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Digging where we stand

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*Driven by restless searching, our modern world often seems to undermine the very community we crave. But **Clare Bryden** believes that's an invitation to dig deeper for the roots that truly sustain us.*

I am something of a human pinball. My stable childhood actually turned out to be the gradual tensing of a spring launcher that set me careering around southern England. I tend to follow a similar pattern in each job and each place I have lived. I get involved in the community, throw myself into the job, get to the top of the learning curve, and then want to move on.

Recently, I have begun to wonder whether it is a pattern that needs breaking, but I suspect that I am not unusual in combining a desire for stability with a restlessness. Many people have stayed in the same place and job for a long time, but they are not really rooted. People live where they do for a myriad of reasons - university, work, affordable housing - but lives have become increasingly scattered as the distances grow between home, work, school, shops and wider family.

For example, the average length of the school run has increased by a quarter over 15 years, and fewer than half of primary-school aged children now walk to school¹. So children live further away from their school friends and spend less time outdoors. Adults too are becoming dissociated from their surroundings. More than two-thirds drive to work, and satnav and Google Streetview have stunted curiosity and observation as they have automated travel. Our attention is focused on the gadget. We no longer rely on our senses and the kindness of strangers to navigate around an unfamiliar place.

BUSY BODIES

We often complain about being time-poor, but these busy-busy complaints have also become badges of honour for us. I have been there myself. It would be laughable if the busy-busy drug wasn't so effective in helping us avoid being fully aware or facing up to the realities of life, or ever being truly present in a particular place or time. As WH Davies put it: 'A poor life this, if full of care / we have no time to stand or stare.'²

Busy-busy also means we need to get from there to here as quickly as possible. Transport policy is driven by economic benefits rather than well-being, whether High Speed 2 or airport expansion or increasing the speed limit to 80mph. Hand-in-hand with planning, it becomes the modern equivalent of enclosure as yet more transit routes collect yet more in-between non-places - service stations, terminals, retail and business parks (parks for cars, of course, not daisies) - and yet more public land is privatised.

For the English, this dislocation is coupled with confusion over national identity (as promoted by the lucrative industry that is the writing of books and making of TV documentaries about the English confusion over national identity).

SOIL AND SOUL

In his wonderful book *Soil and Soul*, Alastair McIntosh writes that he is often approached by English people who ask what they can do: 'I simply suggest that they dig where they stand, and recover their own suppressed but very wonderful traditions.'³ He is writing in the context of the histories of enclosure and land protest, but his words could also be applied to our relationship with wherever we live - village, town, city, suburb or neighbourhood - in England or elsewhere.

'Digging where I stand' means being committed to one place instead of running around looking for the perfect spot with fewer rocks and lighter soil. There is nothing new under the sun, and that includes restlessness. St Benedict, writing his monastic rule in the sixth century, recognised the human tendency to seek ever greener grass. So he specifies 'the enclosure of the monastery, and stability in the community' as the workshop where the instruments of the spiritual art are to be performed.⁴

Stability and enclosure do not rule out once-in-a-lifetime monastic relocations. For one year in 2010-11, I lived alongside an Anglican Benedictine Community as they moved into their new home at Mucknell Abbey, a group of renovated farm buildings set in 40 acres of rural Worcestershire. I was considering a possible vocation to join them, and wanted if possible to root myself in this new place.

DIGGING FOR STORIES

I began digging for stories: Mucenhil in the Domesday Book; the meanderings of the stream forming the northern boundary; any online records. But more importantly, I started a practice of attentiveness to the place. This more than anything helped me put down some tentative roots, even though later I pulled them up again. It even became one of the ways the identity of the place started to develop, as people outside and inside the community read my daily blog.

Shortly before I left Mucknell Abbey, I heard Nicky Getgood speak at Greenbelt Arts Festival about Digbeth in inner-city Birmingham, telling stories of how the community started to rediscover and enjoy what had been wasted land: creative explorations, artistic happenings and guerrilla picnicking; and gardens springing up in unexpected corners.⁵

When I returned to my house (home?) in Exeter, I determined to continue digging for stories, and even suburbia was giving: the ruined chapel hidden behind a bus-stop; biodiversity in the remains of quarries and preserved green lanes; and the Prayer Book Rebellion battle site lying under a Tesco superstore.

ATTENTIVE WORDS

I have found that attentiveness to a place leads to a greater understanding, and in turn to a greater attachment to that place and a desire to care for it and share it with others. We lift our eyes from Streetview to appreciate the beauty of the landscape under today's weather. We notice the quirks of buildings and intriguing alleyways, and greet our neighbours. Instead of being elsewhere, we discover we are truly here. Our heart, body, mind and spirit are reconnected.

Here are some words which help to express this.

The Welsh *cynefin* concerns a relationship of true belonging to a place, a spiritual belonging. The English equivalent might be heartland, although that cannot capture the nuances. *Cynefin* is typically directed to rural landscapes. Digbeth shows that it might be cultivated in urban settings,

though attentiveness to nature still plays an important role, whether green spaces clinging on, or wildernesses and gardens emerging among concrete.

Another word is habitus, related to habitat. But where habitat is anonymous, habitus embraces a ritualised way of seeing the reality of a place, finding meaning in its particularities, and dwelling there creatively over time. Developing our habitus includes developing those rituals, from walking children to school and talking to other parents at the gates, to picnicking on wasteland and learning where the best blackberries are found.

LOCAL FOOD

Food is a vital component of rooting ourselves in a place. From Cornish pasties to Arbroath smokies, foods are intimately associated with particular places, and rituals and traditions have grown up around food production, from wassailing to harvest. Yet the horsemeat scandal shows just how dissociated we as a society have become from our food. I hope attitudes and practices will change now. It is good to drink soup made from vegetables grown just two miles away. It is even better when I have grown the vegetables myself. Growing our own is the most literal expression of 'digging where I stand', and it is heartening to see enthusiasm for allotments, land share schemes and pots on windowsills.

There are inevitably dangers inherent in attachment to place: parochialism and moral relativism; suspicion of change and outsiders; an emphasis on preservation not conservation; lifting our eyes from Streetview only to fasten them on our navel. The key I think can be found in attentiveness, which should help us understand that no ecosystem is closed, and that change is inevitable. The more rooted I become in a place, the more I become aware of connections and interdependencies. If I buy my food from local suppliers, I can build a relationship and understand the issues facing them. My networks actually grow wider. Alastair McIntosh thinks that 'If any of us dig deep enough where we stand, we will find ourselves connected to all other parts of the world.'

ROOTED IN GOD

This is, of course, supported by a rootedness in God. In his Inauguration sermon, the new Archbishop of Canterbury said: 'There can be no final justice, or security, or love, or hope in our society if it is not finally based on rootedness in Christ. Jesus calls to us over the wind and storms, heed his words and we will have the courage to build society in stability.'⁶

All the while, however, we should be willing if called to step out of what Archbishop Welby calls a 'perfectly serviceable boat'. We need to live beyond attachment into detachment, to be fully rooted in and committed to place and community, and yet ready to leave it behind if called elsewhere: from Durham to Lambeth Palace, from Buenos Aires to the uncertainty of the Papal Conclave.

When I left Mucknell Abbey, it was with a sense of stepping out of the boat. My main reason for staying in the community would have been the warm but ultimately suffocating embrace of security. Instead of a vocation to the religious life, I left with a vocation to prayer.

Maybe my overall pattern of life therefore doesn't need to be broken. I have learnt the importance of being as rooted in place as possible, as an outward symbol of the inner reality of being rooted in God, without necessarily seeking long-term security. That might mean continuing to be a pinball, but perhaps I could learn to be content with that.

Ultimately, as St Augustine put it: 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'⁷

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- 1 National Travel Survey <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-travel-survey-2011>
 - 2 WH Davies, Leisure <http://www.englishverse.com/poems/leisure>
 - 3 McIntosh, A, Soil and Soul (Aurum Press, 2004)
 - 4 Rule of Benedict Chapter 4 <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/benedict/rule.vi.html>
 - 5 <http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/blog/2011/08/an-introduction-to-nicky-getgood/>
 - 6 <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5038/we-will-see-a-world-transformed-the-archbishop-of-canterburys-inaugural-sermon>
 - 7 St Augustine, The Confessions (Oxford, 2008)