

DEMENTIA'S ILLUMINATION OF THE SACRED

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"Where am I? Will somebody please tell me where I am?" Alice calls in polite despair. I explain that we are in a nursing home in Church Street Fitzroy. She nods and remarks politely that she thinks she knew someone who went to that place once. I settle back into feeding my Dad, who suffers from advanced Alzheimer's disease. Two minutes later, Alice asks me again, "Excuse me dear, could you please tell me where I am?"

I feel deeply for Alice: it's not her fault that she doesn't know where she is; and yet the constant repetition of her question inevitably uses up the patience of painstaking nursing staff. If, as we are discovering in Australia, the spirit of place is a source of the sacred, then Alice could perhaps be said to be wandering in her own private purgatory, one which she suffers not because of her misdeeds but because of her symptom of dementia.

Dementia with the disorientation which it typically entails can surely tell us a lot about the central role that the spirit of place plays in human experience. My mum tried to care for Dad as long as possible at home, because everyone said he'd do better in his familiar surroundings. He did. Once he was away from home, far from the place he knew best, he was often in distress, trying to work out what was going on without the security of his makeshift laboratory in our back laundry.

He constantly tried to bring his skills (exercised in another place where he had been chief of a team of scientists) to bear on his *new* situation. Once, when he was taken out with a group of residents for an excursion to a country house, he got up and made a speech of thanks as though he was personally in charge of the arrangements.

The staff told Mum this story with amusement, but it gave her great pain, as it does me to tell it, even years later. I'm glad Oscar Wilde pointed out that where there is sorrow there is holy ground. The use of the word sorrow elevates this kind of sadness to a point of poignant beauty where it seems to belong to the dignity perhaps of the Hebrew melody, often sung as

a round to that great Biblical lament, "By the waters of Babylon we lay down and wept, wept for thee Oh Zion. We remember, we remember, we remember thee Zion."

But then the places Dad remembered started to drop back to a time earlier in his life. Who was it who wrote, "I remember, I remember the house where I was born"? Dad was remembering his mum, my grandmother, in the house of his childhood. It was Gaston Bachelard in his fine book, *The Poetics of Space*, who observed that "Before he is 'cast into the world', man is laid in the cradle of the house. And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle."

And so, I've come to learn from Dad's experience and from conversations with my dignified but demented friends in his nursing home that the place which we know well is a "cradle", a central source of our identity. As we lose our memory, it is the place we understand intimately which makes us feel we may still have a secure existence. And when at last we can't recognise where we are we cry "Where am I?" It is the most haunting request I have ever had to answer.

But how does this loss of the place which gives us our sense of self, how does this sorrowful state indicate that the familiar place is "holy ground", as Wilde calls it? Why is the spirit of the place we know well a source of the sacred?

As we read and talk to our Aboriginal friends we learn that *their* sacred places figure in stories of the Dreamtime, their spiritual or "sacred" world. A boulder is the back of an animal, a hill is the location of a celebratory campfire, or a mountain is the figure of a spirit returned from the mysterious beyond. I expect older dementing Aboriginal people may have been able to choose to stay near their sacred places in their own well-known landscapes until they died. I don't know, of course, but maybe the experience of merging with the spirit of a place in death was part of letting go of life and moving into the source of the sacred.

But we have built roughshod over our landmarks, and we have blasted the skin of the earth until it assumes the shape we require for our industrial purposes. We have covered over the waterways until they have

become dank and deadly drains, and we have removed the natural flora which nurtured the animals who belonged here.

We have no shared sacred places in the Aboriginal sense. Certainly landscape has been important in our history, as Schama brilliantly explores in his work *Landscape and Memory*. Perhaps some people still have a memory of a special church or landscape which is central to their spirituality. Delia Falconer shows us how this can be used in her novel *The Service of Clouds*. Her invocation of the Blue Mountains' weather and landscape intensified my reading of that place beyond what I had imagined possible. But I think such persons may be a diminishing minority. As we have become more private in our personal lives, we don't share many non-commercial places. Community development specialists have tried to create them in neighbourhood houses, refuges or community drop-in centres, but they aren't shared enough to make them really sacred, not in the sense of an Aboriginal sacred space or even in the sense which we dimly perceive as we look at a mysterious Celtic cairn on a trip to Ireland.

No, only those of us who are lucky enough to have lived in one place for a reasonable period of time develop some sense of the sacred. Usually this sacred place is right inside the house we've lived in. Bachelard has pointed out that we can sensibly say we can "read a house" or "read a room", and that they can guide us in an analysis of our intimacy.

Often the altar of the house is in the kitchen. I would propose that the altar is usually the kitchen table, around which countless meals have been shared. Our big rectangular wooden table has served as the central prop around which argument, exchange of stories and cups of tea have been the currency, perhaps for generations.

It was at this table that my mother alerted us to the possibility of a biological holocaust unless we heeded the warnings in Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring*. It was at this table that my father reverently explained to us the process of photosynthesis. I can still recall his face, lit with excitement, his hands held in a gesture of wonder as though almost to touch that miraculous process, that translation of sunlight into the tender green and growth of plant life. Photosynthesis had become the focus of his work in his

later years. It seemed to describe the very source of his spirit, and his passion for spreading an understanding of it was nothing short of evangelical. He would explain about the fragility of the food chains on which we depended as we ate our meal, and warn us about the dangers of interfering with the balance of these delicate biological systems. The ecology of the earth was my parents' religion, and our table was its altar. Their regular invocation of the idea of photosynthesis had become a ritual.

And there lies the nub of a sacred place, in the rituals which have been undertaken in its vicinity. That's why, when I wanted to replace our large rectangular table which belonged to great aunts Sissie and Ada, my children shouted at me down the phone from their long distance locations. "No, don't you dare sell that table". "But", I said, "it's really too big and this other one is much more convenient", but they weren't having it, and the great aunts' table stayed.

Our sacred place is where the friends and family and relatives have gathered, just as the Aboriginal sacred places are where the corroborees and special ceremonies are held. Places which become sources of the sacred for us owe their spirit to the rituals that happen between people, like singing or telling stories or eating. They have certain repeated features or formats like the mass or matins of the church service. Whether it is clearing the ground for a corroboree, or putting out the hymnbooks or setting the table, there are preparatory rituals, and then the shared event unfolds using the symbols which have become redolent with meaning.

And so I've begun to realise just how cruel it is to put our old people who are losing their memories in a home where the rituals nourished by repeated use in personally sacred places are no longer performed. I know that the loss of our kitchen table was a source of sorrow for my Dad. I instinctively feel that he still craves to hear the inflections of our kitchen table conversations even now around his bed.

The only positive effect of this appreciation of Dad's loss has been my new understanding and respect for the ritual of a shared meal around the altar/table in our own grubby kitchen. My Dad's sorrow has taught me just how sacred a kitchen table can become.

But as I was thinking about this role of rituals in the creation of sacred spaces, I turned to some of the literature about religious symbols. Michael Lawler talks about the Jews' great *seder* meal in which they say, "This is the bread of affliction our fathers ate in Egypt" and about the Christian ritual in which we recall the Master's words, "This is my body". Quoting Cassirer, Lawler points out that "a genuine human symbol is characterised not by its uniformity, but by its versatility. It is not rigid or inflexible but mobile."

Can this mobility of symbols, I found myself wondering, be of any use as we lose our sense of place? I remembered Oliver Sack's work, in which he describes the reverence which people suffering dementia continue to adopt when attending a church service. I pondered the way my chaplain friend reports that a member of her congregation, after years of silence suffered as a symptom of advanced dementia, lifted her head up high in chapel and sang a hymn, word perfect and in full voice, only to lapse into her previous mute state immediately after.

Do these symbols recreate a sense of place and hence restore identity, I wondered? If, as Michael Lawler suggests, symbols make concretely present what they symbolise, then religious symbols perhaps have the power to bring back into the present the spirit of places which have been the source of the sacred. Perhaps a demented person *can* reach back to the spirit of place through a symbol which is flexible and transferable.

I thought about my father, not a highly religious man but someone who valued the things of the spirit. I became sad about our lack of shared rituals beyond our family table. Where were the communal rituals through which he could recapture his sense of the sacred now? What symbols in his life had the qualities of "multivocality" discussed by Paul Ricoeur? "Water" says Lawler, giving an example of a symbol with many voices, "on the literal, natural level is both life giving and cleansing; it donates, therefore, meanings of rebirth and forgiveness of sins when it is used in the symbolic action called baptism."

Now, I don't think my father was ever baptised, but the sense of baptism is well incorporated into our culture; and I mused about how, when I beg my father's nurses to tell me if he's given them any sign of awareness,

they have on several occasions brightened up, and told me with enthusiasm about how he has enjoyed his bath a great deal this morning. Are baths symbolic of the spirit of important places for my father? Of course they are: they link him with the long-ago baths of babyhood cradled in his mother's hands, with baths of love with perhaps his wife (my mother), and with the water which is deeply part of all of the cycles of plant and animal life which he had reverently studied. His baths may still be capable of capturing the spirit of places he experienced long ago, and perhaps even the sense of the sacred which is enshrined in our well-known ritual of baptism.

Phillipe Diolé describes imagining being immersed in water when he is in the midst of the desert. He says, "I moved about in the heart of a fluid, luminous, beneficent, dense matter, which was sea water, or rather the memory of sea water. Even my weariness was lessened by it."

As I was writing this paper, I overheard the "Life Matters" program on Radio National. A woman was talking about the way she had cared for her husband at home as he was dying. He had asked her to pour water over him, which she did, having learnt from Buddhist texts that this is a common need which is experienced as part of the dying process.

I turned then to Richard Grigg's discussion of Paul Tillich's work concerning symbols, and it took my fancy that Tillich used the concept of "courage" in describing how the symbol can be a source of empowerment. Strangely, one of the ditties my father used to repeat amid the family's moans of "here we go again" was "Life is mostly froth and bubble, Two things stand like stone, Kindness in another's trouble, Courage in one's own." I have always thought of courage as an old fashioned virtue, far too related to the battlefield to be of any interest to me; but here was Tillich talking about it, so I was prepared to follow his argument.

Apparently, Tillich makes much of our mood of anxiety, which is contingent upon our awareness of the possibility of our non-being. But Richard Grigg says, the notion of a supreme being or of an "ultimate concern" can direct thought beyond being and the realm of the finite, releasing a great sense of empowerment. "For once one is made aware of a dimension of reality beyond the region in which nonbeing negates being,"

explains Grigg, "one is free to understand oneself as grounded in that other dimension and thereby free to live courageously, to overcome existential distortion, and at least partially to transcend ambiguity."

My father was very good at "ultimate concerns." He didn't mess about with superficial appearances, and he was given to gently challenging my youthful confidence about the way the world should go with comments like, "You are indeed fortunate to be so sure of your view." Perhaps my father has, even now, as he lies speechless and helpless, an awareness of a "dimension of reality beyond the region in which nonbeing negates being", and hence is freed to live courageously. Perhaps his spirit of place is mediated by flexible symbols like conversational voice, water, classical music, and even some idea of ultimate concern. I hope so, and indeed sometimes I sense this is what has happened.

I can feel that I have moved from the notion of place as a source of the sacred to the role of water as a symbol of courage, but in my defence I find that Stephanie Dowrick quotes some lines from the *Tao Te Ching* in her chapter (in *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love*) on courage. They point out that:

Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water;
But, for attacking the hard and strong, there is nothing like it!
The weak overcomes the strong, and soft overcomes the hard.

Dowrick goes on to explain that "There is courage, and honesty, in coming back to the source of things." I think my Dad has this kind of courage and that he has always had that capacity of moving back to the source of things. Whilst the spirit of a place may often be a source of the sacred, and we are learning that this has been especially so for Aboriginal peoples, my Dad has shown me that we may not be totally dependent on places for access to courage and spiritual succour. For that we can use symbols as common as water.

All we need is to be open to them. Such symbols may carry embedded within them the spirit of a place, and they can continue to serve as a source of the sacred, creating holy ground wherever they are employed for some

holy purpose. In response to the cry "Where am I?" they seem to give us the possibility of an answer.

But in the scientific spirit of my father, using Ockham's Razor to carve away all elaborate or unnecessary explanation, I should add a codicil. Water is experienced by most of the human race as soothing, and the tragic fact is that dementia-sufferers *do* lose their sense of place and self, and it can be terrifying. In this paper I have been pitifully transparent in my attempt to answer my own questions about the end of Dad's life.

I should close more honestly with a question. As John Ralston Saul has warned in *Voltaire's Bastards*, the elites in our civilisation have sought to "divide through answers when our desperate need is to unify the individual through questions". My question, then, is "Where are the meaningful places, rituals and symbols going to come from in our globalised economy?" and "If the world continues to accelerate its pace of change, how will we find the time to answer the increasingly urgent calls of 'Where am I?'"