Discovering Thin Places - Itoyo-no-Sato Izumigamori Park

Air Date: September 08, 2024

Guest: Don Drew

Resources

Don Drew: 0:29

Hello everyone and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. I'm Don Drew and I'm podcasting from a small town on the east coast of Japan, where I've been coming for over 47 years. The town I'm in is Omika, in the prefecture of Ibaraki. And I'm talking to you from the Izumi Shrine, a small but peaceful island of calm in an otherwise incredibly busy world. Izumi Jinja, Japanese for Izumi Shrine, is a Shinto holy place, one of over 100, 000 public shrines in mainland Japan. My goal today is to share with you some thoughts about the value of discovering special physical and mental spaces of peace in our lives, and ways in which you might find them enriching to your spirit. But first, I want to introduce you to this place, and in order to do that, I need to explain a little bit about the Shinto religion and its emphasis on special holy places known more commonly to Westerners as thin, liminal, or numinous places. So here goes. Yuzumi Shrine area I'm sitting in is buried in a small forest surrounded by suburban neighborhoods. You enter the grounds by walking beneath a large torii, or gate, which marks the entrance into all such places. The way to the main shrine is about a hundred yards ahead. There is a straight stone path lined on each side with narrow flags declaring wishes and prayers of many faith adherents. As you approach the main shrine, to the left, there is a golden dragon the size of a small cat dispersing water for ritual cleansing before you approach the shrine. The main shrine is an ancient and beautiful structure, but we won't be stopping there today. Instead, to our right is another narrower and winding stone path that leads to a smaller, but more ornate shrine beside a pool of water. The water in the pool is shallow and very clear, the forest quiet, rarely interrupted by noise outside the shrine area. Sunlight peaks in through the branches of numerous tall trees of various types, casting a spotlight on the main show, which lies at the bottom of the pool. The floor of the pool consists of a white sandy bottom and up from this sand bubbles water from a natural spring, lifting the sand into miniature clouds that immediately resettle on the bottom of the pool. This show has gone on unabated for thousands of years, providing fresh water to local inhabitants. It is here since I was a 19 year old college student, studying at a university in this town, that I have discovered my most peaceful place on earth. It is no wonder the locals thought this was surely a place where God dwelled. Shinto, which means the way of the gods, is Japan's native belief system and predates any recorded history. Practices, attitudes, and institutions have developed to make Shinto revolve around Japanese land and the seasons in relation with human inhabitants. In short, Shinto gods, called Kami, inhabit all things. Like all religions, Shinto has a wide variety of practices and interpretations, and it's not my intention to provide more than a general description. There is an emphasis on ritual washing, a belief that humans are fundamentally good, In short, the Shinto religion concludes that if God or gods inhabit everything, those places and spaces where the divine presence is more intuitively obvious should be venerated and celebrated. This is not an exclusively

Japanese concept. The ancient precinct of Delphi, where the famous Oracle of Delphi prophesied, rests on the southwestern slope of Mount Parnassus in Greece. The surviving ruins date from its most active period in the 6th century BCE, or approximately 2600 years ago. It was at Delphi that, according to myth, Apollo slew Python and its body fell into this rock fissure where fumes arising from its decomposing body. Intoxicated by the vapors, the oracle would fall into a trance and she would be able to foretell the future. It is in this manner that peoples and religions have discovered or created for themselves thin places, where the boundary between the physical world and the spiritual realm seems especially thin. First called thin places by the ancient Celts, these are places where one may feel the sense of the divine, where the ordinary and the sacred seem to intersect. Thin places are considered by many as sacred or holy, imbued with a deep spiritual presence. They are generally locations where individuals feel a stronger connection to the divine or the transcendent. Some such places are geographic in that they are natural landscapes. Occasionally, they are ancient ruins or sites with long standing religious or cultural significance. The cliffs of Moor in Ireland are inspiring for their green expanse, sheer height and roiling ocean below. They place on exhibition the power of nature to create rare beauty unmatched by much of mundane life. Thin places are often steeped in history and tradition. They might be pilgrimage sites or places with myths and legends associated with them. The cultural context of these locations may enhance their perceived spiritual power and thinness. Such places go by many names. Some call them sacred places, places designated as holy or imbued with spiritual significance in various religious traditions, such as temples, churches, shrines, and natural sites. Others refer to thin places as liminal, areas or even moments that exist on the threshold between two different existential planes. The term liminal is used in both spiritual and secular contexts to describe spaces where ordinary experiences feel heightened or altered. Yet, for others, certain land is considered holy ground, being sacred or consecrated, and often associated with divine presence or significant religious events. New Age and holistic traditions sometimes refer to such places as power spots, locations believed to have concentrated spiritual energy or healing properties. I recently climbed Mount Tsukuba in Japan, and rare and unusual rock formations were labeled as Power spots on the map for ancient Mediterranean axis, Mundi was the Latin term, meaning the center point upon which the whole world turns. This concept used in many cosmologies represented the connection between heaven and earth, a central point where the spiritual and physical worlds meet, such as Mount Meru in Hinduism, or the Bodhi Tree in Buddhism, or the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Portal or vortex are terms sometimes used in metaphysical and spiritual context to describe places like Anaxes Mundi, believed to be entry points to other dimensions or planes of existence, such as the energy vortices in Sedona, Arizona. Then there are destinations with religious or spiritual significance where individuals travel to seek enlightenment, healing, or divine connection, such as Mecca for Muslims or Santiago de Compostela for Catholic Christians. you These are thin places known as pilgrimage sites. Yet another form of thin place can often be found in ancestral lands, areas revered by indigenous cultures. These are often considered places where the spirits of ancestors reside. Collectively, all such special places are sometimes referred to as numinous places, a term coined by Rudolph Otto, locations that evoke a sense of profound, mysterious, awe inspiring aspect of the divine or the holy. Each of these

terms and concepts reflect the idea of locations where the separation between the ordinary and the sacred feels minimal, providing opportunities for discovering greater peace and deeper connection to the universe or the divine. Visiting such places can lead to a sense of transformation or enlightenment. People often report feelings of peace, clarity, and a deeper understanding of their purpose or the nature of existence after spending time in such places. But thin places or spaces are not always some specific place. Sometimes the experience of a thin place is subjective and personal. What one person might find profound, another might not. Many of you would not see or feel what I do when I'm sitting by my pool of sandy water. The sense of a thin place often comes from personal reflection, meditation, Or heightened awareness of the surroundings. It's possible to create a thin place for ourselves, and I would like to spend the rest of our time together talking about how you might discover or create your own special place, one where you might uncover peace in an otherwise busy world. You see, the concept of thin places highlights our human desire to find and connect with something greater than ourself, to seek out space where the veil between the mundane and the mystical is perceptibly thinner. Whether through natural beauty, historical significance, personal resonance, thin places offer an opportunity for spiritual reflection and growth. For those of us who are as interested in the scientific as well as the metaphysical, there are neuropsychological aspects contributing to the existence of thin places. Experiences of spirituality and transcendence have been associated with increased activity in the temporal lobes of the brain, a region linked to processing emotions, memory, and sensory input, all of which are crucial to our perceptions of sacredness and awe. Something referred to by scientists as the default mode network, also known as the default network or default state network, is a network of brain regions active during rest and introspection and is involved in self referential thoughts which may be modulated during spiritual experiences. This network of brain activity can lead to feelings of unity and connection with something greater than ourselves. Thin places have the ability to evoke strong emotional responses, enhancing memory encoding and retrieval. The emotional intensity of these experiences can make them more memorable and impactful. Being in a thin place can also enhance mindfulness, a state of focused awareness on the present moment. This heightened awareness may lead to deep emotional and cognitive experiences. Creating a thin place for yourself involves fostering an environment and mindset conducive to experiencing a set of transcendence, peace, and connection. There are several things you can do to create your own right environment. For some, spending time in natural settings like forests, mountains, beaches, or parks works best. But if you want something more private and closer to home, try creating your own green and living environment through a small garden area. My co host, David, and his wife, Carrie, have created their own outdoor space on their patio and very small backyard space, filling it with beautiful trees and plants, along with outdoor art and water and fire elements. You can also designate a specific area in your home as your special place. Decorate it with objects that have personal spiritual significance, such as candles, art, or religious icons. Back home, Christy and I have in our home what we call the peace room. This simple room with seven windows, a small fireplace, a few furnishings, and a variety of meaningful art on its walls serves as our thin place at home. You don't need a whole room to achieve the same effect. Discover what works for you. Certain practices or rituals can also enhance

the experience. Practicing meditation or prayer can help calm the mind, increase awareness, and foster a sense of connection to something greater. Try engaging in deep breathing exercises to center yourself. And to enhance your awareness of the present moment, and it may help to create a sensory experience for yourself. Some use essential oils or incense to create a calming and pleasant atmosphere. You might consider playing calming music, nature sounds, or using singing bowls or chimes to create a soothing auditory environment. If possible, surround yourself with visually appealing items that inspire peace and contemplation. One thing that can really help is to be consistent in your practice. Most religions have their own rituals that gain strength through repetition. Most important is to establish personal rituals that have meaning for you. These could be as simple as lighting a candle at the beginning of a meditation or prayer session. A friend of mine who teaches graduate theology uses this practice to start his morning prayers. For others, engaging in creative activities like drawing, painting, writing or music that to them expresses their inner self and allows them to connect with deeper emotions, yet others practice yoga and other movements integrating body, mind and spirit. Thin places can be discovered rather than created. Some choose to participate in spiritual or community gatherings where they can share experiences and support each other's journeys. Others engage in intentional acts of kindness or service to others, helping others can foster a sense of connection and purpose. But no one has to travel to Japan, Greece, or even the local forest to experience the benefits of thin places. Creating a thin place for yourself only involves cultivating an environment and mindset that fosters peace, mindfulness, and a sense of connection. By integrating these practices into your daily life, you can create spaces where the boundary between the physical and the spiritual feels more permeable, enhancing your sense of well being and transcendence. I realize why I am drawn here time and again. Not just to Japan, but to this place. The simple, clear, and bubbling pool on the grounds of a Shinto shrine has no specific religious significance for me, but the beauty of the water and the clouds of sand, the depth and silence of the Yuzumi forest, and the idea that for eons people have come here to find comfort and pray all make this place special for me. That, and throughout all the changes in my life over the past 47 years, this place has gone unchanged. But I have discovered and created multiple spaces in my life where I can enhance my access to peace. Here's wishing you success on your own search to uncover and create space in your life for greater peace. Mata ato de.

David Lowry: 14:14

Don, what an interesting time you must have had in Japan going to all those places and the memories that you have there over the 40 years that you've been going. I was intrigued by your thoughtfulness about the thin places. I've heard about thin places all my life what is it like on a deeper feeling level?

Don Drew: 14:34

Yeah, that's a great question, David. I talked about Delphi Greece and there's a lot of history behind it. Or if we were to go to some particularly beautiful cathedral, a lot of

people recognize that as a thin place. This particular shrine that I like going to, when I first went there, I would have been 19 years old and I didn't even have a language for any of this at that time. I just knew it was peaceful and beautiful. It's role as a recurring place of great peace and beauty for me over a lifetime in order to become what it is today.

David Lowry: 15:08

I have a spot in New Mexico very similar to that along a riverbank. Those of you who know about New Mexico streams know they tend to be in the high mountains, rather shallow. They have a rushing, rippling sound that moves your consciousness in a different place if you'll sit and close your eyes. as a child, I remember hearing it and feeling peaceful around it. But as an adult going for, you know, 50, 60 years It takes on even more meaning. It's a cumulative effect.

Don Drew: 15:37

I give you another example. Okay. Ghost ranch is a famous ranch in New Mexico where Georgia Keefe did a lot of her painting. It's also known historically because of some really incredible dinosaur finds there, the Coelophysis dinosaur. It's the largest collection of this small raptor that lived in New Mexico a long time ago. So it's got a lot of uniqueness to it, but the site is just incredibly beautiful. All the colors. The quietness. The peace you find there. The hills. The first time I went there, I was immediately struck by that. And we've been back several times since, and it just, every time I go, it just sort of reinforces that it becomes more and more a part of who I am.

David Lowry: 16:15

I think people want a thin place in their life. How might they cultivate or find such a place?

Don Drew: 16:22

Sure. I talk a little bit about how you can create those. Let's talk about your backyard, which we were there last night. That Backyard patio has a lot of meaning to all of us because we've had so many great conversations there, right? It's beautiful. It's wonderful. I love what you guys have done for it. The flowers, the rocks, the water, the fire, the whole elements there. It's just wonderful. But. I've been in people's houses have nice things like that before too. Oh, yeah, it's it's not that that makes it special. It's all the conversations that we have had on that patio. In Christy and I's case creating the peace room Is something where we have accumulated, many things that have great meaning to us over time and we've kept the room simple and in a way that feels comfortable to us when we were there. I'm not sure that anyone else would walk into that room and immediately feel what Christy and I do about the peace room. Right? So you can create your own thin places or special places, if you will. But I think one of the things that

makes thin places thin is the, value and the importance of that particular place to us personally, we personalize it. And it becomes a part of the spiritual self.

David Lowry: 17:31

In my home, there's a place where I do meditating. I have this ritual of getting up around five o'clock every morning and I go to this room in the house. I sit in the room and settle and began a meditative time to remove the boundaries of myself by seeing if I can be in absolute silence in my mind. All of that is a ritual, very powerfully tied into that place and it's taken a power of its own, which is the point of a think place I think.

Don Drew: 18:02

Yeah.

David Lowry: 18:03

What are some of the rituals that you use? In some of these places?

Don Drew: 18:07

Sure. At the Izumi Shrine, there's a couple different ways to approach the small shrine, but one of my favorite ways is to go to the main shrine because you can look down down on the pool I talk about, right? And you can see the smaller shrine that's rests at the edge of the water. And it's really pretty from up there. And so you get this macro view of the area. And then I go down the walkway around the back of it and over that little red bridge. And there's a bench there and only sit about two people. So, I usually sit on that bench and watch the water. The movement of the water is so spectacular because it blows up these little plumes of sand. It's also pleasant to the ear to listen to the sounds of the forest and the movement of the water. And then there's the time element because , there's very little to mark the time. You can watch the leaves floating on the water or whatever. That's my particular experience. Now I've been to other places I find that are quite spectacular. I remember in Vienna, there's a spectacular cathedral. And one time I went in and there weren't very many people in there at all. There was a small orchestra playing down front and they had suspended what looked like stones from the ceilings. I guess they were paper mache or something like that, but they look very much like real stones from the ceiling. And I remember standing in the middle of all this history, hearing this orchestra and seeing these stones floating in the air. And for a moment, it became a thin place for me. It normally wouldn't, but in that moment it was.

David Lowry: 19:31

How can we get the benefit of thin places in daily life? Is there a way of adding those into daily life?

Don Drew: 19:37

I've talked about this in other podcasts before, one of my rituals that is very peace filling is my morning walks. I can't describe necessarily the experience of being an experience in a thin place, but it can become a ritual that I look forward to and I want to take part of. It allows me to connect with nature, connect with myself, think peacefully about those things that I need to think about. It's can be challenging. Many of our listeners may have children at home and they've got jobs and other responsibilities they have to do, so I think that's one of the reasons why creating a space whether it be something you created your home or identify a place that over time can have meaning and add value to your life and become your own personal place of contemplation and thinness because then you have something to go to and it doesn't take a lot of time.

David Lowry: 20:26

You may laugh at this, but my very first cup of coffee is very meaningful to me, I used to throw on Mr. Coffee the night before and it was more of an efficiency thing but over the years, I like to drink good coffee. I like exploring the beans. I have a grinder. I like to grind it fresh. I use filtered water. I have a special press, a special cup. In other words, we look forward to it, we get meaning out of it. We find pleasure in it. It has a bit of transcendentalness to it.

Don Drew: 20:59

A word popped in my head when you were saying that and the word was intentionality. Yeah. The thing of it is, that we can be rushing through our lives with all the business that there is all the things going on in our lives. And we can say to ourselves, I have no more time to do anything, but it doesn't take more time really. And so this idea of intentionality, this idea that I intend to make this happen in a certain way and then go about trying to do that is certainly one way in which you can achieve what we're talking about here. And so preparing morning coffee can become a mindfulness or an intention setting exercise that can bring more meaning to our lives, more richness without necessarily taking a great deal more time.

David Lowry: 21:44

Exactly. And here's another thing I think we can do and it has to do with joy. We all need joy in our lives, and it works like this. Every day, something will happen that causes you to suck your breath in a little bit because you're excited. For me, when I see little children sometimes and they're just so dang cute, you know, I go, aren't they cute? Something deep within you saw the joyfulness of those children. That little moment where you sucked your breath in is a moment of joy. I feel joyful when I see that sunset. I feel joyful by those beautiful flowers over there. Or maybe It was the way the tree moved in the wind, or the clouds in the sky that morning, or the way your partner looked and you thought, you look beautiful today. They're happening all the time. That's a

special moment. Hopefully you'll learn to flag them and you'll have more of them continuously cropping up. Well, what advice would you give to listeners who are on this journey, that's been a part of your journey these past 40 years tied to this place?

Don Drew: 22:48

I think the answer is a combination between the two major themes we've been talking about here in the last few minutes. Awareness and intentionality. Matching those together, finding whether it's a space, a place or being more aware of situations that bring you joy, all of that do the same thing. They connect us to the world in positive, useful ways that can make us feel better about ourselves. It can help increase our peace and can connect us in ways we won't find if we just sort of blow through life be blown about by life.

David Lowry: 23:26

So, do you feel like you receive any kind of inner messages when you're at a thin place or is it more of an alignment sort of thing?

Don Drew: 23:34

It's a really great question. The answer is no, I don't. But I do feel there is more of an alignment. That's a great way of putting it. Putting it okay. It's a recognition of the sheer beauty that exists in places in the world that is just an incredible uplifting experience. And then part of it happens internally to me. It's a change inside of me. And I don't know that I can define that very well.

David Lowry: 24:00

Don, I want you to try to close what your visit and this discussion meant to you. And then as a person who is hearing about this pool for the very first time myself, I want to give myself an opportunity to bring it to a close as well.

Don Drew: 24:14

The experience I had in Japan was, as it always has been for me, an extraordinary adventure. I love Japan. I Japanese culture and history. I've found it fascinating since I was introduced to it at 19 years old. But I have also been to many places in Japan that I don't feel this way about necessarily. They're beautiful. They're wonderful. I felt good there and so on, but they don't have the same meaning. But I know that because I made this discovery when I was 19 and have kept it up to this is a year anyway. It has been tremendously impactful on my life and it helped me. One of the reasons why I did the recording is it helped me try to put into words what this has meant to me and what I think discovering your own thin place or creating your own thin place can mean for others. And that's why I wanted to share that with our listeners.

David Lowry: 25:07

As a person who has heard your story and participated in this discussion, I want to encourage myself and others to be mindful of the moments of joy and inhalation we have when we take in our breath and suddenly realize that there's just a instantaneous few seconds of joy that got through to us and to see how many of those we can string together and also to put a thin place in our life and let that take on meaning as well.