

HARMONY, NOSTALGIA AND A SENSE OF PLACE

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THE PHYSICAL, INTELLECTUAL AND EMOTIONAL INTERACTION between mankind and nature has been the focus of research and debate across a wide range of disciplines and has often revolved around whether we can consider ourselves to be set apart from nature, embedded in nature, as Thomas argues, or as Gold suggested, linked to it in some way so that its meaning keeps changing in relation to us.¹ This relationship has been subject to constant evolution as changes in culture, science and economics have led to a re-evaluation of whether we are subjugated to nature, in nature, or over nature.² Many authors, such as Baker, point to the emergence of industrial capitalism and its misinterpretation of the Genesis idea of dominion as being the single most important factor in stimulating a re-evaluation of nature, as Smith suggested, and a shift towards a more anthropocentric world view in which humanity started conquering time and space through industrial growth and innovation, and in conquering time and space, believed we were conquering nature.³ This disconnection between humanity and nature, characteristic of the Anthropocene epoch, has often been blamed for contemporary global environmental and humanitarian crises; in misinterpreting our place in the world we have upset the balance and have taken on nature as a challenge, instead of realising our wholeness within it.

We are now reaching a point when it is imperative to rediscover the connection, to find harmony in being within nature, not apart from it. The question is – are we ready to be re-connected? Our knowledge of the disconnection is not new – early authors often cited include Thomas Malthus in 1798, George Perkins Marsh in 1864, and Rachel Carson in 1962, all of whom warned us of the impact that mankind was having on the earth's resources – but perhaps most of us who had access to this knowledge were not ready to listen.⁴ Today, there is undoubtedly a growing concern with our negative impacts on the earth as both through policy and personal action we try to respond to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the media has fuelled our understanding of climate change, plastics, population, poverty and humanitarian crises.⁵ However, as we come to an understanding of some of the negative impacts we have had on the natural world, are we looking to find a solution to the problems in hand, or do we realise that we need to re-evaluate our relationship with the natural world for ourselves and

start thinking of the earth in its wholeness, as the subject, not the object of being? Within this chapter, I would like to start exploring some of what I believe to be the outward manifestations of our disconnection and consider how these can be interpreted as a call for harmony – a return to a more connected way of being.

The first of these is the idea of ‘nostalgia’. Described by the Cambridge Dictionary as ‘a feeling of pleasure and sometimes slight sadness at the same time as you think about things that happened in the past’, it is often considered to be a mixed emotion similar to homesickness.⁶ Nostalgia can be personal or collective – almost a need to retrace an individual path or a return to a perceived better time. The growth of a collective nostalgia is evident, as Lowenthal expressed in 1985 – ‘if the past is a foreign country, nostalgia has made it the foreign country with the healthiest tourist trade of all’.⁷ The past fifty years have seen a significant growth in the demand for heritage; the same fifty years have seen an increasingly globalised world, and the emergence of real global environmental, socio-cultural and economic concerns. In an era when we have become increasingly detached or disconnected from nature, the past can often offer a way of offering us meaning, purpose and value – it can be a means of reasserting our identity as Lowenthal expresses: ‘the past is integral to our sense of identity – the sureness of ‘I was’ is a necessary component of the sureness of “I am”’.⁸ The past can offer us escapism, an alternative to an unacceptable present, a response to a growing dissatisfaction with today.⁹ In being nostalgic are we searching through personal or collective time to find something to connect to that is missing from our contemporary lives? Is it an acknowledgement of a loss of connection or a lack of wholeness?

Nostalgia is often thought of as a negative emotion, perhaps because of its obsession with the ‘other’ that we no longer we have, a world that is no longer in our grasp. A preoccupation for the past has also often been blamed for a lack of attention to the present – the postmodern plundering of time and space in an eclectic mix frees us from immediate concerns and offers us the world on our doorstep. However, more recently authors have pointed to the idea that ‘far from being a feeble escape from the present, nostalgia is a source of strength, enabling the individual to face the future’.¹⁰ Instead of thinking of nostalgia as a malaise which stops us moving forward, can we start to think of it as a call to action – to find what is lost, to reconnect and become whole? An increasing number of studies point to the positive associations of nostalgia in terms of its ability to help people find meaning by increasing social connectedness and self-continuity.¹¹

A second, related manifestation of disconnectedness is a sense of place. In recent years concepts such as sense of place and place making have increasingly come to the fore as the realisation that places are socially constructed by the

people who live, work and visit there has transitioned from academic to more practical domains such as planning, economic development and health. Places embody the wholeness of humans, habitat, environment, community through their intertwined relationships and as such offer us opportunities for meaningful connections with each other and with our environment. The complexities of place are interwoven into our lives without us even realising – what is often ‘out there’ is also ‘in here’ as the boundary between the individual and place is indefinite as that between mankind and nature – place is born out of our relationships with the environment and with each other.

In the study of place we again come across issues of identity and belonging as Malpas writes:

‘Sense of place’ refers us, on the face of it, both to a sense of the character or identity that belongs to certain places or locales, as well as to a sense of our own identity as shaped in relation to those places—to a sense of ‘belonging to’ those places.¹²

Fundamentally, ‘sense of place’ is about people, the way in which throughout time they have stamped their mark on the landscape, the way they have interpreted their personal and social history and the way in which they have interacted, and continue to interact with each other, and with their locality, ‘a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world’.¹³ A growing body of work has also recognised the relationship between sense of place and community wellbeing: DeMiglio and Williams point to the relationship between sense of place and sense of well-being as being mediated by variables which affect the relationship between people and places.¹⁴ As such Eyles and Williams contend that ‘sense of place is an important link in the pathway that translates population health determinants to health outcomes’.¹⁵

So why this contemporary concern for place? Again, we return to the issue of industrial growth and technological development. A resurgence in concern for identity, belonging and community has emanated in part from increasing globalisation – as places experienced an apparent de-differentiation, technology and communications annihilated space through decreasing the time it takes to transport ideas, information and people around the globe.¹⁶ With this homogenisation of place, comes a loss of identity that in turn leads to a search for one’s sense of place, something we have lost in our disconnection from physical places and communities. If we take Creswell’s definition, sense of place is the way in which we know and understand the world, so to truly understand the world

we need to reconnect with place in its entirety – as the web of interrelationships that embody our physical, social, cultural and emotional being.

In this short chapter I have briefly discussed nostalgia and sense of place, which I suggest are two manifestations of the same phenomena – the human impulse to search for wholeness, the need to connect with another place or another time that offers meaning. Our search through time and space is a call to reconnect, to find the wholeness that we have lost through our separation from the natural world. Rather than understanding the underlying impetus to reconnect, our response has often been to create marketing opportunities to enable individuals and groups to temporarily satisfy their search for meaning through the creation of tourism opportunities and experiences. The focus of research on both sense of place and nostalgia is now shifting to illustrate how these concepts relate to wellbeing, community cohesion and environmental relationships. Instead of trying to find economic value in all opportunities, we need to find real value and realise that sense of place and nostalgia provide opportunities to reconnect – we need to see the opportunities laid before us. In the words of George Perkins Marsh:

To the natural philosopher, the descriptive poet, the painter and the sculptor, as well as to the common observer, the power most important to cultivate, and, at the same time, hardest to acquire, is that of seeing what is before him. Sight is a faculty; seeing, an art.¹⁷

NOTES

1. Lewis Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell* (New York: Bantam, 1975); Mick Gold, 'A history of nature' in Doreen Massey and John Allen (eds), *Geography Matters!* Milton Keynes: Open University, 1984).

2. For culture see Yi-Fu Tuan, 'Man and nature', *Landscape*, vol 15, part 3 (1966): pp. 30-36 and Yi-Fu Tuan *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974); for science see Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961); for economics see Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), and Andrew Sayer, 'Epistemology and concepts of people and nature in geography', *Geoforum*, vol 10, part 1 (1979): pp. 19-44 and for the question of whether we are dominant over nature see Florence Kluckhorn, 'Dominant and variant value orientations' in Clyde Kluckhorn, Henry Murray and David Schneider (eds), *Personality in Nature, Society and Culture* (New York: Knott, 1953).

3. John Baker, 'Biblical attitudes to nature' in Hugh Montefiore (ed.), *Man and Nature* (Glasgow: William Collins and Sons, 1975) and Smith, *Uneven Development*.

4. Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: Johnson, 1798); George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature* (New York: Scribner, 1864), and Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

5. United Nations, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable*

Development, A/RES/70/1 (2015), <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>

6. 'Nostalgia', Cambridge English Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/nostalgia> (Accessed 1 November 2019).

7. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 4.

8. Lowenthal, p. 41.

9. Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry* (London: Methuen, 1987).

10. C. Sedikides and T. Wildschut, 'Past forward: Nostalgia as a motivational force', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 20:5 (2016): p. 321.

11. C. Sedikides and T. Wildschut, 'Finding meaning in nostalgia', *Review of General Psychology*, 22:1 (2018): pp. 48-61.

12. Jeff Malpas, 'New Media, Cultural Heritage and the Sense of Place: Mapping the Conceptual Ground' *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2008): p. 199.

13. Tim Creswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 11.

14. Lily DeMiglio and Allison Williams, 'A Sense of Place, A Sense of Wellbeing' in John Eyles and Allison Williams (eds), *Sense of Place, Health and Quality of Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd, 2008).

15. John Eyles and A. Williams, 'Introduction' in Eyles and Williams (eds), *Sense of Place*, p. 1.

16. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

17. Marsh, *Man and Nature*, p. 15.