Ritualizing Democracy: Earthborn Attunements for Ecological and Democratic Renewal

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The dual crisis of democratic decline as well as ecological collapse reflects not only institutional failures but a deeper symbolic and affective disconnection from the earth, from one another, and from the shared stories and practices that once helped hold societies together. Present- day liberal democracies often heavily rely on ideas of individuals as rational, self governing actors. However, this view tends to overlook the symbolic, emotional, and collective dimensions of political life. To address these intertwined crises, it is essential to go beyond reforms and technical solutions. This essay argues that we need a new form of democratic culture that is grounded in shared rituals and myths that reconnect us to the earth and to each other. I believe we need a new form of attunement to face the two great crises of our time, democratic decline and ecological collapse. This attunement is not abstract; it must be cultivated through ritual practices that make people feel their connection to each other and to the planet they inhabit. Rituals are needed not as nostalgic returns to the past but as essential tools for imagining and practicing a democratic future that is grounded, rational, and alive.

Theorists and traditions have long recognized the idea that political life is about more than laws and elections. Carl Jung, for instance, understood that humans are guided by archetypes which are deep symbolic patterns that shape how we see ourselves and others. I agree with the central claim made in Earthborn Democracy that democracy also has its own archetypes, such as flight, politicality, and sociality, all which help us imagine freedom, cooperation, and collective power. However, these archetypes do not operate on their own. They have to be felt, enacted, and experienced through the many varieties of rituals that engage both our bodies and imaginations. Hence, ritual is important because it brings these shared stories to life in ways that deliberation and debate alone cannot.

In fact, many modern democracies are failing precisely because they have lost sight of this. They rely too heavily on proceduralism and rational argument. This essentially leaves little to no room for emotional investment or symbolic resonance. This is by no means a suggestion that reason has no place,

but without rituals democracy becomes hollow, because there is nothing that binds us or connects us together. On that very note, debates and deliberations are not efficient in the long run because they ensure that the majority consensus wins, rather than tapping into shared differences and similarities that bind and connect people as one. As Emile Durkheim argued, rituals create a sense of collective effervescence, they generate emotional energy that makes communities feel real and worth fighting for. Hence, if people do not feel that connection with one another, the world will forever be divided and people will be inherently self-serving. This self serving attitude is the reason why deliberation often falls short. Essentially, shared meaning is the foundation of any living democracy.

Rituals are especially powerful because they have the ability to reshape how people understand their place in society and the world as a whole. Today, we are trained to think of ourselves as separate from nature, as individuals in competition, as powerless against systems too large to change, This myth of separation is deadly. It isolates people from each other and from the ecosystems that sustain life. Newer and reformed rituals have the potential to help break this myth and build a more grounded political imagination. When Earthborne Democracy introduces the idea of the "earthborne unconscious", it speaks to this deeper sense of being, one rooted in interdependence rather than mastery or control.

This is not only in theory, it plays out in formal democratic settings as well. For example, consider South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where testimony was not only a legal or deliberative process, but also a ritualized public act of mourning and moral reckoning. Survivors and perpetrators spoke in front of communities, often beginning with prayer or song, creating space for collective witnessing. The commission did not merely seek facts, but it also created a national ritual of truth-telling that helped renew democratic legitimacy after apartheid (Aslam 38). Another example is the use of participatory budgeting in Brazil, particularly in Porto Alegre, where citizens gather regularly to decide how public funds should be spent. These assemblies became ritualized over time. Unlike routine meetings, they had shared protocols, symbolic weight, and a sense of civic responsibility and rhythm. People returned not just to argue policy, but to reaffirm their belonging in a democratic process that felt tangible (Aslam 41).

Feminist theorists such as Silvia Federici have helped me see how these kinds of rituals are often erased or devalued under capitalism, which prioritizes productivity and control. Federici calls for a return to “commoning”; the shared practices of care, cooperation, and celebration that capitalism tries to eliminate. Therefore, without collective rituals, not only do we lose social cohesion but also the ability to imagine alternatives. Rituals allow possibility. They allow people to experiment with new ways of being, even in small moments. This imaginative capacity is essential for the renewal of democracy.

Many would argue that this emphasis on ritual is too emotional or not political enough, However, I would argue that politics without emotion, without imagination, is part of the problem. Habermas and others have worried that ritual can be exclusionary or manipulative. While I understand that concern, it is also important to realise that rituals are not inherently dangerous, and it matters how we use them. When grounded in openness, participation, and care, rituals can create democratic spaces that are deeply inclusive and transformative. They make it possible to feel things that matter together, grief, joy, hope and commitment.

To conclude, addressing the intertwined crises of democracy and ecology requires more than institutional repair; it demands a transformation in how we live, relate, and imagine together. Earthborne Democracy offers a powerful vision for this kind of renewal. Through the drawing on deep resources of myth, ritual, and the unconscious, it shows us how democracy can be more than just a system. It can inherently become a way of life rooted in the earth, in memory, and in shared possibility, Rituals of attunement, whether they take place in a protest march, a communal garden, or a storytelling circle, can help us find our way back to one another and the world we share, essentially as a public good. Hence, they are not luxurious or distractions, but important in building the democratic future we need.

Bibliography

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