

Carrizo Plain

# Mea Culpa



**“I cannot for myself countenance living in a culture which separates experience from reflection--theory from practice.”**

**Hollis Frampton**

**When I was a little kid, someone named James Dean ran something called a Porsche Spider off of a road in California. They said it was near the small town of Cholame, where he died. I don't think it was an accident. I think the Fault got him.**

The thing about an earthquake is that it doesn't start with a bang. It just sort of begins.

A hot and windy day lying face down on the beach. Not really quite at the beach, but very close. A low tide sand bar where a small stream enters the sea. Face down into the sand. Not really face down, face turned to the side. Stomach down. An important posture because it seems difficult to imagine anyone holding on to anything while stomach is down in the sand, but it seems the perfect posture with which to "hold" onto the earth.

At first it was just a little jerky nuisance. Like a heavy truck on the nearby overpass. A bit too chunky and irregular perhaps, but still nothing to think about. The environmental equivalent of a fleeting idea.

With the second movement, it was immediately obvious what was going on. The lesson of perfect understanding. No one knew what was going to happen, but everyone knew what was happening. We were all moving and we didn't like it. Perfect awareness for all at the same time. All after only a few moments meditation on the koan of the moving earth.

Perfect awareness, I doubt it. But at the very least a very hard hit with the geologic stick to help jolt us into the first level of enlightenment.

Although the force was communally understood by all of the sunburned vacationers they were completely unwilling to announce their new positions as visiting seismologists. Five seconds of reflection told each of them there is only one thing that can cause a beach to move, and yet the first reaction after the sensing was one of slow panic. Slow because of not wanting to believe what has been felt. It may only be a little foreshock and all of us know that "THE BIG ONE" is on the way. There was a lot of executive aplomb that turned into adolescent phoney cool, as heads were lifted off the sand and turned with questioning eyes to the nearest person. Asking the idiotic questions that are always asked at this time. "Did you feel that?", "What was that?", or finally the most trite

and yet cleverly ironic of all--"Was that what I thought it was?"

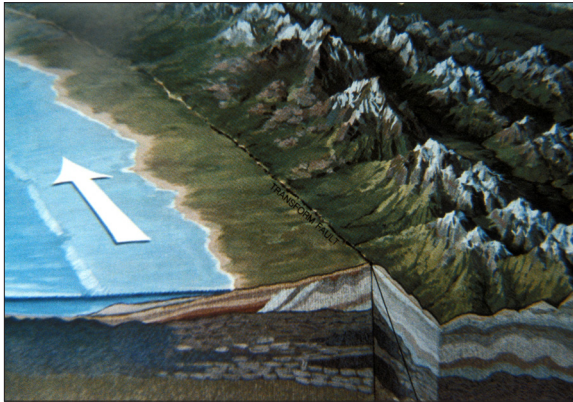
Indeed it was. And yet, with an educated indifference that would have astonished our ancestors, the heads turn back, lower and rest in the sand. While we wait for the one that does more than rumble the beach.

I have been waiting for a long time now and in the process I have discovered that I am concerned with the earth. It is not clear to me where this concern came from.

It may have begun as a youth when I scrambled through the Rocky Mountains, and I came to realize that you must respect the mountains because they certainly will not respect you. The mountains often used the numbing white hammer of an avalanche to pound home their point. Concern, respect and fear are from the same family. It may have begun when I came to see mesas and canyons as a form of refuge. A refuge whose solitary and protective image changed when I saw a fellow climber take a step on a mesa that was the biggest of all steps. It may have begun when, as a steel mill worker, I saw spilled metal, like lava, splash and slither across the ground where it encountered a small building. The building did not have time to burn. It simply vanished in a spasm of boiling metal and smoking dirt. It may have come when remembering my Grandfather's description of what it was like to see Halley's Comet and how his eyes sparkled when he knew I would be here, standing on the changeless earth to see it when it came again. It may have come when I learned of the interstellar communication plaque that was placed aboard the Voyager space craft and felt that they were looking in the wrong direction. If we want a close encounter, we should have buried that plaque. The power is not in space. It is under our feet. It is in the ground. It may have come when I spent time alone in nature and was delighted to discover what Alexander Smith called the infinite suggestiveness of common things.

The recurring memory of these times and places has imprinted me with an awareness of the power of the earth. An additional benefit of this awareness is that I have also become concerned with understanding where I am.

Many people believe they are concerned with where they are, when they are actually concerned with who they are and how they appear. I am speaking about where I am physically. The understanding of your position is space. Yes, even the cosmos, but on a more regular basis, where am I in relation to the things of my daily life. Increasingly, I find it easy to step outside myself and move through a space with my mind somewhere above and behind me, like some shamanistic voyeur, watching me and sensing my relation to other people and to the place.



*A right-lateral slip-strike transform fault.*

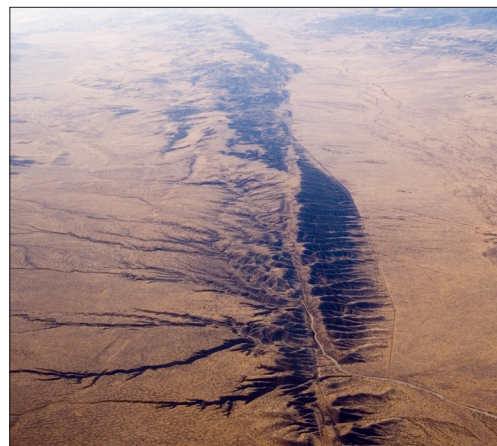
I now happen to live on a portion of the earth that has a crack in it. Well, not really a crack, but a joint where two places of the crust bang into each other. Where, if you believe in tectonic theory, the Pacific Plate is trying to dive, headlong, under the North American Plate. This theory, widely touted since the nineteen sixties, is in great favor with some geologists, while the general public simply believes the San Andreas fault will soon let go and California will simply fall into the Pacific Ocean. That is, unless you happen to live in California, where the prevailing theory is that the San Andreas fault will soon let go and everything east of California will simply fall into the Atlantic Ocean.

As an earthquake has always elicited a profound and universal consciousness of terror. It comes from our idea that Hell is in the center of the earth and fault lines are great cracks that will open up and take you straight to Hell. Yet thousands, if not millions, of people continue to live in close proximity to fault zones and have no intention of moving. In some ways they even like courting disaster. Playing the

odds. Confident, but not positive that death and destruction will rain on someone else.

Confidence in the continuance of these favorable odds is always buoyed by myths, legends and rituals. The Japanese, for example, believe that “Namazu”, a giant catfish, lives under the earth. This catfish is not really a monster, but a rascal, who plays pranks and only the god “Kashima” is able to control him. When Namazu thrashes about the earthquake comes. When Kashima holds the fish down with a large stone, only then is the earth still, and only until the Namazu again squirms out from under the stone.

In California, the earliest people to live along the fault line were the Chumash Indians. They believed that two enormous serpents supported the world on their shoulders and when they moved, the earth moved with them. This legend of the earthquake is painted and carved with other myths at numerous sites flanking the San Andreas fault and exists as a world between reality and the cosmos. Although the Chumash art is religious in nature, there is no doubt that they provided a governmental function. They existed as an official explanation for the unusual and the dangerous. Somewhere in the hinterland between our arctic radar warning system and the predictions of the I Ching.



*The Elkhorn plain on the left, The San Andreas fault in the center and the Carrizo plain on the right.*

Some places are capable of generating their own mythology. The Elkhorn scarp at the edge of the Carrizo plain is flat and empty. In the winter when

the flatness is shiny green, there is a large lake in the middle of the plain where the sheep drink and the Sandhill cranes spend the gray rainy months. Hundreds, thundering at the lake edge, in the not yet dawn, announce the coming of the time when the rain stops. This is the time when the lake is not water but miles of white mud from soda and salt. The time when the turkey vulture circles, the heat shimmers across the flat and the coyote rules. In the Carrizo plain summer, the heat pushes, but it never seems to oppress. Perhaps because it is vast and so open to the sky. The eastern edge of the plain is defined by the Elkhorn scarp. A double ridge separation between the low Carrizo plain and the Elkhorn plain 200 feet higher to the east.

The geology books fall away and feelings begin. No noise. Only sky and the doorway to the soul of the earth. It pulled me into a dream. A dream where I am staying in a hotel that is perched on the edge of the Elkhorn plain. Each room had a little wooden balcony that faced west toward the fault. It wasn't a hotel in the traditional sense but rather a bit more like a dude ranch. A complex of ramshackle rooms bolted together and hanging out over the fault like some ranch hands' vision of Cannery Row. Weather-beaten and sun warped. Dark wood with twist style electric switches. Naked light bulbs in the ceiling. The air inside was that combination of must and dust that is only found in old wooden cabins.



*The Carrizo, green with April barley, looking south toward Soda Lake.*

It is the vast emptiness of this place that is so attractive. Twenty miles in any direction to the nearest human. **Space, like silence is a continuous presence which can only be defined by interruption.** The interruption here is the Elkhorn scarp, the fault scarp, a spatial spine that slashes through the landscape. The geologists call it the fault "trace". Trace to me is like a track and it is an appropriate name as the scarp is eroded remnants of the most recent violent movements of the San Andreas. When you stand in the trace, with the scarp ridges to the east and west you are not merely on the fault line. You are in the fault.

With no one ever at the front desk, it was a geologist's boot camp on the furthest edge of the Camino Real.

I have no idea what people did there during the day, but in the evening, they gathered in the cool dusty air of their rickety balconies, to drink beer and look down to the fault line. To watch and to wait in the silent dark. Even the screech owl is quiet tonight. Waiting for the earth to move.

The Dreamtime is gone with the moon. Now the vulture comes low and you can hear the wind moving over his wings. He rides the warm air above the western ridge, banks left and is gone. Nothing. Just nothing.

This fault, this accident of crustal migration, between the young alluvium of the Carrizo plain and the old Miocene marine layers of the eastern mountain, has made a place of special power. I can feel it. Geophysics tells me this power is connected to reason and the truth of the matter is that the land masses are moving on a north-south axis and that large scale seismic activity will probably take place along the fault with the western portion moving north in one big jump. I say big jump because it is creeping along right now, at the rate of about two inches per year, but this is not enough displacement to keep pace with the stresses building along this famous crack. The herky-jerky motion called an earthquake has been coming in roughly hundred year cycles, with the last really big one in 1906. That leaves us with about 20 years before the next one, but the geologic clock is not a quartz chronometer, and it could happen at any time. As Frank Zappa said, "There ain't no way to delay the trouble comin' every day."<sup>2</sup> I propose to utilize this impending movement of the earth as an opportunity to engage in a dialog with the earth.

I know the earth moves, I want it to speak.

In order to engage in a dialog you must have two that speak the same language and a time and place suitable for the conversation. Since I cannot expect the earth to come to me, requesting an appointment, I must go to her. I say her because, with rare exception, the earth is viewed by human cultures as feminine. I must go to her and find a place where she can speak to me. The location of the conversation will be the linear valley of the Elkhorn scarp. In and on top of the San Andreas Fault.

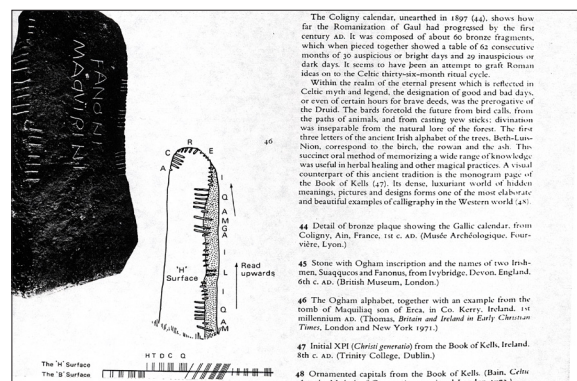
This site has been selected because the most recent major movements along the fault have been far to the north and south of this location and this fact would seem to indicate the pressures within this site have been building here far longer than other places, and therefore, have a greater likelihood

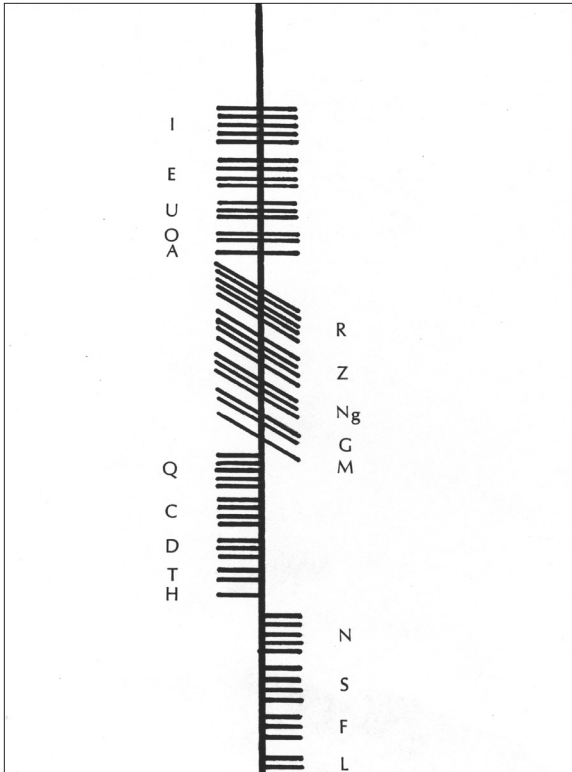
of the need to release those pressures in the near future.

"The San Andreas Fault is active and is expected to be the source of magnitude 8.0-8.5 earthquake in the near future. This earthquake would be accompanied by 20-50 feet of ground displacement." - *San Luis Obispo County Seismic Report*

It is both silly and unproductive to attempt communication without a common language. A traveler quickly discovers that facility in the dominant language of the region is the key to survival. And that is the responsibility of the foreigner to develop fluency, not the other way around. Having selected the fault line as the most likely place for communication, I have the responsibility of discovering a language which utilizes the fault and its movement as a central component of communicative capacity.

The modern alphabets appear to have communication potential only in relation to the order of their symbols. Older languages like Latin, Sanskrit and Arabic also depend exclusively upon a linear ordering of symbols, but like their modern counterparts, make no direct reference to the line on which the symbols stand as integral to the words that they make. The only language which makes use of an axial line to form letters and words is the ancient Celtic language called Ogham. Common in the south of Ireland and Scandinavia, its origins are obscure. Ogham apparently has many forms, all of which were related to the single central line. In many cases, the line was the edge of a stone and against or across this line a series of grooves were cut; the number and position of these grooves is the equivalent of our modern letters.





At this point, one could rightfully ask: How can an ancient Celtic language have anything to do with the San Andreas fault? Aside from the fact that Ogham was developed by primitive people whose rhythms were closely allied with those of nature, like all languages, it began with the mark, with “naming the unknowable”.

The primal act attempts to confine or alter the forces of nature within an order or pattern. And, in this case, the pattern which provides a link to the possibility of communication with the earth is the central, axial line; or in landscape terms, the San Andreas fault line. A series of lines, constructed in relation to the fault line would allow words to be marked on the land. As the earth continues to move along the line, the letters of the words would be shifted into new configurations that would spell new words.

Giving the earth an opportunity to speak a language that humans could potentially understand.

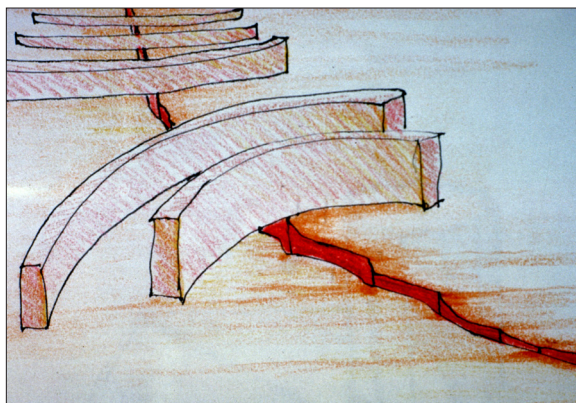
The selection of a site for this process would appear to be a relatively straightforward task. Find a place along the fault that is clearly defined, which has the potential for strong horizontal movement, and construct some Ogham line words.



It is in the construction of the words where this fantasy of geologic Esperanto runs into trouble. What are you going to say? What are the words?

The solution to this quandary presents itself as soon as you realize that only a person of supreme arrogance would have anything to say to the earth. The most I can hope for is that the earth will have something to say to me. And if this dialog will have any aspect of respect, the most appropriate thing for me to do is not to make a statement, but rather to ask a question.

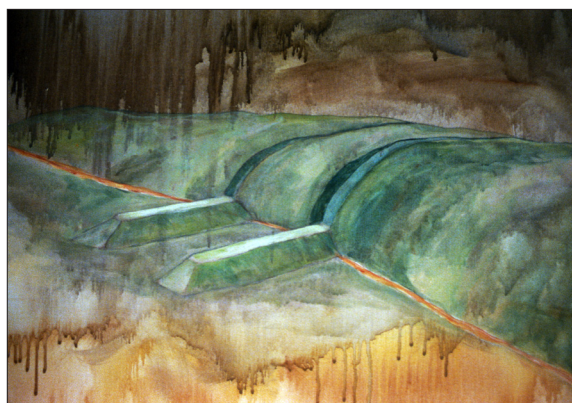
A question has a number of attractive attributes. It does not presuppose any great knowledge, but can be asked in the spirit of learning. A question carries with it the distinct smell of humility. Not a characteristic much evidenced in human actions and history, but a question, by its very nature, presupposes that if an answer is given, the answer will be at least heard and in some way heeded. A question is a ritual based upon attention and care.



If we have evidence of the direction and possible magnitude of the movement of the earth, it would seem logical that we are working to become self-fulfilling prophets. In fact, only the geologically naive would follow this thinking. Just because we think the earth is going to move a certain way may have nothing to do with the way it moves. The only thing of which we can be certain is that the longer the time since the last quake, the shorter the time to the next one. So, the erratic nature of crustal plates may not provide our dialog after all, but the chance that it may is worth the risk. And now the question still nags. What do we ask the earth?

No matter what system is chosen to mark the Ogham lines at the fault, it will require substantial work, and so short questions with small words begin to be very attractive. The Chumash Indians were the earliest humans in the area when they said “Mus-ki-pi”;<sup>6</sup> It meant “Who are you?” An interesting question for someone we are supposed to know so well. “Is it real?”, Was suggested by a clear-thinking friend, but the question that I find most attractive at this particular moment is: “What do we do now?”

I have felt earthquakes but I have never heard them. Talking face-to-face is different than writing a letter, so an acoustic component becomes a necessity in the concept of a dialogue with the earth. A sound work will be composed for this purpose and the work will be played across the fault each day at sundown. Broadcast to an audience that has no humans.



The sound system will be linked to a small solar array to provide power and when the earthquake does come, the ground movement automatically switches the system on. The sound work is played and simultaneously records the sounds of the earthquake.

Currently, testing is underway for the system of the lines of the Ogham words. At the time of this writing, the most promising and least damaging system involves lines made of two inch thick, black, fibrous erosion control mat. Each line is eight feet wide and either three hundred or six hundred feet long, depending on the configuration of the letter. The matting is anchored to the ground with steel staples and will, over time, become completely silted over.

The lines first, and then the solar-powered sound system will provide an opportunity to see and hear what the earth has to say. I know that on the surface of the earth, the San Andreas fault is but a tiny aberrant wrinkle, but the next time it lets go we may be ready to learn from its connection to the thunder of the universe.



*Numerous methods for the construction of the lines were investigated. Excavation, rammed earth walls, etc.*



*Before*



*After*

End note: This project was first conceived in 1982 and aggressively pursued until about 1986. In 1985 I tried to buy a portion of the fault for the project. The portion I wanted was owned by a woman in Minnesota who had never seen the property. The tax records say it was worth about \$75 an acre. When she found out I wanted it the price was \$7500 an acre. The Carrizo Plain is now a national monument and the project has been abandoned. The **BIG ONE** is still on the way.