Place and Pedagogy

by David Orr

David Orr's classic article links education to living in the outdoors and studying all disciplines through the unifying lens of place. Pedagogy of place counters abstraction, it is the natural world embodying principles of learning that involve direct observation, investigation, experimentation, and manual skills. Place is the laboratory providing the hands-on materials through the diversity of the habitat and its messages through a community experience. Emphasis is placed on human history, social science, political science, geology, biology, etc. as creating a "complex mosaic" that widens perceptions about applications of the disciplines and deepens the perception of time. Mr.Orr's article ties into Montessori education and the role of nature in the development of the older elementary child and adolescent.

Thoreau went to live by an ordinary pond on the outskirts of an unremarkable New England village, "to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms." Thoreau did not "research" Walden Pond, rather, he went to live, as he put it, "deliberately." Nor did he seek the far-off and the exotic, but the ordinary, "the essential facts of life." He produced no particularly usable data, but he did live his subject carefully, observing Walden, its environs, and himself. In the process he revealed something of the potential lying untapped in the commonplace, in our own places, in ourselves, and the relation between all three.

In contemporary jargon, Thoreau's excursion was "interdisciplinary." *Walden* is a mosaic of philosophy, natural history, geology, folklore, archeology, economics, politics, education, and more. He did not restrict himself to any academic pigeonhole. His "discipline" was as broad as his imagination and as specific as the $28.12 he spent for his house. Thoreau lived his subject. *Walden* is more than a diary of what he thought; it is a record of what he did and what he experienced. If, as Whitehead put it, "The learned world . . . is tame because it has never been scared by the facts," one finds little that is tame in *Walden.* For Thoreau, philosophy was important enough "to live according to its dictates . . . to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically." Ultimately, Thoreau's subject matter was Thoreau: his goal, wholeness; his tool, Walden Pond; and his methodology, simplification.

Aside from its merits as literature or philosophy, *Walden* is an antidote to the idea that education is a passive, indoor activity occurring between the ages of six and twenty-one. In contrast to the tendencies to segregate disciplines, and to segregate intellect from its surroundings, Walden is a model of the possible unity between personhood, pedagogy, and place. For Thoreau, *Walden* was more than his location. It was a laboratory for observation and experimentation; a library of data about geology, history, flora, and fauna; a source of inspiration and renewal, and a testing ground for the man. *Walden* is no monologue; it is a dialogue between a man and a place. In a sense, *Walden* wrote Thoreau. His genius, I think, was to allow himself to be shaped by his place, to allow it to speak with his voice.

Other than as a collection of buildings where learning is supposed to occur, place has no particular standing in contemporary education. The typical college or university is organized around bodies of knowledge coalesced into disciplines. Sorting through a college catalog, you are not likely to find many courses dealing with ecology, hydrology, geology, history, economics, politics, energy use, food policy, waste disposal, and architecture of the campus or its community. Nor are you likely to find many courses offering enlightenment to modern scholars in the art of living well in a place. The typical curriculum is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's comment after reading the vast, weighty corpus of Hegel's philosophy, that Hegel had "taken care of

everything, except perhaps for the question of how one was to live one's life." Similarly, a great deal of what passes for knowledge is little more than abstraction piled on top of abstraction, disconnected from tangible experience, real problems, and the places where we live and work. In this sense, it is utopian, which literally means "nowhere."

The importance of place in education has been overlooked for a variety of reasons. One is the ease with which we miss the immediate and mundane. Those things nearest at hand are often the most difficult to see. Second, for purists, place itself is a nebulous concept. Yet Thoreau understandably spent little time trying to define the precise boundaries of his place, nor was it necessary to do so. *Walden* is a study of an area small enough to be easily walked over in a day and still observed carefully. Place is defined by its human scale: a household, neighborhood, community, forty acres, one thousand acres.

Place is nebulous to educators because to a great extent, we are a deplaced people for whom our immediate places are no longer sources of food, water, livelihood, energy, materials, friends, recreation, or sacred inspiration. We are, as Raymond Dasmann once noted, "biosphere people," supplied with all these and more from places around the world that are largely unknown to us, as are those to which we consign our toxic and radioactive wastes, garbage, sewage, and industrial trash. We consume a great deal of time and energy going somewhere else. The average American moves ten times in a lifetime, and spends countless hours at airports and on highways going to places that look a great deal like those just left behind. Our lives are lived amidst the architectural expressions of deplacement: the shopping mall, apartment, neon strip, freeway, glass office tower, and homogenized development—none of which encourage much sense of rootedness, responsibility, and belonging.

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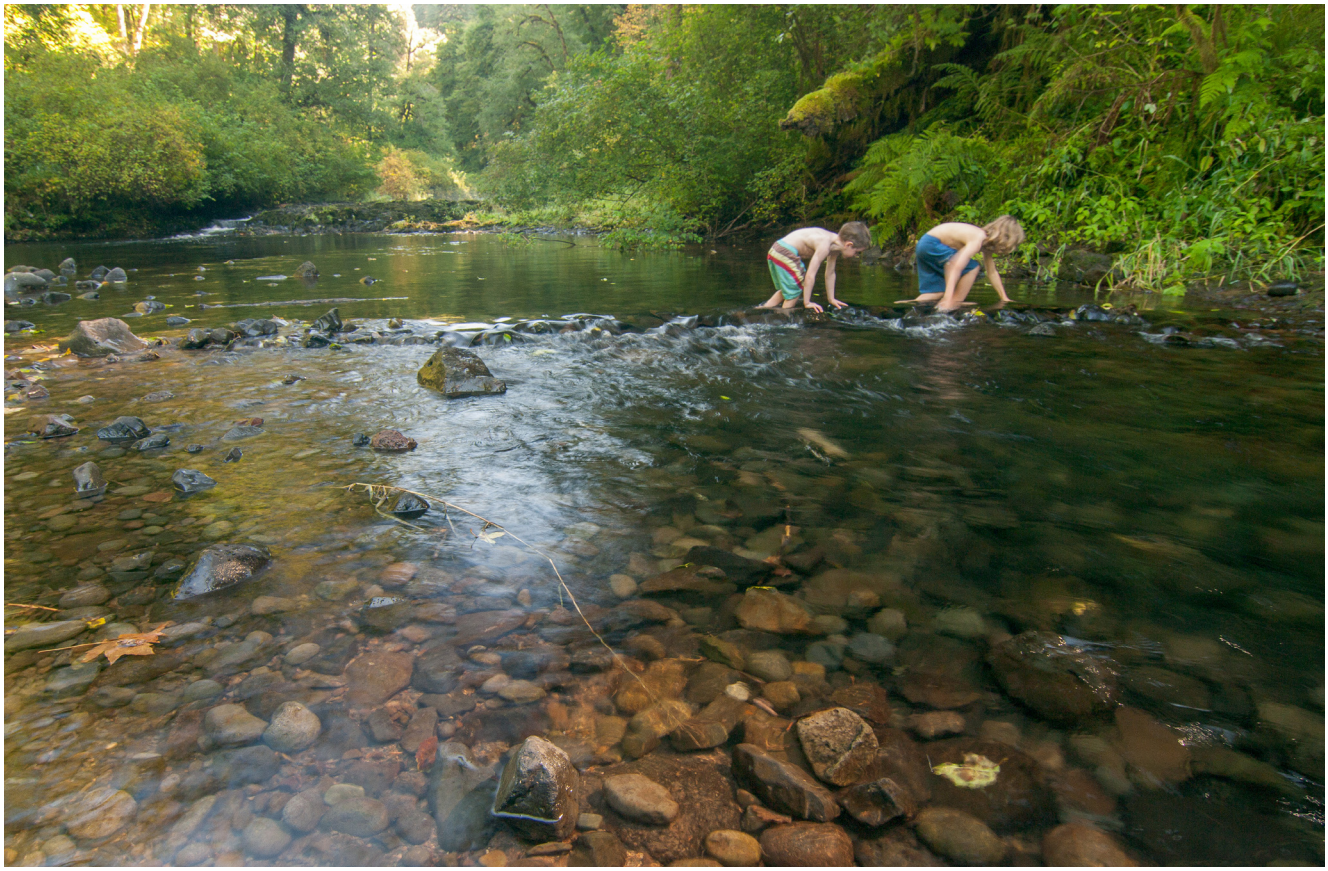
Third, place definition is specific, yet our mode of thought is increasingly abstract. The danger of abstraction lies partly in what Whitehead described as the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness": the confusion of our symbols with reality. The results are comparable, as someone put it, to eating the menu instead of the meal. Words and theories take on a life of their own, independent of the reality they purport to mirror, often with tragic results. At its worst, as Lewis Mumford describes it:

> The abstract intelligence, operating with its own conceptual apparatus, in its own self-restricted field is actually a coercive instrument: an arrogant fragment of the full human personality, determined to make the world over in its own oversimplified terms, willfully rejecting interests and values incompatible with its own assumptions, and thereby depriving itself of any of the cooperative and generative functions of life—feeling, emotion, playfulness, exuberance, free fantasy—in short, the liberating sources of unpredictable and uncontrollable creativity.[1]

By capturing only a fragment of reality, unrelieved abstraction inevitably distorts perception. By denying genuine emotion, it distorts and diminishes human potentials. For the fully abstracted mind, all places become "real estate" or mere natural resources, their larger economic, ecological, social, political, and spiritual possibilities lost to the purely and narrowly utilitarian.

The idea that place could be a significant educational tool was proposed by John Dewey in an



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1897 essay. Dewey proposed that we "make each of our schools an embryonic community . . . with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society." He intended to broaden the focus of education, which he regarded as too "highly specialized, one-sided, and narrow." The school, its relations with the larger community and all of its internal functions, Dewey proposed to remake into curriculum.

The regional survey, which reflected a broader conception of the role of place in education, was developed by Lewis Mumford in the 1940s. In Mumford's words, the regional survey was:

> Not something to be added to an already crowded curriculum. It is rather (potentially) the backbone of a drastically revised method of study, in which every aspect of the sciences and the arts is ecologically related from the bottom up, in which they connect directly and constantly in the student's experience of his region and his community. Regional survey must begin with the infant's first exploration of his dooryard and his neighborhood; it must continue to expand and deepen, at every successive stage of growth until the student is capable of seeing and experiencing above all, of relating and integrating and directing the separate parts of his environment, hitherto unnoticed or dispersed. [2]

The regional survey (Mumford cites *Walden* as a classic example) involved the intensive study of the local environment by specialists and every member of the community, including school children. As the focal point for education, the regional survey was intended to create habits of thinking across disciplines, promote cooperation, and dissolve distinctions between facts and values, the past and the future, and nature and human society. Beyond education, Mumford regarded the regional survey as the basis for rational coordination and planning and as a vehicle for widespread public participation.

The integration of place into education is important for four reasons. First, it requires the combination of intellect with experience. The typical classroom is an arena for lecture and discussion,

both of which are important to intellectual growth. The study of place involves complementary dimensions of intellect: direct observation, investigation, experimentation, and skill in the application of knowledge. The latter is regarded merely as "vocational education." But for Mumford and Dewey, practical and manual skills were an essential aspect of experience, good thinking, and to the development of the whole person. Both regarded the acquisition of manual skills as vitally important in sharpening the intellect. Dewey again:

> We cannot overlook the importance for educational purposes of the close and intimate acquaintance got with nature at first hand, with real things and materials, with the actual processes of their manipulation, and the knowledge of their special necessities and use. In all this there (is) continual training of observation, of ingenuity, constructive imagination, of logical thought, and of the sense of reality acquired through firsthand contact with actualities. The educative forces of the domestic spinning and weaving, of the sawmill, the gristmill, the cooper ship, and the blacksmith forge were continuously operative.[3]

Similarly, Whitehead states that:

> There is a coordination of senses and thought, and also a reciprocal influence between brain activity and material creative activity. In this reaction the hands are peculiarly important. It is a moot point whether the human hand created the human brain, or the brain created the hand. Certainly, the connection is intimate and reciprocal.[4]

In the reciprocity between thinking and doing, knowledge loses much of its abstractness, becoming in the application to specific places and problems tangible and direct.

Second, the study of place is relevant to the problems of overspecialization, which has been called a terminal disease of contemporary civilization. It is surely debilitating to the individual intellect. Mumford's remedy for the narrow, underdimensioned mind is the requirement to balance analysis with synthesis. This cannot be accomplished by adding courses to an already overextended curriculum, or by fine-tuning a system designed to produce specialists. It can be done only by reconceptualizing the purposes of education in order to promote diversity of thought and a wider understanding of interrelatedness. Places are laboratories of diversity and complexity, mixing social functions and natural processes. A place has a human history and a geologic past: it is a part of an ecosystem with a variety of microsystems, it is a social, economic, and political order: they import or export energy, materials, water, and wastes, they are linked by innumerable bonds to other places. A place cannot be understood from the vantage point of a single discipline or specialization. It can be understood only on its terms as a complex mosaic of phenomena and problems. The classroom and indoor laboratory are ideal environments in which to narrow reality in order to focus on bits and pieces. The study of place, by contrast, enables us to widen the focus to examine the interrelationships between disciplines and to lengthen our perception of time.

It is important not to stop learning at the point of mere intellectual comprehension. Students should be encouraged to act on the basis of information from the survey to identify a series of projects to promote greater self-reliance, interdisciplinary learning, and physical competence, such as policies for food, energy, architecture, and waste. These provide opportunities for intellectual and experiential learning involving many different disciplines working on tangible problems. If the place also includes natural areas, forests, streams, and agricultural lands, the opportunities for environmental learning multiply accordingly.

Finally, for Mumford and Dewey, much of the pathology of contemporary civilization was related to the disintegration of the small community. Dewey wrote in 1927: "The invasion and partial destruction of the life of the (local community) by outside uncontrolled agencies is the immediate source of the instability, disintegration and restlessness which characterize the present epoch." The study of place, then, has a third significance in reeducating people in the art of living well where they are. The distinction between inhabiting and residing drawn in chapter six is important here. A resident is a temporary occupant, putting down few roots and investing little, knowing little, and perhaps caring little for the immediate locale beyond its ability to gratify. As both a cause and effect of displacement, the resident lives in an indoor world of office building, shopping mall, automobile, apartment, and suburban house, and watches television an average of four hours each day. The inhabitant, in contrast, "dwells," as Illich puts it in an intimate, organic, and mutually

nurturing relationship with a place.[5] Good inhabitance is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness. Residence requires cash and a map. A resident can reside almost anywhere that provides an income. Inhabitants bear the marks of their places, whether rural or urban, in patterns of speech, through dress and behavior. Uprooted, they get homesick. Historically, inhabitants are less likely to vandalize their's or others' places. They also tend to make good neighbors and honest citizens. They are, in short, the bedrock of the stable community and neighborhood that Mumford, Dewey, and Jefferson regarded as the essential ingredient of democracy.

Paul Shepard explains the stability of inhabitants as a consequence of the interplay between the psyche and a particular land form. "Terrain structure," he argues, "is the model for patterns of congnition."[6] The physical and biological patterns of a place are imprinted on the mind so the "cognition, personality, creativity, and maturity—all are in some way tied to particular gestalts of space." Accordingly, the child must have an opportunity to "soak in a place, and the adolescent and adult must be able to return to that place to ponder the visible substrate of his own personality." Hence, knowledge of a place—where you are and where you come from—is intertwined with knowledge of who you are. Landscape, in other words, shapes mindscape. Since it diminishes the potential for maturation and inhabitance, the ravagement of places is psychologically ravaging as well. If Shepard is right, and I believe that he is, we are paying a high price for the massive rearrangement of the North American landscape of the past fifty years.

For deplaced people, education in the arts of inhabitation is partly remedial learning: the unlearning of old habits of waste and dependency. It requires, first, the ability to perceive and utilize the potentials of a place. One of the major accomplishments of the past several decades has been the rediscovery of how much ordinary people can do for themselves in small places. The significance of this fact coincides with the growing recognition of the ecological, political, and economic costs, and the vulnerability of large-scale centralized systems, whether publically or privately controlled. Smaller-scale technologies are often cheaper and more resilient, and they do not undermine democratic institutions by requiring the centralization of capital, expertise, and political authority. Taken together, they vastly expand the potential of ecologically designed, intensively developed places to meet human needs on a sustained basis.

Education for reinhabitation must also instill an applied ethical sense toward habitat. Again Leopold's standard—"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."—is on balance a clear standard for most decisions about the use we make of our places. From the standpoint of education, the stumbling block to development of an ethic of place is not the complexity of the subject; it is the fact, as Leopold put it, "that our educational system is headed away from...an intense consciousness of land."

Critics might argue that the study of place would be inherently parochial and narrowing. If place were the entire focus of education, it certainly could be. But the study of place would be only a part of a

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larger curriculum which would include the study of relationships between places as well. For Mumford, place was simply the most immediate of a series of layers leading to the entire region as a system of small places. But parochialism is not the result of what is studied as much as how it is studied. Lewis Thomas, after all, was able to observe the planet in the workings of a single cell.[7]

At issue is our relationship to our own places. What is the proper balance between mobility and rootedness? Indeed, are rootedness and immobility synonymous? How long does it take for one to learn enough about a place to become an inhabitant and not merely a resident? However one chooses to answer these questions, the lack of a sense of place, our "cult of homelessness," is endemic, and its price is the destruction of the small community and the resulting social and ecological degeneracy.[8] We are not the first footloose wanderers of our species. Our nomadism, however, is on a larger and more destructive scale.

We cannot solve such deep problems quickly, but we can begin learning how to reinhabit our places, as Wendell Berry says, "lovingly, knowingly, skillfully, reverently," restoring context to our lives in the process.[9] For a world growing short of many things, the next sensible frontiers to explore are those of the places where we live and work.

Endnotes

1. Lewis Mumford, "Utopia, The City, and the Machine," in Frank Manuel ed., *Utopias and Utopian Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 10.
2. Lewis Mumford, *Values for Survival* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1946), 151-152.
3. John Dewey, "The School and Social Progress," in J. McDermott, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 457.
4. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York: Free Press, 1967/1929), 50.
5. Ivan Illich, "Dwelling," *Co-Evolution Quarterly* 41 (Spring 1984).
6. Paul Shepard, "Place in American Culture," *North American Review* (Fall 1977): 22-32.
7. Lewis Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell* (New York: Viking Press, 1974).
8. Baker Brownell, *The Human Community* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1950).
9. Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 281.

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Reprinted from David Orr Ecological Literacy: Education and Transition to a Postmodern World. *New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992: 125-131.*