

*Willem Larsen*

# **Mythic Cartography Explained**

Feb 21, 2006

# Contents

<b>PART ONE: <i>Why Mythic Cartography?</i></b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PART TWO: <i>What does Mythic Cartography mean?</i></b>	<b>6</b>
<b>PART THREE: <i>How do you do Mythic Cartography? How do you recreate and maintain Mythmaps?</i></b>	<b>10</b>
<b>THE HEART SHAPED-BED AT THE BEGINNING OF TIME [lovesick gods of heaven and earth]</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>PART FOUR: <i>The Empathic Way of Needs and Feelings</i></b>	<b>16</b>
<b>PART FIVE: <i>The Empathic Way cont'd: The Ways of Needs and Feelings</i></b>	<b>19</b>
<b>PART SIX: <i>The Empathic Way cont'd: Awareness, Acceptance, Choice</i></b>	<b>21</b>

**PART ONE: *Why  
Mythic Cartography?***

An abundance of resources exist, at this point in history, to explain and set the stage for this fundamental understanding, here on heels of climate change, mass extinctions, and reckless expansive human population growth:

Something has to change. The way we live here, on the Earth, has to change. Our situation has become perilous.

Now, you can look at this in two ways. One way involves breast-beating, despair, panic, doom-and-gloom prophesying, and focusing on all that we must give up to survive and atone.

The other way involves finally giving ourselves permission to belong, and claiming all that our hearts, spirits, and bodies have starved for since civilization first started its relentless march.

Have you ever taken a walk through a park, a wilderness, or any wild space, and reflected on how much you feel you belong there? Do you see yourself as a stranger? A trespasser? Do you feel welcome? Do you feel apologetic?

Do you feel celebrated?

The time has come to reclaim our birthright, that we held and cherished for three million years of human history, to belong to the wild places, to celebrate and receive celebration in return. To receive life in return. Nothing less than the Story we tell about our relationship with the world must change for the most fabulous, mystical, and revolutionary healing to happen. A return from the brink, into the waiting, rioting, helplessly joyful and dancing embrace of the Family of Life.

Do not count yourself alone, with your thoughts and fantasies of another world filled with magic and meaning, of something better than the emptiness delivered to your door every morning, like a newspaper clad with headlines of disaster and tragedy. Despair and depression attack those who most keenly feel our culture-wide absence of spiritual nourishment and meaningful relationship to the family of life.

I use the word Family very consciously. Until we choose to take it back, we lose more and more of our relationship to everything Family means, every day. Everything about this culture urges us to leave our family, to go away: to distant colleges and careers that promise to fulfill us and make us happy, far away from the homes where our mothers gave birth to us. Consider the possibility, that leaving the land of our childhoods behind us, silently steals a wealth of daily meaning. I know when I rarely get the chance to visit the faraway places of my early childhood, as I walk the familiar yet unfamiliar streets, a strange kind of golden curtain descends over my vision, and I see the world as I saw it then, across the impossible gulf of time.

We can't always turn our lives upside down to go back to those places, but we can take a stand. We can stop the hollow nomadism of modern life, and choose

to stay where we've stopped, to reconnect with the magic in the place we find ourselves right now. To work with each other to recreate a MYTHIC MAP of the land all around us.

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<http://www.mythic-cartography.org/2006/02/21/mythic-cartography-explained-part-two/>

**PART TWO: *What does  
Mythic Cartography mean?***

I developed the term Mythic Cartography to describe “the act of creating and maintaining sacred places, sacred paths, and sacred maps”. Some call these places, paths, and maps “sacred geography”. And the relationship we have to them defines our relationship to the entire universe. So Mythic Cartography involves the ongoing relationship with creating and maintaining sacred geography and thus our relationship to all the world.

Every indigenous culture, rooted in place, has (or had) a basket woven of sacred stories that maintains their relationship to the land around them. This basket encourages their care and affection to the land, which supports health and vitality in the people. When this relationship degrades, so do the people. This basket I call the Mythmap.

Nothing tells the story of Mythmaps and Mythic Cartography better than the maps and cartographers themselves.

From *Invincible Warrior: A Pictorial Biography of the founder of Aikido*, by John Stevens:

Morihei Ueshiba was born on December 14, 1883, in . . . Tanabe, Japan . . . at the foot of the Kumano Mountains . . . Kumano is Japan’s Holy Land, the sacred place where the Shinto gods descended to earth; the gateway to Amida Buddha’s Pure Land is also believed to be hidden there. The entire district of Kumano is venerated as a mountain mandala—home, over the centuries, to a host of ascetics, wonder-workers, and sages . . . The grand shrines of Kumano and the sacred waterfall of Nachi are the meccas of Shinto, and every Japanese true believer, including the emperor, longs to make at least one pilgrimage to worship at those sacred sites and perhaps catch a glimpse of one of the Eight Great Dragon Kings who sport in the Nachi Falls.

Morihei Ueshiba, founder of the martial-art Aikido, had a grand reputation for skills and powers beyond belief, and his aging live-in students of more than half a century ago recount marvelous stories to this day. Often present in their recollections you can hear a question: how did he do these amazing feats? As students of Aikido, why don’t we have these magical abilities?

Centuries ago, En-no-Gyoja, the Grand Wizard, practiced Taoist meditation techniques in the surrounding mountains and used his magic to fly from peak to peak; modern-day yamabushi (mountain ascetics) insist that En-no-Gyoja appears to them in vivid visions. It is said that colors and sounds can be perceived in their original state in Kumano, and that ascetic practices conducted there result in unparalleled clarity of mind and clairvoyance. In the year of Morihei’s birth one such yamabushi named Jitsukage leapt from the top of towering Nachi Falls as a final act of sutemi-gyo, the total abandonment of body and soul to the Divine. From birth, Morihei was immersed in an atmosphere in which the supernatural, the mysterious, and the holy were palpably present.

When you live in the embrace of a MythMap, you have the chance to see the whole world with magical eyes. But . . . do some places have “the magic”, like Kumano, Japan, and others not?

From Long Life, Honey in the Heart, by Martin Prechtel:

The people of Santiago Atitlan had no concept of their town being part of somebody else’s country. As far as they were concerned, everything real in the world was inside their territory.

Their land was the world to them. Guatemala as a country was a mythological spirit realm distant and unfamiliar to most Tzutujil people and categorized by them no differently than Japan, Jerusalem, Germany, or the United States . . . There was no possible way of saying “leaving home” in the Tzutujil language. The people called the placement of their own town the Canyon Village. The surrounding land that was their world, the land that fed them, they affectionately called the Flowering Mountain Earth. This was their homeland. The village itself was known to all Tzutujil as Ch’jay, meaning literally “At Home.”

This Homeland was bound and embraced on all sides but one by three forested volcanic peaks, and on the remaining side by the Mother Lake herself. Named for parts of the human body, this land was concentrically circumscribed by still more forested ridges, valleys, and bluffs radiating out some ten to fifteen miles on either side.

Though appearing relatively small on a modern map, this land of the Tzutujil was the world of the Canyon Village people and to them it was enormous. The Canyon Village was subject to an ancient way of understanding I call Internal Bigness. This way of being and seeing permeated every aspect of Tzutujil life. In the same way little children can magically turn the ten-by-ten area of a sandbox play area into the farthest reaches of the Universe, the Canyon Village understood the internal bigness of their world. Because every rock, trail, mountain, stump, spring, and incline was either the back bone of a dead giant in an old story, or a rock placed there by a Goddess who in her grief could go no farther, the land opened up into an internal immensity that was known only to the people whose world it was. The road map to this internal Tzutujil Kingdom were the myriad of stories, mythologies, legends, and histories taught to them during ritual meetings and village initiations.

This sandbox knowledge was not held by one or two children but handed down and added to by the twenty-eight thousand individuals of all ages who lived in this landscape of ancient Tzutujil story dream.

Because of this, their land was so big and magnificent that no human could comprehend it all. Only the Gods knew how to measure it. Its tiny physical size was simply an abbreviation of a cultural enormity that was carried inside each



Tzutujil. Though it appeared to outsiders that the people lived off of and inside their land, the entire earth lived inside each villager.

And so we can perceive our task: to look around us, at the hills, rivers, streets and cemeteries, the parks and playgrounds, to remake them and retell them anew, and have them live inside us, magical and alive. For wherever we live, it lies at the foot of the Sacred Mountains, and wherever we stand, we stand in the midst of the Holy Land.

The central mountain is everywhere. – Black Elk

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<http://www.mythic-cartography.org/2006/03/01/mythic-cartography-explained-part-three/>

**PART THREE: *How do you do  
Mythic Cartography? How do you  
recreate and maintain Mythmaps?***

Well, now we get to the meat of it.

In *Lovesick Gods of Heaven and Earth* we talked about the line our modern culture crossed, however long ago, from the living world as Family, to the abstract rule of Gods. From natural gods and spirits as our parents, grandparents, children and siblings, to Farming Gods, who rule over us from a distance, from unreachable mythic mountaintops, or from another realm of existence.

We want to cross back over that line. We want to get our Family back. How do you rebuild trust with someone with whom you've damaged that bond? You court them, of course.

#### ALL REALITY AS COURTING

You will have to romance your relations in the community of life, whom your ancestors rejected. You will have to put on the healer's robes and do the work that has so long remained undone. In order to renew former ties, you will play heartsick songs of affection and love without conditions or qualifications. You will have to fall in love with Life.

#### ALL REALITY AS RIDDLES . . .

All riddles challenge you to learn the language of eloquence. To understand the poem-speak, and glimpse the heart of that whom the riddle courts. When you glimpse that heart, you've touched its spirit.

All the riddles worth telling, to Mythic Cartographers, concern sacred places and those wild children who live there. They concern our love affair with the goddess, the Earth Mother.

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<http://www.mythic-cartography.org/2006/01/07/lovesick-gods-of-heaven-and-earth/>

**THE HEART SHAPED-  
BED AT THE BEGINNING  
OF TIME [lovesick gods  
of heaven and earth]**

[Darkness. The void at the beginning of time. A SPARK enters, dressed in flowing white robes, androgynous, wearing the mask of an ancient face with long hair.]

SPARK: Small, I wander, playing alone amidst the VAST DARK. My bright feet step here, and there, touching nothing as I drift. In sweet loneliness, I have seeded my belly with a yearning, which becomes an ache, and the aching grows into fullness. What magic will this belly make?

[SPARK pulls out a large red cloth heart, as big as a bed, from beneath its white robes. It lays it on the ground, and sits on the floor, next to it.]

SPARK: I see the center of the universe, right here, and I hear your song, and sing to you in turn. . . .

[With its index fingertip, SPARK pulls a blue handkerchief out from the eye-hole of its mask, and studies it for a moment as it hangs.]

SPARK: My first tear. . . .

[SPARK cast the tear with solemn joy to the left side of the heart. Then pausing, SPARK pulls its index finger off its hand, the finger that touched the tear.]

SPARK: Oh little finger bone. . . I hear you sighing. . . you've kissed the tear haven't you. . . go then, join her. I too love: right here, my heart, at the center of all things.

[SPARK tosses the bone to the right side of the bed. Both tear and bone turn suddenly into blue-water woman and grey-stony man. They come together tenderly on the heart-bed and embrace. A flash, and a rumble of thunder, and stars appear in the void. . . ]

SPARK: [dancing]

I didn't know  
that my first wound would open me up  
that spilling forth  
would come one I love  
a ground for my bright feet to touch  
and in loving the first one  
the children of my heart and me  
would themselves seek out each other  
they've seeded the void with stars  
life has begun  
For the first time in my memory  
I rub my hands  
Warmed by their Love  
I call it: the First Fire

[Drums. SPARK dances off stage. Quiet for a moment, as STONY MAN and WATER WOMAN embrace on the heart-bed. A figure emerges out of the darkness,

moving and looking like a marionette, with a bland smile painted on its face and rosy cheeks.]

PUPPET: Cold fills all I can remember. Alone I wander. Perhaps once I had someone to share my loneliness with. Now, solitary do I stumble here, and there. And there they lie. Envy fills my empty space within. I want what he has. The coldness inside gnaws at me. I will take her spirit and swallow it down.

[PUPPET MAN approaches WATER WOMAN and touches her. Her eyes open. . . she hugs her arms to her side, shivering, while STONY MAN remains asleep. . .]

WATER WOMAN: So . . . cold. . .

PUPPET MAN: [Miming pulling in some invisible essence of her into his mouth, licking his fingers.] Yes, delicious, all for me!

[WATER WOMAN dies, falling back to the ground.]

PUPPET MAN: More. I want more! [looking out at stars, laughs mirthlessly] I have a lot of eating to do. . . [PUPPET MAN dances/stalks/slithers off stage, humming and grinning to himself. A few moments pass and then STONY MAN wakes up, rubbing head.

STONY MAN: Water! [as if speaking for first time, inventing language as it comes from his mouth. STONY man suffers silently, hanging his head].

You crashed against me  
wave against rock  
and wore my rough edges away  
ever since I tasted you  
with that first salt-water kiss  
I began to wake  
I found my purpose:  
Holding you against the dark  
And making the first sunrise together . . .  
Now left alone, perhaps  
but your scent still hangs heavy on me  
I will never forget  
though touched now by loneliness  
I will make it back to your embrace  
here where it all began  
but first, I will hunt it down  
dark power that did this  
behind every star, and all about the new forming world  
I'll catch it and cast it back into the Abyss  
Though ruin stalk me every step of the chase  
Here I come.

[darkness again as STONY MAN exits, determined.]

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<http://www.mythic-cartography.org/2006/03/01/mythic-cartography-explained-part-four/>

**PART FOUR: *The Empathic  
Way of Needs and Feelings***



The Universe consists of two kinds of beings:  
those we call Living. . . .

and those we call Living, Growing.

Everything in our community, Rock, Tree, River, Sky, Dandelion, Fox, all of them pulse with Life.

All beings that Live, have Needs. All beings that have Needs, have Feelings.

When you need rest, you feel tired. When you continue on to exhaustion, you may feel despair, annoyance, sadness. Your feelings and emotions tell you about your needs, alert you to them. Without feelings we would die.

In order to Court all our nonhuman relatives surrounding us, and the sacred places that all together make the one great mythic-story body of the Earth Mother, we have to have empathy for them. We have to recognize our kinship with them as living beings.

When our bodies need water, we feel thirsty, until we drink, and then we feel joy.

When a oak tree needs water, it feels thirsty, until the oak drinks, and then feels joy.

When we need companionship, we feel lonely, until we meet a friend, and feel relief and happiness.

When a wolf needs companionship, he feels lonely, until he finds a pack, and feels relief and happiness.

Take care to not project human needs onto our nonhuman relatives. Know instead, that they have their own needs, each according to their natures. Learn their needs, by observing their feelings. No one can tell another what to feel or what to need. This understanding applies to all life

Can you do it? Can you take the mask of dumbness and blindness off of our nonhuman family, and hear them cry, hear them laugh, see their fear, their anger?

Try it. Next time you look at a stone, a tree, a lawn, a bird, the sky, ask yourself: what does it feel right now? And what need does that feeling point to?

Or go in the other direction – what need does it have, and how might it feel about that need? A leaf with a hole chewed in it, a songbird singing in the dawn, a cat staring out a window.

So goes the empathic way of needs, and feelings.

Anthropomorphize, v.: to ascribe human characteristics to things not human.  
[American Heritage Dictionary]

Anthorpomorphize, v: to ascribe human values to things not human.  
[Mythic Cartographer's definition]

Lisa Wells Says:

March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006 at 4:29 pm

What about desks and ironing boards? Seriously, what do you think?

Willem Says:

March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006 at 4:35 pm

You mean do they have needs and feelings? You could say that we have an even greater obligation to the things we humans make with our own hands, and what we've made out of them, than almost anything else. The children of our hearts, minds, and hands. How do you feel about that?

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<http://www.mythic-cartography.org/2006/03/02/mythic-cartography-explained-part-5/>

**PART FIVE: *The Empathic  
Way cont'd: The Ways  
of Needs and Feelings***

Everything that Lives, has Needs. Everything that has Needs, has Feelings that signal those Needs.

To meet its Needs, every living thing has chosen a Way.

You can also call this Way, a “strategy”. For example, cougars live solitary lives, and hunt mostly through sight and the dance of the stalk and pounce. Wolves live social lives, and hunt mostly through their noses and ears, using the dance of the chase and wearing down.

Both animals eat other animals, but do it in different ways, according to their needs. Their Needs, Feelings and Ways influence each other as they evolve and adapt to a changing world.

Sometimes a living creature will follow a Way that doesn’t meet its Needs. Sooner or later, this being will die from its Way.

Wild animals role model for us a rigorous commitment to living in elegant Ways that work to meet their Needs. Their lives keep them close to instant and powerful feedback when a Way does not serve them.

A being’s Needs, Feelings, and Way, taken together, you can call its spirit bundle, the totality of its true nature.

For countless generations humans have looked to these spirit bundles in the community of life, all around them, and learned from them.

Willem Says:

March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006 at 7:25 pm

Hey Lisa. I see it as straightening a bent bar – to make it straight again, you actually have to bend it past straight.

In this sense, I don’t claim any sole causes for anything. I agree if you consider that foolhardy. I do think though, that once again it comes down to the Grave of Right and Wrong. One of the things implicit in a worldview that “works” involves the idea that the sum total of your behaviors foster life: life for you, life for your habitat and nonhuman family. Abuse can happen in any context. But a machine that runs on abuse, like our culture, cannot sustain itself. It does not foster life. Indigenously, abusive cultures could not survive. How could they? To waste energy on behaviors that do not directly contribute to the life of the family means throwing energy away. You can only do that if you have surplus energy to spare. This may mean that in indigenous contexts where a surplus of energy existed, and something triggered an abusive cultural cycle, that the community could indeed sustain it. I welcome any further thoughts you have on this – I consider it part of my job to say the crazy thing, and generalize shamelessly, when it has a use. :)

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<http://www.mythic-cartography.org/2006/03/04/mythic-cartography-explained-part-6/>

**PART SIX: *The Empathic  
Way cont'd: Awareness,  
Acceptance, Choice***

Places have Needs, Feelings, and Ways too. Life on a mountain, differs from Life in a valley. Life in a desert face different challenges than Life in the ocean. A vital aspect of Mythic Cartography involves seeing the spirit bundle of a place.

To live in a place, you must live with the place. This requires three things: awareness, acceptance, choice.

Awareness of what the place tells you, its feelings and needs, of what you feel, and what needs those feelings signal.

Acceptance of these feelings and needs as happening, without resistance or denial, completely embracing them. We truly understand only that which we fully embrace. What we always keep at arm's length, we will never understand.

Choosing, what action to take that will meet your needs, and the needs of the place. You might call this "flowing", a cooperation with your loving relatives, who get angry, who may even hurt you, but who will always love you. I call it creating your Way, and the evolution of your own spirit bundle.

Those three steps: awareness of the reality, accepting the reality, choosing what to do about the reality. Each time you make a choice, you observe the results. . . .staying Aware of the results, Accepting them, and Choosing what action to take to better meet your Needs.

This describes an upward and expanding spiral of healing, growth, and possibility. The creation of a beautiful Way that works. With this mind we can approach the Land, learn its spirit bundle, and hear the stories it wants to tell, without judgement or fear.

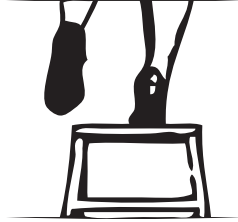
With this under our belts, we can learn to Dance with the land. Both of us Lead, both of us Follow, staying aware of our partner's movements, accepting their energy, choosing how to flow with them. By Dancing, we also Court the Land, showing our intention: love, reconciliation, healing.

In this way we discover Life leads to Empathy, Empathy leads to Dancing, and Dancing leads to Courting that which gives Life.

What do you call the Courting of the Place that gives you life?

A Mythmap.

The Anarchist Library  
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