

You Are Here: The Journal of Creative Geography

Volume 21 2020 Recipes for Revival

Nature & Nourishment

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The leaves are turning, from a summer of greens to yellows, oranges, reds and browns. They hang above us, reminding me of the beauty in impermanence, before floating to the ground - if I am aware, I will catch sight of the fall. On clear blue days, I hear the crunch and rustle of leaves under my walking feet. The sun bringing sparkle to the first frost of autumn, and I feel its warmth upon my body. As I walk, I spy the helicopter seeds of maple trees and I hear the crunch of hazel seed pods under my feet. If I am aware.

Outside the window, blackbirds and house sparrows chirp and sing in the bush so full of bees in the summer. I recall the sparrow hawk and the sparrow my wife spotted in our small garden. That unusual moment, slowed us, enraptured us – a moment of wildness. Our cats showing no interest, instead they meowed and walked around our feet, wanting their tea on our return home. More recently, mushrooms have popped up at the base of the red robin tree. As autumn takes hold, I am reminded of my desire to be in tune with my needs, to embrace a period of slowing down, of renewal. I seek to replenish myself through grounding myself in my places of belonging, places of more-than-human nature, where I nourish my being. Where I can unbind myself from my head, letting go of the to do lists, the promises and deadlines and open my heart to the moment I am in. In those places I uncoil from the state of tension I have placed myself in and breathe. One breathe, two, begins the shift. I notice the trodden path curving up the hill and follow it down to a couple of planks of wood bridging the stream. My curiosity awakens as I step across the bridge.

A beginning in my shift of perspective occurred on the slope of a Yorkshire fell. I was sat on the grass, flask of tea by my feet, sketching the plantation opposite, where I had earlier been digging soil samples. There were no other humans near, but I was not alone, rather, as I pressed stop on my Walkman, I noticed a sense of connection to the more-than-human sculptured landscape. I placed my pencil down, I lifted my white plastic mug of tea and I stared, as if my vision switched to wide angle. I felt at ease in this wide-open space, this sensation was new. I took a sip of tea and imagined the glacial progress of the ice as it carved out the valley, I was now part of. I was in flow for a moment. A year earlier I had first visited the North on a geography fieldtrip and fell in love with the spaces offered by the undulating landscape, the slow rivers weaving along the valley bottoms, the quiet narrow roads merging with the fields. There were also the stone cottages where I had to duck and the laughter of friends. This growing connection with more-than-human nature had very human beginnings.

Without realising it, I had been building roots by playing in the local woods as a kid, by cycling along paths that were once the domain of the railways, and through my family's dog. I recently returned to those woods, for after a difficult day, I wanted to share with my wife, an aspect of my childhood that I enjoyed. The space was smaller than in my memory, but the stench of the mud was the same, part decomposition, part preservation. Whilst I have many enjoyable memories from playing, cycling and dog walking around and in those woods, like that day, it was a place to run to, to run away in, away from watching eyes. For I hadn't created a place in which to connect to and understand myself, but a place that too often required another type of fitting in, a trade off that allowed some fun. Those woods have all the qualities for a place of nourishment, but I wasn't seeking them at the time. For I wasn't aware of my need for nourishment or that I deserved that kindness and care. I had developed

a relationship with the other-than-human nature, but it was one involving escape and respite. It was only when I pressed stop *On the Day I Caught the Train*, did I become aware that I could form a relationship of care and the other-than and more-than-human nature could provide belonging and places to be, to grow, to reflect upon and support my sense of self and passions.

The dew was whipped from the blades of grass onto my shoes and bare ankles, as I ran through the field, up to the gap in the stone wall. Squeezing through into the woods beyond, I followed a path and passed an old ruined house, trees growing where once people rested. I continued and ascended onto an area of limestone pavement and to the fairy steps. A narrow gap between two blocks of limestone and part of an old coffin route. I walked down unable to avoid touching the sides, so no fairies appeared for me. Though this was a run more akin to the carrying of the dead. I continued along the coffin train, watching my feet on the slippery limestone. I ran through a farm yard and across fields, following the route in my mind, but it was a hunch in my heart that led me to take a turn up a steep path through another wood. I found myself on a road, I was momentarily lost, till I decided to keep running and as I rounded the hill, there were the familiar woods that wind around the base of the Knot. At the trig point I whispered my words of goodbye. I returned along the coffin trail a little lighter.

Here, having created places of belonging within the more-than and other-than-human nature, I was able to engage with the landscape as I experienced it, complete with its hauntings through the human marks and tales that had been left, to form a ritual to honour my loss. A ritual that I hoped would help my grieving process, help nourish me, for I wanted to do more than function, I wanted to return to feeling alive and being able to be fully involved in my life and work. That route, that hill is forever associated with my childlessness, and whilst it did help my grief, this (in)visible grief would clearly need more than a run to process it, to be at peace with my unexpected situation.

So, I returned to my everyday. For whilst it is important to have places to go to, where we can nourish ourselves, as well as reflect on our experiences, ideas and emotions and through that process we can reconnect to our purposes with a sense of curiosity and passion, I also believe we need it where we live. Especially if like me, you have found yourself in boom and bust cycles of energy, of work. I found I could no longer live like that and it has taken a great loss for me to learn this. I have learnt I need more than places of retreat and reconnection, I need everyday care if I am to enjoy my research and from that research have something to offer that I believe will help other people to be in the flow of their lives and support them to flourish.

My everyday include two cats and a garden, often together. There was a memorable summer's night watching our cats watching bats fly overhead, as they left their roosts underneath the fascia boards of the houses to go and feed in the nearby woods and along the hedgerows. Under the few stars of a city sky we all sat memorised. There is also the daily warmth from a cat cuddle and the look on their faces whilst they wait for one of us to do the right thing, such as feed them or turn the fire on for them. The co-creation of this companionship brings me joy, which is healing, as well as encouraging as I know I am not alone in my pursuits. Within the garden we are allowing it to go wild in places, we have bird feeders and bug hotels, we also plant fruit and veg with good intentions, of which slugs, snails and insects seem to have as much of it as us. It is their space too. It is this sense of belonging to all that nature is, including humans, that sustains my sense of perspective.

A sense of perspective that came from sitting atop mountains, especially in the Lake District. In those moments, I am in flow, as I take in the view, which I am lucky enough to be able to experience, and I shrink. I recognise how small a part of this world I am, and this recognition allows me to shrug off some of my niggling worries and concerns. It ultimately shuffles forward what is truly important to me, where I need to focus my energy. Now, whilst I still love being in the fells, I find I can engage

with that sense of perspective locally. As nourishing myself isn't an activity to do as and when I am on the verge of collapse, but is something to do daily. It is through my everyday activities with our cats, in the garden or running along local routes that I care for myself. My everyday reinforcing of my relationship with the other-than and more-than-human nature has become a daily practice, without me noticing it. As it is something I enjoy and it is this enjoyment that increases my awareness of my surroundings and relationships, both human and other-than human, which in turn, creates further pleasure. Though the increase awareness I am developing, I am not only more able to contribute to what I believe in, but I can also notice when I need a bit more nourishment and a day in the mountains is required.