**Story, Place and Spirit**

The Ancient Romans believed that the landscape was garlanded with places of spiritual awe and mysterious presences which they referred to as the numina. For the people of the ancient world what made a place sacred was its innate spirit, its ineffable presence or numen. Many of these sites became focuses of pilgrimage and, over the course of time, often the site of temples. A few of those temples were, eventually, replaced with churches. The wisdom of replacing natural wonder with architectural extravagance is open to debate, but the impulse to respond to the spirit of place extends across cultures and millennia.

The same Romans considered that human communities generated their own guardian spirits as well as natural sites having their numina. Jungian psychologists might speak about a sort of collective psyche, but whatever language we use to describe the process the sense of a greater presence is hard to deny. Whilst nature produced the numen of a woodland glade, waterfall, or beach cove, a town or city gave rise to a lar praestites. Each community attended to its lar through annual festivals, prayer, offerings of incense and wine, and so forth. In function, if not in essence, the lar praestites is not so very different from the patron saint with governance over some geographic region.

A large body of Irish folklore resides in the Dindsenchas, a 12th century body of poetry and prose, which outlines a sacred topography. Practically every place in Ireland is mentioned in there and each given a story ~ how that lake sprang forth from the grave of some druid or saint, why that hill came to have such a peculiar shape, or why there are so many wolves living in that forest. People of the 12th century and onwards would have heard all the stories of their local geography a hundred times over. Whilst some may regard such stories as just a way to pass a dull evening, I suggest that the real function is to bond the audience to the landscape. For those who know the stories of their homeland, who can link each and every hill or valley or woodland to a god, a saint, a fairy, that land becomes sacred. In 1980 when Charles Delorean wanted a hawthorn tree chopped down to make way for his car factory, local labourers refused to do it because the tree was widely held to be the home of fairies. Delorean himself ended up driving a bulldozer at it, and shortly thereafter went bankrupt which many people in Dunmurry blamed on his desecration of a holy place.

Whatever the realities of the car industry and strange trees, the story illustrates the unwillingness of people to destroy their local environment when they know the stories associated with it. Whether the tales told are pagan, Christian, or something else entirely, the result is much the same. The story serves to bind, to form relationship – and it is worth reflecting here that the Latin root of religion is uncertain but that St Augustine favoured *re-ligare*, to reconnect. Virtually all religions exist in the realm that Wilhelm Nestlé referred to as mythos – sacred stories and fluid imagery that connect people to deity, to each other, and here we can argue that they also connect to the very Earth and the other living beings upon it. In many respects it seems odd that people should need a route to connect to the very planet on whose good health our very existence is contingent, however we are frequently bears of very little brain and easily distracted by other demands such as shopping, working, and paying bills.

The German psychologist and philosopher Alfred Adler argued that truly good mental health is reflected not simply by a capacity for managing the humdrum tasks of life but by a state that he called Gemeinschaftsgefuhl – a love of both the human community and the wider web of life. Mental wholeness is to be found through philanthropy along with love of all the other species which surround us; a love that expresses itself through a desire to be of practical help and nurture to others. The psychologically and spiritually damaged enjoy destruction, tearing down rather than building up.

The opposite of Gemeinschaftsgefuhl is what the medieval Catholic Church referred to as acedia which normally gets referred to these days as sloth. In its original understanding acedia was despairing of all good, all hope of salvation or improvement and slumping into an apathetic state. These days people talk of compassion fatigue, which amounts to much the same thing and could be extended beyond the bounds of charitable work with sometimes very challenging people to include the state of mind many people get into over the state of the planet. Is recycling our bottles and picking up plastic off the beach really improving the world or are we just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic? With vast industrial nations like China, Russia and India spewing out more pollution in one day than any of us do in several lifetimes, there may seem scant point in making tiny gestures in the face of so much chaos and carnage. For Adler the community spirit that is Gemeinschaftsgefuhl is fostered through relationship, belonging, loving and being loved, knowing and being known. Part of the process of knowing is the exchange of stories.

The key word here is exchange – not only do we learn the stories of the land and its various creatures (including other humans) but we also get the chance to tell our own stories to whoever wishes to listen. It may be that people start to slide towards acedia because there does not appear to be anyone willing to listen to them. Virtually all religions suggest that the Divine is listening, but if other humans are not then there is little to protect us from their indifference. Austrian psychologist Wilhelm Stickel suggested that the opposite of love was not hate but indifference, a view echoed decades later by Elie Wiesel. Indifference, or acedia, views the suffering of others as not worth the effort needed to resolve it. Whether the others in question are homeless people in this country, the victims of famine in another, or species plunging towards extinction all around the world, their problems can seem insurmountable. The road to despair is a short one for those trying to help as well as those stuck in such situations.

One of the impacts of a large transitory population is that people, once displaced from their roots, soon lose touch with the tales they once knew of their home. When there is no guarantee of stability before having to move on for another job, or to find accommodation, there is no real incentive to learn the stories of the new town or city or country, little point in developing a relationship with a place or the other people who live there when someone is just passing through. Whilst not impossible, there is significantly less chance of an unsettled soul caring enough about landscapes and the creatures who dwell in them to wish to preserve them or defend them from attack.

Someone who knows the stories of the land learns what makes the land sacred, makes it of worth. The very word worth is the root of the Anglo-Saxon origin of worship – weorth-scop – which meant to shape or form something by giving value to it. To our distant ancestors this term was not exclusively connected to deity but described any relationship where two beings value each other. Family ties, friendships, the love of a farmer for their fields or livestock, a nurse for their patients, all these are forms of weorth-scop. The experience of being considered worthwhile changes a person (and dogs, possibly cats, not so sure about goldfish), just as learning to value others changes the person who can extend their circle of care beyond their own ego to embrace the Other. As per one of the song lyrics in Les Miserable, to love another person is to see the face of God. The Ancient Romans regarded each person as having a divine spark, a genius, which could be enlarged through the devotions of others. Whilst the Romans were mostly thinking in terms of prayer and ritual, we could expand this to include the devotional nature of affection, or paying attention, of listening. The animist cultures of the ancient world, such as was found in the Iron Age tribes that once lived here, extended this belief in the divine spark in all humans to see that divinity in all manner of animals, trees, plants, rocks and rivers. For such faiths the divine is present throughout the whole of creation.

These ideas do not sit wholly well in Christianity, which largely sought to distance itself from the beliefs of the religions that preceded it. However, there are elements in the views of St Francis of Assisi in his Canticle to Brother Sun and Sister Moon and again in stories such as that of Brother Wolf who follows the example of the wild animals referred to in Isaiah 43:20 who “…honour me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people”.

To see the face of the divine not only in all the humans we love but also in dogs, horses, favourite trees, the very land herself, and all the other things that we might bond to is a major step towards protecting them from defilement.

Thank you