

## The Warp and Weft of Ancient Wisdom

*I walk slowly across the fields, step by step, from my place of power to the grinding rock below the petroglyphs. The ground is uneven; grass seeds swell with rich food. At the flat, wide, grinding rock, the women roll their manos between their hands, rhythmically, calmly, chatting quietly. They are preparing food for today. There is little hoarding, saving: life is abundant. I walk towards the spring, crossing a wash where children splash, adults make snares. Each person has a task, but there is no rush; each action has focus and intent. At the spring, I stand in the shade of granite boulders, grinding a cupule (shallow hole) into the sacred stone. I am patient, like the others who have stood and ground here in prayer. My cells are open, listening. I hear, “This is how we learn. Breathing slowly, listening with our bodies, time and space coursing wide through our cells. Connected.”*

This gift of journeying back in time is a watershed in my life; springs, rivulets, and streams of experience flow into a great river of transformation. All the pieces of my life—mothering, writing, community work, earth healing—feed on and harvest from these journeys.

My connection to these ancestor spirits began on a particular day. At the entrance to the San Francisco Bay, just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, the headlands stood sentinel; wind-blown scrub, purple Lupine, and an old grove of Cypress trees covered the hillsides. At a crescent-shaped stretch of sand, sea sounds overtook the wind. Three of us wandered, collecting; then we formed shells, seaweed, and stones into a circular altar. We called the four directions and acknowledged the elements, creating a space between the worlds for our work. We drummed and chanted, then sat in silence, breathing in and listening for the spirit of the place.

Out of the silence we created a ceremony. To explore how this cove was used by indigenous cultures—people we know as Miwok and Ohlone—before the Spaniards arrived, we decided to

do a group journey. Entering a trance state with drumming, we chose a direction to travel, and spoke our vision as we journeyed together:

*We climb in our canoe fashioned from tules and head south down the bay: fall is coming and it is time to go inland and gather. After spearing salmon and eating, we are drawn towards the old Ohlone grandmothers who are sitting around, gambling and laughing. Their pleasure and rootedness are infectious; we forget about seed gathering and do not want to leave.*

*We ask the grandmothers how we can remember their rhythmic, simple way of life. The oldest looks around the camp with her eyes and says "Take this with you." She tells us to make a ceremonial cape. Finally, she hands us a palm-sized abalone for a clasp for that cape.*

*Another grandmother says, "You carry the light and the life in your eyes. They will always be with you."*

*We thank the grandmothers for their gifts of wisdom and intention. We leave feeling full of the great ebb and flow of river-bay and ocean, returning in our tule boat to the cove.*

Back in this world, we spoke excitedly about making a ceremonial cape. What material should we use? What design? How could we do it together?

A few weeks later, at a Siplichichin Ohlone shell mound (a midden where people deposited clam shells, broken pots, and sometimes buried the dead), we asked the grandmothers for more help in making their vision a reality. They answered:

*Making the cape will take a long time. Be patient and slow. Quiet yourselves within the ceremonial process.*

*Use tules for the cape. The shape should be a circle. Use it for a centercloth, a container for ritual objects for your group, a shamanic tool for personal journeys. Decorate it, and use it, with intention.*

*You will weave this cape/cloth/container with the strands of many people's knowledge. It is an ancestor totem, a gift to remind you of your connections to the first peoples of the Bay, and their connections to you.*

This advice gave us courage to proceed; people in our community helped us learn how. We met with a ranger at the San Francisco Bay Wildlife Refuge to learn the basics of tule weaving. The school science teacher sent us to one of the few sloughs that still holds massive stands of tules, at Alviso in the south Bay, to collect them. (Ohlones had used tules to make boats, sandals, houses, rope, and mats. But the invading peoples had no use for the reeds, so they had mostly been removed.) Weaver friends helped us with books and ideas. A dream sent us the design. The grandmothers continually gave us heart; we helped each other persevere through demanding jobs and children. We sensed the adventure and held it by the tail.

Gathering tules felt holy to us: tules felt like the essence of life and growth. They were fibrous, strong, tenacious plants, rooted in intertidal mud, with narrow, conical, feathery tassels at their ends. They were a soft dusty green in the spring, turning golden brown in the fall; by winter they cracked and disintegrated in dryness. Sponge-like, fresh tules soaked up water and floated. Held upright, tules seemed like staffs or arrows to the sky. Soaked overnight, they were pliable; woven into twine, they were as strong as hemp.

During the year that we wove panels for the cape, I wrote:

*Working with fibers lets my hands know, lets me feel in my cells what the earth knows. The knowing is in me and comes through me at once.*

*Weaving the tules connects my present with the grandmothers' past, just as they promised. It gives me a growing cellular connection with the richness of the Bay.*

We completed the cape in time for a daughter's coming-of-age ceremony. As she accepted her challenge, and began to dance inside the circle of women, with the tule cape over her shoulders, the cape emanated a power, radiance, and energy all its own. We felt the grandmothers join us, and our world became larger.

Each time we used the cape in community ceremony, its aspects became more clear. It became a visible symbol of the interconnections of earth, body, ancestor, and spirit. It became a bridge to ancient wisdom.

After an Angel Island journey to the ancestors, each woman wore the cape to help bring her vision into words around the circle. At healings during illnesses and before operations, the cape enclosed the celebrant tenderly, seeming to emanate light and love.

At a ceremony of preparation for city council testimony, as we tried to save the last remaining open land along the San Francisquito creek, we brought the cape into the larger political community. We spoke these words, “Allow the power of the ancestors to surround you. Breathe in their help and guidance, their deep intent to protect the land,” as each person who planned to testify wore the cape and spoke his or her intent. Even people who knew nothing of the cape said afterwards that they had felt empowered. We marveled at this gift we had been given.

Between ceremonies, we traded the cape back and forth. At my house it hung on the wall above my bed, greeting me each morning with grandmother energy and reminders of the simpler, resonant, connected life I sought. In meditation, I used it to open my heart, to open my cells. I wrote:

*The panels of the cape are protective sheaths; and they are wings. The weaving captures movement (curves) and rest (warp). The whole both receives and emanates exactly as the grandmothers promised: it helps us maintain our connections. It helps us maintain the continuity of place, of material, of ritual. Meaning travels ahead of words.*

Over time I felt embraced, encompassed in the ancestors’ deep, warm tenderness. The yearning I had had for the deepest human mother love and acceptance seemed to dissipate. The grandmother connection replaced the need. I no longer felt alone.

Tules themselves became powerful symbols of the old ones, and of the cultural connections we share across space and over time. Tules grow worldwide. In Ireland, my blood ancestral land,

they fill the waterways and canals; my great-grandmother would have used them to thatch her house, for they are still used that way on rural cottage roofs. In Lake Titicaca, Bolivia, floating islands, boats, and houses are made entirely of tules. What the Spanish called tule, *Scirpus lacustris*, after an Aztec word, was called bulrush in the Bible. The cradle Moses was hidden in, the bed Odysseus laid in, and the first source of paper (papyrus) were all tule relations.

As the seasons passed, pieces of the tule cape broke, and finally a whole panel fell apart. Like any natural material, tules would not last forever. We began to wonder what we would do when the cape finally disintegrated, but kept repairing and reweaving in the meantime. We wrapped it carefully in an old West African cloth I had, and continued to carry it with us to ceremony and sacred sites around the Bay, using the cape to call in the palpable presence of the old ones, to help us in healing ourselves and the earth.

The cape spent its last three months with a woman dying of breast cancer. We did not know her, though she lived in our community; we did not hear the stories until after she was gone.

Maria kept the cape by her bed all the time she had it. She frequently asked to be covered with it, especially after chemotherapy treatments. She seemed to feel comforted, her sister says, to have it near her.

Several months after Maria died, her husband, three children, and family went to the Pacific ocean to scatter her remains. Along with her ashes, her husband threw the cape into the waves. There it floated, carrying light, energy, and grandmother wisdom to accompany her on her journey.

For us, however, there was shock and sorrow at losing the cape. Its permanent absence from our lives has prompted much reflection on what it meant to us.

The cape had become a community shamanic tool, a tool for transformation, a tool for shifting consciousness. This became clear as we came together to remember the cape and tell our stories, and to begin to search for what to do next. The maker of something does not always realize its full power.

When we returned to the Ohlone shell mound to make offerings, we asked the grandmothers, “How should we proceed in order to carry your teachings to others?”

*We see the cape, disintegrating and sinking slowly, its nutrients feeding the bottom plants. We see it descending into ocean mother of all, returning to earth, returning to stone, all the time remembering. Thus do our cellular, historical memories get transmitted, carried on in stone, water, earth, fire.*

*All the insight we gained from and through the cape—opening cells across time and space, letting light through, breathing ever more deeply and slowly, funneling energy, working with heart and intent—all this insight we must put into practice through our own bodies, they say.*

*We hear the importance of attending to our own rhythms, not pushing ourselves. We understand that we must keep weaving, literally and figuratively.*

The grandmother spirits guide us in this weaving. They are a thread back in time to our first ancestors who walked this land, to group mind, and to cellular memories of simpler lives. They remind us about being present—gambling, laughing, weaving baskets, burying the dead. They are a pathway into plant wisdom, earth rhythm, ritual. They are teachers and spirits who hover in the fields, around sacred stones, at certain places on each mountain. They are the warp of 25,000 years of ancestor practice and example. Our DNA holds memories that let us find our way back; our intent is the weft.

The spirits of the ancestors know the vastness of the universe and are waiting to teach us. We have only to ask to learn and make quiet to listen.

**Meg Beeler, MAT** is a heart-centered healer and shamanic practitioner. Meg merges Inca/Q’ero cosmology and healing practices with core shamanism, Medicine for the Earth, and an intimate relationship with the natural world in her experiential workshops and apprenticeship program. A naturalist, writer, and artist in Sonoma, near San Francisco, she has authored many articles on nature, spirit, and Andean cosmology. Meg is the founder of Earth Caretakers, an organization that draws on ancestral wisdom to empower visioning and dreaming a future of balance, reciprocity, and harmony. A monthly ezine, “Shifting Consciousness News,” explores this work. See <http://www.earthcaretakers.net>.