

A Life-Enhancing Experience of Ritual to Support My Living Consciously

by Shaun Dempsey

Conscious living as described by Ron Pevny in his book *Conscious Living, Conscious Aging* is an approach that he sees as the key to transitioning from mid-life adulthood into the final third of life as elders in the community. However, these principles can also be seen as a general aid to living with awareness and intent at all points in life. In this article I will describe an impactful recent event where I attempted to enact the principles of conscious living to help support me at what feels like the beginning of significant transition in my life.

Celebrating my 50th birthday was never going to be cause for pomp and ceremony. I'm not one to party at the best of times and as the day approached I felt a welcome sense of calm and tranquillity settle into my being most likely as a result of being happily married, with two beautiful children and working for myself in a profession I love. Over the last 10 years I had become aware that I wanted to let go of some qualities that had served me well enough in the past, but that were impeding my progress in the future. Consequently, with the support of my wife and children I arranged to set off into the bush surrounding our home the day before my birthday for some thinking and writing time with the view to sleeping in a tent in nature behind my house overnight and waking in the morning to greet my family. On my journey into the bush for the day I took a book from a family reunion from my mother's side which broadly outlined the story and culture of the previous six generations as they left Ireland and settled in Australia.

After about an hour I came to my first stop in the bush where I spent a long time observing the birds soaring nearby and occasionally feeding off the wing on flying insects. It was at this time I began to *examine and consciously reflect on the past in an attempt to 'take the good and leave behind the bad' in terms of unhelpful truths and personal characteristics*. I read my family history book and realised that so much of my family's story for many generations had been characterised by extreme poverty and destitution, which I felt had shaped a lot of my immediate family's negative behaviour (ie the behaviour of my parents, grandparents and aunts and uncles) over my last 50 years. Consequently I became aware that it was a quality I wished to leave behind. I spent some time writing a legacy letter to my children about my experience of being raised by my parents and the role of poverty in shaping their parental tendencies.

After a couple of hours of thinking, writing and observing the birds I took my leave of that temporary camp and moved further up the ridge in search of some shade and a place to lie down. It was at this stage I became aware of another important principle of conscious living; *the importance of simply being rather than always doing*. In my day-to-day life at work and home over the last ten years, and particularly in the context of a busy family life with children, I had become accustomed to always being busy and always engaging in tasks or doing something. However, the feeling of being alone in the bush, with no pressing time limits and the support of my family back home who were 'holding space' for me while I did this work, was enough to free up something in me at that time, thereby allowing me to drop the need to *do*, and connect more with the feeling of *being*. After a brief rest I moved further up the ridge to find a third space in which I could nestle against a tree and recommence my writing and thinking. I had been away from home for about 4 hours in total now and it was approaching the middle of a very hot day.

It was at this point in the day I made an important decision to complete a full 360 degree circuit of the bush track. I had a part of me that wanted to take the safe option and retrace my steps back home, but I also had a younger, more adventurous part that was curious about whether I could indeed complete a circuit and link back in with the original track. I completed an internal check in – something I do regularly when I'm in tune with myself and which centres me and helps me connect with the larger power I feel in my life. It was during this process that I was both *drawn to an activity I wanted to do (that felt whole or holy)* as well as feeling *I was acting as a channel to allow a larger power to do its work*. My experience of engaging with this energy is that it is an accumulated power – consequently, having made the decision to complete the 360 degree circuit, a number of other very important pieces of my experience that day fell into place.

As I was making my way through the second part of the day and heading toward home I picked up a small solid piece of wood thinking I would use it for the fire that night. As I continued walking home I was also open to the possibility that I wanted to change my plans and reunite with my family in the late afternoon rather than sleep the night outside on my own. I contacted my wife and arranged for the family to greet me in an hour and sat down with my stick to think. At this point in my experience I was working from a place of little ego, and was *feeling connected to, and driven by, the Universe/Great Mystery/Divine*. It suddenly, came to me, unexpectedly and in a flash, that I would write on the stick the word representing a quality I wanted to leave behind – and as I was doing this, I also became aware I wanted to write on a stone the word representing the quality I wanted to invite in as a replacement. Consequently, I wrote *poverty* on the stick and then found a stone with a flat surface and wrote *abundance* on it. I then did the same with two more sticks and two more stones making the commitment to leave behind *arrogance* and replace it with *pride*, as well as leaving behind *anger* and replace it with *sadness/forgiveness*. I wrote some words to accompany each of these qualities and my intention to let them go and replace them with something more useful. Here's an example of one of the prayers I wrote – the other two had a similar template and sentiment.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to that part of me that knows what it's like to be poor and to have no money and to be struggling to make ends meet. If it wasn't for that part of me I think I might take a whole bunch of things for granted – like our beautiful house, and our pool, and our amazing lifestyle where we get to do pretty much anything we want whenever we want. I also think if it wasn't for that part of me I wouldn't work as hard as I do and I might be tempted to rest on my laurels and take it easy, or even stop completely.

But now in my life I'm fortunate enough to be surrounded by abundance – in terms of family and friends and food. So I'm releasing that part of me that worries unnecessarily about money and I'm going to ask that part of me if it will focus on enjoying the abundance I currently have. It's the same part and the same energy but instead of being worried about money, it will help me to be joyful and fully experience the abundance I currently have. I think this will serve me better as I turn 50 years old and begin to grow toward my elderhood.

By this stage it was time to greet my family. I had spent the last hour imbuing wood, stone and words with my conscious intent, and as I walked from the bush, through the gate and into our

backyard I could see my family waiting to greet me with incense and burning sage. I was overcome with tears and emotion and felt able to stand with my family while the emotions passed through me, and my wife and children circled me with incense offering their presence and silent support.

As night fell my wife, two children and I sat around the fire and created an atmosphere of sacredness and reverence. I showed them my pieces of wood and then passed the first one (poverty) to my wife allowing her to feel it and experience it. As she passed it around to my children I read my prayer and when that was completed I placed the wood in the fire. I then showed my family the stone of abundance and placed that in the fire next to the wood. I had said to my children that I wanted to let some qualities go and replace them with other qualities and they understood that whatever was left in the fire pit in the morning would be the quality I was left with. I went through the same ritual with the wood/stone combinations of arrogance and pride, and anger and sadness/forgiveness. The mood of the evening was extraordinarily mindful, present and laden with a specific intent and when the wood was placed in the fire I felt an embodied sense of relief and a lifting of a weight as that quality was 'burned away from me'. There was something very powerful about having my ritual witnessed by supportive, loving people and in subsequent months it has been very important to have my stones (which now sit on my meditation altar) to look at and reflect on. I now have a daily reminder that I have genuinely forsaken poverty for abundance, arrogance for pride and anger for sadness/forgiveness. As I went to bed that night I gave thanks for the ritual that I created and enacted. I felt it provided me with an embodied, sensory experience which represented in a lasting physical way the changes I wished to make. I'm already looking forward to creating further rituals to support the changes I feel called to make..

Shaun Dempsey PhD is a clinical psychologist in full time private practice in North Queensland, Australia. Shaun works predominately with a trauma population using approaches such as CBT, ACT and Internal Family Systems. He is interested in the role of ritual in healing for both himself and his clients and he loves his wife, two children, sunshine, and all things psychology. He can be contacted at tcps@aapt.net.au