

STRANGELY LOCATED

An Essay on Place

We've been banished willy-nilly from our geographical, and therefore cosmic, centers—

by Tim Dutcher-Walls

Along the greater stretch of California's Big Sur region and the West Coast of America, Esalen Institute south to Sand Dollar Beach forms a parcel of inhabited nature, a "place" one might call it. Along this coast is Lime Kiln Campground, and hiking from there into the canyon, along Lime Kiln Creek, one soon moves up into redwood forest. Here is an upper valley, steep and expansive. Fog from the ocean often drifts into it, giving a sense of the ethereal and profound.

At Sand Dollar Beach, the coast is lined with cliffs. Waves crash into huge boulders just off the shore. From Highway 1, one walks across headlands to the cliffs above the beach, where wildflowers and low grasses grow.

This stretch of coast is a location that has provided me, for more than twenty years, a "center," a grounding in the universe—an area to return to for blessing and personal restoration, to get off the trail of aimless postmodern mobility in a kind of pilgrimage.

Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday writes:

I am interested in the way that a man [sic] looks at a given landscape and takes possession of it in his blood and brain. For this happens, I am certain, in the ordinary motion of life. None of us lives apart from the land entirely; such an isolation is unimaginable.

The grounding in place so common in traditional cultures is fractured by the compulsive mobility of postmodern life. Where we grew up may hold antiquarian, nostalgic significance for us, and where we presently live and work may after some time grow on us, the familiar becoming meaningful in its familiarity. But our being is no longer taken over by what Native American writer Sam Gill, in *Native American Religions*, calls the "cosmic significance" of a place. Even religious practitioners are no longer that religious. Many in the developed, technological world of America are disconnected from "place," perennially on the road with spiritually nowhere to go.

Poet and teacher Gary Snyder, who aims for a retrieval of the native sense of grounding in a natural region, elaborates, in *The Practice of the Wild*:

For most Americans, to reflect on "home place" would be an unfamiliar exercise. Few today can announce themselves as someone from somewhere. Almost nobody

spends a lifetime in the same valley, working alongside the people they knew as children. Native people everywhere (the very term means "someone born there") and Old World farmers and city people share this experience of living in place.

For Snyder, an existential base in location—even in an urban setting where one can discover a natural harmony—is crucial to identity. From this base, we "go out," not aimlessly but to work, explore, connect with others and to return. Snyder lives thus with his family in the foothills of the northern Sierra Nevada, reconnected with place and community.

This chosen rootedness is not available to all; and, when it is, the shadow side of place ought not to be overlooked: parochialism and tribal conflicts. Parts of our world seem to bleed without end over claims of place.

Still, in our era, many people are inevitably and irreversibly disconnected from place. Personal choice goes only so far in this matter. There has in fact been a kind of "fall" from place that is bigger than any individual's decisions. We have been banished willy nilly from our geographical, and therefore cosmic, centers. Though Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise (heroes of Kerouac's notorious travelogue) may now live in the suburbs, pruning grass instead of smoking it, they're still compulsively "On the Road."

What this amounts to is a kind of "spiritual homelessness," with all the anxiety that being ungrounded in place and disconnected from ongoing community brings with it. When the center goes—what Mircea Eliade alludes to as the "navel of the earth" (in *The Sacred and the Profane*)—existential disorientation follows. Herein is the predicament, and the possibility.

Snyder again:

The Buddhists say "homeless" to mean a monk or priest...It refers to a person who has supposedly left the householder's life and the temptations and obligations of the secular world behind... "Homeless" is here coming to mean "being at home in the whole universe."

Snyder argues for a kind of "homeless" frame of mind while being situated in a chosen place. The perspicacious point here about Buddhists is that being disconnected from place provides the possibility of "being at home in the whole universe." As one moves through the disorientation of spiritual-geographical homelessness (a process of suffering, awareness, acceptance—no small task),