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Connecting to Place In the Land of the Lost: Questions for the Nomadic Wanderers in All of Us

Sal Insieme

2008

*Livin' on the road my friend, was gonna keep you free
and clean. Now you wear your skin like iron and your
breath's as hard as kerosene.*

— Townes Van Zandt, Poncho and Lefty

*I've been traveling so long...How'm I ever going to know
my home...When I see it again.*

— Joni Mitchell, Black Crow

*"Ah, my friends from the prison they ask unto me, 'How
good, how good does it feel to be free?'
And I answer them, most mysteriously, 'Are birds free
from the chains of the skyway?'"*

— Bob Dylan, Ballad in Plain D

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As I gather up my rambling scribbles, wandering emphasis, and drifting thoughts into a (hopefully) more coherent and communicative form, I reflect upon the place I am becoming a part of... I have just returned from a hike up the mountain with some of my neighbors to a spectacular waterfall high atop our watershed. It triggered in me a reinvigorated contemplation of the concept of connecting to place and motivated me to finally wrap up this piece (for now). You see, this aqua-delight is only revealed to us in the middle of winter, a time when many abandon the dank and saturated northwestern lands for sunnier and drier ground. To me, the beauty of this cascading water is a celebration of the essence of this place, of the seasonal shifts and the cyclical nature of its patterns. It reminds me of the vital and tangible substances which we are all comprised of (quite literally, as this is part of my water source). For me, it is only after weeks of pounding rain that this place comes alive again in a certain sense. It is rejuvenated and revitalized for another year of birth, growth, and death (and all the life in between). And it is only through sweat and time, joy and sorrow, warmth and frigidness, that I will grow to be a part of it and understand it and add my influence in a balanced, yet distinct way. It is from this learning and unlearning, disconnecting and reconnecting, that I grow and explore. With my roots planted firmly in the ground, dreams flowing from there, and passions freely explored...

* * *

We've all seen the bumpersticker: *All Who Wander Are Not Lost*. True enough, but does this inherently imply one knows where they are, have been, or are going? Sure, there is an intriguing element of romanticism to it (something I'm not sure I want leading me around). Some of my favorite songs, images, and stories are about the spontaneous and freewheelin' traveler serendipitously flowing and colliding with unexpected situations, characters, and experiences. The allure of this archetype suggests something profound,

perhaps the longing to connect to some missing or repressed sense, or possibly a distinct yearning for something intensely deviant from the crap put before us, possibly it's never fitting into a grossly disjointed world, or maybe simply a response to boredom. It does seem necessary to be physically in motion to chase our dreams (if chasing them is how we wish to live them), and conceivably, for some, this also applies to location(s) of habitation. There are many lessons to be learned and inspiration to be gained from the drifter's and mobile adventurer's narratives for sure, but there also seem to be many limitations, trappings, and delusions, often poetically realized in the terminal chapters of their journeys. But I don't necessarily have the desire to be a ragged road-worn wandering sage-like phenomenon, I just wanna live, here and now. But hey, the travelin' is the moment, so why worry about any presumably more fixed context or situation?

Well, here's the dilemma as I see it, in this post-modern reality where most of us are all so dislocated and separated from our world (to more or lesser extents, without a doubt, but those who claim they are not are rarely honest with themselves), many of the more radical and inspiring respond to this condition by surfing the waves of displacement, and perhaps at the expense of *deeply* connecting to a place and bioregion. To be clear, for me, place is not merely a physical locality or abstract spot on a map, but a context or situation which includes plants, animals, land formations, climate, patterns, narratives, people, etc (and, unfortunately in most places, culture, politics, and other hyper-socialized phenomenon). And, by *deeply* connecting, I don't presume to know for others what that specifically means, nor do I limit this to a mere "biological" understanding. There is much to be explored on this topic, and this initial exercise is not meant as an explicit call for people to run to the forest or create a community of any particular type, nor am I suggesting any specific bioregion as ideal, as connection to place is possible almost anywhere, provided we are open and enthusiastic. I am certainly no proponent of unnecessarily fortifying positions, in

ideas, methods, or physical locales, but for me, so-called-temporary autonomous zones or touring around between the margins is unsatisfactory and incomplete compared with a life of ongoing and deepening connection to a place. I hope to begin a larger discussion that can ask some questions and attempt to distill from them some strategic momentum for myself and for those whose visions may generally overlap in places. This feels essential to me for deep reconnection and healing from an ongoing domestication process that subtly disconnects and brutally tears us from belonging anywhere.

Now we all have abundant reasons for what we do, hopefully derived from a symbiotic combination of critical thought, practical considerations, and unobstructed desires. So, I am not judging those who choose more nomadic ways, I am just hoping to examine the strategic motivations and consider the ramifications of the patterns of our lives as we attempt to move towards a wilder existence as we each may see it. Born into the armpit of industrial and social hell (New Jersey), I have spent what would statistically be half my life, wandering and searching for a place to call home, where my roots can take hold, where I can actively be present without overwhelming thoughts of unsettledness and dissatisfaction moving my mind and body elsewhere. I feel I have found that place for myself. No, I have not discovered a mythical paradise or “perfect place”, just one that I feel I can grow in, in a somewhat healthy way despite any inevitable drawbacks. I have found a place to explore, understand, and become part of. But mostly, I have found this place within myself. It is possible that I may be subconsciously idealizing this (at least enough to allow myself to propagate some roots), and I understand well that people travel to live temporarily or seasonally in various regions for many reasons: financial, family, opportunities, novelty, change, and comfort, to name a few, and there are obviously benefits for some to live in this manner. But what is traded for these benefits? How does one connect beyond a superficial appreciation or tourist-like perception if their roots never intensely

practice? How do we balance a perceived deep understanding with the dangers of thinking we know what is best?

We are living in the land of the lost, where we are shattered and disconnected from the perpetuity and endless cycles of our existence, immensely constant, dynamically in the midst of radical change, and subtly growing and dying; one of being. We can be lost anywhere; far away, down the road, where we reside, or in our heads. It might be enjoyable if anywhere we hung our hat was home, and maybe some can live that, but to me, it seems, that a deep connection to place brings a wholeness with it, one of being at home. One of belonging, or at least trying to belong, to something different, something alive, rather than one of perpetual collisions and temporarily coinciding with things springing from the motivations of civilization. Maybe for some this is holding up in a forest canyon with some folks figuring out how to live with the place, for others it may be forming relationships with a few places, and for some, never embracing any place. But the road has its own chains, because chasing freedom, seems to me, leaves you running on the chase rather than the stuff of life. The grass is not usually any greener despite our continuing fickleness. I don't want to be a transplant forever. I may never be indigenous to a place, but I can be part of it. I'd rather be fully present, plant roots, and live and create where I'm at, than always hoping its just a little better down the road...

ing” can bridge this gap in theory and practice. I tend to think that “rewilding” has much to do with decivilizing our minds. Allowing ourselves to open up to situations and experiences without the ceaseless baggage of civilization (or at least consciously minimizing the unhealthy appendages) is essential in initiating the experience of going feral. For many, however, it remains solely an intellectual and rhetorical procedure, with most practice avoided because of its impurity, or effort required. If it does get physical, it typically repeats certain survival skills over and over. Practical skills like starting fires, building shelters, skinning roadkill, etc. are significant, but more involved explorations and connecting to the world we inhabit seem to require a long-term immersion into living in a place and with people. Beginning to know our world is a slow process, one we are coming into damaged. Those who are born into connected relationships do not learn through scar tissue, but through eyes which have never stared blankly upon a computer screen, or maybe even a printed word. They develop relationships with their world with ears that have never heard a jackhammer or the beep of an alarm clock, but instead, the sound of wind approaching, a critter chewing, or a fire crackling. They explore their world on feet that have never walked on the unforgivingness of concrete, with hands that have not been trained to push buttons and type on keyboards. They kiss with mouths that have never uttered useless rhetoric and digest foods in stomachs which do not know processed sugars or mass produced starches. They come into the world whole and, hopefully, remain there. Despite our impediment, we too can connect. But we need to start somewhere, some place.

New questions arise, only to suggest even more, and none of them are easy or cut-and-dried. How do we assess our negative impact on a place? Can we be a part of healing wounds humans created and be a part of restoration? How do we begin to heal and reintegrate? Where do transitional concepts fit into an anti-civilization

penetrate? How do we develop communities based on deep affinity, trust, and understanding of one another if we are always transient in nature? Without some level of long-term engagement with each other, without a place, how do we maintain combined mutual projects and ongoing explorations that help us to achieve greater autonomy and self-sufficiency as communities with less and less dependence on the system? How might we explore the balance between change and constancy, between motion and stillness? These are just some questions which initially come to mind when examining the differences between a more nomadic and a more fixed reality within the context we currently inhabit and possible future situations. **Questions for the nomadic wanderer in all of us...**

Often, the contemporary nomadic wanderer claims to have a freer life by not being bogged down by the baggage of a more sedentary existence (commitments, accumulation of things, perceived limits of the area), that they can spontaneously decide to go anywhere and do anything at anytime based solely on their desires. This, beyond being a generally rhetorical position, does not acknowledge the baggage of the wanderer and sets up absolutist straw arguments and false dichotomies. It does seem that the more sedentary a life becomes, the more potential there is for certain dynamics that one might view as problematic, but this is certainly no given, and perhaps a partial trade-off for other dynamics that might be seen as more desirable. Personally, I aspire to a bioregional-centered existence, one which might include shorter seasonal travels between more permanent nodes, areas, or encampments, rather than a sedentary one, which implies a passive, inert, and inanimate existence too rigid for integration into organic ebbs and flows, not to mention personal desires. But to be placeless surely has its drawbacks. Regardless of the level of independence, the wanderer typically needs to rely on those with a more permanent situation for many basic needs, ones that often require a more fixed situation like shelter, grown food, storage, stability, and the intimate knowledge of local resources, to name a few. Also, the continuity of a

localized social dynamic is often supported by those who remain, offering the wanderer situations to enter into with little responsibility for making them happen. They become consumers and spectators of a living community. Often, they become the biggest critics of these situations, while risking very little to change them since there is little ongoing connection. These critiques can be a useful detached perspective, but they often lack a deeper understanding of ongoing dynamics. For many who wander, there seems to be a perpetual dissatisfaction with wherever they are and what they are doing, stemming partly from their context, and perhaps, a lapse of creativity, confidence, or motivation. Others desperately fear being “out of the loop” or “missing out” on what is occurring everywhere else, creating an inability to focus attention on where they currently are. This, perhaps, somewhat explains “scene-hopping”, and the massive influx of “lost souls” and people who wanted to be where the action was when Eugene was a hotspot in the late ‘90s and early ‘00s, and similar spots since then, rather than creating something unique where they were. Then there is, of course, always the overly-generous suggestion that the traveler brings a unique perspective and the stories and songs of other places. This can surely be a positive thing, but it also tends to become a specialized role for those either unwilling or unable to take responsibility for their own nourishment and needs and to deal with the perceived ups and downs of being part of a living community and a place.

Some present the life of the traveler or seasonal dweller as closer to how many gatherer-hunters live(d) outside (or before) civilization, but beyond mostly superficial aspects there really is no comparison. The resemblance is poetic if nothing else. Not to idealize any life-way or flatten those with very unique characteristics, nomadic gatherer-hunters do not typically travel outside of a larger bioregion — moving up and down valleys and rivers, from coast to mountains, wetter weather to drier, etc — but rarely to another side of a continent, across vast spaces, or to dramatically divergent

comfort. While some wish to go where the sun is always shining, this seems to be a somewhat cursory and one dimensional aspect of place and reminds me of the fictional safety of New Agers who only want to think “positive thoughts” or a Beach Boys record, two things I just can’t seem to develop a taste for. This endless summer mentality is, in my opinion, a disconnected perspective. The cycles of a season inform much of what a place is. For instance, where I live, the green summers are directly related to the wet winters. Specific life has developed here because of the particulars of the place. This is the case everywhere. There are essential factors of a place which make it what it is, and understanding them and moving within (rather than against them or placing value on them) connect us. When we continually rip ourselves from it, recontextualize ourselves, we become dislocated, and possibly, neurotic, obtaining a virtual “high” from this dislocation, and philosophically rationalizing it as a “more free” existence. We may even develop an addiction or perceived need for this perpetual relocation. But, except for migratory birds that naturally have the ability to fly and have evolved over time in this unique way to travel great distances seasonally, civilized humans are the only terrestrial creatures that move such great distances and complete transformation of setting with the seasons. This has only been an option, to the scale, amount, and frequency that currently transpires, with mass society and technology.

I think most anarchists, including myself, tend to prioritize the “breaking away from” tendency. A necessary and understandable response to our condition as civilized humans. But, I think we are often intimidated and lost when we attempt to advocate for, and even more so, connect to, anything. We become hyper-critical of everything. While it is essential to move with constant critique, if it is at the level of paralysis and absolute pessimism, it is ultimately useless. Hyper-anything is typically a sign of overcompensation concealing an emptiness, rather than an open-ended, yet clear and precise understanding and actualization. The concept of “rewild-

and constancy? There are so many levels to these questions, compounded with individual and collective perspectives and priorities, but it seems to me that the more time spent in a relationship (if that time is spent in open, active, honest, and inquisitive intimacy), the deeper it may become, the more intertwined and supportive it can be. Where nomadism (in its most positive sense) can accumulate a wide variety of experiences, lessons, and substance for living, it tends to be restricted in other ways. What do the nomadic wanderers, perpetual travelers, and the generally unsettled trade for the benefits of a less attached and consistent existence? There is an intimacy with place (or at least there can be, and seems to be with uncivilized peoples, and less civilized earth-based cultures) that feels too deep to grasp without not only weeks, or seasons, or even years in a place, but with generations upon generations of people who share their stories, techniques, and perceptions. There is not only the dynamic experience of living with a place that could contain in it all aspects of sustenance (on many levels), but also the collective experience of living with others in connection. These relationships connect us to life. These seem to be what have been most severed, isolated, distorted, and alienated in the modern human experience.

Our relationship with climate, seasons, local foods and medicines are important factors in connecting us to place. Again, relationships connect us, and the more we have with a place, the more connected we may become. Living through season upon season with a place offers us a wide variety, and yet similar experiences, to create connection. Our interaction may become more fluid, interactive, and organic as we transition into a place. Whereas, the transient perspective on “ideal climate” is odd to me, one I believe has much to do with our socialized needs to be “conventionally comfortable” with as little effort as possible. Rather than allowing our bodies to adjust to changes around us and challenging our mind’s trained expectations, we tend to drastically alter our surroundings or relocate to an entirely different place to keep the dry and 72 degree supposed “ideal” condition for human

terrains, climates, and cultures. This is most likely for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the lack of modern technological transportation systems, as the perimeters of their world is determined by their own feet, something any post-civilized (non-massified) existence would also entail. It makes sense to me that long-term strategies might want to take this into account. Terrain, plant species, animals, climate, and other localized patterns surely have variety in pedal route, but more along a gradual shift or gradation, in which much of the make-up and life of an area remains relatively congruous, or at least fairly predictable as one understands and moves within it. Gatherer-hunters don’t seem to just wander around and stumble upon nourishment for sustaining their life, but instead, they appear to mostly follow ancestral routes and techniques passed on through annual journeys and procedures (not that dissimilar from other migratory animals) and through an instinctual understanding of place. Specific treks might be varied, but they are usually modified more by things like the foods available based on that year’s weather than any particular whim (not that this might not be a factor as well), but still along the same general recognized route. Their journeys seem to be about their survival and understanding of the patterns around them, not merely thrill-seeking. They know the foods, medicines, dangers, and crucial places along the way. There is a perpetual nature and connectedness to their travels, not haphazard drifting or scene hopping. This may not jive with some purists of anarchist dogma who wish to do anything at anytime, regardless of petty physical limitations like eating, but it does have very important relevance pertaining to taking responsibility for our own survival and living with other patterns of life, from which our unique beings may thrive in connection to others in a shared home.

But enough about gatherer-hunters, as we are not them (at least not in practice or in socialized mindset). While I do believe gatherer-hunters are humans in their most animalistic form (that I have yet to see or understand, but certainly not limited to), and

thus how we evolved as part of the natural world in a connected and sustainable way, their situation is not exclusively relevant to us right now. Unfortunately civilized humans have significantly altered the planet and our current footprint (carbon and otherwise) does not match that of a gatherer-hunter. Although I may slowly move more in that general direction, this mode of living offers only a nugget of inspiration and wisdom, within a larger context, to the ways we might live healthier, less oppressive to other beings, and free, both now and in the near future. Considering the immense destruction that civilization has unfurled on the planet, with forests turned into deserts, oceans serving as toxic dumps, rivers fashioned into dammed irrigation ditches and power plants, thousands upon thousands of species relegated to the domains of tales and history, and humans converted into production equipment and consuming implements, it is hard to imagine a foraging lifestyle for many, at least not until a prolonged period of recovery has ensued and a dramatic reduction in human population occurs. The agrarian lifestyle, however, offers too many of the traps that we are currently entangled in, with considerable manipulation and control of almost all environmental factors, tremendous resource extraction and displacement, not to mention surplus and the social institutions which seem to inevitably come along with it. The turn to an agrarian based lifestyle seems to be at the elemental stages of civilization, which may have introduced the development of social stratification, taboos, subjugation, religion, cities, and government. Also, as a step away from living within a symbiotic relationship with the rest of one's environment, it may have led to a disconnect and psychological shift, not to mention a dramatic increase in population and resource depletion.

To me, one of the more interesting and realistic possibilities for humans wanting to reintegrate into the patterns of life in a more sustainable and less manipulative way is a life as foraging-horticulturists, combining the most useful and least controlling methods of both. Obviously, its parameters are extremely site spe-

cific, dependant on plant and animal species still remaining and the climate and terrain of an area, and has a limiting factor as far as scale, thus prioritizing small-scaled environmentally connected communities. It is also a very practical entry into a more connected reality, one that could transition from a more garden-dependant practice to a more wild one, but existing somewhere on that continuum or consisting of a thoughtful blending of strategies for sustenance and self-organization. Perma-culture is but one concept that offers some interesting ideas on a transitional space between these methods of food procurement and interaction with the world. This approach is not too dissimilar from certain native peoples who minimally planted or seasonally altered their landscape as compensation for temporary or long-term deficiencies in wild foods, and as populations began to increase, or as a method of dealing with the beginning stages of or recovery from colonization. To me, this exploration makes more sense for our situation than any ideologically driven absolutist purity about returning to our "true nature". Approaching this delicate balance with critical thought of our impacts, tendencies, methods, and mindsets, and with abundant creativity, we could begin to live as autonomous communities that value individual freedom, collective vision, and ecological balance. Rather than endlessly and exclusively study gatherer-hunters, who admittedly offer extremely vital examples of humans thriving within the balance of wild areas, it might be more advantageous to put some emphasis on understanding and learning from those who live(d) healthily on more marginal lands and situations (those who are active participants in their world, in a balanced way, without developing unhealthy social dynamics often attributed to others who plant food.) and utalizing the applicable lessons, combined with our own particular desires, to a specific place.

But this is beginning to turn into a different essay. So, briefly contemplating the concept of the foraging-horticulturists, or really any small-scale earth-based community, how do nomadism and sedentism relate, and how might we explore the balance between change