

Place

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"I found myself wondering ... what was I really exploring? Place ... or self? And what anyway, in that context, is exploration. Is it standing back and sorting out, or is it moving on? Maybe it is all three at once. And maybe place and self share this curious compelling unity. Perhaps going out towards places where there are others, or where many, many others have been before, perhaps such a journey reconciles our sense of impermanency, to the mysterious continuity we share and make and are, with all mankind." (Jennifer Lash, *On Pilgrimage*)

Special Places

There are a number of ways in which a place becomes special or sacred. The house where one raised one's children and welcomed neighbors and friends has unique meaning for a householder. Even if a particular house is not important, a town or circumscribed area where one has many friends is a special place. Other places are freighted with meaning because they have a long history of human or sacred associations, or because they are what the Celts termed "thin places," where this world and the hidden world of the beyond seem to be in very close contact. Vacation places become special when one has returned to them year after year. There are also locations that because of their beauty have a special allure.

Among the places that I love and love to be, first in time and perhaps first in my affection are Baker and Grant counties in Eastern Oregon. I lived the first six years of my life in those counties, and as an adult I spent many vacations camping in their pine forests. The quiet, the night skies, the smell of sage brush after a storm, the red color of the streamside brush in early spring and the dazzling gold of the Western larch in the fall are magical. More recently, I started spending extended periods at the small mission church of St. Joseph at Unity, Oregon, a tiny town between Baker and John Day, the county seats of the two counties. The members of that community have made me feel at home in ways few other people have. Not long ago my father told me that when I was not one year old someone at Unity put my footprints in some newly poured cement there. I think the cement is still there. Maybe that accounts for the lure Unity has for me.

Many places at or near Mt. Angel have a special meaning because I came to know them so well while I spent so many years at the abbey. I remember the first week of February when the very first flowers bloomed; the orchestra of robins, mourning doves, towhees and nuthatches that woke me up at sunrise on spring mornings; the flock of migrating sandhill cranes that flew over twice a year. That incredibly fertile place is also home to many of my dearest friends.

Christianity and Place

Andrew Rumsey, an English priest, distinguishes four ways in which place Christianity is inseparably linked to place. The Word became flesh in a specific time and place, so that all particular places and times might be redeemed. In the end he gave up his place for us. Because of that one, local life, death and resurrection, all local life may be changed. Secondly, by always pointing us toward the last place, the church declares that every other place is provisional. Yet

while we are called to look up and away from our present place, we are also sent back to it to attend to it to it with greater attention. Thirdly, the tensions between already and not yet and between the particular and universal, the church universal and the church of a particular, the kingdom of God and this place, enable us to imagine our place transformed and to see the uniqueness of each locale. Finally, worship brings earthly and heavenly places together. In worship the local story and the eternal story intersect.

Benedictine Stability

The profession formula which Benedictines derive from the Rule is a promise of obedience, stability and conversatio. The latter seems to have meant something like living a monastic way of life, but later was read as conversio morum, an ongoing effort at conversion. One makes this promise in a specific community in a specific place. The current wisdom is that these are not really three vows, but one promise. The three--obedience, stability and conversatio--amount to saying that the prospective monk promises to strive to live in ever greater fidelity the Christian life under the twofold guidance of the abbot of the community he is entering and the Rule of St. Benedict as that rule is lived in a certain place. St. Benedict did not want monks moving from community to community according to whim, nor, one presumes, would he have liked communities moving from place to place. Oddly enough, his monastic career included two or three spells as a hermit, and two failed runs as abbot, before he settled down on Monte Cassino. However, stability is primarily stability in a community, not stability in a place. It is not absolute. Although Benedict does not legislate for foundations, they were obviously a possibility if the original community became too large and/or some monks in the community felt called to strike out in a new way of living the monastic life. St. Benedict also provided for monks to become hermits. He didn't specify whether those hermits stayed attached to the monastery of their origin, but that is what happened most often in history. Some medieval monasteries maintained hermitages: there were hundreds of them at Cluny.

However, in what follows I would like to think about relationship not to a community but to a specific geographical place, though the two are very closely connected, not just for monks but for everyone.

A Sense of Place and the Sense of Who We Are

There is a passage in the novel *Cold Mountain*, where Ada asked Ruby to teach her how to know the land. Ruby puts her hands over Ada's eyes and tells her to listen. Ruby asks Ada what she hears. Ada says: trees. Ruby said Ada had a long way to go--presumably until she could tell the sound of an oak from the sound of a fir, and so forth. Wendell Berry, who writes about nature and farming, has lamented that as the number of farm families has decreased, the number of people who know places intimately has decreased. He feels that all the technical and scientific research in the world cannot make up for the loss of those who grow up and live in intimate association with a specific place.

There is another side to this. We not only come to know a place intimately by spending a great deal of time at it, perhaps cultivating it even; the place also shapes us. Ortega y Gasset, a Spanish

philosopher who was great at one liners wrote: "Tell me the landscape in which you live and I will tell you who you are." We would have been different people if we grew up on an island or in Lapland, not simply because we would have grown up in a different culture but because we would have grown up in different geographical surroundings. We are shaped by our geographical and social surroundings, just as we shape them. Somewhere in his autobiography, Cecil Andrus observes that Westerners' resentment of restrictions is related to the vast, open landscapes of the West.

The importance of place in our lives has become an issue in part because of the homogenizing of the American landscape. In 1967, after having been pretty well out of touch with the world outside the monastery for seven years, I spent a summer studying in Boston. One of the priests where I was staying took me to a mall. I had never been to one before. He was fascinated by the place. Back in Oregon, I started to notice new shopping malls appearing in Portland and Salem--malls very like the one I had seen in Boston. They had the same or similar stores. Homogenization like this tends, I think, to transport us into an artificial space. Even housing developments resemble one another or at least fall into a few predictable types.

A second factor in the renewed interest in place is the mobility of modern culture. People move on the average of every three or four years. They cannot really identify deeply with the place or area where they live. Perhaps the sameness of housing developments help them to move from town to town and still be in the same kind of place. Perhaps, too, that is why people who can afford it want to have a summer place somewhere like Sun Valley or Sun River, a place that remains a fixed point in their families' lives, even if they move their residence often.

A third factor that makes us place-conscious is the growing awareness that every place, and certainly every watershed, is a very delicate interrelated system of inorganic elements, climate, history and living things, all existing in dynamic balance. We have great difficulty understanding even a small ecosystem, but we notice when there are no more bluebirds, when we have to purify water from mountain streams, when farmland is blacktopped, when topsoil washes away.

So, who we are is affected by where we grew up, where we have lived, where we live now.

Becoming Aware of Place

In a Baker, Oregon, paper several years ago, there was an article about conflict over Steens Mountain. Steens Mountain is in southeastern Oregon. It is a gigantic fault block fifty miles long and 9800 feet high. On its eastern side it towers 5000 feet almost straight up from the Alvord desert. The highest reaches of the mountain have fragile Alpine ecosystems. Fanning out on the western, slope side are numerous canyons and valleys. On the way to the summit are several beautiful mountain lakes. 30,000 cattle are grazed on the mountain, its slopes and valleys. The BLM manages most of the mountain and is trying to come up with a management plan. Two organizations are locked in combat; one represents ranch interests, one represents those who want to preserve as much as possible of the mountain as a unique environmental area. The two groups view the mountain quite differently. In particular, the two groups have very different opinions

about the ecological impact of cattle on the ecological health of the mountain. This is an abrasive example of how different people look at the same landscapes and see quite different things.

An architect has written that "a sense of place is the pattern of reactions that a setting stimulates for a person." Our sense of place depends on our senses. Some people are very good at detecting animals in the wild; others aren't. It depends on practice, field of vision and many other things. Gender, age, cultural background affect how we see a place. We can develop a capacity to sense and value places. We need to try to see, listen, touch, smell, feel and reflect on what is there and how it affects us. Can you think of a place which particularly affected you? What about it? Do you go back to it?

Thin Places and Sacred Places

Early Irish Christianity had the idea that there are thin places, places in which the distance from the visible world to the invisible world is very short. Holy wells, monasteries, mountain tops and islands are public thin places, places which a community regards as holy. There are also private holy places, a gravesite in a cemetery, a stream bank, a camp site where we feel the presence of God. Pilgrimages are meant to take us to holy places like the Palestine or Rome or Compostela, so that there we can meet God in a special way.

Four interrelated factors help places become holy for us:

- (1) Revelation: Mt Sinai, Golgatha, the Mount of Olives. Often revelation occurs at a threshold, a crossing point between two places. Hence, the importance of pilgrimage, which is a hiatus in the ordinary, a journey to a place we go to and return from.
- (2) Ritual can make a place holy e.g., " the dedication of a church, or simply the repetition of ritual at a certain place like the church in Oreana. It was a tavern, but by being used as a church for Sunday mass it became a sacred place.
- (3) Remembrance: the past becomes present to us in memory, especially in sacramental renewals like baptism and the Eucharist, when the power of Christ's dying and rising, and indeed the very reality of his passage to his Father, becomes present.
- (4) Recognition: a place may have all kinds of sacred associations, but it may not move us to a sense of the presence of God. We need to be able to recognize or to be brought to recognition of the sacredness of a place. Such recognition can strike us suddenly and unexpectedly.

Revelation, remembering, ritual and recognition are, then, four interrelated factors through which a place becomes holy for us. There are some biblical passages which illustrate all four: (1) Revelation: Exod 31-6, the burning bush, when God told Moses "Remove the sandals from your feet The place where you are standing is holy ground." (2) Ritual: Zacchaeus' house (Lk 19:1-10) where Jesus was received with the rites of hospitality. (3) Remembrance: "Remember how for forty years now the Lord, your God, has directed all your journeying through the desert" (Deut 8:2-3). (4) Recognition: Mary at the tomb of Jesus, or the disciples on the way to Emmaus (an incident which is an example of all four), although the actual sense of place is tenuous, at least for us, if not for the two disciples who met Jesus there.

Why do these particular places grip us as sacred?

The Bible on the Holy Place and All Places as Potentially Holy

The bishops' letter on the Columbia River watershed aims to insert a moral and theological voice into considerations about the current state and future of our part of the world. One of their key resources is the Old Testament reverence for the land. The Old Testament insisted that people look upon the land as the Lord's; they inhabited it only as stewards. Jesus summed up a key strand of OT teaching when he said: "The meek shall inherit the land" (see Psalm 37). Those who seize the land greedily, who gobble up other people's ancestral land, who treat the land and its resources without respect and without an eye on the future, will find no favor with the Lord, and they will not long possess it. Greed has a way of coming home to roost. The Jubilee Year legislation envisaged a time when the land was allowed to rest, when property was returned to its traditional owners, when debts which drove people off the land were to be forgiven.

The Old Testament reverence for the land eventually became concentrated in the Temple. It was the holy place par excellence, the focal point of God's presence, the place above all others where God was to be met. Ritual and remembrance combined to make it a place of revelation and recognition. The prophets did not oppose the temple in principle, but they did warn that God's presence there was not guaranteed, nor was it confined there. Jesus took up this strand of prophetic utterance: God could be met anywhere. All the world was holy land, everywhere can be a thin place for those who have eyes to see. There are other ways of saying the same thing: we can pray to Jesus' Father anywhere, and where two or three are gathered together, Jesus, the incarnate, crucified and risen Son of God is present in our midst--and so wherever we gather, in church or at home can be a sacred place.

Thus, there is a dialectic between having specific holy places and seeing every place as holy. God reveals himself to us in specific settings and places, so that we can go out and find God anywhere. Equally, God has given us holy places, so that we can share in the transformation of the whole world into a holy place, a place where God reigns and rules by justice and mercy. Or again, we go on pilgrimage to a holy place, so that we can better recognize our home as a holy place through awareness, gratitude and hospitality.

Examples: Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz; a home run in baseball which goes from home plate to home plate).

A Wider Sense of Home

In an article on theology and ecology, Elizabeth Johnson, a theologian, said that we should look at the world from three perspectives: contemplative, ascetic and prophetic.

Contemplative. This means to look at the world with love, interest and delight. There is an oft-quoted statement of Louis Agassiz: "I spent the summer traveling; I got half-way across my backyard." If we knew nature in a more contemplative fashion it would speak to us more clearly, about who we are and what we are part of. We would also learn much about nature's God, not

just from the pretty flowers but from the cataclysms. We would come to see, I hope, that the world is valuable to God in itself. It isn't here just for our use and exploitation. God seems to leave a considerable scope for indeterminacy in the world's evolution. He doesn't aim to control every last aspect of nature and neither should we.

Ascetic. There have been and are many reasons for living a simple life by limiting one's possessions, pleasures, distractions and consumption. We are living in a time when one urgent motivation for such simplicity of life is the continuance of life itself. Simplicity of life is incumbent upon us both for the good of the rest of the earth's inhabitants, human and non-human, with whom we share our place and time, and for the good of future generations.

I think it was Bill McKibbin who wrote a book about the end of nature. The point was that there is no place on earth not affected by human presence or pollution, not totally unspoiled pre-Adamic Eden, where no human footprint or human sound or human light has penetrated. Later, he wrote another book in which he looked for helpful examples of places where people were learning to live in harmony with the world. One was a state in India. The local prince turned over his vast land holdings to the state. These were doled out in very small parcels to all the farm workers, each of whom received enough to feed himself and his family. The state financed health and education. So, the people had the basics. Their lives were certainly austere by our current standards, but they were much better than they had been and much better than the lives of hundreds of millions of people today. I think that as a nation and as individuals we need to find ways to use less, recycle more. To live that way will cost more and take more time, which means less money for other things, which might turn out to be liberating.

Prophetic. If we develop the first two attitudes, contemplative and ascetical, we will be subversive of some basic beliefs in our economic system: that greater production and consumption produce great wealth is one of them. The latter is an illusion that will impoverish us--not just as human beings addicted to conspicuous consumption, but in other ways as well. Increased production generally uses up more resources, some of them irreplaceable. It leads to squandering the inheritance, the capital, not only of human beings but of other species as well. Increased production usually requires increased energy, and there is no source of energy which does not put stress on the environment. There is an assumption that unless companies and nations grow in net worth, sales and profits each year there is something wrong. This is an assumption we must question--in theory and in practice.