Climbing Uluru

By Bruce K. Kirchoff

The center of Australia is a vast desert, flat and dry. Near its center sits a massive stone monolith, Uluru, known to Europeans as Ayer's Rock.

Before I came to Uluru, a friend told me "I did not climb it. I stopped there while I was driving up the Stewart Highway between Adelaide and Darwin, on holiday. It was only a short detour, and though I thought that its mystique was just hype, I had to stop. It was directly in my path and it seemed foolish to ignore it. I was wrong, you know. It is something special. It just reaches out and grabs you. But I did not climb it. There are signs at the tourist stops saying that the Aboriginal owners prefer that you do not climb. The tourists almost all climb it. I think that they want to conquer it. I thought about it, and decided not to climb. I did the walk around it instead."

This was my first experience with Uluru, a friend's description of his experience with the rock, and his decision not to climb.

I arrived by air from Sydney. Flying over the Simpson Desert, I was struck by the immensity and beauty of the place. Though the plane was at a normal cruising altitude, the ground seemed closer than normal. Deserts can trick you like that. It is almost impossible to determine their scale. We flew at the same level as the clouds, and the wind swept great clouds of red dust into the air, almost to the height of the thin clouds of water vapor that hovered alongside the plane.

Uluru appeared out of this vastness as a sand-red boulder set in a pool of green. The last two years prior to my visit had been the wettest in recent memory, and the water that cascades off Uluru accumulates in pools around its base. This, and the buffel grass that was imported from South Africa as an erosion control measure, have created this effect.

"It does not look so big from up here," commented the woman next to me. It looked big to me. I said so, and continued to watch until it disappeared behind the plane.

Once on the ground, my rental car retrieved and hotel arranged, I was off to see this rock that "grabs you." My friend was right. It is almost physical. The desert is flat, but interspersed with dunes of red sand covered with scrub and small trees. These dunes always hold your gaze to within a short distance. You can see only a kilometer or two at best, except as you approach Uluru. Then the rock appears above the dunes, its base hidden behind the red sands, but its crown emerging in silence. Silence. Clouds moving across its face; its deep, almost dissonant, voice as it sings in silence. I slowed down. I do not mean in my car, for by this time I was out of the car. "I" slowed down. It spoke to me out of its timelessness in words that have no meaning – of beauty, and calm beyond human understanding. It spoke as something outside of time – not timeless – but outside time. It spoke as it touched our time through the slow movement of clouds across its face.

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Oh how I wanted a connection with this rock! I wanted it before I arrived at Uluru, before my friend spoke to me, before I arrived in Australia. I wanted it since I knew I was coming here. I knew of this rock, of this place that sits near the center of this old continent, and I thought, "That is where I want to go. That is where I will find a connection to this land."

My first act when I arrived at the base of Uluru was to take a short walk to some of the sacred sites along the Mala walk. A Mala is one of the ancestral beings from the dreamtime, and a type of small kangaroo (a wallaby) that used to live in the vicinity of Uluru, but is now extinct from the region. The Anangu, the local Aboriginal people and owners of the land, are hoping to reintroduce it. The brochures say, the Mala walk "ends at the inspiring Kantju Gorge. From the waterhole you can continue on the Base Walk" that leads around Uluru. Thus, without completely intending to, I began my circumnavigation. I wanted to find a spot to stop and sit with the rock, I wanted to photograph it, I wanted a connection.

It was dark by the time I finished my walk and returned to the car park. The climb, which begins from the same car park, was closed and most people had departed. Only three cars remained. The other two soon were gone and I was left to sit alone until sundown with the rock.

In the morning I drove to Kata Tjuta (the Olgas), a series of rock formations about 45 km West of Uluru. I spent the early part of the day, and into the afternoon, walking and sitting among the Valley of the Winds Track, feeling the presence of these hills and thinking about Uluru, and whether I would climb it.

When the Anangu watch the tourists climb Uluru they say that they look like ants. So they call them "minga" (ants). When I watched these minga on the previous day, I realized that one of the problems with climbing Uluru was that the climbers have no respect for the sacredness of the place. As I walked through Kata Tjuta I began to think that, perhaps, what the aboriginal owners object to is the lack of respect for the sacredness of Uluru, not the climb itself. I could see that there was no respect. It bothered me too. This place was sacred; I could feel that. I wanted to feel it more deeply. Perhaps I could climb with respect. Perhaps that would make my climb acceptable. After all, I was more worthy of the climb than the minga. I could climb and be part of the re-consecration.

These thoughts, and many more like them, came and went through me as I walked among the domes of Kata Tjuta. When a sacred place is treated as if it were not sacred, all of the relations between people and the place become distorted. Some people desecrate the place without a thought for what they do. Others, others like me, know that the place is sacred and tell themselves that their actions in desecrating it are somehow unlike all previous actions of desecration. These people tell themselves that, because the place has already been desecrated many times, it is all right if they do it to. Perhaps, or so they say to themselves, they can even help by desecrating with reverence. When a sacred place is treated as non-sacred, all its relationships become dysfunctional. Even well meaning people are pulled into this dysfunction and can, for what seems like the best of reasons, participate in the desecration.

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I knew all of these things as I walked in Kata Tjuta. I knew that there could be no justification for my climb, but I would climb anyway. I would do it with reverence, but I would climb. That was my intention.

My walk over, I drove back to the Anangu Cultural Center near the base of Uluru to view the exhibits and wait out the hottest part of the day. At the Center I watched a video about how the lands of Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park came to be in Aboriginal hands again. It is still a National Park, but the majority of members of the governing board are now Anangu. The video explained clearly how the Anangu had been mistreated and all of us watching felt shame, even though we had nothing to do with the mistreatment. It also made it transparently clear that climbing Uluru was not appropriate. Climbing was a violation of Aboriginal rights and feelings. Still, I thought, they allow it. They own the land and they allow the climb. Yes, they were forced into accepting the climb as a condition of reacquisition of the land, but they have the land now and they allow it. I would still climb. There was no justification for it, but if others less worthy than I could climb, I would climb too. With this determination I made my way to the car park at the base of Uluru, the starting point for the assent.

Thunder clashed in the distance as I arrived. Scattered storms were dropping rain to the west and east. The storms to the east were the closest, but were hidden behind Uluru from where I stood. There were few people on the rock: two men in uniform near the bottom and several people in the process of descent. No one was going up.

The climb of Uluru was made safer and easier in the 1970's by the installation of a chain. This was during the time when the Anangu were in exile. The Anangu did not own the land when the chain was installed. It was part of the National Park, and though the Anangu were recognized as the rightful owners, the courts ruled that the land could not be returned to them. So steel poles and a heavy chain were installed to help the minga climb. The chain still exists today, and gets almost constant use. I am sure it has helped save more than one life.

Below the chain, is an area of free climb. It was steep going up, and I had to stop twice to rest. I was aware of the storms, but was determined to go up if the climb was open. Maybe the official looking men standing at the base of the chain would know if the climb was closed. I hurried to reach them.

As I arrived at the chain one of the men, a tourist-bus driver, turned to me and said, “You are not thinking about going up, are you? Look at those storms. They are coming this way. Do not go up now!” What was I to do? I had come this far. I wanted to climb. After much soul searching I decided to continue my climb. This was the right time. How could it not work? Should I go up and trust that I would be safe? Coming back tomorrow did not seem right. This was my time. Shouldn't I continue?

After much soul searching I decided to continue my climb. This was the right time. How could it not work?

As I stood there contemplating these things, the other driver said, “Look, if you are thinking about going, just go a bit of the way up. You can stop and re-evaluate then.” The other one said, “Wait till tomorrow. Sunrise is a good time to climb. They open the climb 20 minutes before sunrise. Come back and go then. Do not go now.”

By this time the climber the drivers were waiting for arrived. He was an elderly gentleman who looked none too stable or sure of himself. As he passed, I heard him remark, “Hey, I am not doing badly! Not too badly for someone who has had two strokes and recovered. How about that? I am not doing badly at all.” “Just so you do not have a third one right now,” one of the drivers chipped in as they encouraged him down Uluru.

I watched them pass, stood and thought, and continued up Uluru, alone. A hundred meters further up I stopped, sat and re-evaluated my situation. I felt Uluru below me. Now that I was sitting on its flank, I felt its presence enter my heart. This is what I wanted! I felt Uluru as a living presence below and within me. This is where I wanted to be. Did I need more than this? Could I stop here? There were two thunderstorms to the west. One was clearly not moving this direction. The other might, but it was quite a distance off. Perhaps there was time to complete my climb. The thunderstorm to the east was hidden behind Uluru. It was getting darker in that direction, but perhaps the storm was passing behind the rock and would not affect me.

Suddenly the wind tripled in strength! What had been a moderate breeze was suddenly a gale. My hat, which was tied around my chin, was nearly ripped off. I tightened the strap so that it was almost choking me. Still the wind tried to remove it. I tightened the strap again. Now it was on, but my

head was being pushed around so hard that I was getting a mild case of whiplash. I had to go down. My decision was made. I would not climb Uluru today. Tomorrow . . . well it was too soon to say. But my climb for the day was over.

"Tomorrow" dawned cool and clear. I arose early and drove to the Mala car park for the 8:00 a.m. ranger walk. The car park was full of buses each crammed with tourists eager to become minga by climbing Uluru. I watched them rush out, and almost without a glance at Uluru begin the climb. I watched lines of them pass up and down the chain, so thick that it looked like a queue at McDonalds. I watched them run down the last 20 meters as they completed their climbs, arms held high in victory, almost cheering. I heard them say to each other after their descent "Well, at least now you can say you have done it." I felt sick.

The ranger who led the Mala Walk was an Anangu man who told us some of the stories of the sacred sites at Uluru, and explained how the Anangu had learned that they had to live in two worlds. He had just completed his university degree in preserving archeological sites. He was working with others to start a database of the pictographs at Uluru, the first database of its kind in the world. He was also learning how to draw pictographs from his grandfather. They had recently begun to paint on the sides of Uluru again, after an almost 100 year hiatus.

Back at the car park I looked at the minga again. Their numbers had not diminished. The morning was beautiful. A perfect time to climb. I had plenty of time. I could finish the climb and still have time to catch my 2:15 flight. Now was the time to go . . . but I could not go. That is when my real assent of Uluru began. It began when I realized that I would not climb. It began when I realized that to climb for any reason, even to climb with reverence, was to participate in the desecration, not just of Uluru, but of myself and of the Anangu. The only way to stop the desecration was not to climb. By not climbing I became, intrinsically, part of the solution. Not climbing was the only way to show reverence. Even if I was the only one who noticed, I could not climb. Although my act of not climbing felt completely insignificant in the face of all of the others who were climbing, I knew that I could not participate in the attitudes I saw. Climbing brought out the worst in the people who climbed. It destroyed their reverence for something that could only be viewed reverentially. To ignore this, to ignore the fact that Uluru

"reaches out and grabs you" is to kill something in yourself. I could not participate in this. I could not participate in people harming themselves. I have seen much too much of this in my life. I would not climb, and in this way, I began the assent that I continue today. The assent that I continue as I write this. The assent that I continue as you read what I have written. Please join me. Come to Uluru Take the Mala Walk. Listen to the Anangu.

Do not climb.