the imagination in a WEIRD society (see n. 60, above). Advertising, for example, replaces the virtual resolution of ritual with a promised solution—the deodorant, for example, that promises to end the shame of having a smelly body—and the celebrity generated by the rituals of film and the media, a debased version of the authenticity conferred—or generated—by rituals of initiation or world renewal.

<sup>66</sup> This emphasis on ethics and neglect of the "internal dynamics" of religion, for example, is a theme of Anna Peterson's *Being Human: Ethics: Environment and Our Place in the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>67</sup> Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston, "Environmental Ethics as Environmental Etiquette," *Environmental Ethics* 21 (1999): 115–34.

the question of shame, or the idea that etiquette itself is a way of transmuting shame into value, what they propose is the creation of value through an art that arises from occasions of awkwardness, embarrassment and shame in human interactions. Delores LaChapelle goes a step farther, discussing the role of ritual in making the connection between the “bad” aspects of experience and values implicit in humans’ relationships with each other and with their environment.<sup>68</sup>

It need not be high-church stuff. Toward the end of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, his best-selling compendium of reflections on food and where it comes from, writer Michael Pollan takes up the question of the ethics of eating meat, and winds up with an answer consistent with the idea not only that ritual may “work,” even in our own modern/postmodern society, but that it may conduct us through bad feelings, explicitly including shame, to the experience of value. Having, in the course of his attempt to find “the perfect meal,” shot and killed a wild pig, he finds that he is troubled by the “jolting” contrast between the joy he felt at the kill, evident in a photo taken at the time, and the shame he feels later when he sees the photo. Only later, he reports, is his ambivalence to some extent resolved in the course of the dinner he prepared for friends, featuring “a platter of wild pig”—a dinner that, he writes, “was more ritual than realistic.”<sup>69</sup>

What are we to make of this? Pollan himself is modest in his claims. “I don’t want to make too much of it,” he writes, “it was just a meal, after all.” But Pollan’s story reveals more than a foodie’s attempt to justify carnivorous violence via the low-church ritual of a dinner party. Eating, the theory we are exploring suggests, is an occasion for shame not only because it dramatizes our radical—indeed, existential—dependence on other creatures, but also because it is a focal moment in our experience of ourselves as a transcendent self “fastened,” as Yeats wrote, “to a dying animal.” Pollan admits as much. “What shames at least some of us about hunting,” he writes, “is the same thing that shames us about every other reminder of our origins: that is, the incompleteness of our transcendence of our animal nature.”<sup>70</sup>

The key here is the sacrifice—not construed as paying a debt or giving something up, but as a ritualized encounter with shame. The question for us is whether we can make ritual work in response to the growing panoply of technologies of engagement with nature, just as the invention of sacrifice may well have been a response to the new shame of agriculture.<sup>71</sup> Fortunately, ideas about the uses and efficacy of ritual can be explored and tested in practical ways and in small steps, not challenging a whole worldview, but working within it to find ways of deploying the

<sup>68</sup> Delores LaChapelle, *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex: Rapture of the Deep: Concerning Deep Ecology—And Celebrating Life* (Durango, Colo.: Kivaki Press, 1988), chap. 12, pp. 146–65.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), pp. 409, 407, 408, 361, 409. The phrase quoted is on p. 410.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 408, 361. W. B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), pp. 191–92.

<sup>71</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Domestication of Sacrifice,” in *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 191–205. See esp. p. 200.

technologies of the imagination in ways that work under the new and constantly changing conditions created by contemporary societies.

We see examples in the rapidly emerging culture of ecological restoration, an activity that, like any form of land management, affords many occasions of shame, perhaps most fundamentally in its deliberate and life-destroying forms of intervention to restore “natural” ecosystems.<sup>72</sup>

Some years ago, for example, Barbara Westfall, an environmental artist in Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, had the idea that the restoration efforts being carried out at the nearby University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum might provide an interesting context for a project. Strikingly, after scouting around and talking with the Arboretum’s crew, what she settled on was not the pretty, or even the exciting stuff—the Arboretum’s restored prairies in the full tide of summer bloom, for example—but a little noticed occasion for ambivalence and shame—a project being carried out to remove a grove of aspen that was invading a restored prairie. It would be done by “girdling” each tree, stripping off a ring of bark around the trunk and leaving it to die. If simply cutting down trees with a chainsaw was something of a cliché, offering a more or less unambiguous, artistically uninteresting trope for environmental destruction—the bit of land involved was, after all going to be clearcut—the girdling procedure, which would leave conspicuous wounds at what foresters call breast height around each tree was artistically more interesting. For one thing, it offered a visual image much more intriguing than a cut stump, not merely drawing attention to violence, but also inviting reflection on the contradiction posed by the need to kill trees as part of an explicitly “remedial” effort.<sup>73</sup>

Late the following winter, Westfall went into the aspen grove aiming to turn the work being carried out there into a work of art. She did the girdling herself, making wounds a foot or more wide—considerably wider than they would have to be for purely practical purposes—and purposefully leaving them with ragged edges. To further enhance the visual effect, she then scraped off the dark surface of the bark on the yard or so of trunk below the girdle, exposing a rust-orange layer beneath, which she treated with vegetable oil to deepen the color and enhance the contrast with the smoother, greenish-grey bark above the girdle. Finally, she highlighted the torn edges of the bark above and below the girdle with black paint, which she used as a kind of mascara to highlight the effect, creating a sharp contrast in color and texture with the bone-smooth white of the exposed wood.

She did this to more than 200 trees. The result was a grove of dying trees standing among other, flourishing trees at the edge of the prairie—a contrast that became especially vivid and poignant at the time of leaf-out in spring, an affecting visual testimony to the discrimination and respectful death-dealing that are an integral part of the act of restoration. Overall, the project exemplified the basic technique Turner describes as fundamental to sacrifice—focusing on the shameful act, highlighting

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<sup>72</sup> Jordan, *Sunflower Forest*, pp. 50–53, 172, 187–88.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 172–73.

the prairie's dependence on the crew, and making public what otherwise would have been done more or less out of sight—and out of mind.

Similarly, groups of volunteers working on restoration of prairies and oak openings in Chicago's Forest Preserves have evolved a variety of rituals, ranging from the informal sharing of bagels and reflection at the conclusion of outings to the inclusion of restoration-oriented elements in weddings.<sup>74</sup> Crews restoring prairies on holdings of the McHenry County Conservation District in northern Illinois now conduct a prairie burn at night each spring, inviting the public to attend what is something like a Midwestern version of Burning Man. Asked why they are doing this, considering the inconvenience of working nights, the hassle of planning a burn for the benefit of an audience, the increased likelihood of losing tools or a crew member twisting an ankle in the dark, crew boss Brad Woodson said, "Because it's spectacular, and people love it."<sup>75</sup> We would argue that people also need it.

What we are seeing here is the trade-off of effectiveness for expressive value that we mentioned earlier. This was evident in an experiment one of us undertook in connection with a three-year-old project being carried out to remove Brazilian pepper-tree (*Schinus terebinthefolius*), an invasive exotic shrub, as part of an attempt to restore indigenous vegetation on a twelve-acre (4.8 hectare) area on the campus of Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida. This project could easily have been completed in a few hours by a professional crew equipped with power saws and herbicide. But as a step toward ritualizing it, Environmental Studies Professor Kip Curtis is carrying it out with groups of students, and has taken several steps to make the killing this restoration effort entails a conscious performance—a sacrifice—rather than just a job carried out under the rubric of euphemisms like "culling," "clearing," and "daylighting." The work is done entirely with hand tools—loppers, bow saws, axes, and shovels—and includes periods of silence and reflection. The work itself is both routine and repetitive, and, consistent with Rappaport's prescription for ritual, it is "encoded" by an agent other than the performer,<sup>76</sup> in this case, by the ecologist or a historian directing the work.

A next step would be to move from killing scrubby shrubs—or aspen—easily devalued as "weeds," to the more potent shame of acting as surrogate predators in predator-deprived ecosystems overrun with rabbits, deer, horses, or burros. We know that the future of these ecosystems ultimately depends on this work, but to undertake it without in some way ritualizing it generates unresolved shame, and amounts to wasting a large part of its value.

Whether we can learn to utilize the shame that arises from such restoration work as a starting point for the creation of value remains to be seen. The results of recent

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<sup>74</sup> Karen M. Holland, "Restoration Rituals: Transforming Workday Tasks into Inspirational Rites," *Restoration and Management Notes* 12, no. 2 (1994): 121–25.

<sup>75</sup> A short video of the April 2009 burn, narrated by Brad Woodson, is available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sZm8fLSmDc>.

<sup>76</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, p. 24.

research on the value of restoration as “sacramental practice” are encouraging.<sup>77</sup> But the broader question remains: how can the technologies of the imagination best be deployed in postmodern, democratic, and pluralistic—i.e., WEIRD<sup>78</sup>—societies to cultivate community, engender beauty, and discover meaning while repairing rather than unweaving the web of life?

For millennia humans believed that the fate of the world depended on the rituals they deployed to organize their behavior and negotiate their relationships. In what amounts to a reflection on anthropogenic climate change in Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” the seasons are disordered—the climate changed—when the fairies are prevented from dancing their “ringlets to the whistling wind.”<sup>79</sup> We moderns long ago set aside such “primitive” notions. Yet might the fate of the world actually depend on these technologies of the imagination? Today, as we confront the prospect of global climate change, the question is an urgent one.

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<sup>77</sup> Gretel Van Wieren, “Restoring Earth, Restored to Earth: Christianity, Environmental Ethics and Ecological Restoration” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2011).

<sup>78</sup> See note 62 above.

<sup>79</sup> William Shakespeare, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” act 1, scene 2, lines 81–117.