

Transcribed Interview

Holly Bellebuono with Laura Giles of Pan Society Podcast re: *Once Upon a Place*

(available [here](#))



Laura: What does the forest represent to you as one of the 5 landscapes of the World Journey you identify in your book?

Holly: The Forest is amazing. It's such an interesting pairing of both the individual tree, which is gorgeous and symbolic and reverent in itself, and a whole forest of trees, which is chaotic and messy and dark and tangled and full of paths. The Forest is what we find in fairy tales; usually when you're reading a fairy tale to a child, it begins *Once Upon a Time*, and the next three words are, *They went into the woods*. It is a fantastic opportunity to get lost, and then to find yourself. It's a great place, symbolically, for these epic journeys to begin. A tree embodies our own journey, our own seeking of truth, for perspective. The trunk of a tree connects the heavens and the underworld as a great bridge, a connector. It's an incredible symbol. To have many trees in a whole forest really up-levels that meaning and it creates a space of confusion. So part of the book I go into chaos and void. I really explore you know what the heck are chaos and void doing in all these epic stories? What purpose do they serve? Chaos is where there are no trails, no paths, no road signs, no landmarks, nobody to help you find your way. It's messy and full of everything like a forest.

Void in many ways is the opposite: there are no landmarks, no road signs, nobody to help you find the way, but it's empty. It's this dual symbol. Either way, you get out of your head, into somewhere that is messy and confusing and isolated and you can't think straight. Either way, it helps you get into this "beyond" phase of thinking where maybe you get some answers. You get a little bit more clarity because you're coming from either chaos or void, and the forest—all these locations—offer Chaos and Void. It's especially intriguing for children. They love to play in the woods. I certainly did when I was a kid: creeks, frogs, salamanders, holes in the ground, and the trees. The forest is both familiar and a little bit terrifying at the same time, especially if you're there alone or if you're lost, so it's a great symbol for our own personal journeys.

It's a metaphor you know that's what all these locations are: they are metaphors and they're really just there to help stimulate your own thinking process as we face various challenges in our lives. Puberty for children is a big one, or the really hard stuff: getting a divorce, losing someone close to you. Figuring out how to overcome some really horrible situations or

challenges that we all go through. If you're reading a fairy tale or a myth or a story and somebody is going through that themselves then it gives you something to relate to and think okay if they can overcome it so can I.

Laura: You describe being "Deliciously lost" in a forest. Is it a sign of being off-track? What do you gain from being lost?

Holly: I don't think anybody really likes the feeling of being lost or disoriented or not having clarity on what's happening next, it's just part of our human nature that we want answers. We want clarity, we want focus and when we don't have that in our lives it can lead to anxiety and depression and fear and panic. And that's just part of the human experience. We all feel that. I've been through a divorce, it was horrible. I've lost jobs, they're demeaning. I've watched friends around me go through horrible experiences of their own and we all feel like we've been let down or we've been abandoned or we've done something wrong. We can judge ourselves, we can feel guilty, but in the end, we have to move beyond those emotions but decide what comes next and I think that decision is really the key. We're not just waiting around for something to happen to us. We are taking initiative. And these stories and symbols can show us this is one way to take this initiative and the next step.

In the way past (like Robin Hood period), the forest was a really scary place. Robbers, bandits, outlaws, people didn't go there. Only recently have we put up park benches, trails, retreats, festivals in the woods. It's new. As far as the long expanse of time goes... it's a relatively new thing to appreciate and enjoy being out in the forest. The woods can be appealing; you can get away from people, away from problems, and observe nature in its beauty. The forest is an image, a metaphor and in real life but also as a metaphor it speaks to us on many different levels.

Laura: Tell me about the Cavern. It feels like a fertile place.

Holly: The Cavern is fertile in many ways and that's a good word for it. It's an opportunity for reflection and creating new ideas and then giving birth to these ideas. In real life as well as metaphorically, the Cavern can be fertile, and it also can be scary. We need the stress of getting through it because if you didn't have that stress, then achieving the good thing would feel kind of meaningless. You need to work for it, it's an opportunity to grow and growing is never easy. So with the cavern, you know kids like to play in holes. They like to dig holes. We have Alice in Wonderland where she falls down the rabbit hole, we have all sorts of stories where kids are jumping down or they accidentally fall down a well. So holes deep into the Earth is an ancient image and people have dealt with this image in a nice way and also in a scary way for a long time.

It's also chaos and void. Jules Verne wrote novels about Journeying to the Center of the Earth. Being deep underground is really present for us as people and we don't really think of it that often but it's there. That was part of my mission with this book was to bring it to the surface so to speak and help people feel that image. We tend to focus on sunshine and light, we tend to not think about it, we think about bright sunlight and walking in the park. We don't want to think about what's beneath us. It's a really transformative image because once you go down and

there's that descent and you're under and you're beneath and you're in the dark, then your next step if you're doing it right is to resurrect. So The Descent and the resurrection really need to go in that order and the cave makes that special.

Laura: You talk about entering the Cavern as voluntary. I have both led and participated in rituals where we do this voluntarily and it is scary.

Holly: Sometimes the world Journey does start voluntarily because people realize, 'I need to wake up, I need to grow up, I need a change.' And they embark and look for change. And then other times it's not voluntary; you're triggered, you're pushed, something happens that makes you go on this journey whether it's into the cave or the forest or one of these other locations. In the literature it really doesn't matter if you've embarked on the journey voluntarily or if you ended up there because of something external that was beyond your control... as long as you deal with it proactively. You don't read stories of people just sitting there. You read quests and adventures which is why it's the genre that it is, but as far as personal transformation goes, even if you didn't voluntarily choose to go on that Journey... even if you got pushed... what matters is once you're on that Journey that you make something of it. That you take charge and you acknowledge this is where I am. I either got here by myself or for some reason out of my control but regardless I'm going to look at myself, I'm going to explore what I need to explore, I'm going to learn, I'm going to change so that I can grow and get out of this situation.

Laura: Is there a favorite story of yours that involves the cavern?

Holly: There are a lot. Inanna the goddess/Ishtar and her descent into the cavern is pretty wild and pretty brutal so that's an interesting one though I wouldn't say it's a favorite. The story of Mother Winter Frau Holle is where this little German girl jumps into the well to retrieve her spindle that she had dropped and she ends up having adventures in this underground world. It's partly an epic request and partly a morality tale where this girl is taught how to help out, how to be a helpful member of society, and probably because she's a young girl how to be a good wife and a good mother. So it has this morality tale feature about it that's interesting.

Gilgamesh has some cave aspect to it. But he goes down into the water, which I found when I was spelunking and caving that the water inside the cave was just as terrifying as the darkness of the cave itself, that you know there's water in there you can hear it you don't know how close you are you don't know if your next step because you can't see where you're going you're going to fall into that water or not those those kind of those images really go hand in hand.

The Deep is a really ancient image going back to pre-biblical stories of the Goddess Tiamat and Marduk. It's Old Testament stuff all about the abyss and the deep and this Nether world in this watery area without form and without shape. It's all about shaping yourself and creating form from formlessness, about finding your identity and creating yourself when you don't have anything to stand on because there's no ground. It's a really strong image of self discovery and self creation. You're out in the middle of nowhere swimming and there's nothing to hold onto.

Gilgamesh is one of our oldest pieces of literature and it's been around for like 4,000 years. It's antique but it's still very relevant. This guy who was a king or a warrior, watches his friend die.

He thinks, 'my gosh, he's mortal, he's really dying, it's really happening, and it could also happen to me. I'm going to die.' We all have that thought at some point, like there's going to be a time when I'm not here. For Gilgamesh, it was incredibly frightening, so he resolved 'maybe I won't die, maybe I'll figure out a way to become immortal.' So he goes on a quest and meets this man from the flood, Utnapishtim. It wasn't Noah, it was an earlier story than Noah, but he had been given immortality. Gilgamesh asks him to show him how to achieve this, and he goes through various tests and finally this man gives him answers, thanks to his wife. He tells him about a plant that grows not on land but at the bottom of the sea, way way down at the bottom of the Deep. He tells Gilgamesh that he'll be able to live forever if he gets this plant. Gilgamesh goes out in his boat, ties stones to his feet, and plunges into the water. He goes down, down, so this is The Descent, until he is in the dark and he can't see anything. He finally touches the bottom and reaches out and feels this plant and realizes this is what he had been told about. He grabs it, kicks off the stones, rises back up to the top, and gets back in his boat. But he is exhausted, so he goes to a nearby island to take a nap. He lays the plant next to him on the sand on the beach and falls asleep. What he doesn't realize is there's a snake in the bushes who slithers up and eats the plant and becomes—as they say—immortal. The coil of the snake eating its tail is the symbol of infinity and the snake shedding his skin over and over means that it is constantly renewing itself. So, Gilgamesh wakes up and sees that the snake has found everlasting life and he didn't. It is interesting because he fails in his mission, but he does get answers. He gets awareness, this epiphany of, hey, this is what life is all about and it includes death and it's not what he wanted but we're all in this together. That's what we are all experiencing.

Laura: How do you honor the Deep without losing yourself in it?

Holly: Losing yourself is the really key point. Nobody who wants to lose themselves or their identity. Going into the deep where it's dark or into the forest you can't see yourself and nobody else can see you... you're invisible basically, and it's up to you to put some form around yourself. It's up to you to create form from formlessness and then rise back up so that you have this identity. It's hard and it's painful, so my advice to people who find themselves going through this is you do have to let go. You have to be aware and take shape but on the other side you have to kind of let go and allow these processes to happen. You have to be rigid but still float.

The vessel image is beautiful. I just got back from teaching in Italy and the vessel was prominent. There were urns and bowls and you see this shape everywhere, it's a very ancient shape but because it is so homey and domestic and present it's been the repository of stories and myths and folktales for millennia. A lot of beautiful stories and Celtic myths involve cauldrons. The mythology is all about renewal, being reborn, stirring soups and brews that will bring you wisdom or everlasting life. They're colorful and beautiful and fun.

There's one about Cerridwen the Celtic goddess and how she is brewing her brew in the Cauldron, which is the vessel, and she's intending it to give wisdom to her son. She hires a boy named Gwion to stir it for her. It has to be stirred for a year and a day, but she warns him don't drink any of it. This is all for my son. At one point it's bubbling, bubbling and a little bit of it spits onto his thumb and it burns, so he sticks his thumb in his mouth and immediately becomes full

of the magic and wisdom with which Cerridwen enchanted the vessel. Cerridwen is enraged and pounces on him and there is shape-shifting: he turns into an animal, she turns into an animal to chase him. He turns into a bird and she turns into an eagle, there are otters and hares and all sorts of fun animals in the story and eventually he turns into a grain of corn and she turns into a chicken and eats the grain of corn. That's the image of the Beast, he's being consumed which is a transformational act in itself. Nine months later she gives birth to a baby called Taliesen, who grows up to be known as Merlin. It's a really fun story and there are lots of variations but it's the vessel and this Soup pot image.

There's also another way that the vessel can be used in stories and that says the shimmering surface that's reflective. So, if you have a bowl or a pot of water you can look at it from above and you see yourself reflected. Different authors have used it to see the future to tell what's going to happen next so it's a great variation on place and it's easy for us to imagine because we have such daily interaction with vessels.

Laura: What would a leaky or cracked vessel look like?

Holly: I don't know because in the stories I've read all the vessels are whole and functioning and magical. But if you just take that symbolically and think about it as a metaphor, if you are going through a tough time in your life and you come across something that's not working, it's broken, it's either an opportunity for you to fix that thing or to look at it symbolically as we do in stories. Think: how does this relate to me, how am I involved in this, how should I engage. It's an opportunity again for reflection. My book is all about imagery and symbolism and so when you see something in a story whether it's a tree or a vessel, a soup pot or whatever, it's an opportunity – an invitation – for you to think about the symbolism. Does it mean anything and if it does, what does it mean for me? Those can be really fun questions to ask, or they can be really scary because you don't want to see your own brokenness, but that's exactly what triggers your need to change and your opportunity for growth.

Laura: How can somebody begin to listen or see more closely to the places that they find themselves in metaphorically or physically?

Holly: It's really nice to have a map or a guidebook for your life but most of us don't. We know where we are as individuals, but do we know where we are in our community or in our family? If we do, do we like it and are we happy and are the people around us happy? If not, do we need to change and does that mean changing your location, going somewhere new, trying out something different, or does it mean metaphorically looking at how you interact and connect? Basically, that's what it comes down to for me: connecting with others and with yourself is key. That's what Maps do, they connect you from where you are now to where you want to be. That's the beauty of the locations in these Journeys is that they give us a chance to look at where we are. Going back to Alice In Wonderland, Alice was not going through terrible times and needing a big change. In the story she was bored and that was an opportunity for her to grow up a little bit and have the universe say you don't have to be bored, there's a lot going on. But she did have to go down the road with weird and wacky characters. In Lewis Carroll's story, when she came back up she was good, she had a different perspective. That's a big part of it, even if you stay in the same place, same home, same job, how can you shift your perspective as if you had

moved somewhere or gotten some big revelation? Because not all of us have the opportunity to travel or change everything about our lives, it's really about what you change on your inner side that will end up making a difference.

We're all in this together. Even if you feel like you're the only one experiencing what you're experiencing or you're sad or lonely, you may feel isolated but it's not entirely true, we're all in this together. These stories prove it, they've been written for thousands of years and it's people reaching out and saying this is how this person got through it or this is how you might think about getting through it too. It's hard to see, that's why these stories have symbols and imagery because the real truth can be ugly and painful and scary, so the symbols make it a lot easier.

Note: Segments of this video interview can be viewed [here](#).

Holly's [website](#) and [Press Kit](#)