

# TIME AND PLACE

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We have all at some time stumbled back onto the past - accidentally or on purpose coming back to those places where important events occurred in our lives. The seats in the schoolrooms seem tiny. The trees are larger, or gone. The house we grew up in is gone, or changed, or possibly untouched by time. That special tree in the moonlight on our first date..... That wonderful place on the mountain. Many things, including ourselves, seem time-worn and older. All have the power to evoke memories and restore connections through time and across space. The memories held in these places bring an inevitable re-valuing of our lives.

Places retain the reverberations of events long past that have occurred in them, and the cumulative patina from those events adds to the power of the place to affect our lives. Our family has stayed two summers in a house in Maine that has been in the same family for seven generations. The mark of all those lives and years, the happiness and pain, and the care or neglect of each time whispered to us out of every worn step and handrail, every coat of paint or wallpaper, every piece added, taken away or changed.

The generations in human places and the eons in natural places that constitute the history and legacy of a place surround us and put our lives and actions in a deeper context and meaning than in a place newly made. That past can give strength, or it can press us down with its weight. The accomplishments of the past can stand as monuments reminding us of what each generation can achieve, or stand as unmatched achievements against which we can ill measure up.

To walk a path in China worn down a dozen feet into the earth by forty

centuries of footsteps, or along a road in India lined with the crumbling monuments of dynasty after dynasty can limit our dreams or give them added dimension, continuity, meaning, and direction. To live in Rome, surrounded by the civic and artistic legacy of two thousand years can inspire us or dominate us. Much depends on us.

Even acknowledging our power to alter their impact, places affect us powerfully - emotionally, symbolically, and physically. They act as mirrors of the values, dreams, and pettiness of their creators and users alike. Building walls or building bridges, our intentions are perceived by others. And we affect our places in return - even our attitudes towards the events which occur within them alters the place itself.



The spiritual traditions of many cultures speak of a particular kind of human life energy - chi, prana, ki, mana, ka, kundalini, vis medicatrix naturae....the names are many. And many traditions speak also about the energy in a place - feng-shui, ley-lines, earth energy.

We know now that there is a demonstrable geophysical basis for much of this power of place - electromagnetic anomalies and energy fields in the earth's crust tied to the energy emissions of the sun and the earth's magnetic field, radioactivity levels, and air ionization. And it is being clearly shown that these geophysical phenomena affect all life including the thought processes in our minds through the magnetite which is incorporated into almost every part of our brain.

What is newly being understood is that this interaction works *both* ways. Our

*internal* "chi" energy impacts and alters the energy of the places we inhabit, and consequently affect others that use those places. In the Pueblo tradition, our breath goes out and fills the spaces we inhabit, leaving forever traces of our thoughts and actions. In the Chinese tradition, our chi alters the chi of our surroundings.

Dowsers in England a number of years ago documented amazing correspondence between the physical configuration of various cathedrals and the patterns of earth energy they could measure. What it appears today is that the energy fields in the building have resulted as much from the visits and energy brought to the place by centuries of pilgrims as from the original energy patterns of the sites.

A wide variety of techniques including dowsing, acupuncture, computerized electrophysiology and kinesiometry are now used to measure physiological responses to ELF (extremely low frequency oscillating magnetic fields) and other environmental stressors. Consistent and persisting physiological impacts have been demonstrated from events as small as an overflight by an airplane, and lasting impact on the energy of a place from the "state of mind" of its users.

Our surroundings are not isolated containers for our activities. Our anger, indolence, reverence and passions are physically imparted to our surroundings through interacting electromagnetic fields, and in turn affect other present and future users of a place. Our feelings can set up a chain reaction for good or ill. The accumulated energy profile of a place can also be altered (cleansed or "exorcised" if you wish), through actions taken to counterbalance them.



There are numerous "gateway" or transformative experiences, events, or times which create or mark powerful changes in our lives. These are not just milestones ticked off on a calendar, but major changes in our self-concepts, capabilities, commitment, dreams and resolve: Leaving home for the social environment of

school. Becoming sexually active... Becoming an adult. Discovering that our physical or will power has exceeds our parents'. Attaining a vision quest. Winning (or losing) a battle - with people, with nature, or with ourselves. Creating a family or a new life. Reaching an age where personal "success" becomes less meaningful than the legacy we can create with our lives. "Retirement". Near-death, death of loved ones, or old age and approach of death.

Each of these changes constitutes a transformation of our inner consciousness. Each requires an intensive focusing and clarifying of our inner energies to assess and respond to the new context within which our lives are moving.

Acknowledgment from society of the importance and difficulty of these transformations, and availability of places which embody that support and valuing, gives valuable assistance in successfully coming to grips with them. The assistance and insights of others who have proceeded us through these changes can also give meaningful support and encouragement.

Successful passage through these changes is essential to our individual and collective psychological makeup. It enhances our ability of as individuals and as a society to deal with the issues that confront us in various stages of our lives.

In some cultures people have recognized the fundamental change in their nature which occurs in these experiences by even taking an entirely new name. We often are truly not the same person as before.

Some of these experiences, by their nature, we have to struggle through alone and without support. For others, many cultures have developed rituals to acknowledge and mark the event, nurture, and express social support and value. In many cases also, special places have been set aside or created which play an important part in those passages.

The role of places in our passages varies. "Vision quests" frequently make use of natural places - sometimes powerful ones, sometimes not. Other cultures, however, use monastic retreats to special places created for meditation for the same

purpose. The village church, cathedral, temple or shrine represents a common expression of a community's wish to place many of these events of our lives into meaningful context, to provide support and evidence of their value. They allow us to publicly as a community affirm each of us as we pass through these gateways, take on new responsibilities and roles, and bring new capabilities to the benefit of the community.

The Romans built triumphal arches to celebrate the return of their victorious military leaders and armies. To march under an arch is in itself not an exceptional experience. But to be welcomed home through a gateway expressing the gratitude and honor of your nation, in the midst of a tumultuous welcome must have been an immensely powerful experience for all.

One of the transformations which affects us most powerfully is death - its approach, our loss of loved ones, our acknowledgment of the finiteness of our material existence. The Scandinavians in this century have created a uniquely powerful tradition of memorial chapels at their crematoria and cemeteries. Two of them, both in the same city of Turku, Finland, stick in my mind as showing the power of a sacred place in making the rituals of our passages nurturing and powerful, and how clearly our values are reflected in the places we make.

The mother chapel, the *Chapel of the Resurrection* by Eric Brygmann, is one of the most powerful spiritual settings for the celebration of death to be found in the world. It was built about fifty years ago, nestled among moss-covered rocks and aged trees. The pews in the chapel are offset at an angle in the space, curiously, it seems at first. Then we become aware that something else is being given equal space in the room.

Our attention is drawn not only to the symbols and rituals of human life within the space, but also through the open side of the room to the signs and rhythms of nature outside. The changing seasons, the birth, death, and rebirth of the plants, the glorious burst of beauty of the flowers climaxing the long cycle of renewal, the falling leaf, the passing bird all become part of your experience of the ceremonies.

The duality of the setting becomes powerfully united at the close of the memorial ceremony, when the dead are carried by the living through a special portal in the open wall, out into the forest, back into reunion with cycles of nature itself.

And the other chapel? The language is the same, the architectural words repeated carefully, the site is the equal of the older place, but what comes out is not a song of celebration but almost a scream of terror. The windows open upon precisely manicured grass lawns, the dead are removed by invisible machinery into the depths of the building. Everywhere technology is celebrated rather than humanity.

Down beneath the chapels sits a console, manned by a vision from Jules Verne complete with cap, cropped beard, and black uniform. He sits before three television screens connected to hidden cameras in each chapel. The artificial lights are changed automatically, the microphone levels adjusted, the doors opened and closed, the flowers placed and removed, the schedule carefully kept.

Death, more clearly than all else, reveals the limits of life and of the knowledge and technology we have created. That knowledge and technology can have no role in the rituals of death. Its presence can only serve to mask our direct confrontation with the realities of our nature and our universe. It can only imply that our technology and knowledge are still in command, that things haven't changed. But they have.

Death rituals are for the dead, but also for the living. They are a ritual not physical but an experience almost wholly spiritual and emotional in nature. It is our interaction with each other—our experiencing together; revealing, unfolding, and opening out our inner nature—that is the essence of the ritual.

Today we are beginning to create places for conscious dying itself - for the terminally ill to face death with friends, within a web of human and natural support, and with ennobling surroundings rather than dehumanizing hospitals. What kinds of places assist us best to make

highest use of those now short last days of our lives?

A friend recently commented on being present at the death of another friend, "He wouldn't die for the longest time. He couldn't let go of his amazement and wonder at the depth and power of love towards him with which he was surrounded as he lay dying in the arms of his friends." Everyone present had their life immensely enriched and deepened by that occasion. Settings which support and encourage such occasions and passages can contribute immeasurably to our lives.

And consider Dr. Richard Selzer's reflections on the nature of the hospital in his book, *Down from Troy: A Doctor Comes of Age*:

*"The hospital differs from those ancient buildings in which living people were immured in that its house spirit enters the premises **after** it has been built and put into use. This spirit is born out of the suffering and death of those who occupy it. Year after year the building becomes re-created in the form of spirit as the suffering of the sick is set free within its walls.*

*"But what, you ask, has all this to do with the architecture of a hospital? All these foundations and wind chimes, the sacredness of brick, the vitality of wood, the house spirits - these are the fantasies of a mere scribbler who cannot even read blueprints. And I, in turn, ask: Where is the architect who, without sacrificing function and practicality, will think of the hospital as a pregnant woman who suffers the occupancy of a human being who enters, dwells for a time and ultimately passes forth? Where is the architect who, from the very moment he begins his design, will be aware that in each room of his finished hospital, someone will die? Who, while seated at his drawing board, will pause to feel upon his naked forearms the chill wind of his mortality? One day, he too will enter this building, not as its architect but as a suppliant in direst need. If I am wrong, and such human emotions cannot be expressed in architecture, why then it is time to surrender the hospital to writers, who will build it out of words and dreams."*

I remember also a story about a hospital- was it in France? - which every

morning as the sun rose, and every evening at sunset, lapsed into silence. Then from some corner of the hospital, someone began to sing. Sometimes it was a song of pain or of thanks; a song of memories, or a song of dreams. Sometimes the singer sang alone. Other times they were joined by those who were able. The singing was often brief. Sometimes it went on and on, its origins moving from one place to another. As it wove a web of sound throughout the place, it pulled together the spirit of all those present into a shared consciousness and evocation of their need and acknowledgment of the meaning of their life.

Design for the sacredness of place is not limited to the great passages of our lives. Recently, a number of our friends had a local gathering to celebrate the Equinox. This was not a major passage but a repeated one in our lives. This time, however, we held the gathering in a home which had been built with a soul, and which was built with a special connection to nature and to the seasons. Our friends brought food and musical instruments, and we ate and made music and celebrated the evening.

But something different happened this time. Through the evening, as the sun set and the moon rose and circled overhead, our music became deeper and deeper, and the energy created among us and with the place grew more and more powerful. We crossed somehow that hidden line between the profane and the sacred. A potent event occurred that we had not experienced before.

The place made a powerful contribution to that experience. One of our friends said the next day that she had been there often before, and it had always been a wonderful place, but it seemed to say that night, "Yes! This is what I was created for!!!!"

We are relearning the importance of the oceanic changes in our lives, the value of ritual in enriching, supporting and deepening those changes, and the role of special places in contributing to that power. We are learning how to make good places which can contribute to and intensify both the power of our special experiences and that of everyday life.



Making places which have a soul, and which can enrich the experiences of our lives *is* possible, though such places may be outside of the experience of most of us. Some elements of that process were discussed in my *"The Sacred Art of Building"*, *IN CONTEXT*, Fall 1986. There are many touchstones which can give guidance to that process:

- \* Evaluate, protect and enhance the feng-shui of the site
- \* Avoid waste - minimize impact on energy, resources, and connected systems
- \* Make where we ARE paradise
- \* Focus on inner rather than outer qualities
- \* Seek durability - build for eternity
- \* Let nature work for us
- \* Provide rewarding work in design, construction and use of the place
- \* Honor life and the power that begets it
- \* Create silence and peace
- \* Connect us with the stars
- \* Give our spirits places of shelter and nourishment
- \* Honor things
- \* Celebrate death
- \* Connect us to the life around us
- \* Put us in touch with the seasons
- \* Touch the spirit of where we live
- \* Connect us with the universe
- \* Help us touch invisible worlds
- \* Create intense and fresh experiences as servants
- \* Touch the heart of all you make
- \* Learn to say no - learn restraint
- \* Create simplicity
- \* Create places for our hearts and minds
- \* GIVE the unexpected
- \* Affirm sacredness in our buildings
- \* Incorporate meaning
- \* Provide proper topology for occasions which can occur in the place
- \* Pay attention to economics rather than finance
- \* Pay attention to the feng-shui of the use of the place
- \* Embody sustainable values, and most simply and importantly:
- \* Put love and energy into the place

In the process of learning the importance of honoring ourselves, other

people, places and things in everyday life, we are transforming our society from a secular one which suffocates our capabilities, self-respect, and relationships with others into a sacred one which celebrates and enriches the incredible unity and wonder of all creation. □