

Weaving A Sense of Place
by Ann Keuper
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In my life, I have lived in three clearly different places. I grew up just outside of Boston in a small town surrounded by leafy woods and soft fields, wet running streams and ponds. Every year cycled through distinct seasons. After about thirty years of absorbing the landscape in my soul, I moved to Tucson, Arizona. The desert landscape was drastically different; woods were replaced by cactus and green barked Palo Verde trees, streams and ponds were dry washes, and the seasons blended like watercolor, as plants and animals changed through the year. The shapes and forms of the plants were more distinct. Light could be strong and dramatic. Enormous skies filled the heavens and were like old romantic paintings where the clouds billowed tall and grand and the light rays shown through to the earth. The land was dry and hard edged.

My family and I continued to travel back East to see family. By now they had moved to Prince Edward Island, Canada. This is a place where land and sea meet. The sea is wild, unpredictable, ever changing and moody; the land is home, friendly and safe. The colors of the area are rich blues of the sea and sky, red soils, and yellow wild flowers. The air tastes salty. The area is full of sea stories, phantom ships and the recent tuna catch.

These three lands are deeply part of me now. I breathe them in and out as I travel each year. It is refreshing to go to a new landscape.

Tapestry is the medium I am challenged and grow with. It helps me to understand and explore the worlds around me. Tapestry is a unique creative process in the way that one must weave linearly, like time, from the bottom to the top. It is how a story begins and unfolds; how life moves forward with a past, present and future; how the past informs the present and the future. If one form is created, how is the next going to relate. If I choose a color with which I am not comfortable, how can I make it an integral part of the piece. Likewise in nature, if I pull a weed from a garden, how does that affect the neighboring plants? Or, if I give a warm greeting to a store clerk, how will that change his or her actions that day? I often think how we are all in relationship with everything around us. Perhaps understanding this relationship, helps us to understand a sense of place.

In 1996, I was asked to participate in a conference about the Sonoran Desert. People who represented many communities in the region including Native, Mexican and US, gathered to talk about their Sonoran Desert Land. The Sonoran Desert does not recognize the US/Mexican border, rather it is created by the boundaries of sea, mountains and terrain. Conference participants were asked to bring with them something that represented their home in the Sonoran Desert that would later be woven in to a tapestry. There were no limitations as to what could be given. It was my challenge to figure out how they could be woven together. There were about 80 items. They all were honored but that didn't mean they stayed in one piece; sometimes they were broken or cut to work their way into a new way of being. The piece was woven intuitively, with each object voicing,

suggesting a piece to follow. Once finished the piece traveled back to the communities of the Sonoran Desert. (Arid Lands Newsletter no. 39)

About two years later, I set up a loom in the long-term recovery area of the county hospital. Patients, as they were able, could come to the common room, watch me weave, tell me stories and speak of what they saw in the tapestry. Those interactions were what informed the direction of the tapestry. There were also a few who were brave enough to try their hand at weaving. It was an interactive piece and was later exhibited in the hospital reception area.

On Prince Edward Island, 2005, my mother and I collaborated on a public tapestry. We scavenged for materials on sea and land. Most of the materials were from the beaches and were fishing materials like nets. I learned a lot about different kinds of nets and then we artistically incorporated them according to the color and interest forgetting all about their function. People came to watch and gave their two cents or ideas. We also collected titles for the piece from visitors for a raffle. There was a winner and so again the piece traveled on to have a life of its own.

Weaving is a frequently used metaphor in the English language. But to quite literally weave actual things together is another challenge all together. By weaving materials found around the *place*, one can develop the *sense* that helps us to understand where we live or travel, whether inside or outside, emotional or physical.

Ann Keuper is co-owner of the Desert Weaving Workshop in Tucson, Arizona. Every summer she travels north to Prince Edward Island to see her family and weave. This summer she will be teaching a 5-day tapestry workshop on Weaving a Sense of Place. You can go to her website at www.weaveanisland.com to learn more.