

TerraPlaces: Enlivening Relationship with Place

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ABSTRACT

Regular, sustained, and intimate contact with natural places, combined with increased awareness of and attention to place, leads to shifts in consciousness. These shifts can be subtle or pronounced depending on the level of contact and depth of awareness. During the first five months of the TerraPlaces project, participants demonstrated rapid shifts (both inner and outer), increased intimacy, a change in their levels of attention, and increased community.

INTRODUCTION

The TerraPlaces project was birthed on a June evening a few weeks before the summer Solstice. Craig Chalquist, Renee Levi, and I pondered how to make terrapsychological inquiry applicable to those outside academia. Terrapsychology “studies how the patterns and shapes and features of the human and nonhuman world sculpt our ideas, our habits, our relationships, and even culture and sense of self” (Chalquist, 2009). We wondered if helping people connect with a specific place in nature coupled with a curriculum in terrapsychology would develop a deeper relationship with place. Out of this meeting came the TerraPlaces project, which was designed to allow people to choose a place in nature to sit with (or walk through or observe in other ways) for an amount of time they chose.

Craig and Katrina wrote curriculum to share with participants. The first curriculum was a crash course in terrapsychology, laying the foundation for group members to engage deeply with the place in nature they chose to sit with. The second curriculum took participants deeper by examining the relationship between place and dreams.

The project began August and continued through December. Our first phase ran from August 1 to September 20, and our second phase went from the fall equinox on September 21 through the last day of fall, December 20. Thirty-three participants signed on to the summer phase and 31 joined the fall phase.

The goal of the project was twofold: to teach participants how to conduct terrapsychological inquiry, and to determine the effects of sitting with a place in nature for a set period of time.

Each week, participants were asked to share their experiences online through a group forum. This stimulated dialogue among the members and helped create a sense of community. Several conference calls were held as well.

People joined the group at any time during the project and members participated for anywhere from one to four months. The length of participation did not necessarily translate into deeper or shallower interaction with place; some members who only participated for a few weeks experienced deep shifts.

Several outcomes were expected as a result of people’s participation in the group. We looked for obvious shifts in consciousness, actions taken on behalf of place, feelings of stewardship toward place, and increased intimacy with place.

Specific examples of hoped-for outcomes include:

- Feeling calmer, less stressed, and greater connection
- Creating closer ties with neighbors, family, friends
- A growing sense of protectiveness toward place
- Increase in community-level activity
- More interest in learning about local flora and fauna
- Interest in where resources, food come from
- Increase in resource conservation
- More regular and deeper spiritual practice

The results we saw included participants spending more time outside, becoming more intimate with their spot, gaining more awareness of their surroundings, and enjoying contact with others who were interested in the power of connecting with place.

PURPOSE

The purpose of creating the TerraPlaces project was to train people in terrapsychological inquiry. The structure of the project created a container for participants to enter into what Chalquist calls the “preparation phase” of terrapsychological inquiry. During this phase, researchers might participate in several activities Chalquist delineates in *Terrapsychology* (2007):

- Holding an awareness of place that investigates both its exterior and interior as well as the exterior and interior of the researcher
- Giving questions higher priority than answers
- Allowing preconceptions to fall away, creating space for the spirit of place to emerge
- Watching for synchronicities and imaginal musings that arise
- “Employing a *nomadic awareness*” that moves from seeing the land as something owned into an awareness that allows the land agency and a voice

PROCESS

To facilitate this purpose, Chalquist and I created a curriculum to teach participants basic terrapsychological inquiry techniques. During phase one, project members got basic lessons in the background of terrapsychology as well as introductory techniques for studying the land, such as learning the biome and bioregion of their place. With the start of phase two, we added elements that helped participants deepen their study, including how to incubate dreams of place and utilize various dreamwork techniques in order to communicate with place.

Participants eagerly put what they learned into practice and experienced several of the outcomes we hoped to see as a result of their work in the project. Some had dramatic experiences within a short

period of time. Others witnessed a deepening over the entire span of the project. Some felt an increase in community, while others experienced growing intimacy with their place. Many reported significant internal shifts and a greater respect for their place.

A questionnaire was used to track the changes participants experienced. An initial questionnaire was given at the beginning of each phase (see Appendix One), and a final questionnaire given at the end of each phase (see Appendix Two). Results were also ascertained from participants' responses in the online forum.

OUTCOMES

Rapid Shifts

Two participants in particular experienced dramatic results from participating in the project. (A note: all participants will remain anonymous and will be referred to "Participant.") The first, Participant One, joined the project in the summer phase. She chose to visit a local beach and found herself enjoying the time she spent there. One afternoon, about a month into the project, she experienced a phenomenon that she felt changed her life.

Here she relates the experience in her own words:

"I often just watched the beach goers, kite surfers, swimmers and people just walking by... I listened to the wind and the water but that was it... Suddenly one day I started to become more aware about what was really happening... the wind was talking to me, the ocean sounds were singing for me... the more aware I became the more I felt it, being present in the moment allowed me to really experience the beauty of what I was witnessing... I was no longer just sitting there... I was part of it.

"One day, [the beach] was packed with people; I guess the wind brought in lots of kite surfers and there were a lot of onlookers. Suddenly the clouds in the sky got incredibly dark even though it was still very sunny. It was clear there was rain coming in from offshore. As it started approaching I could see a rainbow forming. As the storm got closer and closer the rainbow seem to get closer as well. Suddenly there was a full rainbow in the sky. We all could see where it began and where it ended and the colors were so incredibly intense! It seemed for a moment as if all stopped; everyone was just standing there in awe. A few minutes later it started raining.

"We didn't run for cover. All I could do was just stand there and feel the beautiful drops of rain all over me. I felt as if Mother Earth was putting up a show just for us. The rainbow got incredibly close and it truly felt like we were being blessed.

"At that moment I felt life couldn't be more beautiful. I felt complete, fulfilled, and at one with the Earth. When the rain passed people started expressing what they felt. I think we all realized the interconnectedness amongst us all. It was just absolutely amazing! I can tell you it will live with me

forever.

“Since I started this project with you, I have taken to meditation, and my meditation practice has become much better. I am also writing a journal which I now find incredibly insightful.”

Participant One clearly experienced some of the intended outcomes of the project, most notably increased connection with nature, as well as the beginning of a spiritual practice (meditation) and a deepening of that practice.

Furthermore, she experienced a greater sense of community. When she witnessed the rainbow on the beach, she was not alone. She was not only with her significant other, but she was also with other beachgoers who all stopped to see and pay attention to the rainbow and the rain. What is especially poignant here is the fact that people shared with each other how they felt about seeing the rainbow. As Participant One said, “...we all realized the interconnectedness amongst us.”

Participant Two also witnessed the power of storms, but in a completely different way. She chose to sit with a ravine downhill from her house. She would bring her lunch down to the ravine and open herself to the land and the trees. About three weeks into the project, she had what she calls a “very dramatic” experience.

“One windy night in early October, right in my spot, a tree fell down, taking down two or three others with it. I had spent time the evening before in my spot, and when I went back the next day at lunchtime, an oak tree had literally fallen across my path on the way to my sitting place. During the following week, my landlady had several more dead trees in the immediate area taken out, along with those that had gone down initially. This dramatically changed the whole area, from being wooded and sheltered to being largely open, with only a few ground shrubs and bushes, and lots of dead tree trunks and wood. The area looked brown and dead; the rains had not yet come. The surrounding area has been badly hit by sudden oak death.

“This experience was quite dramatic for me. I had to work with what death in this spot, and by extension death on the planet, means. I felt depressed when spending time in the spot after it first happened.

“After a couple of weeks, I realized that nature was already beginning her rejuvenation process; that other species were already and would continue taking advantage of the void left by the oak trees. The relative proportion of various species in the area would change over time, with less oak trees, perhaps more bay and pine, more low growth shrubs, etc., yet nature’s green presence would continue. This was an amazingly liberating realization for me.

“After a few more weeks, I found I was not content to just sit in the area; I had a strong urge to clean up the brush, twigs, and dead branches. So I began to collect them for kindling for fires in my wood burning stove. There is still dead wood to clean up in the area, but it looks neater than it did. This made

me aware of how strong the human impulse is to participate in the transformation and beautification of natural surroundings, especially after a catastrophic event.

“My connection to this spot has strengthened. I feel that the place has dramatically changed in a short time, and this change has been present in my psyche. I was blessed to be part of a dramatic shift in the area that caused me to reflect on radical changes in nature, and how this process of change affects human moods and the human psyche, and how it can be engaged by humans. I have let the place be a teacher to me about natural cycles of change. “

Participant Two shared that it took several weeks for her to get motivated to be part of the project. She fully intended to choose a spot and sit with it, but she struggled to actually get outside. But it appears she chose the right time to be with the land, for within a few weeks of starting the project she saw the death of several trees and worked with what their deaths meant to her in her life and the life of the land.

She demonstrates one of the projected outcomes of the project: an increased feeling of protectiveness toward place. After the winds brought down the trees, she felt the urge to help nature’s rejuvenation process by going to her spot and clearing the dead wood. Although she did not comment on it specifically, one could guess that she also did some clearing in her psyche as she picked up the branches and twigs. The land reflected to her things she wanted to learn about “natural cycles of change.” Additionally, she mentioned that she became especially attuned to watching how the spot shifts now that the trees are gone.

Increased intimacy

Another possible outcome from the TerraPlaces project was increased intimacy with place. Participant Three demonstrated this when she described her experience of the second phase: “I ended up bonding with and becoming quite attached to a place in the woods on campus of the university where I work part time. I missed it when I didn’t have a chance to visit it for a few days....I found myself daydreaming about it. I took a few friends there too, like I was introducing them to another friend.”

Changes in attention

Many TerraPlaces participants shared that they noticed a change in the type of attention they had for place after starting the project. Participant Three mentioned this: “I am more conscious and more aware of where I am, even if I am not in my chosen spot. I [feel] much more richly related to my world.”

Participant Four, who sat with a lake in Maine, said that when she began tuning into the sounds and smells of the place, her attention became more nuanced.

“What I’m finding for now is that it’s the wind and the sounds of the place as much as it is the spectacular visuals. The water is lapping around me, the wind tickles my skin and dances my hair around, and I can feel the sun moving in and out of the clouds even with my eyes closed. This movement, this vibration I sense is very powerful. It reminds me of how very alive this place is. Although

I believe that every place is alive, I think that the sensory stimulation available here, in a place so deeply embedded in nature, makes me just so much more aware of what the earth is saying.

This more complex awareness led her to deepen her practice of coming into a more balanced relationship with place. As she describes it, she began relating “to a place simply as a place...simply observing what is there—a mountain, water, a few ducks or loons gliding by—and not trying to interpret it as a message for my life. When I can hold Others (nature, people, my work, etc.) simply as Other, perhaps I can be in true reciprocal and reverent relationship. For me it's the I-Thou type of relationship Martin Buber speaks of, not the I-It, where Other is there to be of some kind of service to me. It hasn't been easy doing this, but I'm practicing.”

Participant Five noted a similar shift between phase one and phase two: “What changed was the quality of my observation, listening, and inspiration,” as did Participant Six: ““There has been a tremendous change. I am much more observant and cherishing the tiniest of things I see. I also experience where I am in a much larger context, like layers of meaning awaiting my reception.”

Increased community

One outcome that was not necessarily on our radar was how participants felt an increase in community with each other. Many of the participants noted that they felt grateful to be in communication with other people who were putting their attention toward the land. As the weeks went on, a deeper sense of connection and friendship developed among the group, an experience enhanced by conference calls we began hosting during the fall phase.

Participants shared the ups and downs of their time in the project as well as their concerns and difficulties. While we had anticipated that participants would feel greater community in the actual place they chose, what happened instead was the growth of community online.

Participant Seven described this phenomenon well:

“You ask how I am different since beginning the project. Well, I took in the loss of a heart-made altar, and of someone's friend, the miracle of mountains, lakeside sanctuary, cityscapes, the ever-shifting, but ever-present sky, the light shining through golden-orange autumn leaves, a goldfish in blue water turning my world upside down, a tiled image of a possible new world, a woman finding the one needed moment of clarity of presence and vision in a busy life, gentle, insightful sharing of information relevant to soul growth, heartfelt and generous encouragement, new and diverse perspectives and a vista view that broadened out into an ever-expanding sphere of connectivity through the online community.

“How am I different? I have experiential knowing, however limited in online or other contact, of a group of really inspiring people and of the places they are in conscious relationship with. Through their experience of place, I took in something of the person that lives in the place and something of the place that lives in the person. I am enlivened and transformed by this kind of encounter with people and places.”

External shifts

Participant Five had a unique experience during phase two. She walked through a neighborhood in Oakland each day and noticed one spot in particular, a paved area with a structure that seemed to be someone's abandoned garage. It was apparent to her that homeless people were using the area as a bathroom and trash receptacle. For some reason, she felt drawn to this spot and wanted to bring it healing. She asked her friend to create a wooden altar that she could place there and shared her thoughts about the project on the forum.

"I had a vision of creating a shrine in this inlet—a place where humans could stop to pray, be silent, give thanks, make an offering, sing, chant, meditate, listen—a place where they could seek comfort. Could such a place inspire attachment, love, care for this place? Or would humans tear it down and continue to deface it? I am curious. I feel cautiously hopeful. "

On the autumn equinox, she placed the altar there with the help of her daughter. She told the group about her experience placing the altar:

"I first picked up trash and broken glass before retrieving the altar from my car. I quickly placed it towards the back of the inlet and then smudged the entire space with a rosemary stick I made last year with rosemary from my garden.

"I tied some Tibetan prayer flags on the top that I had and placed an empty round balsa wood box with a granola bar, a pack of Kleenex, and a box of Slippery Elm throat lozenges inside. I also placed a picture of an adult bird feeding a baby bird on top, along with some feathers, and some shells from a beach on Kauai, a dried rose, and a rock from Sunol Wilderness Park—all things that I have collected. On the bottom I placed a red journal and a writing pen in a Ziploc bag, along with a small card with the word 'strength' printed on it. I also placed a note introducing the altar in a Ziploc and tacked it to the inside of the altar. I acknowledge that this altar could be stolen or defaced, and know that I cannot be attached to it and must release it to the universe."

What happened next was quite interesting. Participant Five returned to the altar the next morning, and already people had written in the journal she'd placed with the altar. Comments in the journal included, "Autumn is the beginning of the dreaming season," and "I am glad this is still here." Clearly, others who cared for the place wanted to express themselves. One man wrote: "My daughter, Matriya, and I often come here to walk and breathe beneath the trees. Thank you for this sacred place and moment created by your intention. Let's care for this place, and world, together. "

Over the next few days, the altar grew, enhanced by objects left by others and several more entries in the journal. Participant Five wrote about the objects: "Many items have been added to the altar including leaves, acorn tops, tree bark, a tree branch, and a bead." It seemed she had created a healing space, a spot where people could come together and share their love for the area and build community.

But she could not anticipate what happened next. She wrote:

"It has been difficult for me to write this entry today, but I know I must tell. Today I took my usual walk along my route. The altar was still there and new entries had been added. I placed a new flower on the

altar and continued on my walk. On my way back about 50 minutes later, I glanced at the altar as I was passing it and noticed that the note I had written explaining the intention of the altar was gone—taken during the short time I had last left it.

“Upon closer inspection, I noticed that bits of the plastic bag I had placed it in to protect it were lying on the floor of the altar. I had hammered it in so that it would not be easy to remove, but someone had torn it off. I decided to return to my place, print out another one, and come back and hammer it in place. This was very upsetting.

“I quickly returned by car to post the new one. As I was leaving the space, a woman with a dog across the street began calling out to me to come and see her. She said, ‘I would like to speak with you.’ I crossed the street and was sternly confronted by a very unhappy woman. This space where I had placed the altar was, according to her, at one time her garage. There was no roof anymore and she did not have the money to replace it.

“She claimed that she was a ‘Christian too,’ but that she could not understand why I would just set up my business in her space without knowing who it belonged to. She clearly had been checking it out and visiting it. She also commented that certain people were regularly coming to visit it. I got the sense that she felt left out, but also violated.

“I apologized to her several times and told her that I meant her no harm. I told her that it was for a research study that I was participating in and that I had chosen this space after observing it for two years. I told her that I had no idea that it was someone's garage and that in two years time I had never seen a vehicle parked in it, but that I had noticed lots of trash and evidence that the homeless use it often to do their business. I told her that I was drawn to the space and felt protective of it and that is why I had chosen it.

“None of this mattered to her. I told her that I would remove it right away if that is what she wanted, and she said, ‘Please do.’ She watched me the entire time from across the street and I felt so bad. I felt bad for her, mostly because I sensed that she was a lonely, unhappy woman. I sensed that she was challenged by this altar and needed to know where it came from and why. I felt bad also because I knew that this altar was transforming the energy of this place and people, bringing beauty to this place, but this did not matter to her. I thought it was interesting that she assumed I was Christian. I never mentioned the word God or religion in the note.”

What had caused this woman to act this way, to feel threatened by the altar? Why did she assume that what Participant Five was doing was a business? Why did she confront Participant Five in this way? How are these women's reactions an extension of the place? Did it react against the creation of the altar as well? Were the shifts occurring as a result of the altar and the community it created too much for the woman to handle? We can't know for sure, but we can say that Participant Five's altar had a definite effect on the spot.

Internal shifts

Many participants reported sensing internal shifts as a result of this project. Participant Eight is one example. She joined because she wanted to “stop working and pay attention to the natural world.” This goal proved elusive for her throughout the project as she entered the time of year when her job demands the most attention from her. She often added “sit in my place” to her “To Do” list, but never ended up checking it off. Then she had a revelation.

“I have decided I will not worry myself, berate myself, stress out over yet another thing to do. Instead, I will befriend my strength, thanking it for what it brings me, and then find small ways to refresh myself within the context of ‘my place.’ So my place travels with me now. I take tiny breaks now, wherever I am, allowing myself to refresh in an undisturbed moment, no matter how short or how long, and rest with the natural world, whether I'm in it or looking out on it.

“I stop when I'm walking the pedestrian overpass between hotels and notice the great blue heron standing perfectly still in the shallow pool below me. I hold the moment with that same stillness, breathing in the patience and expansiveness.”

Participant Eight's ability to internalize her place in this way represents a significant shift in her psyche, for now she can tap into her place's gifts throughout the day. Additionally, her place is not just one spot...it is the many faces of nature she encounters on her extensive travels across the country. One of the hoped-for outcomes of this project was a decrease in stress for participants, and Participant Eight shows one way that result manifested.

Participant Nine chose a surprising place to study: the sky. He combined the practice of observing place with the exercise called subject/object reversal, which he describes as “contemplating something, then imagining that object contemplating me.”

It was the marriage of these two practices that created internal shifts for him.

“When doing this with clouds, I found that I often experienced a shift in consciousness when imagining myself a cloud contemplating me. It was as if my consciousness became more cloud-like, with shades of difference depending on the type of cloud. These images of cloud consciousness have begun showing up in my meditation. Overall I often have an expanded sense of space, as if discovering a new sense organ.

“I became much more attentive to the sky, clouds, and by extension more aware of the space above and around me. And I have become at least somewhat more observant of the external world.”

Participant Nine felt greater connection and saw a deepening of his meditation practice as a result of his participation in the project, and he also gained an expanded awareness of place.

Finally, Participant Ten expressed that she felt several internal shifts, saying the project “left an indelible print in only a matter of mere weeks.”

For her, the project helped her better tune into the city she's studying for her doctoral research. “I listen more intently to hear what Los Angeles has to say from the ground up. I am more mindfully aware

of the face I turn to the City. I look at Her landscapes far more differently, thanks in large part to this amazing group and work.

“I am discovering how varying parts of me (psyche and soma) intersect and interact with the place of Los Angeles and her many facets—from Beverly Hills to ‘L.A. proper.’ One most notable change is the connection between how the seasons of the City, the climate, the elements, affect me body and soul. Another change is finding more sacred moments among the places that are often deemed ugly and profane.”

IMPLICATIONS

The TerraPlaces project has been renewed for another season and it is my hope that it will continue at least for an entire year so we can track changes among participants over the course of 12 months. It is already apparent from what has been shared here that shifts happen as a result of sitting with place and such shifts will likely be more profound and lasting over a longer period of time.

Why is it important to think about the impact of sitting with a place? We have lost our connection to the natural world. We have forgotten that we are part of this world and that our actions cause immediate reactions in the natural world. Were humans to remember this, it seems, especially in light of the shifts that occurred during this project, that it is possible major shifts in how we treat plants, the land, and animals would occur. We would understand our surroundings, and ourselves better. We could reduce our stress to a great degree and perhaps even discover that many of the things that stress us out are things we can let go of.

Furthermore, the communal implications of the impact of sitting with nature could be huge. For instance, if each person in a town chose a spot and sat with it for an extended period of time, say six months, thus developing a deep relationship with that piece of land, it is likely they would experience shifts. These shifts in awareness and the increased feeling of community they would develop might lead them to band together to protect the land in the town. If we expanded this phenomenon out to counties, states, regions, countries...we could create a global movement. We could create a world of people committed to having deep relationships with place that would lead to conservation, protection, and just treatment of the land and its inhabitants.

APPENDIX ONE: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE, FALL PHASE

TerraPlaces Questionnaire New Members

Please take a moment to fill out this questionnaire. It will help us in our research for this project, giving us an idea of where you are at the beginning of the project and what you’re bringing to it. There will be a similar questionnaire at the end.

Participation in this research is purely voluntary. You are free to end participation in the study at any time. If you decide to participate, your contribution to this research project will be greatly appreciated.

You also have the right to know the potential risks and benefits of this project, what's expected of you as a participant, and to be treated with courtesy, dignity, privacy, and respect.

The information you give will appear on the Powers of Place TerraPlaces web page only if you choose to put it there, although sharing is encouraged. You are in control of what you share in this forum. You are also welcome to share information directly with the researchers.

Your signature below indicates that you clearly understand all this and that:

I certify that I have been advised that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without prejudice.

I give my written consent to participate in this research project with the understanding that my consent does not waive any of my legal rights, nor does it release the researcher from liability for negligence, if any.

Additionally, I understand that this is a research project and that the researchers will be using the information I provide as part of their research. I also understand that the researchers will not use my name in any of the documents written about this project unless given written permission by me.

Signature of research participant

Date

Please scan and email, fax, or mail this questionnaire:

Email: katrina@katrinadreamer.com

Fax: 925-969-3101, attn. Katrina Martin Davenport

Mail: Katrina Martin Davenport, c/o Fisher Library, JFK University, 100 Ellinwood Way, Pleasant Hill, CA 94523

1. Name
2. Email
3. Phone
4. Are you attending school? If so, which school? Graduate or undergraduate?

5. What drew you to this project?

6. In a few sentences, describe your relationship with place?
7. What do you expect or hope might change as a result of sitting with a place?
8. How often do you go outdoors?
9. What is your relationship to your dreams? Do you remember them? Do you keep a dream journal?
10. Has a place ever come to you in your dreams? If so, please describe the circumstances/the dream.

APPENDIX TWO: FINAL QUESTIONNAIRE, FALL PHASE

TerraPlaces Phase Two Final Questionnaire

1. Name
2. In one or two paragraphs, describe your experience during the second phase.
3. If you were part of phase one, what changed? What stayed the same?
4. How did your experience of/ relationship with place change over the last two to four months?
5. How did your relationship with your dreams change? Do you remember them more? Understand them better?
6. Do you think your place has shown up in your dreams? Why or why not?
7. What has been easy about this project?
8. What has been difficult?
9. Here I offer you space for suggestions for improvement, things you'd like to see more of, ways to enhance the group, etc.

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