

## **A Sense of Place: matters of space, mind and personhood**

**by Chris Loynes**

In everything there is a context of place. These notes are meant to help explore the part that place plays in the identity and development of people especially when they come together in learning groups. Emphasis is placed on the role of the facilitator of “Development Training” groups which use adventurous activities in the outdoors to facilitate personal and organisational change.

### **Definitions**

In English there are many overlapping words that we use when we talk about place:

Space: ‘I need my own space.’

Environment: ‘It was a great environment for playing with ideas.’

Nature: ‘Nature played its part in helping us to relax.’

Territory: ‘He treated the knowledge about this as though it were his territory.’

Landscape: ‘It was the rural landscape that made me feel at home.’

Scenery: ‘She was surveying the scene.’

Place: ‘I found a place where I could get away from the others.’

Place words are complex words each with several and multi-layered meanings (see Macnaghten 1998). Do the speakers mean an actual space, a mood state, a set of relationships or an abstract space in the group mind? A landscape acquires a deeper significance when it becomes home. The phrases also imply that space supports a quality of experience. In these examples those qualities are neutral or positive, ‘playing, relax, at home, get away, etc. Other phrases can suggest negative responses: ‘this place feels creepy. I can feel the hair standing up on the back of my neck.’ The first part of these notes explores certain ideas that have emerged to help understand some of this complexity. The second part will introduce some of the implications for development trainers.

### **Place and the Body**

Certain colours, music, rhythms, objects, views and horizons have all been shown to affect the body’s biochemistry in a way that also alters mood and emotion.

In a recent creativity workshop for managers they gave anecdotal evidence that the following helped their ability to be creative: a window view, music, incense, a bath, a run, a pot plant, a poster, a walk, digging, orange colours, quiet, clouds, flames, waves, waterfalls, breathing fresh air and going somewhere new. The mood effect they reported was a combination of relaxation and stimulation. The result was progress with a blocked idea or the generation of new ideas. They also reported being nervous about letting others know that these things helped. Some said they would rather have the work place degraded than confess to affection for a pot plant!

Some of these affects are easy to explain. Fresh air in the lungs gives oxygen to a brain that has been sedentary for too long. Some show connections that are intriguing but still defy a complete rational explanation e.g. the rhythm of music people cite as stimulating creativity and its match with certain brain rhythms. Others, such as certain colours or trees reducing stress levels, remain phenomena that have been noted but are so far unexplained.

I could attempt a rational explanation for the euphoria experienced on reaching a mountain top: a flush of oxygen; the long, rhythmic pace; a sudden, extended horizon; novel patterns in the sky; an orange sunset; all affecting the activity of the brain through observable biochemical actions. This falls short of explaining why the mind appreciates these moments as profound experiences.

Martin Ringer

**Comment:** Replaced "not" with remain largely

### Explaining Peak Experiences

The literature of outdoor experiential learning and of spiritual experience is rich in accounts of moments described as transcendent (a feeling of oneness and a loss of ego) induced by the hypnotic effect of the changing and elusive patterns in clouds, flames, waves and waterfalls. These mysteries remain a central source of inspiration for spiritual (see Marshall 1992; Abram 1997)

John Heron (1992) attempts to explain these moments from a spiritual and yet psychological perspective. He makes an important distinction between feeling and emotion. He describes feeling as 'the ground of emotion', a precognisant sense, the world as perceived by the senses and felt as the body in the mind. Perhaps this is the preverbal 'spell of the sensuous' recognised by Abram (1997). Emotion, Heron claims, is the reaction of the mind generated by the match between this feeling and our intention, a match that is either judged as frustrating or enabling with an appropriate emotional response present in the conscious mind. He explains the feeling of euphoria and our appreciation of it as:

'.... The capacity for feeling as a need to exercise, that is, as a need to participate in our world. And the fulfilment of this need gives rise to our most basic .... emotion of all, delight or joy. This is the creative paradox at the heart of feeling. Feeling participation in the world individuates us with delight.' (Heron 1992, p.23).

This feeling, Heron believes and represents in his model of personhood, is available to the primal and spontaneous child prior to the acquisition of language and the separation from the world that accompanies the naming of things. In this psychic state the child participates fully and innocently in the world. As the child acquires language so compulsive and conventional states override this innocence with a constructed social world we call our culture. At the same time as we are individuated and socialised by our culture we are also separated from nature.

However, Heron challenges development trainers to go beyond the humanistic approaches to resolving the personal and social issues arising from this maturation process. He identifies four more psychic states that he understands as creative and spiritual in nature. They have the dual purposes of healing the wounds of separation and restoring the capacity for participation in the world without the loss of the individual's distinctiveness. As he suggests, resolving the paradox of the One and the Many in many faith traditions, by living with both.

Development Trainers have intuitively used nature's effects on the body and mind. Despite the humanist rhetoric of the models and theories supposedly describing all the practice of this field, facilitators know much more about working with all of Heron's psychic states. This lay knowledge is reflected in some of their unguarded practice.

Recent research has shown a link between breathing and working bare foot and rates of healing leading to a reduction in violent tendencies. Beliefs about ways to practice with client groups with behavioural difficulties also draw on this lay knowledge. For example, attention and suggestibility are thought to be facilitated by long, rhythmic activity, like a long hike. A similar outcome has been noted when as many points of reference as possible are removed from the client's normal context. The landscape and the experiences within it are new and the lack of reference points creates an opportunity for inner as well as outer changes to occur. Breathing and relaxation techniques are increasingly popular as aspects of many training sessions. Music is commonly played in the background at workshops.

Experience implicitly includes action and therefore the body. The starting point for development training is sensuality, a direct engagement with people and places in a physical way. Our minds are rich in tacit knowledge about the significance of this sensory information. Largely unconscious we become aware of it through our feeling for something.

Much of this tacit knowledge can be understood as inherited genetically as part of our survival package and, as such, links back to our animal selves (Midgley 1979). Others doubt that this plays any part at all and it is all socially constructed, learned early on in our first encounters with place and our mother's understandings about it. The argument is interesting but largely unhelpful. What Heron believes to be true, whether nature or nurture, is that we can develop and transform these dispositions as well as repress and deform them.

As we are describing a language of sensuality here it is inevitable that sensual experience remains a deeply significant but often unacknowledged and uncriticised element in experiential learning. Because of the inevitable link with intimacy and touch it can easily become a muted knowledge as a taboo topic of discussion. How often does a group raise the issue of touch without the help of the facilitator before playing a contact co-operative game?

Martin Ringer

**Comment:** Needs a footnote to explain to non-development trainers what a spiders web is

Some models of learning from experience place the body, including the brain, between the mind and the environment as a kind of mediator of both input and output. The self is clearly defined by the boundary of your skin as different from others and from environment. Other models treat the spirit, mind, body and environment as a whole and draw a much fuzzier boundary between person and place if indeed a boundary is drawn at all. These models see place as tied up in our sense of ourselves and see our actions in place as an expression of our spirit. The self is everywhere you are as well as everything you are, (see Claxton 1984). Heron provides a framework with which we can work with these insights and tacit understandings. He acknowledges our need to individuate and to attend to the inevitable wounds of this process. He also gives us the hope that through creative and spiritual development we can learn to transform our egoic selves and also participate in the world.

Our personal and facilitated efforts to support the unfolding of these psychic states and so reach our full potential leads to a variety of developmental responses which can seem paradoxical. They certainly lead to a variety of ways of relating to space which, in the light of Heron's model of personhood, can be understood as potentially congruent rather than conflicting though this of course depends on how appropriate they are to the state of mind of the individual and group at the time.

### **Place as a Cultural Space**

I have chosen to use 'place' and not 'space' for these notes because I am interested in this interaction between the place we are in and the development of our minds. The interplay of space and mind creates place, (see Macnaghten 1998). Space implies a neutral and empty area. In practice no space is neutral to a human being. We invest every space with many meanings. There is a physical reality which we could call nature however we cannot help but interpret this nature through our cultural lenses, town and country, climber and paddler, English and Scot. Place is a cultural landscape. We do this in two ways, by construction and by projection.

### **The Constructed Place**

Place is first a construction, a record of the history of the uses we have put it to and the interpretations we have placed on it. This landscape of the English Lake District has been a horrid and vile wilderness to travellers and an aesthetic delight to romantic poets. In part we learn how to read this landscape as part of our development, how to see it in some way that others have seen it, from the clues others have left in the way they have

made their mark on the place. They also leave a 'guidebook' in their written and aural explanations which we can use to approach their own reactions to these places.

Place also contains a much more subtle language that is read by the mind but harder to trust or believe. Just as an empathic group can pick up on something distressing a member of the group from his or her past even though it has not been mentioned so a person can pick up on the language of places and discover emotional responses to their history. It is hard to walk into ruined crofting sites in Scotland without this reaction. For those of us who have heard the stories of these times the reaction is easily explained. The ruins cue the knowledge we already have about these sad events. It is harder to explain the reactions of people unversed in this history. I once watched a group of teenagers unaware of the story of the clearances walk into such a place, stop and fall silent and then one of them spoke out a spontaneous prayer. They were as taken aback and moved by the events as I was.

In Northern Ireland there is a tradition of the hungry grass. People report walking over meadows and suddenly feeling sad and inexplicably hungry. These fields turn out to be the site of mass burials during the famine years. An Irish writer recorded how she experienced the same emotions and hunger walking over hidden and unknown mass burial grounds in Singapore and Cambodia. Again the idea of the hungry grass is deeply embedded in Irish folklore but the Asian reaction is harder to account for.

These meanings are carried forward from the past embedded in the cultural overlay of the place and read by our unconscious minds just as body language is read, understood but remains largely unnoticed.

Sociologists have suggested that, until modern times, most places, just like most roles in society, were established constructions. There were few alternatives to choose between and only a slow process of reconstruction of our sense of place as one generation succeeded another. The only disturbance to this gradual evolution would have been caused by major disruptions such as a natural disaster and/or the displacement of people to a new land.

Modern times have increasingly changed this as technology has accelerated the rate of change in the landscape as everywhere. People have become increasingly liberated from one place and one view of place. We are more likely to live away from home, perform a different role in our community and so relate to place in a new way and see many more examples of different landscapes and cultures through travel and the media.

The part played by place in building and supporting the conventional psychic state of Heron's model is therefore no longer simple. Messages are more diverse, contradictory and sometimes unrelated to the cultural and historical context of the person. I suggest that, although this might be understood as problematic for the development of the conventional psyche and the socialisation of the person, it can also be constructive as it precipitates the person into a creative resolution of these diverse possibilities. The person is drawn towards the creative psychic states healing the wounds of separation and

acquiring the autonomy necessary to critique their acquired worldview at the same time as developing personal intentions for action. In Development Training this would be expressed as the power of new horizons and novel experiences to broaden the mind and develop a personal vision.

### **The Projected Place**

We also create the place around us and always have done. By this I do not mean the process by which a community constructs and reconstructs the idea of a place as I have outlined above. In this case I am describing a personal process. In this sense the meanings we project onto a place are an expression of our frame of mind and our needs at any one time. For example a fear of the dark or the forest may be an expression of our inner fear of the hidden parts of ourselves (see Schama 1995).

My son went caving with me from his third birthday. He treated the caverns and grottoes like a playground and we often had difficulty keeping up as his small frame slipped through the narrower spaces. Then, just after puberty, he decided caves were scary and he didn't want to go. Later, he returned to caves treating the same passages he had played in at three as serious challenges to be overcome and to be proud of completing.

A colleague described to me a night walk with a friend. The hills were brightly lit by moon and stars and the path was well known to both of them. It was, however, her friend's first night walk. She noticed how her friend's body language was very different from her own buoyant stance. They stopped and her companion described how she couldn't get the image of battalions of soldiers pouring over the crest of the hill out of her mind.

This way of identifying at a personal level with special places has a long tradition some of which has travelled a long way to enter our language - 'walkabout' and 'vision quest' for example. Whatever the truth of these tribal practices we increasingly use them as a metaphor for a process of maturation. As the signposts to growing up are increasingly vague and point in many directions it becomes easier to get lost. The journey has become the defining metaphor for life in modern times and we use real journeys to 'walk our talk'. Myths are the stories that traditionally help us explore this inner world. They inevitably involve a journey or quest. These days we are just as likely to seek out a real landscape on to which to project all the mythic elements that we require of our hero story of personal transformation. The expedition and the gap year, a year off to travel between college and work, are CV essentials.

### **A New Place**

We can no longer rely on our community to tell us how we fit in, we have to construct a role for ourselves from a widening range of options with, it seems less guidance (see Giddens 1991). In the same way the landscape is problematic. It is no more fixed than our role in our community. As the constructed landscape fades so the projected landscape becomes stronger. Not only is it a landscape contested by groups who have different

meanings for it these meanings are increasingly often projections of the psyche rather than social constructions.

Our culture values this liberation of the individual. We hold dear the notion that we are free. We prize the opportunity to make our own way in the world. With this comes the necessity to create our own selves, our own communities and our own places. We celebrate the continuous reconstruction of all of these and idealistically site the control for this process in the individual. In practice the old constructions and the established understandings continue to compete, often very successfully, with this idealised notion. The sense of place is contested.

### **The Contested Place**

So places are also contested (see Barry 1999). We use landscape onto which to project meanings and the different meanings can either be celebrated as a part of our diversity or they can compete with each other to become an established understanding.

The result is that places are constantly reconstructed for utilitarian, political, economic and aesthetic reasons or all at the same time. It is far more likely that different views of a place are present at any one time than that there is agreement on the meaning or value of somewhere. The Scottish Highlands is experiencing this in a very visible way. Old estates and bought up by conservation groups, local communities, mountaineers, marinas and new, moneyed owners with different ideas about the purpose of their ownership. The result is a rapidly evolving patchwork of new constructions about the meaning and value of these mountains. The impact has placed land reform at the top of the agenda of the new Scottish parliament.

### **The Place of Development Training**

Outdoor experiential learning operates in this 'space' helping people to find their way. Some programmes approach place as somewhere to get to know and with which to become familiar again. Other programmes hold on to the wilderness notion using the space as an unconstructed 'desert' in which individuals can explore their sense of themselves before returning to the 'ordinary' world with their new or strengthened identity. These are just two examples of how place has been constructed as a learning environment. Space for learning is no more neutral than anywhere else.

It might be explored by an individual through recreational activity. At first glance this might seem unconstructed 'freedom of the hills'. But a hill walker arrives with a set of values already established. That there are differences of recreational view becomes apparent when the walker encounters the stalker intent on shooting deer or the naturalist intent on protecting a rare bird.

The walker carries symbols that have come to represent these views; rucksack, jacket style and colour, footwear, even his or her position in the landscape all label the walker as a walker. I once kayaked to the Farne Islands to see the breeding sea birds. I am a bird

watcher and belong to the organisation that owns the reserve. Despite all this I could not convince the warden to let me land on the island as a legitimate bird watcher. Meanwhile fellow bird watchers who arrived on a trip boat wearing green anoraks and with binoculars slung round their necks were walking right up to the breeding sites. My kayaking clothes and equipment were seen by the warden as symbols of “otherness.”

Another kayaking moment: arriving on the outside of the sea wall of a remote island off the west coast of Ireland we climbed over the wall to be startled by an old man dressed in black tweed and leading a donkey loaded with creels of peat. He, equally startled, stared back at wet suited figures clad in buoyancy aids, helmets and spray decks in high visibility colours. The space may be seen differently but this does not always mean a contest. The three of us walked together along the quay to enjoy a cup of tea at his house and discuss the weather, currents and fishing in the sound. It can also be a celebration of diversity.

Educators construct the places they work in to support the learning process they have in mind. Even the idea of an empty, unconstructed place is of course a construction. The learner may or may not be invited to engage in this process of construction. It is helpful to identify three distinct positions on what is properly a continuum of possibilities:

We (facilitator and learner) arrive together in a place already constructed (*accompanying*);

I (the facilitator) construct a place for you to explore (*training*);

You (the learner) construct your place for you to inhabit (*developing*).

These three dimensions give us three facilitation styles shown in italics after each position. The power balance between the facilitator and the learner compares well with John Heron’s model of the politics of facilitation (Heron 1999). As a facilitator you may find your view on where to place yourself on this model is grounded in pragmatism, idealism or an ethical framework. Wherever your preferences lie it is important to know that other positions are possible and, indeed, considered desirable by other facilitators.

There are other ‘taken for granted’ about place that may be more universally held by development trainers but are, in fact, equally open to alternatives. For example it is a widely held belief that a place away from and different to the learner’s normal setting is desirable. One axiom of the field that is mentioned above is that the further you are removed from normality the greater the potential for learning. It is also a belief that the further away you are the harder it is to return to normal with the learning intact.

Another widely held assumption is that a circle of chairs is the most desirable configuration because it represents an egalitarian arrangement. However, notice how things feel different after you have moved people to different places in the circle. Even in a circle power is not necessarily equally distributed. The benefit of a circle may lie elsewhere.

Such beliefs deserve questioning from both psychological and sociological perspectives. The answers may widen the repertoire of development training and improve the effectiveness of our response.

Whether the facilitator's 'place' is a stage, a group room, a retreat, a gym, a maze or a canvas we use place as a lot more than a setting to create the right ambience for our work. Place can act as healer and as guide as the emerging soul begins the tasks of creating their own world and acting in it. Heron sees these processes as essential activities of the creative psychic states and it is familiar territory for the Development Trainer. It suggests that the application of humanistic thinking to the practice of Development Training only helps with a part of the story and, possibly, a smaller part. If this is our familiar and normal ground then it would be better supported by psychological interpretations from the spiritual schools of thought such as Heron's transpersonal model.

Hodgkin (1976) talks about the way a teacher creates an object as a focus for learning. This object can be an object in the mind like an idea or a real thing like a rock face. A good object for the learner is one that is barely understood but intriguing. The teacher is there to encourage this process and to listen to the discoveries as the object is explored. In early years he refers to the objects as toys. They become tools and finally semiotic devices, that is objects that represent rich and layered meanings. Places can be used in this way by the facilitator.

### **In summary**

Development trainers are working with a number of different senses of place. Here are some important ones that emerge from the notes above:

**Tacit place:** the sense of place that can be felt but not articulated, that somewhere, for example, is safe or dangerous but you don't know why.

**Lay place:** the projected place created by individuals and groups. This place is used as a dimension of the individual's or group's psyche.

**Expert place:** the constructed place that is present as filters in our minds and with which we interpret place uncritically.

**Muted place:** just as aspects of ourselves are muted, things we do not talk about, so some aspects of place may be muted because they are unacceptable areas for the group to explore.

**Social space:** the space as it becomes to be understood by a group as they share experiences and agree on meanings for a certain space.

Transcendent place: places that are rich in abstract meaning understood symbolically. This may be personal, group, societal or historical in focus.

Commodified place: a place of transactions like the ropes course, a kind of market place extended to the trading of experience, value and meaning.

Immanent place: place symbolising a sacred connection to the elements, to birth and death, to life cycles and the meaning of life, to the ground as body and the sky as spirit, a modern paganism perhaps.

The way we work with place makes a difference. It:

carries messages, intentionally or otherwise, and acts as a receptacle for our own projections of the meaning of a learning event;

provides a projection screen on which individuals can reveal aspects of their inner worlds;

acts as an object for the group to work with, a toy, tool or semiotic device;

carries deep, 'taken for granted' values linked to history, identity, territory, gender and power;

alters perception and establishes moods;

can bring the body, mind and spirit closer together.

Whether we are discussing a ring of chairs, a drama studio or a woodland, place is a rich dimension with which to enhance our work. Language, the primary aid to individuation, can be a hindrance as participants attempt to resolve the dilemma of being distinctive individuals as one truth and the quest for participation in the world as another. Intentional experience, on the other hand, can be a help. I once asked an aboriginal whether the Australian word bush meant the same as wilderness. He asked me to explain wilderness. I talked about the remote, dangerous, unpeopled landscape in which it was easy to get lost and where we went for tests of inner as much as outer strength. He was quick to spot a difference. He remarked, 'How can I be lost in my own home?' He added, 'I am never lost. I always know where I am. I just don't always know where everywhere else is.' This is not the first time people have embarked on this journey to recover a participation in the world.

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