

“Paulus Berensohn: The Pebble Ritual”
S. Portico Bowman

Paulus Berensohn tells me there are stars in the stones, my tea cups, the ventricles fastened to my heart valves, and strung through my body like patio lights. He would say I can see remnants of their light on the tips of my lips. I don't know if I believe that. But I want to. Glitter in the gloss at the cosmetic counter tastes bad and I want to live a natural life.

Meteorites on their way to get groceries or gather more speed plowed into Australia, Mexico and South Dakota. Scientists have gathered this celestial booty into display cases at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. Sheered smooth to show off the unbroken Widmanstätten pattern, their devastating beauty is stacked and caged and put on view like wild tigers in the zoo. There are septillion planets in a hundred million galaxies. Earth was an unfortunate place for these meteorites to land. Other more progressive Milky Ways wouldn't have considered these oversized rocks something to trap and display. Someone big and tall with hair under their arms, or on their back, could have picked up these rare chards and tossed them away like fish that no one really needed. But old habits die hard, or don't die at all. Humans are greedy. We don't often replace what we take from the earth. Or the sky. Civilized societies believe museums are the best place to see the beginning of time.

Night staff dutifully clean off the marks of young tongues that lick the case when distracted mothers talk to their sisters who get good government jobs. The plastic cleaning bottle sprays the special contents that arrive from Spartan Chemical Products in Ohio. The company tagline declares “We Make Clean Simple.” Starlight shouldn't have to battle grime to be seen. Except that busy tourists rarely take the time to read the index cards. Other minerals wink in

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S. Portico Bowman

more pleasing sea green, blue and amethyst. The colorful allure is magnetic. The Hope Diamond will be their final reward at the exit.

However, it is these meteoric giant chunks of ore that bear the iron that makes blood red, pink in the cheeks of their children, and provides the ochre used by the Aboriginal Dreamtime ceremonies that Berensohn revered. “Aborigines have always respected the force of magnetic energy and they recognize the capacity of blood and red ochre to increase their sensitivity to it.”¹ Ochre on skin provides the conduit of transformation and healing in their ecstatic rituals.

However, grammas and uncles visiting from all over the world are only reminded of bullets. Or buildings. The steel gray slate surface doesn’t look red. Or alive. It looks dead. However, the formation of elements in the stars proves that iron is the core of all celestial bodies.² The detailed description for the Casas Grande, a meteorite found in an ancient Mexican temple, wrapped in cloth and buried alongside human remains lists the content as iron. Only. Supernova explosions are believed to be triggered by the iron of the star’s core collapsing and dispersing.³ “The life pouring through us, pumping our heart and breathing through our lungs did not begin at our birth or conception. Like every particle in every atom and molecule of our bodies, it goes back through time to the first splitting spinning of the stars.”⁴

I walk the nine blocks back to the Smithsonian Archives of American Art appeased. And grateful. I carry on with my research for the book I’m writing, *Dig: Paulus Berensohn, A Natural Life*. I’ve been converted. I’m a believer. For once I could see the truth with my eyes.

In copious and detailed notes for every workshop Berensohn would teach he’d metaphorically prick his finger with a miniature silver sword⁵ and dot every person, page and

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piece to remind them what the indigenous people always have known and don't want to forget.

We are punctuated by stardust stranded in bodies of flesh, bone and ignorance. Amnesia of this truth is the roadblock to infinity and Berensohn lived to remind us of this, one workshop at a time, one Pebble Ritual at a time.

At its core, the Pebble Ritual is an opportunity to gather together for the sole purpose of experiencing a ritual. We live in a society bereft and cut off from a practice common to all cultures as far back as 95,000 years ago. Our Neanderthal brothers and sisters took stones and bones to make connections with their ancestors. The invisible world was made visible. The past was also the future. There was nothing to be afraid of. The cycle of life continues. Berensohn calls for us to renew our relationships with ritual and create our own ways to worship, to connect and to pray that are not dogmatic, or denominational. Berensohn believed that “until the artist in us is involved, we don't have a cosmology.”⁶

Berensohn spent significant time in Australia. He learned how the Aborigines possess their sacred science and fuse the energies of the earth and humanity to those of the cosmos. The ochre-earth medium is the matter to bridge the physical and subtle levels of expression. Blood, mineral pigment and red ochre are interchangeable in Aboriginal ritual. “Both red ochre and red blood contain ferrous oxide compounds which cause cells and molecules to line up parallel to the lines of force that surround magnetic fields.”⁷

The inscape of the body and the outer-scape of the cosmos become one.

“Stones are the first embodiment of matter. Pebbles are the first play thing.”⁸ Making objects from clay is an intimate placeholder in a world gone wired and wild with grief for lack of

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S. Portico Bowman

true relationships while being technologically connected to the whole planet. Paulus invites you to adorn your necklace of consciousness with the eye as tongue, licking and tasting the light, not the display case. He tells us over and over again that every finger has 90,000 sense receptors, and emphatically reminds us that we are losing our imagination for the earth and for touch.

99% of the universe is in darkness. Stones were the first inhabitants to carry the light born as they are in the primal fire of creation. In *Desert Notes* Barry Lopez writes that stones in the desert are small enough to be missed lying as they do, down in the desert floor, but “they are the last thing to give up the light. You will see them flare and burn like coals before they go out.” Stones – the first beings to carry the light are the last to let it go. “A lump of clay will glow with ultraviolet energy for a month if you hit it with a hammer.”⁹

The Pebble Ritual was Berensohn’s invitation to become a cosmonaut without ever leaving the earth. In fact, the Pebble Ritual is an example of how you can go the furthest out by coming the closest in.

Berensohn, or the celebrant — as his notes direct — asks the participants to take about three quarters of a pound of clay and hold it. Sense it. “Behold it.”¹⁰ The celebrant demonstrates two, or three, or even four ways to make twelve pebbles in ascending size. Participants then place their pebbles in any configuration but a straight line, in graduating order. When everyone is finished the celebrant asks, “Do you remember when we lived in the cave? These were our first play things. Pebbles as free toys, a gift of Nature. All we had were pebbles and our imaginations. Now we have mathematics and architecture.”¹¹ The celebrant then asks everyone to form a circle. The center of the group has now become an altar. Starting with the leader the pebbles are

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S. Portico Bowman

gathered up and set down in a new pattern. Each participant, in turn, adds their twelve pebbles and the arrangement transforms in a kaleidoscope of choices. The ritual closes with votive candles placed and lit and if appropriate, the room lights are turned off. The participants and the celebrant take hands and perform a simple circle dance or slow walk around the spontaneous pattern that has appeared. The dry clay on your fingers becomes moist again through the touch of another hand. You lose sight of your pebbles as the circle turns. It's not a burden to surrender ownership of your twelve orbs. The collective arrangement is the star altar of the ancestors. The ceremony closes when the celebrant reads the poem “Stone” by Charles Simic.

Berensohn's call to action through artistic participatory engagement echoes the poets of every age. “Poetry is the romance of time. It tells the history of the human heart. It allows you to travel from one place to another. It can take us from the familiar to the unfamiliar. It can take us from Kansas to Oz. It can take us from death to life.”¹² The Pebble Ritual was Berensohn's way to make language something we could touch. Fingers letterpress whirls into soft clay as we remember the grandchildren of the children in our lives. How do they want us to live as we invite their presence into the prayer circle? Poetry, in the life of Paulus becomes the quotidian measure of our societal ability to bond with the unseen. And care about it.

Paulus declares that art is not a thing. It's a behavior. It's a participatory consciousness. All primary materials are a wilderness. And behaving artistically can save us.¹³ Modern science has been robbing us of our sensual connection to the earth as sacred and we must win it back.¹⁴ Writer and poet Ursula Le Guin, fortune teller for our time tells us the world needs people that will remember what freedom feels like. David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Suzi Gablik's

“Paulus Berensohn: The Pebble Ritual”

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The Reenchantment of Art, and more recently Deborah Haynes’ *Beginning Again: Reflections on Art as Spiritual Practice*, and Day Schildkret’s *Morning Altars* all remember. Ritual, or rtá, the principal of natural order within the universe is the oldest expression of being. “It is rooted deeply in our brains and nervous system just like rhythm. Ritual has always been the place to combine the world of the senses with the world of spirit. Ritual is the way of relating to universal mystery and the mysterious nature of our personal lives.”¹⁵

All need not be lost because we have been on our way to here. Greed and avarice are not our only hallmarks. Tableware can become altar ware for family and friends. Sculptures for the galleries can become offerings for strangers we don’t know yet. Here we have moved in the right direction. Sun-star Saturday afternoons with fresh lemons are squeezed into silica held frozen by the fire. Ripe avocados are spread over whole grains from the local bakery on stoneware plates harvested from the earth with gratitude and thoughtful reimbursement. These actions are not random, or meaningless or not enough. Martín Prechtel, a modern day shaman trained by Nicolas Chiviliu, one of the greatest Tzutujil Mayan shamans in Guatemala says that a gift must be given to that which gives you life. And that preferably this gift be handmade because that is the one thing the spirits do not have. “Ritual gifts are the spiritual economy of the village.”¹⁶

The alternative action is eating alone on styrofoam at the mall. Only one of those meals leads in the direction of global healing. The suicidal commonplace eco-irony is to give up because we think we can’t do enough, so we don’t do anything at all. But everyone in the developed nations can pivot towards the local and handmade. Craft arts become a pattern of kindness. Peaceful action can offset the addiction to technocratic mass production and runaway

“Paulus Berensohn: The Pebble Ritual”

S. Portico Bowman

economic growth. It’s bountiful to hold a yellow thread and weave a line of countercultural integrity. Indra’s Net is also a tapestry. Counting down to some possible end of the world is not going to save us. Counting up, or as Paulus would say, “singing up” the earth will. The craft arts are patient. And long suffering. Harmony is natural like the stars in the sky or a kiss between lips.¹⁷

¹ Robert Lawlor, Voices of the First Day: Awakening in the Aboriginal Dreamtime, (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1991) 106.

² *ibid.*, p.103.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Joanna Macy, World as Lover, World as Self: A Guide to Living Fully in Turbulent Times: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal, (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2007) 157.

⁵ Paulus Berensohn, Manuscript for the Silver Sword, (Paulus Berensohn papers, circa 1950-2017, bulk 1976-2010. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

⁶ Paulus Berensohn, Shining Clay Workshop Notes, (Paulus Berensohn papers).

⁷ Lawlor, *op.cit.*, p.102.

⁸ Paulus Berensohn, Shining Clay Workshop: Pebble Ritual Notes (Paulus Berensohn papers).

“Paulus Berensohn: The Pebble Ritual”

S. Portico Bowman

⁹ Paulus Berensohn, Dr. Leila M. Coyne in Speaking for Stones, Talking for Clay, (Paulus Berensohn papers).

¹⁰ Berensohn, Pebble Ritual Notes, (Paulus Berensohn papers).

¹¹ Berensohn, Pebble Ritual Notes, (Paulus Berensohn papers).

¹² Billy Collins, Billy Collins Teaches Reading and Writing Poetry, Master Class, (San Francisco, CA, 2019).

¹³ Paulus Berensohn, Shining Clay Workshop Notes, (Paulus Berensohn papers).

¹⁴ Paulus Berensohn, NCECA Journal, (Paulus Berensohn papers).

¹⁵ Paulus Berensohn, Shining Clay Workshop Notes, (Paulus Berensohn papers).

¹⁶ Derrick Jenson, Saving the Indigenous Soul: An Interview with Martin Prechtel, (The Sun Magazine Online, April 2001).

¹⁷ S. Portico Bowman, Dig: Paulus Berensohn, A Natural Life, In Progress. 2019-2021 (Publication Pending).