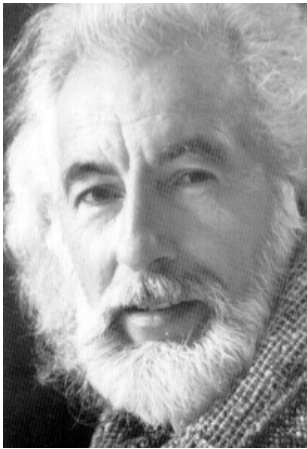


Making Magic: Art, Ritual & Soul

A Conversation with Doug von Koss and Francis Weller



On a warm summers day, Francis and Doug sat under a grand old oak tree and discussed the ways of art and ritual, beauty and magic. What follows is an excerpt of their conversation. Doug is a gifted artist, teacher and performer who presents chanting workshops, poetry performances and rituals throughout North America and Europe.

FW. It seems that the role of art and ritual have never been as separated as they are today. We have artistic renderings in one part of our culture, we go and admire them in museums, appreciate them, but in terms of its evolution as part of our lives, they were never segregated, the arts were a part of ritual and ritual was imbued with art. What are your thoughts on how we can begin to stitch that fabric back together.

DvK. I remember as a kid in Iowa, everyone had their garages in the alleyway and they were always painted white, white houses, white garages, maybe they had some black trim, but it was white on white. I must have been six or seven because I caught a lot of hell for it, but I had every kid in the neighborhood with mud and we were putting our handprints on the side of the garage. So I guess that was our first move into cave painting, saying 'we're here.' I remember some kids were doodling with mud on the walls and we didn't think anything other than this was a natural thing to do.

FW. You bring up something of interest to me, which is that the connection between art and ritual has changed. They have gone from a community activity to a very private activity, particularly art. It has essentially become private. I think we need somehow that we can bring art and ritual into a more communal event, where it is not about production, you're not producing a piece of art, but you are participating in art.

DvK. I've got on my refrigerator, 'Youth is a gift of nature, but age is a work of art.' I truly believe that. We have as individuals and as communities a chance to recreate ourselves daily. In the absence of that creative act our communities are falling apart, they are becoming bleak places to live. In San Francisco in the Mission District there are murals everywhere. They are stunning in their complexity of the culture that they are painting. It's all there. It's a community project and then the community protects them so that graffiti doesn't get on those paintings and the whole community is involved.

FW. I don't know if I would normally have put protection and art together. I'm intrigued by that idea.

DvK. Why did people paint their bodies but to disguise themselves so they blend in or protect themselves. The Pennsylvania Dutch would paint those wonderful mandalas on their barns. Art can be protective. Blind them with your beauty! Even musical arts have that. Taiko drumming came about because they weren't strong enough to do battle but the sound was big. The sound was big and you certainly wouldn't want to approach an island were that much sound was coming out. Must be a very big dragon or a demon living there. But it was art developed into a form of protection.

If you have ever watched an aikido dojo in full blossom, the artful form that they have. The beauty of the movement, and it is an art, and yet it is protection, surely. It is not an aggressive martial art; it's a protective one.

FW. There is also a strong connection between art, ritual and the imagination. I am thinking of this idea of the martial arts and I think it was Einstein who said that 'Violence was a failure of the imagination.' We don't seem very imaginative at this moment as a culture.

DvK. Well, yes and no. Big time, we're not. There is a terrible safety in sameness. Like the nail that sticks out that has to be pounded in. I live in San Francisco where there is every kind of architecture that you can imagine. I discovered a house this morning on 19th Ave and the windowpanes themselves had been painted. They painted on the panes and it became art on the front of the house. I'm sure that some of the neighbors might have said, 'what are they doing to the neighborhood? Look what they've done.' Yes, look what they've done. It's beautiful. If other people had helped them paint it then we are into ritual and community.

I like to do things were I just put all the materials out there and say, 'okay guys, what can we make with this that will express who we are today or this week.' I like things that can be beautiful and then nature takes them away so that we really don't leave a track behind. And yet for all the world they are stunning.

A ritual that I have been doing with Martin Prechtel in Minnesota is one where we will build these little spirit houses. There will be a hunk of the woods that we will go to and we will make these little houses for the ancestors. Each man takes things from the woods, everything must be biodegradable, and be able to just disappear in time. You can be very creative with what you find in nature and the structures of these gorgeous little pieces of art. You turn loose and a man will marry himself to a tiny little spot on the ground, just a few inches high, I suppose it is all imaginal, while others will jet bigger and bigger. It's done in community, it's done silently but it is bigger than themselves. Then there will be an art walk later on and we will walk through it. You walk in talking and within four steps you're in this other

world of enchantment and beauty and you just tip toe through the woods and nobody speaks. You're changed like a good initiation; you're changed when you come out the other end. You will never be quite the same again for having seen and worked on that. I suppose that is part of art and ritual also. In there is the artist always calls in the gods whether they would speak to it in those words or not.

FW. How do you think we can get from the specialization of the artist to everyone feeling called upon to participate in artistic expression?

DvK. Better still, why is it in our culture that it goes the other way; that we start out as an artist and it is systematically handed over to somebody else to do it.

FW. It has become a spectator sport.

DvK. In all the arts we are spectators because we say if I cannot play like Rubenstein I am certainly not going to begin to practice. If I can't paint like so and so, who am I to pick up a brush? And on and on, dance, whatever.

You know I go to Bali quite often where in the Balinese language there is no word for artist, yet everyone is. Children at some time in the evening will sit on their father's or the grandfather's or their uncle's lap in front of the gamelan orchestra and they learn the rhythms and beats and they don't think of themselves as musicians, but later on, oops, they have become a musician. It's the same way with painting. The little kids are given little tiny sticks and paint and brushes and it is expected that they will want to copy what everyone else does and pretty soon after a few years and, 'oh, I can paint that way.' As you get older and the apprenticeships last longer and longer when you work under a master and it may take twelve or thirteen years but when they are done, 'Aha!'

And the women, it's not like the men have the corner on art in the culture. The women have an art that goes back to nature very quickly. They will spend days and days making a sculpture piece out of grasses and reeds or maybe colored rice cakes, gorgeous things, that

will be given over to the gods and after two or three days, they disappear.

On the thread of all that is that their art is in their religion, is in their dance, is in their music. It isn't separated, it isn't compartmentalized, it's just what you do.

FW. That's what I have found in most indigenous cultures. I have yet to find a traditional culture that has a word for art. It's as if you name what has become separate. This is so much an integral part of who you are that you don't have to name it. It also seems that the arts and ritual did not lose their association with the sacred. Consequently you don't have to name what has not been separated from the sacred.

DvK. Good thought. If we could go back, go way back to the middle ages when it was just a few people who knew how to read and write, and that was held by the church. The illuminated manuscripts that came out, the beauty that came out of offering up art to the other, to the divine. The robes that they made for the priests were...and then you just keep going with that, going into the cathedrals and the churches, the enormous uplifting of art into spirit for the divine, and it was just what you did. Art is that, all artists would do this. They didn't like you to do a subject that was not devoted to the divine.

FW. Judith and I went to see an exhibit at the Palace of the Legion of Honor. It was an exhibit of the works from the cathedral of St. Francis of Assisi. The church had been severely damaged by an earthquake, so they were taking some of the artifacts and displaying them around the world to raise funds for the repairs. So we went to this exhibit and it was very beautiful. Unbeknownst to us, at the same time there was an exhibit of Australian Aboriginal art downstairs.

We went and looked at those art pieces and the most amazing distinction between them was that every piece of art from the church had a human being at the center of it. All of the images, the carvings, were all human centered. You could not find a human being in the images of the aboriginal paintings. That really struck me, that somehow...the

words that came to mind were that the aboriginal art was still sacrocentric. That's not exactly a word, but the feeling was that the sacred was still at the center of the piece. You could look at it, it was often simply a series of concentric rings and circles, but somehow the numinous quality of the image hit you. Something of the 'other' was truly present. Whereas I could look at the piece of work from the cathedral and appreciate it, it was stylistically very beautiful but it didn't have the same effect on me. Somehow having a human take the center made it very different. I don't know how to describe it any other way. But it was a profound contrast within a couple hundred feet of each other.

I think the difference reflects our relationship to the 'other' in western thought. We hold the human as central and the others of animals, trees, hills, rocks as somehow peripheral. I remember coming across one of those evangelical preachers on TV who said 'God created man to rule the universe.' Now that is an actual quote. This humanism has deeply affected art and ritual. The other has been lost to some high degree. Whether it's the Pleistocene cave paintings where the other is just, my god, the other is so profoundly central. And at the periphery sometimes you can catch a human image maybe, but even those images are more shamanic.

DvK. Exactly. The animals, animals hiding in the animals. What just came to mind, that there may be place where it switched from we are man and in nature, but there was a time when we were nature, when we just were. We thought of ourselves as part of nature, as the animals that we are. And I'm thinking of the beginning of the cathedrals in Europe where the stone carvers and all of their acanthus patterns, their green leaf stuff. They got as much nature into the building as they could. Now low down they got all these little figures and images over the doors, but as they went higher and higher halfway up, halfway up where you couldn't see them from down below, are these, just these eyes and faces looking out but its all green, it's the Green Man. The leaves are all coming out of their faces. And they were still

looking with the eyes of nature. They were still not trying to suppress the other then.

FW. I think that's a huge piece of where art and ritual meet as far as I can tell. They were ways of entering into the mystery of that kind of connection. And it seemed that as the other became more abstract, the deities in the sky or whatever, things began to get more specialized, more abstract themselves. Even art became abstract. But the original intent of art and ritual was to enter into a mysterious relationship with that other.

DvK. Yes. Look, take a hike to Australia and to their art form, if you want to say their art form, aboriginal art. I'm sure they don't call it aboriginal art. They are sacred drawings, sacred

The deeper we go into singing praises to the other, we do move into a ritual space and a lot happens when we sing, but when we stop, in that great silence that falls then, we are definitely in the presence of the other. People are so hungry for an experience of that.

representations. They would paint their bodies or make rock paintings, whatever they were doing, it was not about *them*.

FW. One of the things I've heard is that often these paintings were maps. They were sacred geographies, and when you would see particular images on these maps they would tell you how to get from here to there because water was so precious and because the geography was so sacred. Every depiction on the painting would tell you something of the territory you were passing through and what in the deep time story of the ancestral dreaming had happened there. It may be Kangaroo Dreaming or Wallaby dreaming. You knew who you were walking along the songlines with.

What happens to the psyche when the others disappear? If our evolutionary story is one in which the others help shape us, gave us song, gave us ritual, gave us language and food then the others are no longer part of daily life...

DvK. Then we are impoverished. Our soul, our spirit is impoverished and shrivels and is not fed.

FW. And the only others are other humans.

DvK. Who are likewise impoverished, malnourished.

FW. I think that is part of what I feel that the arts and ritual have to redress, our relationship to the other.

DvK. I was just thinking the art which I know best is voice, is rhythm, is singing, but in community. I marvel each time when a hundred, two hundred people can come together in a space, basically as strangers and within twenty minutes of singing together walls fall down and they lighten and feel really safe. Then when you change the songs to something that might invoke the sacred, what a change comes over everybody. When they begin they are only singing from the neck and when I introduce the slightest movement,

which is dance, the sound changes and they change and lines fall off them. The deeper we go into singing praises to the other, we do move into a ritual space and a lot happens when we sing, but when we stop, in that great silence that falls then, we are definitely in the presence of the other. People are so hungry for an experience of that.

I have been analyzing that for why that is so different because people go to church on Sunday and they sing in community there. One thing is that they are all sitting with their backs to everybody else, all facing forward in one direction and not in a circle.

Then they are trying to take what is written on the page and are afraid of making a mistake or they are not the musician that everyone else is whereas the things that I do and all aborigine tribes do is they don't work from the written word, a singer will begin singing and somebody else will pick it up and it grows and everybody puts their spin on it and they roll and rock.

FW. It's participatory.

DvK. Absolutely participatory. Which is where we sort of began with art and

ritual and giving it over to somebody else, to other performers.

FW. In that Stafford poem that speaks to the darkness around us, I'm wondering what do you see that art and ritual can offer to us when it is so dark?

DvK. I guess since we are close to the anniversary of September 11th I'll share this story. Last Memorial Day was a retreat with a lot of men and on the opening evening, I built two simple structures about fifteen feet apart. They seemed to be two towers that were made of bamboo, four corners of a tower with a bent bow on top with colored crepe paper hanging down. It was just art, just two figures. Before the men got there I had them walking in silence thinking about what had died in their life that year or what they might

just want to give away this year that was not serving them. So then in groups of two or three while singing was going on around it, they would go up there and pretty soon it became a funeral pyre. Once we lit them, the crepe paper that was hanging down was being thrown up by the flames almost like a bird trying to get air born, like a phoenix trying to rise up. But that was not the way the story would be that night. I didn't know how long it takes for bamboo to burn so it was this incredible struggle for it to not burn and yet off course it did. It didn't burn evenly so these things just fell slowly east down to the ground and you could hear the men just groan and it was a sigh that had not been heard in the world and a sigh that they all felt for what had happened. The image that had so destroyed us was in a way healing us. It was beautiful, it was ritual.

There were other things that were supposed to be going on and I turned to the other elders and said this is it, we stop now. We're done. The guys sat in silence for over an hour not talking just close to one another watching that fire burn. But we did create art and we did ritual. It burned up and in the morning we saved and worked with the ashes. Things like that can save the world.

FW. I was in New York City visiting my son last October so he took me downtown and I was amazed at how many shrines had emerged and these rituals were going on in the squares and parks. There would be these beautiful shrines with photographs of people who had died and flowers. It was as if the heart had an absolute need to create art and ritual in response to this tragedy. They were everywhere, all over downtown and it made me slow down as I was walking through there and take in and pay attention to what these things were saying.

DvK. I love now as I am driving, I don't know how it is in the rest of the country, but in California now more and more where there has been a fatality these shrines appear. I don't remember that twenty years ago: Places where violence or crimes have occurred, that kind of attention being paid to it in that way.

Do you remember way back, just before the Gulf War, Life Magazine had a two-fold of all of the faces of the Marines who had died in one catastrophe. The photographs were of all these fresh faced all American boys in the bloom of youth. I called up a bunch of guys to come over for an evening of singing and poetry because I was feeling lower than a snake's belly and the dream of what was going to come was clearly there. Knowing that they were coming I cut out everyone of the pictures and placed it on hunk of cardboard with a little string on it and put them in a basket. As we started singing I passed the basket around and each guy would take out a picture. The singing changed then to things like, 'Johnny I Hardly Knew You,' 'How Many Roads,' all of those and it was the beginning of my struggle with anti-war poems and I've been learning them ever since. Again it was a ritual way of responding to this crisis.

Now the remarkable thing is I hadn't thought any further than to hand out the photographs. Then we went out on my porch, the living room was no longer big enough for it, that what we were doing had to be a little bigger. So we went out onto my front porch and I have this ornamental pepper tree and

one of the guys leaned over and hung his photograph in the tree and we all thought what a good idea this is and we continued to sing and went down off the steps and put those photographs on the tree, had a little circle and said goodbye. It was good we did that.

The next morning I went to work and there were all these Marine faces, sort of like a strange Christmas tree. It was really strange. Well I came home around 5:30 and there were flowers and flowers under the tree, that people had made a spontaneous shrine, somebody in the neighborhood as they were going by saw it and made a shrine. I left them on there until time took them away. I call it guerilla ritual, guerilla art, when ordinary language will not serve any longer.

I think that when ordinary language, ordinary ways of doing things will not serve what's going on, when things are too big, like you encounter sometimes at a funeral, that's when I move into something much bigger and try to get people together and let's go, this stinks, or this needs to be blessed or attention must be paid here or we are all going to get sick.

FW. So art and ritual is the bigger language.

DvK. I think so. It's something that isn't worn out and doesn't have tight meanings attached to it.

FW. It's also not something that is proscribed. It is an eruption and the psyche, the soul, the earth seems to know the shapes that it wants to see carried forward even if we don't. We have had many rituals when we had a plan to go this way and we ended up some place completely unexpected.

DvK. Magic has got to be in here somewhere too; just the idea of magic.

FW. I think magic is the synaptic connection between art and ritual. You can have art and you can have ritual, but what is it that sparks it into something alive.

DvK. One time we had a fire burning for a couple of days by a river and when it was time we took buckets and

buckets of water and we threw the first bucket and all of the stones were so hot and they steamed and hissed and howled, they howled and we kept doing it. The earth was bubbling and oozing and popping like some primordial ooze coming up and I thought well that's it and then what comes out of it, but we are all there knowing what's gone on there and out comes this salamander crawling out of this thing and across the sand, from there. Now this was one of those synaptic moments between art and ritual.

I was someplace indoors when this guy was making this full intentional statement. 'This I am. This is it, now never again. This is it.' And this wonderful bird flew in right over his head and right out the other side and we all stopped. Not more than three or four minutes later, this same guy was once again talking and here comes that bird again. Well clearly that was one of those magic places where the other has seen this, the other has blessed this.

I was doing a closing once and this guy came down the hill with this butterfly on the end of his finger and this butterfly is not going anywhere. He walks over and sticks it out to me and I say well sure and the butterfly crawls around on me. I can't be attached to this; I've got things to do. I could feel the butterfly crawling all over me. So I continue to do the things I do and I realize there is a little magic here because I've got a butterfly on me while I am doing this closing and I close and with the last words the butterfly goes up and everybody's eyes follow the butterfly up into the trees and we were done. Now that was a gift. It was a beautiful butterfly, it was art with form, ritual and magic and participation.

I saw a man with an eagle whistle. I told him we need an eagle in about a half an hour. This is in Minnesota. We will need an eagle when we finish here. He blows the whistle and the eagle came just when we needed. He wasn't asking for himself and he was asking in ritual for something bigger.

FW. You bring up an important piece about the arts. It feels like it has become too psychologized, mostly

focused on personal healing. What we are talking about here is more about a therapy for the world and our communities.

DvK. Is not a good therapeutic environment a ritual space?

FW. It is also beginning to understand that what we are suffering from is not private, is not purely personal. I think that is one of most powerful things I have learned from indigenous cultures. The idea of private suffering is ludicrous. How could we ever believe that our pain belongs to us? It belongs to the community. It is the way the spirits are talking. It is through your suffering. So art and ritual is meant to address what the spirits have asked for through your illness. Every time we try to privatize our suffering, our depression, our addictions or whatever, we keep the ultimate message from being received and heard.

DvK. Let's put this one in there too since we are dealing with art, ritual, creativity and beauty. It has to do with the ancestors and their availability to us. They are available as allies that will help us and if we want to work on healing the world, which is much bigger than us, we need all of the allies, all of the help that we can get. This whole other world is waiting for us, waiting to be used. We'll line up the ducks here but you have to do your part to. That's part of serving something bigger than ourselves.

We've talked about the indigenous people and the earth, in another context I've said that neither Moses or Abraham or Jesus went to a weekend retreat for a teaching or a learning. They went out to great nature and let nature be the teacher. If we were to say that to an indigenous person they would just laugh.

FW. We don't go to nature. We are coming out of a long history of putting ourselves at the center and peak of creation learning how to dominate and control the world. If we can use these tools of art and ritual to do what they were intended to do, which is to maintain relations with the greater world, then there is a reparative tool to stitch back those pieces that have been

torn over the millennia, which have seen this gradual dislocation to now there are days where some people don't place a foot on the earth.

DvK. My mind just made a major leap on how to bless these beautiful things. It would be one thing if I went off into your forest and wrapped the most exquisite pieces of braided ropes and fabrics around each one and draped them as a little thank you. That would be fine. In the Golden Gate Arboretum and as you walk in the front gate, there is this great old tree there on its own little mound. Generations and generations of San Franciscans know that tree and if a guerilla ritual would come in and sing and praise that tree and all the trees in the park. You great father of all the trees, you have seen so many changes, we honor you and bless you' and then drape the most beautiful brocaded fabric, the most costly we could get our hands on and put it there in such a way that you would have to cut it off to remove it. I wonder how long it would stay. I imagine a long time.

FW. Even if it didn't, what a wonderful gesture for the tree itself whether it effected the other humans or not. It would be good to meet in the woods and sing to the elders, the deer, the others in the woods.

There is something in the soul that has to engage the world in this fashion. Art and ritual are our genetic links to the world. We are connected to the more-than-human world through those powerful actions.

DvK. A Native American elder told me once, 'you know you go around with all these images on your T-shirts; you put all these things on. To us it is not an image, it is it. A buffalo is everything that buffalo is.

There was a teacher in New Mexico who was trying to keep the minds of the kids juicy and so she would hold up a piece of paper with a drawing of a rose on it and ask the kids what is it. And they would respond, 'a rose.' And she would respond 'no, that's a piece of paper.'

FW. With a drawing on it. We have become a culture of reference instead of experience. The sensuality has all but evaporated. So now we have virtual realities. I remember David Abram once saying, so we have a virtual reality of a woods, whose reality is it. Is it the badgers, the beavers? No they are not in that construction. It is purely synthesized by human constructs.

John Stokes shared a quote from one of his elders. He said, 'what we don't talk to, we don't understand. What we don't understand, we fear. What we fear, we destroy.' Where is the conversation with the world right now? Do we speak to the woodpeckers, do we speak to the trees. The conversation has all but ceased with the world. We come back to the way art and ritual can reestablish the communication.

DvK. James Hillman was quoting somebody when he said that 'the first symptom of the loss of soul is the loss of the sense of beauty.' Which speaks to this big hole we have. We haven't spent much time in this conversation speaking about beauty. Even in the darkest ritual with the darkest things you can imagine, beauty has to be there or the gods won't pay any attention.

FW. I think beauty is that which enables us to tolerate the darkness. How else are you going to go into dark places without that accompaniment? Hillman had another phrase about beauty. He said, 'beauty is an epistemological necessity. It is the means whereby the gods touch the senses, reach the heart, and attract us into life.' So what is it without beauty that attracts us into life? Ugliness causes the soul to shrivel. Beauty keeps us being able to respond to the world. Beauty keeps the heart flexible.

We sit here under this oak tree dropping its acorns. Its beauty shelters me, not just the shade.

DvK. Well, thank you. I've enjoyed this.

FW. Many thanks Doug.