

Recovering the Practice of Place

Len Hjalmarson

*Geography is simply a visible form of theology.*¹

It was 1981. I was living in the west end of Vancouver and it was spring. The trees were alive with light, and the rhododendrons were opening their buds. I was driving a 1976 Honda Civic; it was aging and starting to smoke a bit, the tail pipe was leaking and the front shocks were frozen. It was time for a new buggy!

A friend was selling a 1973 Renault. I had never seen one before, and when I drove it I was impressed. I bought it and a whole new world opened up. I had assumed it was a rare car. After my first days of driving I saw them everywhere. Why had I not noticed them before? What changed?

My seeing had changed. Richard Rohr writes, "The mind only takes pictures using the film with which it's loaded."² Humans develop mental maps as aids in orienting in a complex world. It isn't only our attention "span" which is limited, it's also our attention "space." Our mental maps help: they are lenses through which we see the world.

Most of our maps are updated in small increments, like my experience with a new car. Sometimes our maps are upgraded wholesale, and we experience something like a conversion. We find a new center that requires the entire map to be rewritten, and any landmarks that remain are reorganized.

But it isn't only mental maps that limit our ways of engaging. Technology offers a new kind of space which is a threat to a placed life. Paul Virilio comments, "We now have the possibility of seeing at a distance, of hearing at a distance, and of acting at a distance, and this results in a process of de-localization, of the unrooting of the being."³

In 2003 my wife began work which required her to make appointments all over our city. Suddenly *my* appointments required a bicycle. I quickly discovered that the easier pace and openness of a bicycle changed my way of seeing the world. I discovered a richer texture to my neighbourhood than I had ever noticed in a car.

From "Place" to "Space"

Paul Virilio argues that the dominant form of violence in Modernity is speed. The pace at which we live contributes to our dis-placement. Our churches are heavily influenced by this dualistic spirituality, and by the legacy of Newton who traded "place" for the universal and non-local "space." My maps were formed in a church culture that gave attention to heaven (the real) and less to the earth. In contrast, Walter Brueggemann writes of the biblical view of land:

¹ Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985) 116.

² Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (Crossroad Books, 1999)

³ Paul Virilio and Carlos Oliveira, "Global Algorithm 1.7: The Silence of the Lambs: Paul Virilio in Conversation." In: Patrice Rimens (Translator). *Ctheory*. June 12, 1996.

Land is a central, if not THE central theme of biblical faith. Biblical faith is a pursuit of historical belonging that includes a sense of destiny derived from such belonging...⁴

Land, a central theme of biblical faith? Who knew?

We live with a rip in our psyche: we long for a place where we truly belong, and are rooted. At the same time, we suspect that the call to come home will carry us *out* of this world. This duality contradicts Jesus prayer that, “[His] kingdom come on earth as in heaven.” Futurist William Knoke argues that we are entering a “placeless society” where the difference between near and far is erased and where the longing for a place to call home will only increase.⁵

The Gospel response is simple: to recover the practice of parish and become Jesus body, visible and local. Lesslie Newbigin, the father of western Mission, doubts that,

the geographical parish can ever become irrelevant or marginal. There is a sense in which the primary sense of neighbourhood must remain primary, because it is here that men and women relate to each other simply as human beings and not in respect of their functions in society.⁶

This experience of neighborhood requires a commitment to living in the places we dwell. “Good inhabitation is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation and sense of care and rootedness.”⁷ Yet local knowledge is at an all time low, and neighborhood as an expression of community and a soil for the gospel faces great challenges through mobility and virtual networks.

The automobile is a tool for mobility that fragments our communities. In 1970 futurist Alvin Toffler commented that, “Never in history has distance meant less. Never have man’s (sic) relationships with place been more numerous, fragile and temporary. Figuratively, we ‘use up’ places and dispose of them in much the same way we dispose of Kleenex or beer cans.”⁸ We drive through neighborhoods to attend a church across town, in a building often isolated from its neighborhood, an island a parking lot cut off from the fabric of community life. Simon Carey Holt records the resentment created by commuter churches:

Mark and Wendy have a deep affection for their neighbourhood [except for] the presence of a large church on the corner.. “Hundreds of people pour into it every Sunday. They come from all over the place, but none from the neighbourhood. Even the pastor lives somewhere else..” They [noted] the poor level of maintenance on the building and the gardens. “It’s like they don’t care about the people who actually live here. In effect, they’re lousy neighbours!”⁹

Without a vision to redeem space and convert it to place, we unwittingly contribute to the destruction of local culture. *Local culture* – who cares?

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 3-4.

⁵ William Knoke, *Bold New World: The Essential Road Map to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Kodansha, 1996)

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1981) 64.

⁷ David Orr, *Ecological Literacy* (Albany: SUNY, 1992), 130

⁸ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (Toronto: Batman, 1970), 75

⁹ *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood* (Melbourne: Acorn Press, 2007) 81.

Wendell Berry highlights the value of local culture through observing an old rusted out bucket nailed to a tree. The bucket collects leaves and nuts and bird-droppings over the years, then the fibers break down and the collection turns into soil that returns to the earth and promotes growth. Berry sees in the bucket an analogy for how human community should develop:

A human community, too, must collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account. It must build soil, and build that memory of itself—in lore and story and song—that will be its culture. These two kinds of accumulation, of local soil and local culture, are intimately related.¹⁰

Berry claims that in order to do this kind of work, a community must exert a kind of centripetal force on its residents, holding local soil and local memory in place. It must draw residents toward the center of community life, and it must encourage the next generation to return and make their contribution to the local culture. Tony Hiss argues that it is only as we experience a place from the inside that we begin to invest in it as our community.¹¹

The church in the neighborhood could exert this kind of influence on a neighborhood if it saw the value of the role. It would require a sense of its physical connection to the neighborhood: *a sense of parish and a sense of belonging*. For a neighborhood to invite belonging one of the critical factors is public space.

The Power of Public Places

In long gone days, urban design sought to make the public realm attractive, a pleasant place to interact with neighbors. Research is showing that when people encounter a space functioning as a commons, they tend to gather there. *Soul of the City*, a project funded by the Knight Foundation, asked critical questions in relation to attachment to place.¹² What makes a community a desirable place to live? What draws people to stake their future in it? Their research found that there are three main qualities that attach people to place: openness (welcoming), aesthetics (beauty and green spaces), and social offerings – opportunities to interact. Two of these criteria are social, and the other is physical. Peter Block writes, “The social fabric of community is formed from an expanding shared sense of belonging. It is shaped by the idea that only when we are connected and care for the well-being of the whole that a civil and democratic society is created.”¹³

Public spaces are critical to the quality of neighborhood life, because community building occurs in an infinite number of small steps. Block notes that it requires that we “treat as important many things that we thought were incidental. An after-thought becomes the point; a comment made in passing defines who we are more than all that came before. If the artist is one who captures the nuance of experience, then this is whom each of us must become.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Common Place* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002)

¹¹ Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990)

¹² <http://soulofthecommunity.org/>

¹³ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2008) 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Stability is an endangered species. Yet without long term relationships, we withhold ourselves in ways that are costly to ourselves and to the quality of our communities.¹⁵ Without personal investment, we don't garner the local knowledge that enables us to thrive in the places where we live.

The Heavenly City

Surely God is in this place, and I was not aware of it! Gen. 28:16b

Brent Aldrich appeals to Peterson's translation of John 1:14: "The Word of God became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." He writes, "At the scale of the neighborhood, we can know by the senses of our bodies; we can meet our neighbors and strangers in common, shared spaces; and we can enter into and work towards the long work of God's transformation in our places."¹⁶

From 2001 to 2005 my wife and I stepped outside the culture of the organized church, and suddenly we had time for our neighbors. With few structures to rely on and some unlearning to do, we began to listen in new ways. We saw the texture of our neighborhood. We learned a new dependence on the Spirit, and we saw God active outside church walls. Until this time, we had no way of really seeing our neighborhood as a place God could dwell; no way of engaging the call of God there.

I recall one Saturday when some neighbors arrived to share a meal, and brought friends with them. We picked fresh beans and tomatoes from our garden. After dinner, one woman entered the kitchen to help clean up. As she worked she shared her story, growing up in a religious home with an abusive father. Suddenly she popped out with, "You're Christians aren't you – I can tell by your love."

God loves *places*. "All living is local: this land, this neighborhood, these trees and streets and houses, this work, these people."¹⁷ Love is particular: we name *this* person and love them. We invest in *this* place, in this soil and watch things grow.

Vinoth Ramachandra argues that globalism has become a master-story that is blind to the significance of place, history, culture or religious identity to peoples' work and well-being.¹⁸ Difference is unimportant. As a result, serious engagement with the other is by-passed. Globalism is just colonialism with better press.¹⁹

In contrast, the very nature of the body of Christ is to make space in love for the other. We who are many and diverse are *one body*. We bring worlds together around a common loaf, a shared meal that is a remembrance of Christ and a performance of the future healing of all things. The Eucharist opens a space that is anchored firmly in the world, yet transcends particular places. Gathering at the table and *re-membering* is the path forward, because memory is both local in the places we know and dwell, and universal, rooted in God's story.

¹⁵ See Mark Mulder's treatment in "Mobility and the (In)Significance of Place in an Evangelical Church." *Geographies of Religions and Belief Systems*. Vol. 3, No. 1: 2009: (16-43).

¹⁶ Brent Aldrich, "Eric Jacobsen – The Space Between," in *The Englewood Review of Books*, October, 2012.

¹⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005)

¹⁸ "Christian Witness in an Age of Globalization." Leonard Buck Memorial Lecture, Melbourne. May, 2006

¹⁹ Post-development and human security theorists advocate relocalization and cultural pluralism in response. Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) xxiv-xxvi.

<https://vimeo.com/51492378> An Introduction to “Place”



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