

# Walking the Llano: Personal Ecologies – May 8, 2016



ON MOTHER'S DAY: Some Thoughts About Mother Earth

Walking the Llano: Personal Ecologies by Dr. Shelley Armitage

In my book, *Walking the Llano: A Texas Memoir of Place*, I say at one point that I need to be adopted by Mother Earth and Father Sky. I had been hiking an intermittent creek which headed on our farm, awash in discoveries of Comanche and Antelope Creek people sites, Folsom and Clovis artifacts, records of Spanish entradas, and the faint wagon wheel ruts of 19th American expeditionary explorers. The comment, isolated like this, sounds romanticized and unlikely, but then writing, perhaps most of all memoir, reveals certain emotional truths. “Felt thought,” I like to call it. At this point in the narrative, I had not only lost my father some years before, but also my mother and brother during the hikes. Originally an adopted child myself, I wanted at that moment to be a child of Nature—someone desperately in need of belonging, balance, a personal ecology.

Ecology—a big word, right, especially when we think about all it encompasses: “The science of relationships between organisms and their environments.” But what about “personal ecologies”—how may something so large be so small, so intimately individual?

Ecology, like the common western view of landscape, may suggest something out there, separate, other. Leslie Silko reminds us of this perspective when she seeks to redefine landscape:

“the term landscape, as it has entered the English language, is mis-leading. ‘A portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view’ does not correctly describe the relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings. This assumes the viewer is somehow outside or separate from the territory he or she surveys.

Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on.”

It’s worth noting here that the etymological origin of the word ecology is the Greek *oikos* or house. The question then of experiencing an ecological relationship to landscape might be thought of as how we make a house our home. Personal. Personal ecology.

This is in part what Rick so beautifully referenced in his poem. The grass becoming man. Other writers have said so—historian Elliot Porter who writes about our plains as a place where the energy of grass flows outward due to the use of this chain of resources. The poet Peggy Church also used a similar image to describe relationships of the human and natural world. She wrote of the production of manure by our shaggy friends as fodder for light in late 19th century lamps. An energy cycle of relationships. She also wrote of stones as animate rather than inanimate energies, thus transforming. In “Stones on an Arid Hillside” she likens the markings on stones to grooves of music. “Would their colors be audible,” she asks. “If I could listen would I someday hear the stone’s voice/that goes on and on putting God into its own voice?”

The memoirist, Patricia Hampl, has said that perhaps we only really begin to live when we see our lives as a story. But perhaps we only really begin to live when we can see our lives in another’s story. Adopted indeed.

A few summers ago, well, several—2005—I sought the inclusive stones and boulders referenced by Church and Silko in an intermittent creek in my own backyard, you might say. The Middle Alamosa Creek which I discovered headed on our family farm out west of Vega. Initially, the reason was curiosity and the immense pleasure of experiencing a tiny aspect of the 32,000 acre Llano Estacado as it broke off into the Canadian breaks. This was a country billed by early Spanish and American explorers as “a sea of grass,” what they viewed as part of the Great American Desert. We know this today as tourists speed across a landscape they mostly find boring, empty, unworthy of love. But I knew better. Growing up in this area, I knew the subtle draws, like the one on our farm, were natural highways to the canyons and Canadian breaks.

But more: I realized by consulting a topographic map that the mostly dry creek bed ran from Armitage Farms to a place called Ysabel’s Camp, a cow camp, some thirty miles away on the Canadian River near where Ysabel had built his first dugout. Despite the farms, fences, ranches, oil rigs, microwave towers, and sand and gravel pits that dotted portions of the breaks landscape, here was a wholeness—360 degrees of earth and sky as draws become canyons—in a meandering but contiguous relation. My dad had told Ysabel stories. One of the earliest settlers in the Canadian River Valley, Ysabel was a pastor from Anton Chico, New Mexico who had built a dugout on the Canadian River banks. My dad knew Ysabel when he was an old man in his 80s, dad, only 16. Over those thirty miles of intermittent creek was the arc of the two men’s stories linked by the narrative of the land itself. Walking it would allow for not just their stories or mine, but the land’s—all bound up together. At one point when, as a girl, I was helping my dad take down an old sagging XIT fence on our place, I realized that the land was bounded not by fences but by our stories. As Nora Tilden has said: “Places pretend to be blank, though beneath any place is everything that has ever happened there.”

Later, when I decided to try to write a memoir of that land, to tell its stories, I remembered Tilden’s own definition of landscape: “To write a place is not simply to inscribe the place onto a page. . . .To write a place is to lay across it a skin, a membrane of text and experience. The skin is there to hold the stories of the place in place, transforming the illegible (because shapeless) land into a storied landscape. Land becomes landscape once humans have touched it—once it contains and embodies our stories.” Because memoir, different from autobiography, is about not only an

interior "I" but an "I" which engages the exterior environment, its subjectivity is externalized and dialogical. It promotes a conversation, a relationship.

As I walked, I found the land did most of the talking, if I would only still myself and listen. As I write: **pp. 12-13**

**"I've ridden this road with my dad since a was a baby, later jogging it, giving the gloved wave back to his one-finger greeting as we passed each other when he drove south back into town. Lately, the resident Swainson's hawk, territorial on his cedar post, eyes my walk. Running days over, I am slowed to a pace fit for my desire to write the llano, for, pointed north and alone, I understand the act of walking to be writing, the act of writing, listening—inside and out.**

**What does the land say to us? I've wondered for years. True, there's been no poet of these plains. Plains history is a history of migration, movement, and change—conditions that make people look ahead, look past. But there is a poetry of the plains. This part of the llano, both rolling plains and flatlands, exists as a shape of time, requiring the rhythm of a habit of landscape, of the repetition of experiencing. . . I think: if we could read the land as a poem, we might more intimately learn from it, understand what it says of natural and human cycles—and that sometimes uneasy relationship between them."**

So it's not surprising that some Native people talk about the wisdom of place. Likewise, environmentalists have advocated trying to "think like a river" in order to gain the wisdom of natural cycles in our own actions and decision making about their resources. Keith Basso relates in his book of the same name that the White Mountain Apache say "wisdom sits in places." Stories told by the people he interviewed were not "set" in a place, but emanated from the energy and history of what had happened there, available through memory and storytelling.

I remembered this admonishment when, nearing Ysabel's camp, I realized again how calming the land and its environs were. During the decline and then death of my mother and the surprising passing of my brother, I had touched ground like a worry stone. I had had to sell the old home place, care-give when I felt doubtful and ineffectual, work at my profession while managing a farm alone, some 400 miles away.

**"It's quiet, getting late. I made a late start. It's not quite the crepuscular time of skunk, badger, bobcat, and cougar, but the wind has died down and the light lingers yellow in the west. It's as if the land holds its breath before exhaling into the night. I linger when I should drive. The silence is such that a buzz sets in my ears—a ringing from within held by the lassitude without. Time doesn't stand still. But I do, for the first time in weeks, permeated with nature, the calm settling in for the night.**

**This must be what Keith Basso means in his reports of the White Mountain Apache. His informant tells him that "wisdom sits in places" and if one heeds this wisdom, he will have "a smooth mind" like water, that is, calm, without worry. The wisdom of place, like the thinking river, is about emplacement, something the Navajo describe as being "in place." It's not simple physical being but a being conscious of the storied place, of all that has gone on before it, of the natural layers and the membranes laid down through time."**

Being in place also means recognizing nature's Being, according to Eckhart Tolle. He says that nature exists in innocent stillness that is prior to thought, a sacred harmony. "When you perceive nature only through mind, through thinking, you cannot sense it aliveness. . . .Thought reduces nature to a commodity. . . . The ancient forest becomes timber, the bird a research project, the mountain something to be mined or conquered." If we become still, recognizing our interconnectedness with nature, there is an added dimension of knowing, of awareness, in the stillness beyond thought. "The moment you become aware of a plant's emanation of stillness and peace, that plant becomes your teacher," Tolle says.

Out on these plains, the Comanche revealed this interconnectivity linguistically, in their linking of seemingly disparate aspects of the natural world through shared suffixes, a language of kinship.

Basso's informant also made clear that a smooth mind, a mind open to the realization of relationship, only comes from time spent deeply inhabiting a place, its stillness. Interestingly, habit and habitat share a root word which means "to dwell." Focus. Listening. Awareness. What also is required, according to one neurosurgeon, in order to have a good memory. Memory perpetuates dwelling and kinship. I reflected on this notion when sitting high on a tractor one day.

**"The plowing made me see time differently; looking back while moving forward. I checked over my shoulder to see if the rows were coming out straight while at the same time I moved ahead through the unplowed ground, creating them. These comings and goings connect like the wishbone of draws joined out north. Memory isn't about the past, it's about the process of shaping a continuity.**

A personal ecology.

When I arrived at Ysabel's camp, I found an almost collapsed adobe slowly dissolving into the earth. Dusty whisky bottles lined the warped mantle inside, leftovers from some last lonely night cowboy parties perhaps. And behind me back on the escarpment near Armitage Farms where I had begun, the march of 260 wind turbines being built, awaiting my return. Though supporting green energy, I had resisted the coming of the turbines, raising environmental questions at meetings but also knowing they would forever change my habit of landscape. The fragmented landscape mirrored the fragmented stories. Kinship, memory were forever fragile, forever changing. I write:

**"I kept holding a vision before me, memory a kind of mirage. In it Genneil Curphey, another of my hiking buddies, and I were walking the old creek bed north of Tom's camp. She specialized in wildflower identification, and I kept close behind, listening to her musings over one plant or another. "Tansy aster, or. . .or. . . .?"**

**We came upon a webbing of sorts, but like a translucent wall, and stopped suddenly to avoid entanglement. It was about three feet across and suspended between rank weed stalks. At first we thought it was a spider web, all building up and creation. Then we sensed it was something in its last stages, delicate, decomposing.**

**"What's this?" Genneil asked, tipping her straw hat back in order to bend more closely.**

The filaments danced in the wind, buoyed this way and that, catching the afternoon light, billowing shadows.

"I think this may be the skin of something, no, I mean—look—just the hair. What's left," I said reaching out but not touching. "Maybe the last stages of some animal—a coyote?"

Shape-shifter. Trickster. Death is like that.

I was filled with wonder, fear, and the desire to take care of.

It was the feeling I had trying to take care of Mother. The fragility, the threads that barely hung on. One misstep and. . . And now that feeling about the land, and the turbines too.

"Whatever it is, it will go to the loving embrace of Mother Earth," Genneil said.

We hovered there, perhaps a moment just before the skein's vacancy would fill the air.

"We'll buy your wind," the Cielo wind turbine representative had said.

But the breath of the story is not for sale.

There were many gifts, like this moment, from Mother/Father, Earth and Sky, along the Middle Alamosa Creek. As there are in each of our so-called own back yards. This is the power of the landscape— to draw us into greater understanding of ourselves and others by experiencing a deeper connection with the places we inhabit—no matter where our places might be.