Landscape and Loss of the Classic Maya:
An Archeological Foray into the Excavation of the Self

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Life has always seemed to me like a plant that lives on its rhizome. Its true life is invisible, hidden in the rhizome. The part that appears above ground lasts only a single summer. Then it withers away—an ephemeral apparition. When we think of the unending growth and decay of life and civilizations, we cannot escape the impression of absolute nullity. Yet, I have never lost a sense of something that lives and endures underneath the eternal flux. What we see is the blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains. In the end the only events in my life worth telling are those when the imperishable world irrupted into this transitory one. That is why I speak chiefly of inner experiences, amongst which I include my dreams and visions. (Jung, 1961, p. 165)

My fieldwork took place at an archeological site at Blue Creek, Belize, Central America, in a rural area near the northern border shared with Mexico. Led by Dr. Thomas Guderjan, archaeologist and director of the Maya Research Program for the better part of nineteen years, excavations on Classic Maya sites in this locale have been ongoing since 1992, and Maya Research Program has become one of the largest and longest running archeological organizations in Belize (Maya Research Program, 2009).

When I arrived on site, after a two-hour bus ride from Belize City over bumpy, broken pavement and dirt roads, past run down shacks, tired-looking people waiting at bus stops, and endless herds of cows, horses, and homeless dogs all with their ribs protruding as if they were starved, I landed amidst a stunning landscape of rolling green fields of corn and beans, surrounded by gentle hills. Just a mile or two to the north was the river that served as the border with Mexico, and not far away in all directions, the jungle awaited with its rippling heat, haunting cries, and dense vegetation.

At the base camp of the Maya Research Program, I joined a community made up of professional archaeologists and scholars from all over the world, including at least 12 different
universities. I was one of several students and laypeople who held a strong interest in the scholarly imperative of the MRP: to gain better understanding and add to existing research of the ancient societies of Mesoamerican peoples who historically populated the region, as well as to gain insight into why the Classic Maya who dwelled here from around 200 A.D through 850 A.D. completely vanished from the region, abandoning their well-developed cities and complex lifestyles and disappearing to parts unknown. MRP, in addition to financial support that has come from the National Geographic Society and the National Science Foundation, among others, partially funds their mission by inviting students or professionals of any age to get direct experience in archeological and anthropological research (Maya Research Program, 2009).

The archeological excavations around Blue Creek, named for nearby Rio Azul and for the Mennonite village of Blue Creek just a kilometer or two away, all focus on Classic Maya sites. With at least two large plazas, temples, and dozens of surrounding buildings, the main Maya city of Blue Creek, inhabited by about twenty thousand people at its height in the Late Classic Period around 600 A.D. to 800 A.D., is believed to have been a wealthy one with large amounts of jade, vast, rich agricultural lands surrounding it, and a strategic position at the termini of two important rivers. Evidence indicates the Maya culture, with advanced skills in astronomy, engineering, and mathematics, is built on concepts from the Olmec civilization which dates as far back as 1200 B.C. to 900 B.C. Evidence shows these ancient people began raising tall pyramid-shaped buildings as early as 600 B.C. and decorating them with stunning cosmological scenes sculpted in plaster by 300 B.C.. Blue Creek in particular, appears to have been inhabited for almost two millennia, beginning around 900 B.C. until it was abruptly abandoned, like many cities in the Classic Maya period, sometime around 1000 A.D. (Guderjan, 2007).

Indeed, my interest and intention in pursuing fieldwork on an archeological excavation of a Maya city, the pursuit that motivated me to adopt a hard wooden cot in one of the tiny corrugated tin cabanas at the base camp along with everyone else, to rise at 5 or 6 a.m. and put on

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clothing covered with earth from a previous day, and to hazard the dangerous environment that included spiders (one day, there was a tarantula on my head and I still went back!), scorpions, centipedes and 52 different species of snakes—9 of which are deadly to humans--was to seek insight and understanding into the collapse of cultures, peoples, species, and civilizations.

What motivated me to return to the jungle day in and day out, traveling with my crewmates in the back of a decades-old dilapidated pickup truck through pastures, fields, and mud; battling parasite-carrying mosquitoes (which ultimately caught me), hiking a mile each way through the jungle as the toucans and howler monkeys called, carrying heavy equipment or 50-pound water bottles, and taking up my pickaxe and shovel with blistered hands each new day and work at a level of physical labor I have scarcely faced in my life (even after growing up on a farm), was to experience and to know on an intimate level what the life of an ancient Maya individual may have been. To understand what motivated him or her, what hazards he faced on a moment-by-moment basis, what tasks she was required to do in everyday life, what objects, places, and actions were important to them, and what ultimately led to their terrible and catastrophic demise was my quest. What I encountered in my undertaking was an unexpected excavation, not only of an ancient Maya site, but also one at a personal level: one that not only uncovered a fascination for and a relationship with a mysterious and compelling culture deeply rooted in ritual, ancestor worship, and the underworld, but also one which began to reveal corresponding layers in my own psyche and my relationship to the culture at large.

Archaeology

Archaeology is “the scientific study of historic or prehistoric peoples and their cultures by analysis of their artifacts, inscriptions, monuments, and other such remains, especially those that have been excavated (Dictionary.com, 2009). Both Freud and Jung had strong interest in archaeology, which ultimately directly influenced their contributions to psychology. Freud was
an avid collector of antiquities, and was widely read on the topic of archaeology. He used many, archaeological ideas in his writings, parlaying the metaphor to psychology in his preferred role as an archaeologist of the mind, referring to ideas like excavating layer after layer of a patient’s psyche in order to uncover valuable treasures (Bowdler, 1996).

Similarly, Jung, who planned to study archaeology early in his career before diverting his attention to the medical field, found that his interest in the subject played a part in his findings in his chosen career in the burgeoning science of psychology. In a now-famous dream, he recounts finding himself in a house, which, as he descended through the levels, revealed itself to be from increasingly older time periods containing corresponding artifacts. From modern to mediaeval and down a stairway to an ancient Roman level, Jung descended, until he finally lifted a stone slab in the floor, and, descending further, discovered a cave filled with thick dust containing scattered bones, broken pottery, and two old, half disintegrated human skulls (1961).

Jung (1961) ultimately credited the dream for his theory of the collective unconscious, determining that it referred to the increasing depth of the psyche, ranging from normal consciousness at the level of the house all the way to the cave, which represented the most primitive consciousness of mankind, the aspect that links to a collective storehouse of racial memories, archetypes, and images. Jung also stated that the dream led him to a renewed interest and passion for the study of archaeology.

Excavation refers to digging or hollowing out, exposing or making bare, or unearthing. (Dictionary.com, 2009). In archaeology, excavation takes place in layers. In Belize, as I wielded the pickaxe in a mighty effort to break up the roots and vegetation covering giant mounds that surely contained ruins beneath, I learned that the topmost layer of soil, called the humic layer, (often several feet deep, depending on the amount of time that has passed since the original civilization was buried), is typically composed of organic material, plants, roots, leaves, and soil.
that has accumulated by plant growth, erosion, wind, and weather over centuries. Beneath the
humic layer lies the collapse layer, comprised of rock, stone, powder, and limestone, remnants of
the building materials, human residue, and personal possessions left by ancient cities and their
inhabitants. Needless to say, most artifacts and bones are found in the collapse layer and require a
certain amount of effort to uncover them.

The presence of layers also directly applies specifically to excavations of Maya sites.
Over generations, the Maya tended to build over the top existing structures and, when excavated,
earlier buildings are uncovered within more recent ones like the layers of an onion (Guderjan,
2007) (see Figure 1).

The idea of nesting
structures that are excavated in
layers is also applicable to the
science of the mind. The
archaeology of the self, though not
a new idea to be sure, is a powerful
lens through which we can gain
understanding of our selves, our
culture and our world.

As hot as the jungle was the first day we uncovered a bench in an ancient residence, the
temperature at the site rose exponentially with the excitement of the discovery. Though the
bench was obviously meant as a place for sitting or storage, it was also common for the
Maya to place a burial beneath the benches so the ancestors could be nearby. A feeling of
almost frenzy seemed to overtake the dig: the anticipation of breaking through the bench in
order to find what may be buried below was all-encompassing, sweeping the participants
like a virus ready to take hold. I was taken aback a bit, conflicted by a feeling of dread at
identifying what felt to me like a certain disrespect for the dead. What made us, acting in the
name of archaeology, any different from the looters and grave robbers who sought only to

Figure 1: Illustration of how Maya construction took place in layers making excavation like peeling an
onion.
uncover treasure and fame by taking advantage of those who were long since gone? When I posed the question to the archaeologists, this was the answer I got: the ability, the potential to know how just one human lived his life is worth the dig; it validates the effort. We desire to know, and to learn from what is buried. “We dig up the dead to feed the living,” one archeologist said. (Excerpt from author’s journal, July 2009)

The job of the archaeologist, Schele and Freidel (1990) suggest, is, in part, to “interpret the history recorded in architecture, art, and artifacts; in words, images, and ruins” (p. 18). They claim the study of Maya civilization through the relics left behind paints a worldview that informs us about “the origin of humanity, the purpose of human life on earth, and the relationship of the individual to his family, his society, and his gods” (p. 19).

What, I was beginning to wonder at that moment, there in the heat of the jungle amidst the ruins of a lost civilization, was buried in my own psyche, waiting to be brought to light so the true essence of this individual might be known? What truths about humanity, about our purpose on earth in modern contemporary culture might be revealed after careful excavation? And what was the fine line between respecting boundaries and following the call to dig, to excavate a truth that could bring insight and imminent transformation?

Classic Maya Civilization

The Maya civilization which existed over nearly 2500 years from approximately 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C. covered more than 100,000 square miles (Schele & Freidel, 1990) was not centralized or consolidated into one group, but rather was comprised of hundreds of thousands of people that spoke hundreds of languages, some as different from each other as English and Chinese. Major cities in Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico have been unearthed in the past century indicating a culture that, in spite of their linguistic and geographic diversity, featured deep and pervasive belief systems built on consistent creation myths, complex ritual practices, and the worship of established deities, as well as well-developed artistic skills.
and advanced technological and engineering skills in agriculture, math, engineering, and astronomy.

While Europe slumbered in the Dark Ages, the Classic Maya, who are estimated to have numbered anywhere between three and 14 million, thrived from about 200 AD to 900 AD. They used advanced building techniques to construct massive stone edifices, including temples shaped as pyramids, which were meticulously aligned with the planets and constellations. Inscriptions on buildings, murals, pottery, and stelae or local stone monuments, all indicate a highly advanced form of glyphic writing that was virtually undecipherable to modern scientists until initial breakthroughs in recent decades. The Maya command of a complex calendrical system associated with deities, cycles, solstices, and the movements of stars and planets, alongside their compelling and enigmatic depictions of ritual bloodletting and sacrifice to mark important dates and events have left a legacy of beauty, power and terror (Schele & Freidel, 1990).

The Maya political system was comprised of a class of elite who ruled the hundreds of independent polities in the region and a class of laborers and farmers who acquiesced to the leadership. Kings maintained the support of the peasants because they claimed to have direct access to the deities and interceded on behalf of their people to requisition the gods for help. At times, they dressed as specific gods and it was believed they became that god for a time while entreating him or her. They also conducted most of the rituals, including bloodletting, on behalf of their followers, as well collaborated with or shapeshifted into various power animals or spirits in order to carry out ceremonies for insight or healing (Freidel, Schele, & Parker, 1993).

Landscape

Michael Shanks, Timothy Webmoor, and Christopher Witmore (2009) suggest the basis of archaeology revolves around material objects that contain vital information, that ta archaia, the etymological root of archaeology, literally means “old things”, so “a concern with things, an
obligation to 'materiality', a commitment to landscape runs to the heart of the profession” (2009). Indeed this commitment to landscape is a common intersection in archaeology and depth psychology, a center axis which supports it’s theories and allows for both diversity and unity at the same time, an articulation of individual elements that make up both the physical world of the Maya cosmology and those components of the psyche that result in a unified worldview. Jung states, “Since psyche and matter are contained in one and the same world, and moreover are in continuous contact with one another and ultimately rest on the irrepresentable transcendental factors. . . . psyche and matter are two different aspects of one and the same thing” (Jung, 1960, para. 418). Thus the internal events and external objects both reflect the same message.

The material landscape shaped by the Maya is intriguing and compelling. Ryan refers to it as the “mystical geography of the Maya civilization (2002, p. 156). Indeed, its monumental pyramids, imposing temples, and vast plazas create a fascinating and symbolic landscape, recalling mountains rising up from a primordial sea, as if the creation myth from the Popol Vuh, the Maya holy book, had sprung to life. The Maya believed the pyramid temple represented the First True Mountain, symbolic of the World Tree, the axis raised by the First Father to separate and lift the sky from the primordial sea and to hold it aloft. As the axis mundi, the axis of the world, the World Tree is the considered the source of all creation.

Maya peoples perceived the material world as the manifestation of the spiritual realm, and the spiritual world was the essence of the material one (Schele & Freidel, 1990). Jung refers to integrating the external world through the senses but also suggests we “translate into visual reality the world within us” (Ryan, 2002, p. 156). Thus, the compelling monuments the Maya made in the outer landscape can correlate what Ryan refers to “structures of the psyche” (p. 156) becoming symbolic in the “inner psychic landscape of the mind” (p. 156).

Jungian analyst, Edward Whitmont (1969), says symbols allow the emergence of themes from the unconscious in an attempt to reconnect us with a mode of experiencing from which we
have become disconnected. He theorizes we experience both external objects, things we can see and which have meaning for us in a specific context we have learned, and we also experience inner objects that we can’t necessarily know or recognize. Since concepts from the unconscious are unknown or unrecognizable, the psyche co-opts outer familiar and known images that have meaning for us to represent inner objects. Thus, the external object that represents some unknown inner object becomes a symbol, which is “the best possible representation of something that can never be known” (Hopcke, 1999, p. 29). In this way, the external landscape around us reflects and gives us clues as to what is going on inside our inner psychical one. For me, both the images of the Maya landscape during the height of its glory, as well as the buried and crumbling ruins suffocating under a dense layer of humic soil and jungle can be seen as powerful and symbolic symbols from my psyche.

Ritual

The *Popol Vuh* reveals the original Maya creation story of how humans were made by the gods. After various attempts with mud, straw, and wood, each time the fledgling humans were destroyed because they were weak or defective: they could not remember their creators and failed to make offerings. It wasn’t until the gods made people from corn that they found success, and those who became the Maya knew how to make ritual offerings (Freidel, et al., 1993, p. 108).

The word *ritual* is generally defined as pertaining to routines, established procedures, and regularly followed methods connected to religion or ceremony, suggesting at a broader significance behind the physical action of repeating something. As opposed to *rote*, meaning habitual and mechanical, ritual must be infused with attention and intention in order to assert the true power it carries. Ritual sacrifice, because of the attention and intention the Maya infused into the act, lived up to its true meaning as well: sacrifice is etymologically connected to the idea of making something sacred (Dictionary.com, 2009)
Onsite at Blue Creek, I was constantly confronted with the intensity, frequency, and methods of ritual practice with which the ancient Maya seemed to live their lives. Rather than differentiating between the sacred and the profane, the little we know about this complex society indicates they simply were not conditioned to venture outside the belief system which required them to be aware of the gods and offer up what was needed to maintain balance at all times. For the Maya, there were two realms: one in which they lived their lives and the Otherworld, inhabited by spirits, ancestors, and gods. Classic Maya temples were carefully aligned with stars and constellations in the sky, and were laid out with each of their four sides in some relationship to the four directions. Maya cosmology dictated that the quadripartite with the axis at center had to exist for humanity to be in balance with the cosmos (Freidel, Schele, & Parker, 1993).

Maya kings, who also served as shamans and liaisons to the gods, used the temples, the vertical axes which allowed access between the worlds, to perform sacred ritual designed to redefine and articulate the relationship between the two realms (Ryan, 2002). According to Maya beliefs, the gods originally created people through a sacrifice of the deities’ own flesh and blood. Therefore, ritual and ongoing offerings had to be given in return out of appreciation, reciprocation, placation, and petition for survival, help, and well-being. They were also conducted at special times and events like births, deaths, victories in conquest, or changes in existing rulers (McKillop, 2004).

Among the various ritual offerings, bloodletting was a common practice in which individuals drew blood from their genitals, earlobes, or tongues (see Figure 2), then dropping it onto paper, which was burned as an offering. Additionally, due to

Figure 2: Lintel depicting the ritual of bloodletting by pulling a thorny rope through the tongue
their unwavering adherence to their advanced calendrical system which clearly designated appropriate and auspicious times for all events, regular ritual sacrifices were required periodically and were often conducted amidst great ceremony and feasting. For example, in addition to dates that marked the beginning and ending of seasons ideal for planting, harvesting, and building, the Maya also celebrated the end of twenty-year historical cycles called *katuns* with great ceremony. Sacrifices, and human sacrifices in particular, were sometimes conducted in preparation for going to war or on the ascension of a king or ruler to his throne (McKillop, 2004).

According to Schele and Freidel (1990), bloodletting achieved two purposes: nourishing and sustaining the relationship with the gods, and allowing vision rites to occur by opening the axis to the Otherworld in order for communication with the gods and ancestors to take place. Archaeological digs have turned up human remains buried in various specific positions where the victim was clearly bound and sacrificed using specific ritual procedures.

Joseph Campbell believed the ritual enactment of mythic themes put the natural transitions of life into context, creating a fabric that held and supported events like birth, coming into adulthood, and death. According to him, ritual is not merely symbolic: it literally transports you to a non-ordinary reality. “The function of myth,” said Campbell, “is to pull you into accord with the rhythm of the universe.” (McCarthy, 1988, p. 1). He adhered to the idea that myth and ceremonial rites enable the mind to be in harmony with the body and the way of life to be in harmony with the way nature requires (Campbell & Moyers, 1991).

As the crew at Blue Creek gathered our gear together at the end of the day to make the trek back through the jungle, the two supervising archaeologists were hastily processing a large cache of artifacts my partner, Katie, and I had uncovered at the last minute. As we waited impatiently while the findings were being bagged and tagged, I caught myself in a reverie, imagining just how the initial ritual went down; how these shards of pottery, tools, and beads came to lie in exactly this spot, on what we had dubbed “the Stairway to Xibalba”, a...
newly uncovered staircase that evidently led off the northwest corner of platform next to the shrine.

Surely the Maya who lived in this courtyard, probably stricken with grief and fear, and faced with an unknown and daunting future, stood around the stairway one last time, bags packed and waiting with all they would carry away from this place. It's possible they simply tossed the things they couldn't carry down those stairs: extra possessions that could have no place in their new life as nomads who would be searching for sustenance and a new life in unknown locales.

More likely, I believed, they were making an offering of something that was truly meaningful, sacrificing a prized possession in the true sense of the word. Sacrifice, after all, means to make sacred. Maybe they each spoke aloud as they tossed the one precious thing they had chosen to give up down the stairwell, and, casting one last prayer to the ancestors who lay buried under the shrine from which the staircase descended and under the benches in various other buildings around the square, they turned their backs and slowly walked away, shoulders hunched as they shouldered the heavy knowledge that things would surely get worse: they were leaving the ancestors behind. They had to leave the dead to feed the living, so we could eventually dig them up more than a millennium later.

My thoughts turned from the ritual that unfolded in my imagination to the ritual that was unfolding before my eyes. The archaeologist in charge of site L28, the staircase, had grabbed several plastic gallon ziplock bags and was hastily but carefully labeling them with a black sharpie marker. The name of the site, name of the archaeologist, date, number of the excavation, number of the structure, and the type of artifacts found must all be ritually logged before the items are tossed inside and zipped securely closed (see Figure 3). Because it was the close of the day, other archaeologists and volunteers milled about, bored and impatient to leave after a long day of physical labor in difficult environment conditions. No one thought much of yet another cache of shards and tools that Katie and I found mid-stairs.

I wondered for the umpteenth time what the ancestors thought of us digging up their relics that they had clearly meant to give to the earth. Had we found them because the ancestors were willing for us to find them, or in spite of the fact that the ancestors wanted them buried? What was the process, I wondered, for those of us who were digging to acknowledge and thank whatever benevolent forces allowed these artifacts to be uncovered at all? At what point did the established ritual of bagging and tagging take on a meaning beyond the practical recording of physical material?

I was rather shocked by the stunning contrast between the focus on ritual between our culture and that of the Maya we were in the process of digging up every day. What was the boundary between violating a civilization in the pursuit of knowledge and asking...
permission to dig so that information could be brought forth that would help those ancient peoples live again, if only in spirit and memory? What link, what liaison was made with the memory of place inherent in that site, images, voices, emotions, echoes of a living population who were born, lived, laughed, cried, and died on that very spot?

And more, what about the last generation who were forced to leave the home of their ancestors who had been connected to that place for centuries, struggling to maintain the balance that would please the gods and keep the people alive and thriving. Who were we to blithely waltz in and dig as we would without so much as a by your leave? The words of Martin Prechtel, contemporary author, Maya village elder, and shaman seem significant here: A culture that will not make offerings will always be relegated to making arbitrary sacrifices (2009).

The Otherworld

Schele and Freidel (1990) suggest the Maya worldview bordered on what we modern westerners would call the supernatural. Certainly, it was a shamanic culture that relied on ties to other worlds from which they drew their power. The king-shamans had spirit guides and enlisted the help of ancestors during ecstatic trance, seeking vision quests brought on by dancing, drumming, intoxicants or ritual self-mutilation in the form of bloodletting. Human sacrifice was not uncommon in certain locations. These ritual practices were believed to maintain an open portal to Xibalba, the underworld, through which the ancestors and gods could communicate to the living. Xibalba, translated as the place of fear, was made up of nine separate levels. Here the gods of the underworld resided. They also recognized a celestial realm that consisted of thirteen levels (McKillop, 2004). Like many ancient cultures, the Maya adhered to animism, believing all matter had life and intelligence, not separating inert matter from the living, breathing organisms as we tend to do in contemporary society (Schele & Freidel, 1990).

Perhaps no other practice is more indicative of the place ritual played in Maya life than that of ancestor veneration. Unlike western practices, the Maya espoused a close proximity between the living and the dead, interring their dead under their residences or in tombs at the center of a city where the bulk of the population resided. The dead were not forgotten; rather, communication remained intact between those who were still living and their ancestors who had
crossed the boundary into death (McAnany, 1995). In fact, the tombs in which the elite were buried frequently included specially constructed tubes, which ran from the tomb to the surface of the earth, sometimes many meters long, so that the communication between the dead and their progeny was facilitated. The ancestors enabled strategies for surviving and thriving in the future for the living who remained behind (Schele & Freidel, 1990).

Indeed, the practice of burying leaders and founders of a lineage in the floor of the family home was a way of linking the lineage to the land as well as creating social cohesion in the lineage that followed. It also provided what McAnany calls a blueprint for action when key figures of a family died: their descendants had a clear picture of “intergenerational transmission of property, rights, and duties upon the death of powerful members of the lineage” (McAnany, 1995).

In addition to communication with ancestors, the Maya maintained connection to the Otherworld through the way, animal spirit guides who led shamans and others to the dreamtime. The Mayan glyph way or wayob which refers to these supernatural animal guides derives from the words sleep, dream, and transform. Pottery, paintings, and inscriptions in Maya cosmology show shamans, rulers, or people transforming to and from jaguars, snakes, and other animals, symbolizing shapeshifting and the link between humans and the natural and supernatural worlds. Jaguars, especially, common in Central America, and highly regarded by the Maya, were frequently depicted in ritual situations and many of the gods showed up with jaguar paws, ears, or spots signifying their close connection to the animal spirit (Ryan, 1999).

Caves

Archeological work is not conduct simply to uncover the past, but to make meaning of it. The purpose of careful excavation is to connect what is uncovered to the bigger whole; to locate it in the web of space of time. Not only is the word excavate related to the Latin excavare, to
hollow out, but also to *cav(um)* or *cave* (Dictionary.com, 2009). The region populated by the Maya rests primarily on a shelf of limestone that is honeycombed by caves and underground rivers, thus, historically, caves are common and recurring locations for shamanic and ritual activity. The *Popol Vuh* specifically refers to access to Xibalba via a cave on the eastern horizon. Cosmologically, the cave was portrayed as being located at the base of the World Tree, a portal to the mythical mountain and the Underworld; a natural opening into the depths of the earth. The cave marks interiority, and the interior is the place to go for insight, wisdom, and understanding. As the cave is at the base of the World Tree whose branches ascend to heaven, the cave is the portal for both the descent and the ascent. The cave is the port of entry for all three realms: the underworld, middle world, and upper world. The journey that begins in the cave, therefore, is not only the descent, but also the return to the origin and the gateway to illumination (Ryan, 1999). Ryan suggests the use of ritual actions are an indication of the natural ability of the psyche to introvert; to go within, return to the womb of the mythopoeic realm where a rebirth can occur. The use of caves as a sacred space to conduct ritual supports this fact. They provided a dark, private space where magical practices could be contained and pass unseen from unwanted eyes while the magic went to work.

*Indeed, the caves I explored with local guides in the Caves Branch area of Belize showed evidence of ritual use. Shards of burned pottery and bone fragments dating back over a millennia in some cases suggest use of the caves for ceremonial purposes. The feeling that I was in a sacred place, a special place, was omnipresent and I wanted to capture it all. I took picture after picture with my digital camera, desiring, on some level, to have visual proof of what I had been reading and hearing about for weeks, both before and during the dig at Blue Creek. However, in the very depths of cave, after rappelling down one steep wall and squeezing through countless narrow passageways past stalagmites and columns weeping with condensation, after startling bats from their daytime dreaming and tiptoeing past giant cave spiders the size of my palm, my camera suddenly began refusing to work. I had never experienced a problem with my camera before. It’s a decent Nikon camera, fairly new, and I have used it to document many trips including the excavation at Blue Creek in previous weeks. Try as I might, the camera would simply not take a picture.

At one point, I suddenly realized I had been so preoccupied with taking pictures...*
during my foray into the cave, I was filtering the entire experience, both allowing myself to be completely preoccupied and distracted by trying to get some good shots and manipulating the settings and flash as well as constantly demanding my husband and the guide to stop, pose, or move in order to accommodate my quest. Tuning in, it was almost as if I heard the ancestors say, “Leave it alone. This is a sacred place—not meant to be captured as a photograph.”

I became still and silent, listening, being present, perhaps, for the first time in the cave. For the next fifteen minutes of the expedition, I paid attention as I negotiated the sometimes steep and slippery surfaces of the cave, my headlamp burning a luminescent flame into the damp air that sparkled with water vapor around me. Then, around a turn, suddenly there lay a chamber where the only way out seemed to be a downward tunnel straight to Xibalba. Pottery shards along with burnt out nearly-whole pots were located in the center of the small cul-de-sac.

I was aware of a strong physiological reaction, feeling almost as if I were in the presence of the individuals who conducted these rituals, able to see them in my mind’s eye as they pierced ears, tongues, genitals even, allowing the crimson river it produced to flow onto paper which was placed into the clay pots by the shamans and burned. The flames and smoke rose upward, coating the walls and ceiling of the cave with smoke and offering the blood to the gods in thanks and entreaty; providing blood in return for the blood the gods themselves had let in the creation of the world. The ancestors pressed close as the vision serpent emerged from the smoke, rising up in the air. Oddly, camera began working again like nothing was ever wrong as we neared the entrance of the cave.

Ryan creates a compelling argument for connection between the ritual worldview of the Maya and Jungian psychology. For Jung, Ryan (2002) reminds us, the excavation of the blocked subterranean passages that led into the unconscious turned up “symbols of the descent and related images of introversion” (p. 157). This psychological process seems to be made material as Maya ritual to communicate with the Otherworld often took place in subterranean sites: caves, wells, bodies of water, and sunken lakes called cenotes (see Figure 4). Additionally, the

Figure 4: The author descends into the depths of a subterranean passage used by the Maya for ritual
introversion process is commonly linked with symbolic death and rebirth, so practices such as bloodletting, piercing, dismemberment and sacrifice evoke potent images of death. Auto-sacrifice can be clearly linked to the dissolution of the old self in the wake of transformation and rebirth.

Jung believed that the state of reduced consciousness and ego-dissolution brought on by ritual activities allowed a port of entry for archetypal or mythical images. The further down into the depths the ego descends on this ritual plunge, the more the unconscious offers up its rich rewards. As the introverting libido taps into the levels where cultural heritage resides, the primordial images the individual encounters are no longer experienced as dead vestiges of the past, but rather as a living part of the individual himself through the connection to the collective.

“The deeper layers of the psyche lose their individual uniqueness as they retreat farther and farther into the darkness, “ Jung states. “Here they become increasingly collective until they are universalized, merging with the body’s instinctual and biological functions and eventually with nature itself. Hence, ‘at bottom’ the psyche is simply ‘world”’ (Ryan, 2002).

Thus, as the soul descends into the substratum of the unconscious via any specific method such as bloodletting, drumming or dance, the objective psyche encounters the archetypal figures, often in the form of ancestors, that can potentially empower it, or more, engulf it (Ryan, 2002). Frequently, the ancestral forms found in Maya images are depicted as rising out of the smoke emitted from the burning bloody papers saturated during ritual bleeding. Additionally, images of ancestors, the serpent, or the jaguar—common icons in Maya cosmology—are shown with gaping maws, ready to swallow anyone within reach. Ryan asserts this image corresponds with the lowering of our conscious psyche into the depths of the unconscious and eliciting the power that resides there, surrendering to it even as it encompasses us. In this way, the jaws are a passage to the Otherworld, and the archetypal forms found there are the collective, primordial ancestral wisdom that is as inherent as it is instinctual. It is only by introversion and descending to the
deepest levels of the psyche where one can encounter these transpersonal symbols, the collective core of creative power that leads to renewal and rebirth of the individual (Ryan, 2002).

The World Tree

In fact, the descent in Maya iconography leads to the very source of life itself: the World Tree. The cave and tree are often depicted together with the cave at the base of the tree and the roots penetrating the underworld of Xibalba. On one cave expedition, as I scrambled past large columns of weeping white limestone that stretched from ceiling to floor, my contemporary Maya guide informed me that stalactites are regarded as the roots of the World Tree penetrating clean through the roof of the cave.

In the material world of the Maya, the interior journey into the cave was symbolized in by entry into the center of the pyramid. The journey leads to the axis mundi, the World Tree which, raised by the First Father to hold up the sky, is the source of all creation. The serpent, typically chthonic in our view, is associated with the roots of the World Tree, and therefore the cave. In Maya iconography, it, too, is shown rising up from the ritual smoke of the burning bloodstained paper. This image is an enantiodromia, a reversal of poles, resulting in a variation of the snake as a feathered serpent or bird known as the Celestial Bird or Serpent Bird that sits at the top of the World Tree. The descent has shifted and become the ascent: the transformation has entered into a celestial realm. Indeed, the Mayan word for snake and sky are homophones, a wordplay that is clearly significant.

Thus, encountering the cave and then the Tree is a symbolic return to the primordial source, a recapturing of the powers of creation. When the shaman-kings of the Maya ritually raised the World Tree—or became the World Tree in many cases on their ascent to the throne—a portal or pathway to the source of all creation was thought to be opened for the good of all. (Ryan, 2002).
As we know, the separation of earth and sky around a central axis was accompanied by a quaternity in Maya worldview. The four directions with the tree at center was a source of power and creativity. Ryan (2002) suggests it is this source the initiate encounters when he enters ritual space seeking a vision. For the Maya, as well as for Jung, this encounter with the fountainhead correlated with an “explosion of energy, which orders, creates, and sustains the cosmos and at the same time empowers and illuminates the individual” (p. 165). Thus, the world is ordered through ritual. Ritual makes order out of chaos, opens the pathway to the sacred, and establishes contact with the creative source.

Collapse

I asked myself again and again: what was I doing there? This place had been intentionally abandoned over a millennium ago. Why was I there? Did the ancestors approve? Was there something in the depths of my psyche that drove me there? Was the land itself welcoming me or watching me, waiting for its chance to communicate a sinister story? When I listened to the wind, I only heard sighing; when I sensed the presence of the jungle, it was the trees I felt most—yet the trees had all been displaced when this site was populated all those centuries ago. Maybe the trees were the ancestors, I thought, here to watch over the place and inhabit the land once more. I cringed each time we cut down a tree with the sharp blade of a machete. Horrifyingly, some of the trees even bled, right in front of my eyes.

Seeing it, I felt I was bleeding too (see Figure 5).

Though there are nearly four million Maya today, the Classic Maya, originally numbering as many as 14 million, virtually disappeared within the space of a generation. By the time the Spanish arrived more than five hundred years later, the culture had changed dramatically from what it was, and the major cities had long since been abandoned. Sadly, the Spanish forbade the Maya
they found to speak or write their language, and the books they had kept for thousands of years were discontinued. Christian missionaries, deeming the existing books to be of the devil, burned thousands of them with zeal. Only four codices, now located in various museums of the western world, are known to have survived.

Theories abound as to why the Classic Maya civilization collapsed after thriving for nearly 2,000 years, rapidly deflating in the eighth to ninth centuries; then gradually declining to almost nothing by the mid-1500s when European conquistadors arrived on the scene. Potential reasons for the initial collapse, however, stem from environmental destruction, warfare and political power struggles, and extreme drought among others. Recent scientific analysis reveals several environmental and climate changes that occurred during the swift downfall of the Classic Maya (Diamond, 2005; McKillop, 2004).

One of the key suspects for the cause of the collapse of this sophisticated culture at the height of their power and civilization may well be the actions of the Maya themselves. As centuries passed and the Maya drifted into larger and larger centers of population, their numbers burgeoned beyond the ability of the land and environment to sustain their ever-growing needs for food and water. Though archeological discoveries validate their advanced knowledge and techniques at agriculture, irrigation, and cycles of planting and harvesting, evidence indicates they were constantly and creatively finding new land to plant by terracing hillsides and draining swamps in the lowlands. Because they practiced slash and burn or swidden farming in which a forest is cleared, burned, then planted to crops for a few scant years until the soil is exhausted. No matter how advanced their techniques, there was nothing they could do to replenish the nutrients in the soil after a few years of growing crops in a particular location. Once depleted, a fallow field was abandoned for 15-20 years, prohibiting productive use while allowing erosion to take its toll (Diamond, 2005).
In fact, their ongoing practice of deforestation to build their cities and plant crops may have been the straw that broke the camel’s back. Evidence in a recent study by Haug et al. (2003) shows that Maya agriculture was dependent on consistent rainfall. Even though they developed advanced methods for capturing and storing rainwater, during the best of times, the Maya population seem to have been “operating at the limits of the environment’s carrying capacity” (Haug, et al., 2003, p. 1733). According to the authors of the study, a century-long decline in rainfall punctuated by critical multiyear droughts, which occurred around 810, 860, and 910 A.D., resulted in the collapse of the culture and the abandonment of major population centers that could no longer support those major populations.

Trees act as sponges that soak up water and keep things wet and growing. With fewer and fewer trees, less water is absorbed and the ground becomes drier. What rainfall there is gets lost in runoff because there are no longer enough trees to prevent erosion. Runoff soil chokes rivers and streams, allowing less distribution of water. The entire hydrologic system is changed: with less water in the soil, there is less transpiration and therefore less rainfall altogether. Longer and more frequent periods of drought then occur in which little or nothing will grow (University of Cincinnatti, 2009, July 23).

These critical failures may have also led to increased warfare and violence as major cities battled over dwindling resources and looked to those of their neighbors as a new source of sustenance. The drive to secure foreign captives who could be sacrificed to gain favor from the gods may have increased, while decreasing faith and loss of trust by populations in their rulers, rituals, and the deities may have also led to massive unrest and loss of confidence, increasing riots and violence. As the avatar of the gods and ancestors, increasing crisis in the kingdom would have reflected poorly on the ability of the king to enlist their aid and support (Schele & Freidel, 1990). Certainly, if artificial reservoirs were controlled by political powers and drought caused them to fail, Maya rulership may have faced criticism and loss of loyalty among their
citizenship when existing technologies and sacred ceremonies failed to produce sufficient water (Haug et al, 2003).

And, while many of the elite lived on the hilltops surrounding the lowlands in order to have better views and cooler breezes, the peasants lived in the agricultural lowlands. This loss of trees may also have contributed to man-made drought in the fertile valley floor, decreasing the natural cycling of moisture and resulting in lowered rainfall. In Copan, Honduras, archaeological excavations of lowland residences show foundation floors covered by sediment, indicating surrounding hill slopes were being heavily eroded. Not only were the hillside fields quickly rendered unproductive, the soil of the more fertile lowland fields was covered by lower-quality silt from higher up. Pollen samples show the hillsides originally teeming with trees were eventually completely deforested for fuel or for the making of plaster to decorate the soaring and numerous temples commissioned by the kings. Stone forests in the guise of man-made stelae depicting the conquests of the elite were raised in their stead.

In 760 A.D. studies show, the worst drought in 7,000 years took hold and peaked around 800 A.D., directly correlating with the momentum of the decline among the Maya (Diamond, 2005). Collapse occurred at varying intervals among Maya cities from 760 to 910 A.D. All available land was clearly used up, with no additional usable farmland available to provide grow crops. Additionally, increasing warfare resulted in land between precincts being rendered too dangerous for anyone to farm. Murals and monuments depict violent conflicts between individual citydoms becoming more frequent and more intense leading up to the period of collapse among the Maya. Clearly, warfare peaked right before the collapse. As resources dwindled and faith was tested, neighboring kingdoms looked to their rivals to provide sustenance and human captives that could be ritually sacrificed to gain favor from the gods.

Experts also believe there must have been increased fighting between commoners over
land as it became more scarce and less and less productive (Diamond, 2005). The population of Copan dwindled drastically after the downfall of the last recorded king in 975 A.D., and by 1250 A.D., there is no evidence of any human activity in the area. Only in ensuing years does the pollen record begin to show the return of trees, after the local human population was eradicated (Diamond, 2005) (see Figure 6).

Clearly, evidence suggests a time arrived when the people turned their backs on the existing hierarchical social structure and returned to a simpler way of life. Over ensuing generations, though they never gave up the use of shrines and temples, these were more frequently dedicated to deities and less to ancestors; as well, they were increasingly found in homes rather than social centers. All of this, in addition to a gradual added focus on a mercantile cadre rather than previously proven social and worship practices served to dissipate the power center of Maya society and may have contributed to its eventual devastating downfall (Schele & Freidel, 1990). By the time Spanish conquistadors arrived in 1502, though hundreds of thousands of descendants of the Classic Maya still inhabited pockets of land close to rivers, lakes, lagoons, or cenotes, it was a small percentage of the original population, and people had all but disappeared completely from what had previously been the heartland of the Maya.

The collapse of the Classic Maya is believed to have silenced between 90 and 99% of the Maya population. Estimated at between three million and 14 million people during the height of
civilization, only about 30,000 remained at the time the Spanish arrived. When Cortes passed through the region around 1524 with his followers, accounts relay how they almost starved from lack of corn and other staples, and though they passed within a few miles of the once-great cities of Tikal in Guatemala and Palenque in Mexico, the former meccas went completely unremarked as they were totally overgrown by the jungle and no one lived in the vicinity. Clearly, as Jared Diamond reminds us, the history of the Classic Maya are a blatant reminder that collapse can befall even the most advanced, and creative societies (2005).

Sadly, modern conditions bode little better: in the Peten region, the heartland of the Classic Maya, over half the environment is once again degraded and deforested. According to Diamond (2005), studies show around one quarter of the forests in Honduras were destroyed from 1964 to 1989 (Diamond, 2005).

Once I arrived in Blue Creek and visited the excavations for the first time, I was both surprised and moved by the dense jungle in which they were located. The sheer abundance of vegetation and green growing things was a stark contrast to depictions I had seen of Maya cities where massive edifices sit in full sun on gleaming stone courtyards and plazas often stripped bare of most, if not all, vegetation (see Figure 7). Upon learning that the Maya had cleared vast expanses of jungle in order to build their metropolises, I had a new understanding of the impact their presence must have had and an inkling as to why they may have collapsed.

And, as with all cultures, if loss of faith occurs or the reason behind an act dissipates, the power is lost as well. Joseph Campbell suggested, “Ritual has lost is force. The ritual that once

Figure 7: Illustration of how a Maya city may have looked, stripped of all its trees to create vast open plazas where people could gather.

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conveyed an inner reality is now merely form” (Campbell & Moyers, 1991, p. 8). The question remains: did the Maya lose their faith in the ideal, the master ideologies, and the steadfast truth? Or do the termination rituals they conducted symbolize that they still believed and were willing to move on under the auspices of the gods and the kings who pretended to be the liaison with them even as they ignored the common people?

Termination Rituals and Deposits

Excavations of abandoned Maya cities during the Late Terminal Classic period (between 800-900 A.D.) typically featured what some experts believe are ceremonial termination deposits, where mounds of personal effects such as shards of pottery, hand tools and flakes of chert or obsidian, beads, jewelry, and bone were left behind as the population disintegrated and moved away. Rather than haphazard heaps of debris, however, these deposits appear to be ritual in nature, intentionally created in advance of the leaving for reasons unknown (Guderjan, 2007).

Though we have little information on the practice or logic behind the termination deposits, we do now the Classic Lowland Maya believed that material objects could contain energy and power, and were used in ritual to capture or contain ritual energy. It was common for the Maya to ritually bring things to an end during certain historical time periods or events. When an object was no longer needed, or which they wished to have released from service, the Maya terminated its power by smashing it, by drilling a hole in the center of pottery, defacing or beheading figurines, or discoloring sculptures. This served to dissipate the object’s power and allow its soul or essence to move on (Schele & Freidel, 1990).

What kind of power do those objects have now, I wonder, as we uncover them, regard them, and touch them with human hands for the first time since they were put to rest all those centuries ago. What kind of meaning do we give them? Are they simply dead items waiting to be
bagged and counted, or do they still hold vestiges of power that we simply overlook? Additionally, what might be the value of conducting our own termination rituals in our lives and our cultures to allow the release of energies, complexes, attachments, or influences that are no longer relevant or appropriate? Perhaps, given the value we place on material objects in our current culture, it would behoove us to act with more attention and intention regarding the objects that surround us and which have corresponding counterparts in the landscape of our psyches.

Findings

Many were the discussions among the community about Blue Creek about the ethics of what we were doing: digging up relics and artifacts from a culture that does not belong to us, and among them, human remains that by all evidence were intentionally and ritually buried. In *Living with the Ancestors*, Patricia McAnany (1995) refers to the “opposition between science and human rights” (p. 167) to describe the general conflict currently presented by those primarily Caucasian archaeologists who are digging up the remains of the past, ancestral burials included, an act which clashes with the ethnic rights of first peoples and their descendants to keep the past buried and intact. She boldly cites a cavalier attitude and laziness on the part of many archaeologists to communicate their findings or link them in a meaningful way to those who have lived on the land for centuries after them. Certainly, at Blue Creek, I asked again and again: What am I doing here? How do I fit in a culture, a place that is not my own, amidst a group who are aggressively excavating a culture that is not theirs? What permission has been granted, and what requests made? Who is fit to possess or even handle the sacred objects we unearth? Even the local descendents of the Maya who worked alongside us at the site, experts after many years of digging up their ancestors’ graves, seem vaguely only spectators and not engaged witnesses to a process that deserves a second look. Ritual practice without assigned, felt meaning, cannot truly be deserving of the term *ritual* but instead becomes *rote*: an excavation that is simply a hollowing
out rather than an intentional visit to make offerings to the gods and ancestors in the dark passages of the Underworld.

My time within the community of archeologists, scholars, and students at the Maya excavation in Blue Creek was filled with challenges and wonders. I have alluded to how foreign the environment was to me at first, both physically as well as culturally, and for both the ancient culture we were studying as well as the contemporary culture I joined. My initial discomfort stemmed from a number of disturbing issues including ethical concerns about our rights to excavate relics from a culture long since buried and gone as well, as well as from the vague beginnings of understanding just how far and how fast this complex culture fell due, perhaps in great part, to their own tendency to warfare and aggressive depletion of the environment.

The wonder and excitement at the opposite end of those poles, however, issues from the possibilities generated by increasing our knowledge about a culture ripe with ritual and magic; one situated with one foot in the world of ancestors and spirits—a far cry from our contemporary culture today. The opportunity I see to work within a community that is completely surrounded by ritual and magic of the ancient peoples they are studying, yet which seems hardly influenced by it at all, having little ability to make a connection to our current lives and culture, is vast. The potential to reawaken our intention and our attention, to seeing how we are inexplicably and irrevocably linked to the very individuals whose ancient lives we are digging up, though they be long dead, is filled with power and mystery. The capacity and act of linking ritual to something larger and thus providing meaning, can allow magic in our lives as well—leading to a reforestation of own deforested selves; to a reseeding of magic in a culture that has lost its capacity to sustain itself and which, may, even now, be heading into rapid decline.

Shanks et al. (2009) theorize that archaeology, at its core, is both a study of what it means to be human and how humans relate to the material world around us, including the importance of
the past. The presence of the past, often buried, is a powerful agent in the excavation of the psyche, a search for sacred objects must somehow correspond to modern surrogates; a quest for material objects that reflect the psychic objects of the landscape within. Jung says, “It is the body, the feeling, the instincts which connect us with the soil. If you give up the past, you naturally detach from the past; you lose your roots in the soil” (Sabini, 2005, p. 73).

In our culture, our roots have failed. Without meaningful ritual to ground us in the past, to connect us with the myths and ancestors that can provide a foothold in the other realm where magic occurs, we have little to anchor us to the soil. Given the vital importance of the World Tree in Maya cosmology, it should be no surprise that the massive deforestation of the lowland Maya regions would have had a corresponding symbolic effect. The repercussions of the loss of real trees, when you think how the World Tree is the axis that holds up the sky, is paramount. It’s as if, as the trees vanished and the cities began to fail one by one, the sky was truly falling.

Thus the World Tree cannot take root and falls. With no contemporary World Tree to hold up the sky and separate it from the primordial sea, today we find ourselves treading water, sometimes drowning, under a sky that is falling. Unable to ascend, we are mired in a watery Underworld where ritual is no longer performed with any kind of meaning; where trees are cut down without enlisting the aid or asking leave of the gods or the ancestors, where natural resources in the material world are harvested randomly, completely, thoughtlessly. No offerings are made in return for what we take. The World Soul is failing. Without intention and meaning, our own termination ritual, in modern terms, may already be taking place.
When I consider my own psyche and sense of self, I must apply the same symbolic lens. Have I, as an individual, undergone, a colossal deforestation of my own psyche by neglecting ritual, attention, and intention in my daily life? If so, have I reached a critical mass where the trees are too far gone to save myself, resulting in massive and recurring drought, my ground dried up and no longer able to produce enough essence to sustain me? At what point in my life was I sacrificed to a demanding god without thought or ritual, taken captive by the warlords that surround me and sent to a violent death for the sake of sustaining a culture that can no longer go within and find meaning? And how can I excavate my psyche layer by careful layer while keeping critical balance with the ancestors and the Otherworld? (see Figure 8). Once again, the cautionary reminder from Martin Prechtel comes to mind: a culture that will not make offerings will always be relegated to making arbitrary sacrifices.

Epilogue: During our final days onsite at the Blue Creek excavation, we designated a tree as an altar and made offerings of pretty rocks and other nature objects to offset the trees we had to cut down in order to continue to dig. On that day, I could swear I heard the ancestors singing.
References