

THE ORDINARY STREET,
THE STOREHOUSE OF TREASURES

Susan Murphy

In old-fashioned stores, still sometimes to be found in country towns, you could once see a sign in the window that reassured you: 'Feel free to look around. No obligation to buy'. An era that obviously still respected dreaming forms of awareness; still respected people; in fact, had not yet invented 'consumers'. I pay homage to that old vanishing courtesy by taking its invitation much further, out of the shop and into the street.

Zen literature, the mirror to the world as it comes forward in the depths of meditation, is replete with exquisite imagery extending deep recognition to the natural world, both because of the barely urban world in which Taoism, Ch'an and Zen arose, and because of the kinds of places in which monasteries, temples and hermitages tend to be built. Mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, grasses, clouds, blossoms and moon richly elaborate and differentiate our own most intimate self, more readily, maybe, than the world of streets and fire hydrants and electricity sub-stations.

The flower in the grass may point the Way with humble ease. But what about wall rubble and discarded plastic toys and a broken tile in the weeds? That too is where we live; it is a fragment of our regular world of human trouble and riches, and it waits to meet with us. I suggest we can well afford to love it, tend it with our open attention, redeem it with our full imagination. To fail to truly attend to it is to lay waste the place right where we are, where we live our lives. It is to agree to live with indifference.

Is indifference so bad? Well, strange as it may first sound, it is a kind of terrorism, which from one angle of view may be thought of as the extreme expression of contemptuous indifference for the human world. A friend who is an eco-philosopher¹ has suggested the only truly dangerous places in our human world are the only truly unloved ones. The concrete canyon of a freeway, the dark, fluoro-lit intestines of a grease-stained car parking station, the urine-desecrated stairwell... Is it possible to feel the propensity of things, to lean into contentment, even here?

When we recognise a place, or an aspect of a place, when we bless it with our inner recognition, then we know it to be part of us, and something can begin to live there. A home is made, a haven, in the most unlikely place. Until then, we dump there everything that we do not like about ourselves, and it will seep back into our dreams like toxic waste.

Counter-terrorism, in this sense, is to actively take up the practice of loving the order of matter generally. This is not the act of shopping, of turning compulsively towards material goods as though suffering and loss may be magically eased by that hankering. It is more subtly the act of not turning away, of not breaking faith with the things of this world. It is feeling for the mysteries beneath appearances, without picking and choosing – in other words, the far side of shopping.

So you can wander across an abandoned lot and begin to discover the suggestive fragments and relics of human life preserved in it, partly breaking the surface, moulded into ephemeral sculpture. Or an improbable cluster of objects strange to one another but embedded together in strange kinship and richly art-directed by time. You can become an *aficionado* of outback goldfield rubbish tips, where gadgets

¹ Freya Mathews, 'Becoming Native to the City', *Blind Donkey*, 18 (1) Summer 1998: pp.12-17.

grown extraordinary and unintelligible by time have become welded and melded by rust into things both beautiful and so gone they can never be explained. When you feel free to look around, many of the beauties arise through a secret love of ruins, and fascination with the sea-change of time; and others come with the sheen of nostalgia – but in its perverse mode, unsentimental.

A flattened tin can, as blood-red in its rust as the red dust that the heart so loves out there among the olive-grey saltbushes, can be a treasure to take home with you – on its upturned base, an imprint of the map of Australia. When you handle it, red dust fine as incense ash, silt-layer memory of an ancient sea, lightly coats your fingers. The red silt salt in the lines of your palm restores the meaning ‘nostalgia’ has, in its older, Latin roots, the sense of ‘our old (sweet) shared pain’: the ability to hold the bitter until it joins up with all sweetness.

Each treasure starts with a sense of the world as distinct and penetrating, a little piece of the world’s grit trapped in the soft wet open eye. It is something like a pearl. The grit or grain of the world washes in to the tender open oyster of the embodied self and leaves its residue – a kind of suffering accepted. Then it can suffer a slow sea-change, in the depths of psyche, memory, imagination, and the abrasions of the world become gradually pearlescent, many layered, spun around the embedded injury to make it no longer alien but tolerable, included, and strangely beautiful over time. So this receptiveness to the world is a powerful practice – accepting the pain of openness in a human body, and turning that way. It is the act of holding carefully, and looking again: the literal meaning of the word ‘respect’, to look again. Respect restores the house and holds up the gate. It redeems us from the half-life of being barely present.

A storehouse of treasures is opening of its own accord inside your self. Just letting it in is part of it. The rest is the willingness to play. That is the fantastic, uncalled-for, inspired movement back towards the suffering, the forgotten or unloved or overlooked thing. That is the real meeting.

Such a sense of play is a true antidote to terrorism and its mortal fear of life, its aloofness from the complexity and duration of suffering, and its literally deadly disrespect for the comical and lovely human effort of making a world. I want to call our common comical, lovely, ugly human world 'the street', the shared social space we build and desecrate together. And I want to ask, what happens if we agree to fully live in the glorious mixed feast of the street? What secret dimension of play, what unexpected home-coming, may that open up in us?

Just as you might dream your way into the inner life of a honeysucker hatchling by finger, inwardly entering the downy inside of a tiny abandoned nest, to freely look around in the street demands that you find its imaginative resonance, that you dream and play your way in. To take up the street with your imagination and follow its back-ways into time is to allow the overlooked and overgrown and half-ruined faces of the street to become the topography of your most intimate being. As Gary Snyder says, bringing together these two kinds of mind:

As for towns and cities – they are (to those who can see) old tree trunks, riverbed gravels, oil seeps, landslide scrapes, blowdowns and burns, the leavings after floods, coral colonies, paper-wasp nests, beehives, rotting logs, watercourses, rock-cleavage lines, guano heaps, feeding frenzies, courting and strutting bowers, look-out rocks, and ground-squirrel

apartments. And for a few people, they are also palaces...²

In my own looking around I have met people who were storm-water-tunnel walkers; people who even walked the underground train system in the quiet between midnight and 3a.m. on Sunday nights, searching for the ‘false starts’, the abandoned tracks, the odd buildings said to be left in there in obscure appendices; people who visited disused gasworks, brick-pits, the underneath of old wharves;³ people who boated up the old industrial canals of Sydney, who combed land-fill sites and took Sewage Treatment Works tours; people who knew about the underground passageways linking old mental asylums with landing-stages on the harbour... I did not just meet them, I joined them.

I have slipped past the guards of many a ‘private’ industrial road, sauntered round the backs of things, poked my nose into the cracks, hung around the parts marked ‘Danger. No Entry Except To Authorised Person’. You find your right to be free to look around even there. Especially there! There is a lovely freedom in momentarily stepping back into the privilege freely taken by children and withdrawing the diplomatic recognition adults extend to authority, which enables you to find the gap in the cyclone wire fence, to saunter along in that heightened state of casual alertness, to explore beyond the bounds of official permission, to just have a good look around....

I have begun to recognise other denizens of these layers of the street world, time-rich, nostalgic, incurably curious. In Ben Katchor’s cartoon strips collected as *Cheap Novelties*:

² Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, Northpoint Press, San Francisco, 1990.

³ Collected from strips first published 1988-91 in the *New York Press*, *Miami New Times*, Washington DC *City Paper*, Providence RI *Nice Papers*, and the *San Diego Reader*.

the pleasures of urban decay,⁴ a fedora-hatted Jewish New York real-estate photographer Julius Knipl patiently walks the streets, his Box Brownie camera strapped to his back like a pilgrim's knapsack. Knipl has a sixth sense for obscure bus routes facing extinction as the places they link drift out of real relationship, notices how the telephone books in public places begin to yellow and roll their tattered leaves as their replacement date approaches with its inexorable season, finds comfort in the sight of a remnant smokestack standing useless and abandoned in a corner of the city because no-one can afford to demolish it, notices how the scar of a sidewalk excavation takes years to completely heal and blend from sight, can predict the kinds of businesses that will tend to cluster at the last stop on any subway line.... They are, for the curious, a trophy manufacturer, a movie theatre converted into a business school, the offices of a wedding orchestra, a bus drivers' uniform and supply store, an illegal franchise of a defunct fast-food chain, and at the most extreme limit, a plastic slip-cover showroom for furniture is even possible....

The Yiddish word for little treasure to put away for a rainy day, little nest-egg that the palm of your mind can hold, is a *knipl*. Julius Knipl has an eye that can see a New York right down to the 1930s strata of the street. Ben Katchor himself gives an example of a *knipl*:

The best ones are things I never saw the interest in before. Like, today, I was walking down the street and noticed a very faded, tattered, almost illegible old sign, a sign from – who knows? – maybe forty, fifty years ago, warning about rat poison... I mean, think about it: the rats are long gone, the people who posted

⁴ Collected from strips first published 1988-91 in the *New York Press*, *Miami New Times*, *Washington DC City Paper*, *Providence RI Nice Papers*, and the *San Diego Reader*.

the warning are gone, the people they are warning are gone. The sign's still there. It's a knipl.⁵

Knipls are always touched by time, carry evidence about their secret tidal shifts. And each one offers a tiny private joy. When you recognise a knipl, you will notice the very act opens a private lair for dreaming right there inside the moment, on even the most bleak or shelterless street. The ground keeps opening to such secret happiness, and the most unprepossessing street becomes valuable.

Architects are only the inaugural dreamers of the built environment; what they make are merely the props for all the other dreamers. On the street, and there is a deep well-being in this, all of us have right of way, a share in it. The streets, it turns out, even the most unlovely ones, are brilliantly art-designed stages for our dreaming minds. And streets have life of their own that we share in but do not own. It is a special joy, on the street, to be only one of the dreamers. In it, you blend your dreams with strangers. Some kinds of street are less alive to you than others, but a street has life the moment it grows interested in you, 'has an interest', as Katchor said. Then it will talk to you, waft smells at you, set off trains of inner connection and dreaming.

The street is a midden of the human world and every thing in the midden has its proper place in our attention as it descends through the layers of time, acquiring 'pearlescence'. Each thing in the human midden belongs to a natural poetry that the great Yun-men spoke word for word when he challenged his monks with, 'Everyone has his own light. If you want to see it, you can't', and then responded to his own implicit question with, 'The store-room. The gate.'⁶ The kerosene lamp on the kitchen bench.

⁵ Interview, *New Yorker*, March 17, 1993.

⁶ Case 86, *The Blue Cliff Record*, trans. Thomas Cleary and J.C. Cleary, Shambhala, Boston, 1992, pp.472-4.

The box of cabbages. The verandah. The front step. No-one can go past poetry of this force. (Yet everyday we do, we pass over it as if it were not the breath of God on our faces!)

Martin Buber, in his *Tales of the Hasidim*, enters the same gate in his tiny story of the understanding of a seventeenth century Polish Hasidic master.

The Rav once asked his son: ‘What do you pray with?’ The son understood the meaning of the question, namely on what he based his prayer. He answered, ‘With the verse: Every stature shall prostrate itself before thee.’ Then he asked his father, ‘And what do you pray with?’ The Rav said, ‘With the floor, the bench.’

The floor, the bench, should not be seen here as means to an end: they not only bear rich witness to prayer, they are themselves prayers straight to the centre of all things. Try this: close your eyes and gently press on the surface of the table or chair where you sit. Let your fingers meet not just the grain of the wood, the patina of past touch, the well-worn places and the less touched. Let them meet the exquisitely subtle and pleasurable answering return of pressure from the chair, floor, wall, that completely meets the soft pressure of your fingers – an exchange that brings a satisfaction too deep for words. It is a beautiful little shock to remember this: you never have to go more than halfway, and the universe becomes the accomplice of all your wishes.⁷ A Zen master was once asked how one should practice. He asked the student, ‘Can you hear the sound of

⁷ To paraphrase Jacques Lusseyrans, *And There Was Light: Blind Hero of the French Resistance*, Parabola Books, N.Y. 1998, p.27. ‘If I put my hand on the table without pressing it, I knew the table was there, but I knew nothing about it. To find out, my fingers had to bear down, and the amazing thing is that the pressure was answered by the table at once. Being blind, I thought I should have to go out and meet things, but I found that they came to meet me instead.’

the little stream at the foot of the hill?’ The student listened, and then confirmed that he could. ‘Enter there’, said the master.

A late twentieth century shopping mall is not quite a fit place for feeling free to look around, for dreaming. On the air-conditioned privatised ‘street’ your rights are restricted. The fluorescent bath of denatured light (we are all suspects) is a part of the trauma, the trapped effluvium of electronic sound is another... You can not doss down on a bench there. You can’t escape the forced muzak and announcements. In fact it is often frustratingly difficult to escape at all – the rare exits are marked in such very small print. Real choice, real surprise, real discovery are very limited – is this why sleepiness falls like a pall? Something has been fatally pre-digested, like the ‘imagination’ called for by a video game. You are welcomed by the Cheshire Cat of commerce just as long as you consume, present a willingness to be consumed.

The proper pace of feeling free to look around is lazily slow, idiosyncratically detailed, and half-entranced. It is the pace at which you might stop and stare and see the almost unseeable gap between two buildings, a gap big enough to let your eye look in and grow dark-adapted and begin to see all the things that have been poked in there over time, and your nose to register the dankness of things down near the mystery area where a building meets the earth.

In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin explored Baudelaire’s Paris through the *flâneur*, the idle stroller whose slow and purposeless peregrinations brought the city into being. The *flâneur* ‘goes botanising on the pavement’, writes Benjamin. And then he notes (astonishingly!): ‘Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The *flâneurs* liked to have the turtles set the pace for them.’ For social and technological historian John Stilgoe, the *flâneur* may become a bicyclist *explorer*,

gleaning from the ordinary and therefore nearly imperceptible oddities of the human world (seeing ‘what no-one photographs’, noticing ‘what no-one realises’) a harvest of intimate historical sensitivity:

Outdoors, away from things experts have already explained, the slightly thoughtful person willing to look around carefully for a few minutes, to scrutinise things about which he or she knows nothing in particular, begins to be aware, to notice, to explore. And almost always that person starts to understand, to see great cultural and social and economic and political patterns unnoticed by journalists and other experts. In that understanding may come a desire to cry out to tell [people] about discoveries great and small, but the understanding may just as well produce a secrecy, a quiet smile, a satisfied nod.... It brings a near magic to the traveller...⁸.

The discoveries may range from the kinds of trees and shrubs ‘installed’ as landscaping to motel and fast-food franchises found at freeway intersections (in North America, it is dwarf conifers on bark mulch, house-broken pet plants that can be planted close together, therefore looking ‘mature’ from the beginning, but that will never get bushy, touch each other, or demand pruning); to the unlandscaped backlot where employees park and musicians struggle with their equipment, where the air is scented with laundry detergents, overwhelmed septic systems in the vacant lot just through the chainwire fence, and the unemptied Dumpster.

Or he may explore the backs of a commercial strip and discover the secret network of rutted short-cuts edged in morning glory: the oily film of dumped solvents in the puddle that the loping dog avoids; the heavily graffitied

⁸ John R. Stilgoe, *Outside Lies Magic: regaining history and awareness in everyday places*, Walker Publishing Co, 1998, p.186.

walls of the back of the supermarket; the patterns of rise and fall of businesses; the debris left behind like terminal moraine: 'The explorer walking and looking and thinking realises that the commercial strip is a sort of business ecosystem with its own dinosaurs, its own predators, its own survivors.'⁹

The secrets of railroad-building, highway construction, the remnants of technology decayed and the stories these tell...

Noticing dates on cast-iron storm-drain grates and fire hydrants introduces something of the shift of iron-founding from Worcester and Pittsburgh south to Chattanooga and Birmingham. [They] are touchable, direct links with larger concepts, portals into the past of industrialisation.¹⁰

Closer to home, the manhole covers in Sydney streets, portals to many kinds of underworlds, are usually machine-pressed, though various and interesting; but you can still find hand-wrought examples, made more beautiful by their detectable irregularities, in inner-city Glebe and Paddington. Stilgoe's explorer takes or makes any right of way, leading herself as secretly as any coyote deeper and deeper into the little seen landscapes of the everyday and its live traces of a certain feral historical intelligence awaiting playful discovery.

When you touch such a nest for dreaming, right there on the homeless street, even the most routine city moment becomes a journey. Once you place one foot into the unknown and the other in the most deeply recessed self, you are in liminal space, travelling, any day of the week, right in your own home town. There is a pilgrimage aspect to this, too. The little 'stations' of discovery can be revisited and celebrated: a small and secret homage to a

⁹ Ibid. p.87.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.6.

crack in ordinary banality through which the light has shown itself. You can take other pilgrims to share your arcane joys, to strengthen the sacred as it stands up in the ordinary. Walking is a pilgrim's wisdom. The categories of the 'ordinary marvellous' opened up on foot cannot be praised enough.

And so letting the streets flow like water, mutable and empty, and entering the flow, mutable and empty as water – this is to encounter walls, tiles and pebbles as mind.

They passed eons living alone in the mountains and forests; only then did they unite with the Way and use mountains and rivers for words, raise the wind and rain for a tongue, and explain the great void,

says Dogen of the old Zen hermits and teachers. In the hermitage of the everyday, we have to learn to talk the language and become the silence not just of mountains and rivers, but also the median strip between the sucking slipstreams of the traffic, the flare of neon in the mist, the rain staining a concrete apartment block, the broken tile in the weeds....

Just follow the little tug of curious interest somewhere in your chest, and curl your palm inward around the *knipis* as they collect you into the treasury of the ten thousand things. Follow the longing in belonging. It takes little more than missing your bus and walking in the rain those five blocks, finding the streets are black mirrors and the rain light deforms each thing just beyond its habitual invisibility.... Enter there.