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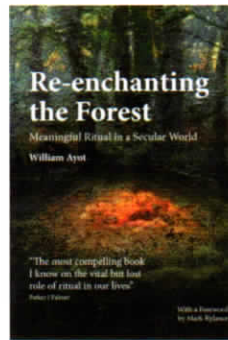
## Re-enchanting the forest: meaningful ritual in a secular world

**William Ayot**

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Ayot takes us on a rich and beguiling exploration of ritual – something he describes as ‘a symbolic action through which we can give our soul or psyche an important message’. He ‘talks the talk’ so authentically because he has walked – and continues to walk – the (long hard) walk. He is gutsy yet humble, fully immersing himself in an alien world of ritual practice in his quest to reconnect with himself, others and the beyond human world, re-claiming what he sees as our lost birthright, and, in the process, becoming a ritualist.

Ayot’s own story and the natural world are central as he guides us undogmatically through the why, what, when, how and where of meaningful unceremonial ritual, his own experience(s) breathing life into what risks being arid terrain. His openness is to be admired and his lyrical style is hypnotic. In 15 chapters, he recounts his own chance ‘pilgrimage’ through life – from a place of subjective darkness, despair and deep depression, through grief, to a much brighter landscape of beholding and acceptance, arrived at through pained self-examination and soulful – and often soul-bearing – ritual practice. As he writes, ‘A ritual wouldn’t be a ritual if you didn’t feel like you’d been put through the wringer would it?’ The initial chapters are about remembering and reconnecting with his troubled and troubling past – a vital first step in his (and perhaps any) journey. He writes: ‘You can’t get really spiritual until you’ve cleaned house, which means you have to deal with your past, whatever it holds, before you can even hope to step onto any spiritual path.’ It is poignant in its truth.

Ensuing chapters introduce a realm of indigenous ritual practices and different types of ritual, including rites of passage, the different stages of ritual, and practices such as Blot, an act of sacrifice or gratitude. In subsequent chapters, Ayot introduces us to the acts of smudging – a sort of purification or self-cleansing. Later, he describes so-called ‘vision quests’, putative aboriginal-style walkabouts – where individuals venture out alone into nature as a means of discovering life’s purpose or seeking spiritual guidance.

Ayot is thorough in his examination of pilgrimages and rites of way, initiation and rites of passage, rituals of alignment, separation, parting and closure, shrines and spirit houses, archetypal energies and sacred technologies. The narrative is peppered with examples of traditional ritual practices and his ultimate creation of, and ongoing participation in, many. Of his own initiation, he says: ‘It was time for me to be someone else.’

I was drawn to this book because I believed my own life lacked such ritual, yet it confirmed to me that my move to rural Cornwall many years ago was all about relinquishing the material and reconnecting with nature. As Ayot concludes: ‘Life is a shedding. Simplicity is best.’ A worthy and worthwhile read for all.

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