

Spirit of Place: Awakening a Sense of Awe and Wonder

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The geography national curriculum which was taught in English primary schools in the 1990s was underpinned by four clearly articulated aims. These were in summary to

- (a) stimulate children's interest in their surroundings
- (b) foster their sense of wonder at the beauty of the world around them
- (c) help them to develop an informed concern about the quality of the environment
- (d) enhance their sense of responsibility for the care of the Earth and its peoples.

QCA/DfEE (1998 p3) (abbreviated)

Looking back it seems these aims have much to recommend them. Stimulating children's interest in their surroundings suggests an approach which places the child at the heart of learning. The focus on the environment and responsible living addresses on-going concerns about the state of the planet. Meanwhile, fostering children's 'sense of wonder at the beauty of the world around them' focuses on an emotional rather than a cognitive response and opens the door to deeper levels of learning.

This paper focuses especially on children's response to place and the way that place impacts on geography education. Over the last two decades I have come across many articles written both by geography specialists and more general educators which affirm how experiences in the physical world can both engage and motivate pupils. David Sobel is a typical example. He argues that children's experiences in nature offer an opportunity to 'foster their sense of awe and wonder at the mysteries of the world' (2008 p17). It is tempting to suggest that Forest Schools and other movements that promote outdoor education are underpinned by a similar ethos.

I was trained as a teacher at the Froebel Institute (now part of Roehampton University) in the 1970s. There was no particular requirement at that time to read any of Froebel's works but his spirit was certainly in evidence, not least in the kindergarten located in the grounds of the college. I got the feeling that there was a distinctive ethos and sense of purpose which permeated our discussions about teaching and learning. After a while I ordered a copy of Froebel's edited works to find out more about his thinking. I was particularly struck by the sections in which Froebel talked about the child's sense of oneness with nature, the way in which we give outward expression to our inner life and the holistic approach to child development. Questions about meaning and purpose had been quietly nagging away at me throughout my undergraduate years. Somehow Froebel's ideas seemed relevant to my concerns.

The idea that there is some deeper purpose to what we are doing is something that appeals to many people. Indeed the quest for meaning seems to be an essential part of what it means to be human. Meaning operates on a number of different levels. Making sense of our lives is not just a matter of

relating to the external world around us. It also involves making sense of our inner being and trying to understand our motivations and desires. Howard Gardner (1983) acknowledges the importance of trying to understand what motivates us in his notion of 'intra-personal' intelligence and he identifies a specific 'spiritual or existential' intelligence in his later work (1999). I also think that exploring self-knowledge is one of the reasons I have been drawn into finding out more about sustainability in recent years. One way of understanding sustainability is to see it as a process of reaffirming deeply held values and beliefs. More specifically it involves making personal connections – making connections (a) to our environment (b) to each other and (c) to ourselves. In other words sustainability is part of a wider endeavour of generating narratives and about who we are and what matters in our lives. It is about making sense and seeing the meaning in our lives.

Recently I have come across a number of texts which have served to deepen my thinking and broaden my understanding of meaning making. In their recent book, *The Systems View of Life*, Capra and Luisi reflect on the relationship between science and religion which they see as two major driving forces of civilization. Like other scientists before them - one thinks of Newton and Einstein - Capra and Luisi acknowledge the importance of spirituality and the way that it nourishes and sustains us. Being aware of the mystery of life is a profound experience which can enhance our sense of being alive. Spiritual moments involve a sense of oneness and belonging with the universe as a whole. And they have the effect, as Capra and Luisi point out, of orientating us 'toward the numinous and the mysteries of the cosmos, as well as a love and respect for our fellow human beings' (2014 p275). Such moments are encounters with the ineffable. In other words, they cannot be described or directly encapsulated by language. Instead, they need to be experienced and felt. And they often evoke, as Capra and Luisi note, 'a deep sense of awe and wonder together with a feeling of deep humility' (p278).

We can probably all identify ineffable experiences in our own lives – experiences which we cannot articulate but which somehow seem to be deeply meaningful. They may well be associated with particular places or events. To understand them further it is instructive to turn to the ideas developed by a German theologian, Rudolf Otto. In his book *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) Otto develops the notion of the 'numinous' to encapsulate a non-rational group of emotions which he associates with the sense of the holy or sacred. Otto argues that the numinous is evoked when we are confronted with the inexplicable and fascinating mystery of creation and he sees it as an absolutely irreducible mental state which is often explored by artists, poets and musicians.

Otto identifies the feeling of awe that results from the numinous as the starting point for religious development. Awe is an interesting term. Rather than associating it with wonder, Otto interprets awe as religious dread, as something which is literally 'awful' (i.e. full of awe). Such an approach introduces an element of power. Being aware of the majesty of God and our own personal insignificance leads us to point of profound humility. But it can also be interpreted another way. An awareness of nothingness can lead us to a sense of transcendence.

Otto notes that the numinous cannot, strictly speaking, be taught. It can only be evoked or awakened in the mind 'just as everything else that comes 'of the spirit' must also be awakened' (1923 p7). But it can also be aroused from feelings that are analogous. Otto notes how religious art sometimes blends 'appalling frightfulness' with 'exalted holiness' in images of the gods, thereby giving expression to what is fearful and dreadful. But the arts and music also represent the

numinous by evoking a sense of the sublime. Otto contends that architecture is a particularly powerful example in this respect and he asserts it was also one of the first ways in which the sublime appears to have been realised.

In today's academic world it is very difficult to explore the spiritual dimension of education. And as geographers we are naturally predisposed to consider experience from a secular rather than a theological standpoint. Nevertheless, developing a sense of place is seen as a mainstream geographical endeavour. Massey (2006) has written persuasively about the nature of place and how it eludes us. Bonnett (2008) talks about 'the fundamental human need to find order in the world' (p9). Both Massey and Bonnett use the notion of the geographical imagination to provide a framework for their ideas. In the process the significance of awe and wonder is constantly reaffirmed.

I would like to suggest that as a community, geographers should continue to recognise that merely cataloguing and analysing the world is never going to offer entirely satisfactory explanations. We also need to acknowledge the unity between ourselves and our surroundings – that we are inextricably bound up with the nature and that we have an innate desire to search for meaning. The following extract from Carl Jung's autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* makes this point much more eloquently than I ever could. Here Jung reflects on the house he built on the shores of Lake Zurich and what the surrounding landscape meant for him:

At Bollingen I am in the midst of my true life. I am most deeply myself.....At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the plashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons....Here everything has its history, and mine; here is space for the spaceless kingdom of the world's and the psyche's hinterland. (1961, 1975 p252)

Our surroundings are deeply significant. Historically many people used to believe they belonged to the soil of a particular place in an organic and religious relationship. The Romans, for example, recognised the spirit or essence of a locality (its *genius loci*) by setting up shrines to local deities. Anthropologists have recorded similar beliefs and practices among the native inhabitants of Africa, Australia and North and South America. Modern notions, such the Chinese idea of Feng Shui, seek to harmonise people with their surroundings. Around the world people today affirm their sense of belonging to a particular country and their love for their homeland.

The idea that some places are deeply conducive to learning is also widely affirmed. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who many of you will know for his work on creativity, notes that 'from time immemorial artists, poets, scholars and scientists have sought out places of beauty expecting to be inspired by the majestic peaks or the thundering seas ' (1997 p127). Awe and wonder are not simply the preserve of the geographers. Our response to our surroundings has relevance for many other areas of learning and can act as a catalyst for creativity.

It is also possible to identify a cross cultural dimension. Recently I have come across the idea, developed by my friend and colleague, Simon Hoult, that learning has latitude and longitude. This is a neat way to express how moving outside an established cultural context serves to highlight existing assumptions, bias and hidden contradictions. Interestingly, the process of cultural translation is often perceived by participants as both humbling and enlightening. As they move from one cultural

and geographical context to another they find that their ideas are challenged and disrupted. Houlton argues, that this disturbance, when supported by theoretical and philosophical perspectives, opens the door to new and deeper forms of understanding. Formal education, especially and the current moment, is particularly badly equipped to facilitate this kind of reflective awareness and self knowledge.

Awe and wonder are almost impossible to quantify. The spirit of place is subjective rather than objective. Personal responses are all too easy to dismiss but they are often rooted in profound experiences and are deeply felt. Antonio Damasio in his work on the neurological basis of the emotions has highlighted the importance of the affective dimension in learning (2003). He argues that almost every object that surrounds us is vested with an emotional tag or marker. He concludes that when it comes to education we ignore pupils' emotions at our peril. If motivation and engagement are one of the keys to learning we need to acknowledge that the emotions provide the bedrock for other forms of cognition.

Across the four UK jurisdictions, the current Programmes of Study for primary geography pay scant regard to emotional and spiritual responses to the environment. Yet if geography is about telling the story of the world, the story needs to be told in many different ways including the personal, spiritual and affective. Furthermore, any meaningful account needs to include ourselves and to recognise that we view our surrounding through many different lenses. At a previous Charney Manor conference, Owens and colleagues (see Owens 2016) offered us the 'Wildthink' framework for outdoor learning which is a powerful invitation to 'put the meanders back into learning'. I strongly agree that we need to break away from linear and reductionist approaches to learning. Furthermore I want to contend that the meanders should never have been taken out in the first place. The twists and turns which lead us to emotional encounters and existential moments are a necessary part of learning and essential to any authentic geography curriculum.

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