

**Re-enchanting the Forest:
Meaningful Ritual in a Secular World**

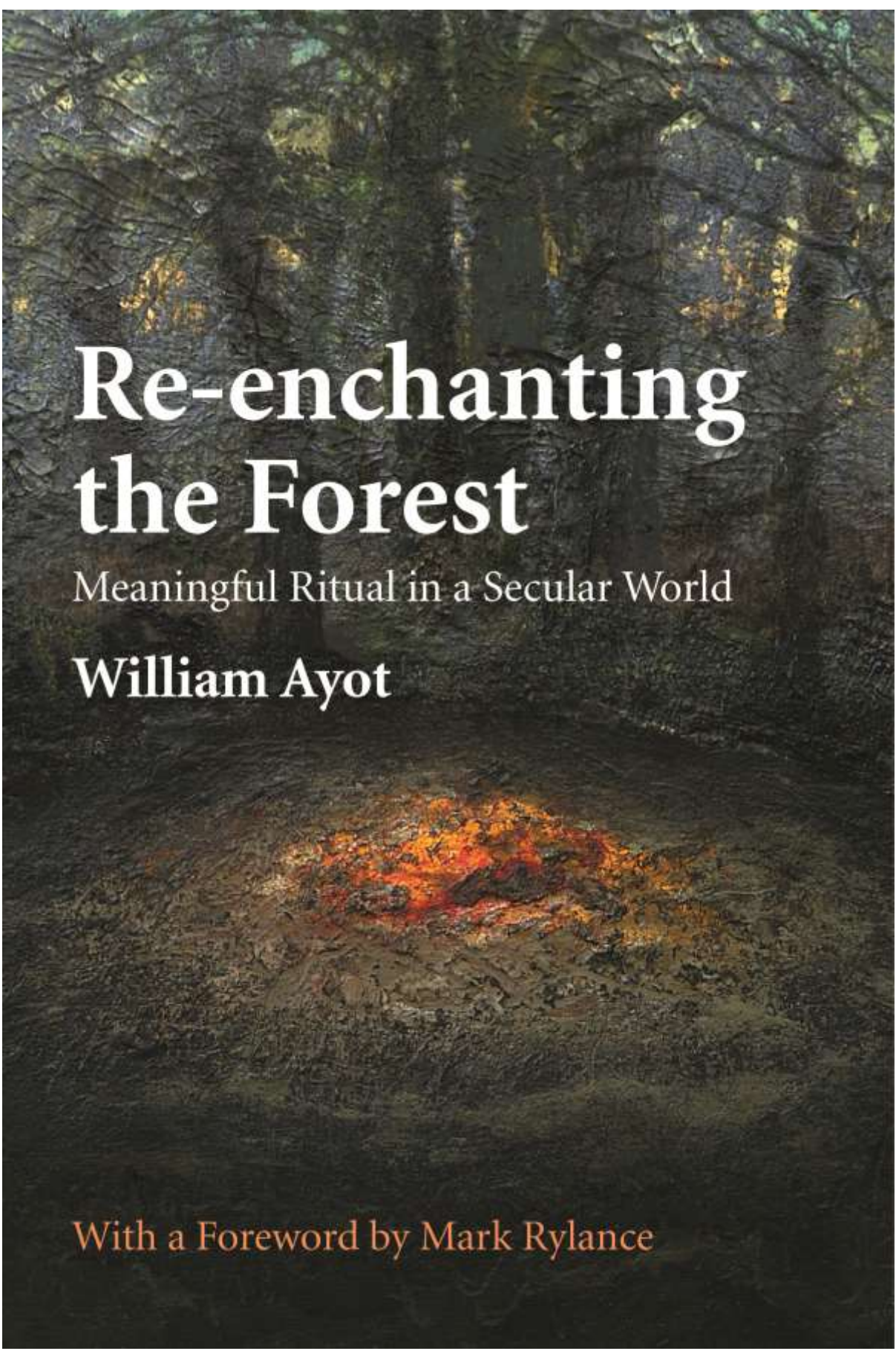
By
William Ayot

A Free Chapter
for attendees of the
**Real Life Magic
Virtual Summit**

Published
by
Sleeping Mountain Press

Available on this website

<http://williamayot.com/shop/>



Re-enchanting the Forest

Meaningful Ritual in a Secular World

William Ayot

With a Foreword by Mark Rylance

Chapter Twelve

Living with Giants

Archetypal Energies and Sacred Technologies

*"The purpose of ritual is to wake up
the old mind in us, to put it to work."*

Z. Budapest

Life's not always serene and gentle. While smudging can purify and calm us before a ritual, and a shrine can bring us to quiet tears, we can also release immense and seemingly uncontrollable emotions in liminal space. The gradual gentrification of western religion, with its politeness and essential decency has, over the centuries, shut down and denied many powerful human energies, that have since found a home at rock concerts, comedy stores, avant garde theatres and football matches. As the medieval mystery players and the Lords of Misrule understood only too well, we need places for our rowdiness and our joy, our explosive anger and our accumulated grief to be expressed.

It's also true to say that ritual itself is neither polite nor refined. There are huge archetypal energies that can be unleashed in ritual space. Witness the seething rage that we have seen erupt at funerals in the Middle East, or the 'mob-joy' expressed in the UK around royal weddings.

These energies, be they individual or communal, are an essential part of our humanity. No matter how uncomfortable we may have become around them, they are still going to arise. Anthropologists speak of ritual as being able to contain the human shadow, to allow for spontaneous, dark, even explosive behaviours. In the nineties, I became interested in finding a safe ritual container that could hold these often scary energies, whilst providing adequate means of expression.

One summer around that time I was studying the 'radical rituals' of the Dagara people and working as part of the team that organised and supported the first communal rituals led in the UK by Malidoma and Sobonfu Somé, as I mentioned in the previous chapter. This became a deep dive into a whole new way of ritualising, during which I learned a great deal about these titanic energies, about their expression in liminal space, and about myself.

It is one of the great losses of our culture that three hundred years of slavery, colonialism, and cultural superiority have blinded us to the intricate yet down-to-earth genius of West African spirituality. The great spiritual traditions of the Fon, the Dogon and the Yoruba, and the philosophical subtleties of Ifa have, until recently, been grossly distorted and relegated to mere superstitions and mumbo-jumbo. Oddly this doesn't happen with other traditions. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, though often misinterpreted and misunderstood, are acknowledged as having great merit, while the spiritualities of America, Oceania and the Arctic, have a kind of cool. Only African spirituality is still seen as dark and dangerous, on the one hand, or superstitious claptrap on the other. This is ironic because it is these very cultures that have the surviving sacred technologiesⁱ to manage and process

the supposedly dark and difficult feelings and behaviours that we in the West increasingly fear and deplore.

As any African child will tell you, a feeling is merely a feeling, and naturally expressed through the body. The trouble seems to be that we in the West are spending less and less time in our bodies and more and more time in our heads. This was the challenge facing the Somés as they sat in front of a roomful of predominantly nice, white, middle class people one hot July evening on a wooded 'edge' in Gloucestershire, at the beginning of what was to become the first full-on West African grief ritual held in Britain.

Malidoma Somé had always considered Great Britain to be a particularly ghost-ridden island. He maintained that this was because Brits tended to shy away from open manifestations of grief. This left the dead un-mourned, when they needed to be fully grieved, so that they might join the ancestors. As it stood, the lack of overt grief left them lost and abandoned – hence the numbers of wandering ghosts that cluttered our lives and psyches. Malidoma maintained that it needed the weight and power of communal grief to row the dead 'over to the ancestors'. Given the differences between a Dagara village and a group of British 'workshop junkies', a communal grief ritual in England was necessarily going to be a tall order. Malidoma began to consider how he might set one up and handed over much of the teaching to his young wife.

Sobonfu Somé appeared so young that at first glance it was quite hard for me to take her seriously, but she quickly proved to be as wise and as powerful as any teacher I had ever worked with. Thin, gawky, and angular with gap teeth and a smile that could melt the hardest of hearts, Sobonfu, whose name means "keeper of the rituals" was, like Malidoma, sent out into the world to pass on the wisdom of their Dagara elders. Having overcome her own loneliness and grief at the loss of her homeland, she quickly realised that there was a deep yearning in the West for some kind of connection – for community on the one hand and spirituality on the other. She set out to open doors in people's hearts, alongside the fiercely intelligent Malidoma, and over the coming years, was to lead us through some of the most powerful ritual experiences imaginable.

As far as the Dagara are concerned then, a grief ritual is aimed towards helping the dead to navigate their way over to the ancestors. The undoubted emotional or mental health benefits for the living are really a side issue, though no less useful or valuable 'in the village'. I began to see that, if the ritual came together, I would be serving my own un-grieved line of dead as much, if not more than myself. This was not going to be a neat therapeutic process.

Imagine an old Cotswold stone country house, with a large lawn, a vast tulip tree to one side, and at its roots, a spring of the purest water. Imagine fields, with docile cattle, leading away to woods at either end, and opposite, a broad vista of the sleepy valley below and the hills of Gloucestershire beyond. This was to be the site of our first howling, snarling, and ultimately empowering West African grief ritual.

The Somés gave an introductory talk on the Dagara way of ritualising and the five elements of Dagara cosmology. It was announced that we would all be doing a non-specific *communal* ritual, the following day, and that this would be a large and elaborate affair. The rest of the day was spent divided into five clans based on the Dagara elements. I was a general gofer for Sobonfu, who oversaw the practicalities, while Malidoma withdrew to prepare the area spiritually, and think through the implications of doing a grief ritual. With a hundred people industriously working away under her direction, Sobonfu had a great deal to do.

In true Dagara style, the ritual was to be housed in a 'village', an oval enclosure which was prepared at one end of the lawn. Within the oval was a semi-circle of element shrines, each built in the expectation that their function would become apparent as the ritual unfolded. The Earth Shrine held a large amount of soil from the fields that had to be sorted through for stones and then passed through a sieve, while the Fire Shrine involved a fire pit and a great pile of firewood that had to be collected from the adjacent woods. Each shrine was constructed using an immense amount of hard physical labour.

I learned a lot from Sobonfu about ritualising, but one thing stands out from that first day. I was on an errand for her and running toward one of the shrines when her voice cut across the countryside. "William. Stop!" I stopped. "Don't run," she said more quietly. "This is ritual space. You need to be respectful." I looked at her face and saw that she was absolutely serious. In Sobonfu's mind the ritual had already begun and the spirits were already present. My eagerness to serve had blinded me to the fact that I was working for her and that she felt responsible to the spirits. She expected a kind of impeccability from us when it came to our behaviour in liminal space.

At the end of the day, Malidoma and Sobonfu invoked the ancestral spirits and we were asked to connect with our ancestors, something that I found both stirring and surprisingly comforting as I imagined my ancestors running back through the ages, bringing a sense of continuation to my ragged and random life. We then rehearsed a chant that we would be using for the ritual. It was a simple invocation to the ancestors, going all the way back to the first grandfather and grandmother. This chant was to be sung for hours at a stretch, the following day, supported by a bank of djembe drummers who kept heroically to the same African rhythm.

In the morning Malidoma finally announced that we would were about to start our full grief ritual. At the other end of the village from the element shrines there arose a huge semi-circular ancestral shrine. It was some twenty-five feet across and over ten feet high, made of greenery collected from the woods. A white sheet was spread on the floor in the centre and items people associated with their departed were spread among the greenery. The whole had a dark and sombre atmosphere, and was bounded at the front with a demarcating line of ash. This was there to separate us from the dead. Two 'gatekeepers' were assigned to either end of the line, their task being to stop any grief-distracted person from crossing the line between life and death, by throwing themselves towards the ancestors. Finally, at either end of the shrine, two fierce Dagara masks were mounted to further

discourage the living from seeking to join the dead. Comfortable rural Gloucestershire was melting away around us.

While the group dispersed to search for meaningful oddments, or bits and pieces to add to personal 'grief-bundles' that would be put on the Ancestors' Shrine, a group of us finalised preparations within the oval of the village. We set out rows of lanterns, made of nightlights set in earth-filled paper bags to mark out the egg-shaped oval of the village. This now had the Ancestors' Shrine at the 'rounded' end and seating for five or six drummers at the 'pointy' end of the egg. Lastly we marked out a line that separated the village from the grieving space – what Malidoma more than once called the Road of Chaos. All was now ready.

At this point we all faced the Ancestors' Shrine and the 'ground rules' were laid out clearly so that there could be no misunderstandings and all would be kept safe. We advanced in a body towards the Ancestors' Shrine and cast our grief-bundles onto the white sheet in the middle of the shrine. We then returned to the village and lined up along the village boundary, which had become our starting line. The drummers took their places and the rest of us picked up the chant. The ritual began.

Initially, everyone 'stoked the fire' of the ritual by chanting and drumming – to serve others in their grief, but also to bring up their own by constant repetition. Then, when we felt the call to walk the Road of Chaos, we were to step forward and move directly toward the Ancestors' Shrine. At this point another member of the community was expected to follow us. Not to comfort, but to watch out for us by standing a few feet behind us as we grieved, prepared to hold us back should we try to cross the line of ash. In the event of the supporter's grief being triggered by what was happening around them, they were to raise their hands and *two* other people would then come from the village, one to support the original 'griever' and the other to support the now grieving supporter.

It took a while, but soon men and women began to lose their inhibitions, crossing to the Ancestors' Shrine and giving way to years of pent-up grief, first in ones and twos, and then in their dozens as the ritual developed a momentum of its own. I remember escorting one woman back to the village after she had completed a particularly vocal, and heartbreaking session of grieving. As we returned, like a pair of exhausted refugees, she looked up at me and said the most poignant thank you that I've ever received. We held on to each other like orphans in the storm – which in a sense is exactly what we were. We became friends after the ritual and well over a decade later she was still recalling it as a re-defining moment of communion and trust. To have someone watching over her, silently protecting her when she was expressing herself with such vulnerability, was a life-changing event for her.

Participants were now walking, staggering, sometimes even running towards the shrine. And suddenly Sobonfu seemed to be everywhere: chanting loudly in the middle of the front rank, instructing us how to keep an eye on the element shrines at the rear, checking to see if people were okay after coming back from the Ancestors' Shrine; pointing out to someone that they needed to support a griever

as they broke from the ranks, shadowing another who had suddenly leapt forward in their grief, and calling for one of us to take over and then returning to the end of the line to help keep the chant going.

Suddenly I was overwhelmed by a wave of grief that swept me across the lawn and onto my knees before the Ancestors' Shrine. I howled uncontrollably, like a child, my mouth close the ground, as wave after wave of feeling passed through me. And then I was shakily on my feet again, walking back, arm-in-arm with my smiling supporter, towards the line where I joined Sobonfu, who smiled encouragingly too, as we turned to stoke the fire of the chant once again.

After hours of chanting, drumming and grieving, the energy began to wind down, and we went indoors for a well-earned rest. In the dining room, over hot tea and biscuits, we congratulated ourselves on having shown Malidoma that we Brits really *could* express our grief. As it turned out, we'd hardly skimmed the surface.

In the morning Malidoma shocked us all by saying that there was a lot more grieving to be done and that we'd hardly begun. He wanted us to start the ritual all over again from the beginning. Grimly, we trudged out to the line and the drums kicked off their relentless African cross-rhythm, carrying the beat right into our bodies, quickly stoking the fire again to the point where people were returning to the Ancestors' Shrine as if there had been no break. We were diving deeper and deeper into our grief. In fact it seemed that the previous day had been no more than a rehearsal. A huge power seemed to be released as an archetypal quality entered the proceedings. The day crackled and blazed with feeling. As people returned from the Ancestors' Shrine they were clearly at another level of grief, wide eyed and distraught, their supporters now looking worried and out of their depth.

Quickly and forcefully, Sobonfu directed some of us back to the Earth Shrine and others to fetch water from the Water Shrine. She then guided returnees, some of whom had taken off their clothes and were clearly beside themselves, towards us, and instructed us to lay them on the ground where, as is the Dagara custom, they were liberally coated with cooling wet mud; mainly over the heart area, sometimes covering the whole body. This ancient grounding technique worked impressively on those who, moments before, had seemed utterly inconsolable and lost in their grief.

This went on for some hours as the day heated up and the ritual with it. At one point, having grieved at the Ancestors' Shrine more than once myself, and escorted numerous others to do their grieving too, I slipped into an altered state, flashing back to another time. In reality, I was sitting splay-legged on the muddy ground, with one of the boarding school survivors draped like a *pietà* across my lap. I was dazed and still brim-full of grief, though filled with compassion for this man who was covered from head to foot in mud and recovering slowly from his own profound experience before the Ancestors' Shrine. His unfocussed eyes stood out white in his muddy face, and I was minded of what veterans of war and trauma call the thousand-yard stare. Suddenly, following his gaze, I was looking out across a First World War battlefield, in which so many of our grandparents had fought

and died. I shook my head and stared about me at this nightmare spectacle until another weird sight broke the bubble.

Out of nowhere, stepping down from the gravel drive towards the spring under the tulip tree, an elderly Englishwoman and a little boy of no more than eight years old stooped to fill a bottle from the spring. Was she surprised to see a hundred-odd mud bespattered, naked crazies, howling and rolling around in a veritable mud-bath? Not a bit of it. The stiff upper lip was alive and well in Gloucestershire. As she gently but firmly led the boy back down the drive he looked back towards us – and beamed cheekily – just as a local child might in Africa.

Memories of my childhood came flooding back, and I became aware of how little the surviving old men of my village had actually spoken of their First World War experience. The old soldier's grief they held yet never expressed welled up in me. As soon as I saw that the man I'd been supporting was in good hands, I headed back to the Ancestors' Shrine one more time. I hit the deck, overwhelmed by an inconsolable sorrow that welled up from some echoing space deep within me. It was less raw and jagged than present grief but carried the immense weight of two generations' unwept tears.ⁱⁱ It left me wracked but also cleansed, somehow even elated. Then I rejoined the line near Sobonfu and the ritual moved towards its natural end.

Malidoma carefully closed the ritual down. He chose two gravediggers who rolled up the sheet with its grief-bundles and took away 'the corpse' of our communal grief. In line with Dagara practice, they buried it, secretly, in a place that only they would remember.

That night I was deputed to guard the Ancestors' Shrine. Long after the deeply contented participants had gone to bed, I sat alone on the moonlit grass with the great shrine in front of me. I knew that I had witnessed something unprecedented, a full-scale grief ritual, unlike anything that had been done in Britain before – or rather unlike anything that had been done for many hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. I realised that I had touched what people were now calling the indigenous soul, the ancient atavistic part in us westerners that knows the ancient ways of humanity. It felt like a prodigal's return.

oo00o

In looking back on my first ritual with them, I was struck by how respectful the Somés were of the energies they were dealing with. There was no glee in what they were doing, no triumphal sense of 'getting a result', just a quiet satisfaction at having, by their lights, served the ancestral spirits of these islands. From where I sat they seemed to be working impeccably, creating safe ritual containers for whole communities to process *generations* of unexpressed grief.

On a personal level I had now been quietly purging my grief over a period of years, getting more and more comfortable with it, as I explored its causes, depths and parameters. I had also looked deeply into the fear that I had inherited from my mother, and on the way re-discovered the joy I had experienced as a child. What I

had studiously avoided, what I had shunned and recoiled from, was the all-too-human rage I knew must be lurking within me. The Jungians I had come to know and respect had taught me that one can 'eat the shadow', by acknowledging, assimilating and re-absorbing our darker potentials – be that any kind of ugliness, as well as powers and talents. However, when it came to my anger I had tried all manner of workshops and therapies, to no particular avail. If my anger came up I just buried it again and pretended it wasn't there. It was another Dagara ritual that opened the door to my rage, a ritual more powerful than I ever could have imagined.

It happened the following year at a 're-birthing' ritual led by the Somés at the same venue. Once again I was a part of the team assisting Malidoma and Sobonfu, supporting Richard Olivier who was in the role of ritual stage-manager. I'd spent the better part of the day finding tools, helping to build a circular sequence of element and ancestor shrines that we were to process through later. I was tired, and I have to say, a little cranky. By the time the ritual started I was done in – but that was only the beginning of my troubles.

Community rituals can be long drawn-out affairs. There are great pauses when queues before shrines grind to a halt while someone goes through an emotional process. Sometimes one of the shrines is *so* beautiful and *so* mysterious that every single participant stays just that little bit longer. Indigenous people are perfectly happy to get bored in ritual space, have a chat about the crops, or discuss the latest plan for getting water to the village, in the confident expectation that the ritual will end – well, when it ends. But in the West, we are used to *concentrating* on a properly timed experience that lasts no longer than a movie or a soccer match, all of which have clear start and finish times. We find it hard to accept that liminal space blurs all sense of time. Anyway, I was just cranky. I'm a fire person.

In his third book, on finding life purpose through nature, ritual and community, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, Malidoma describes the attributes of fire and the fire personality:

"In the indigenous mind, fire kindles and sustains an animating and pervasive energy in all our lives... It is the mediator between worlds since it is very close to the purest form of energy. Any connection with ancestors, spirits and the Other World is mediated by fire... A complete understanding of fire requires a serious relationship with death, and the dead. Because fire burns, those who relate to fire are often tense and must be clear about their intention in working with the fire. The tension referred to here is like a charge of energy about to burst. Those who carry such fiery energy are being prepared for energetic action that reflects, and is the result of, a touch from the other world." ⁱⁱⁱ

By the time I had chanted eighty-odd people through the village, welcomed most of them back, and relieved all the shrine-keepers that needed relieving, I was exhausted. Student ritualist or not, I just wanted to wrap the thing up, secure the shrines, and get some well-deserved sleep. Richard came over and suggested that it was time for me to go through the process. By this time the rest of the team had gone through and only Richard and I remained. Rightly, he was reserving the last place for himself, and when I said I wanted to call it a day he said that Malidoma was specifically wanting – he may have said expecting – me to go through next. I

bowed to the inevitable, and headed for the first port of call, the Ancestral Memory Shrine.

During our day of preparation, we had all been asked to consider our ancestors and to make an ancestor mask. I had determined that I was going to work around (or with/on?) a very specific ancestor of mine, a Jacobean bishop called John Overall, who was one of the church scholars who translated the King James Bible. The beauty of his clear and evocative language had stayed with me over the years, though I had never, until that day, connected him with ritual. I'd chosen him over an obviously mythical Viking of my East Anglian bloodline, because I wanted to explore the literary connection. Mask in hand, I plodded up to the Ancestral Memory Shrine and, as instructed by Malidoma, attached my mask of John Overall to one of the poles stretching up into the sky. He hung there amongst other masks, just another ancestor. I knelt and waited. Nothing happened. I stood. I looked up at the mask and thought, "Oh this is bollocks. It's just a paper plate, isn't it? I don't even know if I'm really connected to this man anyway." I shook my head like a tired bear, and disappointed, headed disconsolately over towards the Fire Shrine and its three pits of glowing coals, which we had dug out so laboriously that afternoon.

It was dark by now, and the Fire Shrine glowed red and threatening. I didn't know what time it was, and I can't remember much about stepping down into the trench, or standing between the shrine's surrounding fire pits, but I will never forget what happened next.

I need to say, as an aside, that I've always been overweight and – probably as a result of my childhood experience – have always had a really bad self-image. In fact I've always carried a great deal of shame around my body. I was the kind of man who never, ever took my shirt off in front of others, even on a beach. So there I was, standing between the fires, feeling wholly alone, and a little put upon, realising that the extraordinary heat of the fires was about to singe my army surplus fatigues if I didn't move on, when a wave of raw, animal energy blasted through me.

Once again, it was as if I was in another place and time, but this time in another body too. My muscles began to pulse as my blood surged around my veins, and I felt myself filled with an incandescent rage that rose from deep inside me, forcing its way out through my widening, growling, animal throat. My nice white middle-class anxieties had, in a red-raw moment, been ripped out of me. In every fibre of my body I was a bear – or more properly a *bear-sarker*, one of the bear-shirted ones, a wild Viking berserker – utterly invulnerable, and full of incandescent rage. My muscles seemed to bulk out, my hair stood on end, and my eyes burned in my head. I had short-circuited my bloodline and jammed my fingers in the socket of my Nordic ancestry. I was possessed. I began to roar. From the outside I imagine you will have seen a plump middle-aged Englishman standing in a trench between three fires, but on the inside I was undergoing an almost cellular sea-change. My breath rasped in my chest. My shoulders and back prickled as I felt myself swelling in bulk and in sheer, brutal strength. Abruptly, explosively, I ripped at my shirt open, baring my chest to the fire, and roared out a killing defiance at the world.

“Odin!” I bellowed from somewhere way, way back. “Odin!” - the rage of it echoing down the valley and away into the night.

Dazed by this shattering of my metropolitan veneer, I looked through the flames to see Malidoma himself, crouched there where he had been waiting for me, eyes fire-lit and smiling but somehow understanding, nodding at the ferocious, bestial, yet infinitely more powerful creature I had become.

The rest of the re-birthing ritual passed relatively peacefully. The re-birthing itself – a powerful journey through a ‘birthing hut’ that recreates the muscular contractions of a birth canal, followed by a healing and loving welcome – left me exhausted and limp, more like a newborn pup than a human. At the Water Shrine I plunged myself deep under the surface, spraying a great arc of water as I came out gasping – but back in my own tired but tingling body. On the final walk back to the village I knew I had touched something profoundly mysterious. Through years of therapy and recovery, workshops and retreats, bodywork and alternative treatments, I had sought my ‘lost power’, whatever that was. And now I had met it head on. Furthermore, I had been gifted an insight into its terrifying human potential. For the first time in my life I really understood my shadow, and who I really was. I reeled at the knowledge, both inspired and scared.

ⁱ I am indebted to Jerome Rothenberg for this term. His book *“Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania.”* (University of California Press. 1992) was a groundbreaking anthology of earth-based, tribal poetry, which has served me as an important sourcebook for ritual chants and invocations from various cultures. I use the term here because the connection between tribal poetry, chant and ritual is so strong – and the creative energies evoked by both are so very similar.

ⁱⁱ Later, at a debriefing session, it became apparent that many among us, had experienced similar ‘visitations’ from the Great War. The general consensus being that we were shedding the unshed tears of the generations before us who had been cursed with the stiff upper lip – who were traditionally unable to express their grief.

ⁱⁱⁱ Malidoma Patrice Somé. *The Healing Wisdom of Africa.* Jeremy P Tarcher/Putnam. New York. 1998.