

Space
and
Place
*The Perspective
of
Experience*

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Intimate Experiences
of Place

It is impossible to discuss experiential space without introducing the objects and places that define space. An infant's space expands and becomes better articulated as he recognizes and reaches out to more permanent objects and places. Space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning. We have noted how strange space turns into neighborhood, and how the attempt to impose a spatial order by means of a grid of cardinal directions results in the establishment of a pattern of significant places, including the cardinal points and center. Distance is a meaningless spatial concept apart from the idea of goal or place. It is possible, however, to describe place without introducing explicitly spatial concepts. "Here" does not necessarily entail "there." We can focus on the experiencing of the "here," and we shall do so in this and the next two chapters. We move from direct and intimate experiences to those that involve more and more symbolic and conceptual apprehension.

Intimate experiences lie buried in our innermost being so that not only do we lack the words to give them form but often we are not even aware of them. When, for some reason, they flash to the surface of our consciousness they evince a poignancy that the more deliberative acts—the actively sought

experiences—cannot match. Intimate experiences are hard to express. A mere smile or touch may signal our consciousness of an important occasion. Insofar as these gestures can be observed they are public. They are also fleeting, however, and their meaning so eludes confident interpretation that they cannot provide the basis for group planning and action. They lack the firmness and objectivity of words and pictures.

Intimate occasions are often those on which we become passive and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, exposed to the caress and sting of new experience. Children relate to people and objects with a directness and intimacy that are the envy of adults bruised by life. Children know they are frail; they seek security and yet remain open to the world. In sickness adults also know frailty and dependency. A sick person, secure in the familiarity of his home and comforted by the presence of those he loves, appreciates the full meaning of nurture. Intimate places are places of nurture where our fundamental needs are heeded and cared for without fuss. Even the vigorous adult has fleeting moments of longing for the kind of coziness he knew in childhood. What sensual ease compares with that of a child as he rests in the parent's arm and is read to sleep? In the curve of the human arm is comfort and security absolute, made all the more delectable by the threatening wolf in the storybook. As adults, after a day of strenuous assertion, we sink gratefully into an armchair and relax in its receptive hollow while we watch televised news of mayhem. The home itself feels more intimate in winter than in summer. Winter reminds us of our vulnerability and defines the home as shelter.¹ Summer, in contrast, turns the whole world into Eden, so that no corner is more protective than another.

Unique to human beings among primates is the sense of the home as a place where the sick and the injured can recover under solicitous care. Washburn and De Vore, in their account of the society of early man, note that all human societies have bases where the weak may stay and from which the fit may move out to gather, hunt, or fight. In the home base are tools, food, and normally some sort of shelter. "No such 'base' exists among the baboons, other monkeys, or apes. When the troop

moves out on the daily round, *all* members must move with it or be deserted. . . . [T]he only protection for a baboon is to stay with the troop, no matter how injured or sick he may be. . . . For a wild primate a fatal sickness is one that separates it from the troop, but for man it is one from which he cannot recover even while protected and fed at the home base."²

Several conditions necessary for an elemental sense of place are encapsulated in this brief account. Place is a pause in movement. Animals, including human beings, pause at a locality because it satisfies certain biological needs. The pause makes it possible for a locality to become a center of felt value. Baboons and apes apparently do not pause in order to take care of an injured or sick member. Humans do, and this fact contributes to the depth of their sentiment for place. A person recovering from sickness is aware of his dependence on others. He is aware that he is cared for and made well at a specific locale, which may be the shade of a tree, a lean-to shelter, or a fourposter bed. At one place the patient is cradled back to health. Before full recovery he remains for a time weak and passive like a child; he is able to respond to the immediacy of the world and see it with the fresh intensity of childlike eyes. The lasting affection for home is at least partly a result of such intimate and nurturing experiences.

To the young child the parent is his primary "place." The caring adult is for him a source of nurture and a haven of stability. The adult is also the guarantor of meaning to the child, for whom the world can often seem baffling. A mature person depends less on other people. He can find security and nourishment in objects, localities, and even in the pursuit of ideas. Home, for the conductor Bruno Walter, was the world of classical music. He did not feel estranged when he had to abandon his native Austria for the United States. Exceptionally talented people can live for art or science and go wherever they thrive. There are also recluses and misanthropes who shun men in favor of the consolation that nature or material possessions can provide.³ For most people possessions and ideas are important, but other human beings remain the focus

of value and the source of meaning. We say of young lovers that they dwell in each other's gaze. They are free of attachment to things and to locality; they will abandon their homes and elope if they have to. Old couples are attached to place but they are even more attached to people, services, and each other. Old people may not wish to survive their partners' deaths for long, even when the material conditions that maintain their lives are kept up. For such reasons we speak of *resting* in another's strength and *dwelling* in another's love. Even so, the idea of a human person as "place" or "home" is not immediately acceptable.

Tennessee Williams, in a play, suggests how home may well be another person, that is to say, how one human being can "nest" in another. Hannah Jelkes, a middle-aged spinster, and her ancient grandfather are rootless people. They roam the country and try to make a living by selling their fragile skills; she as a quick sketch artist and he as "the world's oldest working poet." The following dialogue is between Hannah and a cynical dissipated man called Shannon. They are on the porch of a run-down hotel in Mexico.

- Hannah: We make a home for each other, my grandfather and I. Do you know what I mean by a home? I don't mean a regular home. I mean I don't mean what other people mean when they speak of a home, because I don't regard a home as a . . . well, as a place, a building . . . a house . . . of wood, bricks, stone. I think of home as being a thing that two people have between them in which each can . . . well, nest—rest—live in, emotionally speaking. Does that make any sense to you, Mr. Shannon?
- Shannon: Yeah, complete. But . . . when a bird builds a nest to rest in and live in, it doesn't build it in a . . . falling-down tree.
- Hannah: I am not a bird, Mr. Shannon.
- Shannon: I was making an analogy, Miss Jelkes.
- Hannah: I thought you were making yourself another rum-coco, Mr. Shannon.
- Shannon: Both. When a bird builds a nest, it builds it with an eye for . . . the relative permanence of location, and also for the purpose of mating and propagating its species.
- Hannah: I still say that I'm not a bird, Mr. Shannon. I am a human being and when a member of that fantastic species builds

a nest in the heart of another, the question of permanence isn't the first or even the last thing that's considered . . . necessarily? . . . always?⁴

The dialogue ends on a note of doubt. Permanence is an important element in the idea of place. Things and objects endure and are dependable in ways that human beings, with their biological weaknesses and shifting moods, do not endure and are not dependable. Yet Hannah makes a point. In the absence of the right people, things and places are quickly drained of meaning so that their lastingness is an irritation rather than a comfort. Saint Augustine's native city, Thagaste, was transformed for him with the death of his childhood friend. The great theologian wrote: "My heart was now darkened by grief, and everywhere I looked I saw death. My native haunts became a scene of torture to me, and my own home a misery. Without him everything we had done together turned into excruciating ordeal. My eyes kept looking for him without finding him. I hated all the places where we used to meet, because they could no longer say to me, 'Look, here he comes,' as they once did."⁵

For Augustine the value of place was borrowed from the intimacy of a particular human relationship; place itself offered little outside the human bond. Experiences like that of Augustine are not uncommon. Here is an example from current sociological research. Neilson is a widower. His wife died in childbirth—the birth of her sixth child. Neilson worked as maintenance man for a large firm. By working on the second shift he could see his children off to school and be at home when they returned in the early afternoon. Neilson's younger unmarried sister had moved in with him after his wife died. She would come home about five, cook dinner, put the children to bed, and then retire herself. She was asleep when Neilson returned from work. Neilson returned to a full house but he felt its emptiness. "When I come home from work in the nights," he said, "I feel empty. I feel, coming home, I feel kind of funny, a funny feeling that I'm going into an empty house. Even though the house is still full with the kids, it's just not the same."⁶

Intimacy between persons does not require knowing the details of each other's life; it glows in moments of true awareness and exchange. Each intimate exchange has a locale which partakes in the quality of the human encounter. There are as many intimate places as there are occasions when human beings truly connect. What are such places like? They are elusive and personal. They may be etched in the deep recesses of memory and yield intense satisfaction with each recall, but they are not recorded like snapshots in the family album, nor perceived as general symbols like fireplace, chair, bed, and living room that invite intricate explication. One can no more deliberately design such places than one can plan, with any guarantee of success, the occasions of genuine human exchange. Consider the following description of a brief encounter and its setting; neither is so unusual that it calls for special notice, yet they are the stuff that enrich people's lives. In a novel by Christopher Isherwood, George is a lecturer at a California state college. As George steps out of the classroom building, the first people he recognizes are two of his favorite students, Kenny Potter and Lois Yamaguchi.

They are sitting on the grass under one of the newly planted trees. Their tree is even smaller than the others. It has barely a dozen leaves on it. To sit under it at all seems ridiculous; perhaps this is just why Kenny chose it. He and Lois look as though they were children playing at being stranded on a South Pacific atoll. Thinking this, George smiles at them. They smile back. . . . George passes quite close by their atoll as a steamship might, without stopping. Lois seems to know what he is, for she waves gaily to him exactly as one waves to a steamship, with an enchantingly delicate gesture of her tiny wrist and hand. Kenny waves also, but it is doubtful if he knows; he is only following Lois's example. Anyhow, their waving charms George's heart. He waves back to them. The old steamship and the young castaways have exchanged signals—but not signals for help. . . . Again, as by the tennis players, George feels that his day has been brightened.⁷

Trees are planted on campus to give it more shade and to make it look greener, more pleasant. They are part of a deliberate design to create place. Having only a few leaves, the trees do not yet make much of an aesthetic impact. Already, however, they can provide a stage for warm human encounters;

each sapling is a potential place for intimacy, but its use cannot be predicted since this depends on chance and on the play of imagination.

What things move us? What is the most beautiful thing in Belvedere? Belvedere, in Paul Horgan's novel, is the name of a small town on the west central plains of Texas. A teenager in the novel poses the question and answers:

It's not what they brag about, the lilacs, and the green tile dome on the city hall, and the Greek pillars on the bank. No, it is what happens after the sun goes down, and the vapor lights on the tall aluminum poles over the highway start to come on! Do you think I am raving? . . . You know: the sky is still brilliant, but evening is coming, and for the first five minutes or so, the vapor lamps have a color . . . and the thing is so magic when it happens it is enough to make you dizzy. Everything on the earth is sort of gray by then, yes, lilac gray, and there are shadows down the streets, but there, while the sky is changing, those lights are the most beautiful things in the United States! And you know? It's all an accident! They don't know how beautiful the light is.⁸

Different things move us. In a short story John Updike makes his hero, David Kern, say:

I, David Kern, am always affected—reassured, nostalgically pleased, even, as a member of my animal species, made proud—by the sight of bare earth that has been smoothed and packed firm by the passage of human feet. Such spots abound in small towns: the furtive break in the playground fence dignified into a thoroughfare, the trough of dust underneath each swing . . . the blurred path worn across a wedge of grass, the anonymous little mound or embankment polished by play and strewn with pebbles like the confetti aftermath of a wedding. Such unconsciously humanized intervals of day, too humble and common even to have a name, remind me of my childhood, when one communes with dirt down among the legs, as it were, of presiding fatherly presences. The earth is our playmate then, and the call to supper has a piercingly sweet eschatological ring.⁹

The modest work of human erosion, Updike continued, "seemed precious because it had been achieved accidentally, and had about it that repose of grace that is beyond willing." Accident and happy chance, these are key ideas in the three examples taken from the works of Isherwood, Horgan, and Updike. Trees are planted for aesthetic effect, deliberately, but

their real value may lie as stations for poignant, unplanned human encounters. Highway lamps are functional, yet at sundown their vapor lights can produce colors of dizzying beauty, "the most beautiful things in the United States." The trough of dust under the swing and the bare earth packed firm by human feet are not planned, but they can be touching. Intimate experiences, not being dressed up, easily escape our attention. At the time we do not say "this is it," as we do when we admire objects of conspicuous or certified beauty. It is only in reflection that we recognize their worth. At the time we are not aware of any drama; we do not know that the seeds of lasting sentiment are being planted.

Humble events can in time build up a strong sentiment for place. What are these events like and how do they depend on the feel of things? On a warm May day in one of the hollows of Appalachia a child had just been breast-fed. Robert Coles, observing life in the hollows, noted how suddenly the mother put the child down on the ground, and gently fondled him and moved him with her bare feet. She spoke gravely to her child: "This is your land, and it's about time you started getting to know it."¹⁰ Another mother said to Coles: "When one of my kids starts getting all teary, and there's something bothering him, you know—then is the time for me to help as best I can; and there's nothing that'll work better than getting a child to see if the chickens have laid any new eggs, or to count how many tomatoes there are hanging on the plants, ready for us to pick."¹¹

Chickens, eggs, and tomatoes are commonplace objects on the farm. They are there to be eaten or marketed; they are not aesthetic objects. Yet they seem to have at times the essence of wholesome beauty, and they can console. The contemplation and handling of a jug or a warm but firm tomato can somehow reassure us, in depressed moods, of the ultimate sanity of life. In Doris Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook*, Anna felt that an unpleasantly grinning man was following her. She wanted to run. Panic threatened to engulf her although she knew that her fear was largely irrational.

She thought: if I could see something or touch something that wasn't ugly. . . . There was a fruit barrow just ahead, offering tidy coloured loads of plums, peaches, apricots. Anna bought fruit: smelling at the tart clean smell, touching the smooth or faintly hairy skins. She was better. The panic had gone. The man who had been following her stood near, waiting and grinning; but now she was immune from him. She walked passed him immune.¹²

The home place is full of ordinary objects. We know them through use; we do not attend to them as we do to works of art. They are almost a part of ourselves, too close to be seen. Contemplate them and what happens? Nausea, for the lacerated sensibility of Sartrean man. For Wright Morris the word "holiness" comes to mind. He asked: "Was there, then, something holy about these things? If not, why had I used that word? For holy things, they were ugly enough." Morris looked at the odds and ends on the bureau, the pin-cushion lid on the cigar box, the faded Legion poppies, assorted pills, patent medicines, and concluded that "there was not a thing of beauty, a man-made loneliness anywhere." Yet he was feeling, at that moment, what he expected a thing of beauty could make him feel—an independent presence. People dare not feel for long, Morris asserted. To keep feeling at bay we call on embarrassment. Embarrassment "snaps it off, like an antiseptic, or we rely on our wives, or one of our friends, to take the pressure out of the room with a crack of some kind."¹³

Home is an intimate place. We *think* of the house as home and place, but enchanted images of the past are evoked not so much by the entire building, which can only be seen, as by its components and furnishings, which can be touched and smelled as well: the attic and the cellar, the fireplace and the bay window, the hidden corners, a stool, a gilded mirror, a chipped shell. "In smaller, more familiar things," says Freya Stark, "memory weaves her strongest enchantments, holding us at her mercy with some trifle, some echo, a tone of voice, a scent of tar and seaweed on the quay. . . . This surely is the meaning of home—a place where every day is multiplied by all the days before it."¹⁴

Hometown is an intimate place. It may be plain, lacking in

architectural distinction and historical glamor, yet we resent an outsider's criticism of it. Its ugliness does not matter; it did not matter when we were children, climbed its trees, paddled our bikes on its cracked pavements, and swam in its pond. How *did* we experience such a small, familiar world, a world inexhaustibly rich in the complication of ordinary life but devoid of features of high imageability? To prompt our memory Helen Santmyer wrote:

You passed the doctor's office, and were at the corner of your own street, where you turned west, and saw the trees arched against a glowing sky. Perhaps you went toward them thinking of nothing much, comfortably aware that you were nearly home. Perhaps, if the skies were gray, if it were winter and the pavement were streaked with soot, and lumps of black snow filled the gutter, you were even remarking how ugly the town was, and how drab and dull. If the skies were clear, you almost certainly paused at the gate, with a hand on the latch, to search for the first star in the west, to wish for escape and a brilliant future far, far away—and yet at the same instant you were aware of the iron of the gate beneath your hand, and were storing away the memory of how it felt.

And so the touch and heart make up their magpie hoard, heedless of the calculating eye and intelligence. "Valentines in a drugstore window, the smell of roasting coffee, sawdust on the butcher's floor—there comes a time in middle age when even the critical mind is almost ready to admit that these are as good to have known and remembered . . . as fair streets and singing towns and classic arcades."¹⁵

Home place and quotidian life feel real. An Illinois farm girl went with her husband to California for their honeymoon. She said:

We didn't stay as long as we planned; we came right back here. We do that all the time when we take trips; we can't wait to come back. It's so unreal to be gone. That's the unreal world. We know where life begins and ends here. Life goes on here. It's nice to think about going away and doing, getting away from it, but it's always nice to get back to life that really is. When I think about it, it was like a waste of time. Our real life was back here. We wanted to get back and start living.¹⁶

What does the Illinois farm girl mean by "real"? It is hard to say. The real, we feel, is important, but paradoxically it also

goes unnoticed. Life is lived, not a pageant from which we stand aside and observe. The real is the familiar daily round, unobtrusive like breathing. The real involves our whole being, all our senses. On vacation, although problems have been left behind, an important part of ourselves has also been left behind; we become specialized and unanchored beings, sight-seers who sample life effortlessly.

Seeing has the effect of putting a distance between self and object. What we see is always "out there." Things too close to us can be handled, smelled, and tasted, but they cannot be seen—at least not clearly. In intimate moments people shade their eyes. Thinking creates distance. Natives are at home, steeped in their place's ambience, but the instant they think about the place it turns into an object of thought "out there." Tourists seek out new places. In a new setting they are forced to see and think without the support of a whole world of known sights, sounds, and smells—largely unacknowledged—that give weight to being: vacation areas, however delightful, seem unreal after a time.

In Santmyer's recollection of her hometown, she contrasts vision with touch. Seeing, like thought, is evaluative, judgmental, and conducive to fantasy. If the sky were gray, she said, you would remark on "how ugly the town was, and how drab and dull." And if the sky were clear, you would pause at the gate to wish for escape and a bright future far away. Images and ideas discharged by the mind are seldom original. Evaluations and judgments tend to be clichés. The fleeting intimacies of direct experience and the true quality of a place often escape notice because the head is packed with shopworn ideas. The data of the senses are pushed under in favor of what one is taught to see and admire. Personal experience yields to socially approved views, which are normally the most obvious and public aspects of an environment. To illustrate, here is Robert Pirsig's account of how tourists see Crater Lake in Oregon:

At the lake we stop and mingle affably with the small crowd of tourists holding cameras and children yelling, "Don't go too close!" and see cars and campers with all different license plates, and see the Crater Lake with a feeling of "Well, there it is," just as the pictures show. I

watch the other tourists, all of whom seem to have out-of-place looks too. I have no resentment at all this, just a feeling that it's all unreal and that the quality of the lake is smothered by the fact that it's so pointed to. You point to something as having Quality and the Quality tends to go away. Quality is what you see out of the corner of your eye, and so I look at the lake below but feel the peculiar quality from the chill, almost frigid sunlight behind me, and the almost motionless wind.¹⁷

Intimate experiences, whether of people or of things, are difficult to make public. Apt words are elusive; pictures and diagrams seldom seem adequate. Music can evoke certain feelings, but it lacks denotative precision. Facts and events are readily told: we have no problem saying that we went to Crater Lake on a Sunday, with the children and two dogs, in a station wagon, and that it was a cold day. We know what to admire: the lake. We can point to it and take a picture so that it stays with us as a permanent and public record of what has happened. But the quality of the place and of our particular encounter are not thus captured: *that* must include what we see out of the corner of our eye and the sensation of the almost frigid sunlight behind us.

Intimate experiences are difficult but not impossible to express. They may be personal and deeply felt, but they are not necessarily solipsistic or eccentric. Hearth, shelter, home or home base are intimate places to human beings everywhere. Their poignancy and significance are the themes of poetry and of much expository prose. Each culture has its own symbols of intimacy, widely recognized by its people. Americans, for example, respond to such emblems of good life as the New England church, the Middle Western town square, the corner drugstore, Main Street, and the village pond.¹⁸ An armchair or a park bench can be an intensely personal place, yet neither is a private symbol with meanings wholly opaque to others.¹⁹ Within a human group experiences have sufficient overlap so that an individual's attachments do not seem egregious and incomprehensible to his peers. Even an experience that appears to be the product of unique circumstances can be shared. The scene drawn by Isherwood, in which a teacher

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makes brief contact with two students sitting under a newly planted tree on a California campus, is highly specific. Its meaning, however, is not impenetrably private: all who read the passage and nod in recognition, whether or not they have taught in an American college or lived in California, share it to some degree.

There is far more to experience than those elements we choose to attend to. In large measure, culture dictates the focus and range of our awareness. Languages differ in their capacity to articulate areas of experience. Pictorial art and rituals supplement language by depicting areas of experience that words fail to frame; their use and effectiveness again vary from people to people. Art makes images of feeling so that feeling is accessible to contemplation and thought. Social chatter and formulaic communication, in contrast, numb sensitivity. Even intimate feelings are more capable of being represented than most people realize. The images of place, here sampled, are evoked by the imagination of perceptive writers. By the light of their art we are privileged to savor experiences that would otherwise have faded beyond recall. Here is a seeming paradox: thought creates distance and destroys the immediacy of direct experience, yet it is by thoughtful reflection that the elusive moments of the past draw near to us in present reality and gain a measure of permanence.

11

Attachment to
Homeland

Place exists at different scales. At one extreme a favorite armchair is a place, at the other extreme the whole earth. Homeland is an important type of place at the medium scale. It is a region (city or countryside) large enough to support a people's livelihood. Attachment to the homeland can be intense. What is the character of this sentiment? What experiences and conditions promote it?

Human groups nearly everywhere tend to regard their own homeland as the center of the world. A people who believe they are at the center claim, implicitly, the ineluctable worth of their location. In diverse parts of the world this sense of centrality is made explicit by a geometrical conception of space oriented to the cardinal points. Home is at the center of an astronomically determined spatial system. A vertical axis, linking heaven to the underworld, passes through it. The stars are perceived to move around one's abode; home is the focal point of a cosmic structure. Such a conception of place ought to give it supreme value; to abandon it would be hard to imagine. Should destruction occur we may reasonably conclude that the people would be thoroughly demoralized, since the ruin of their settlement implies the ruin of their cosmos. Yet this does not necessarily happen. Human beings have strong