



# Learning to Love Place through Dwelling

Donna Ladkin

I have this idea which won't let go of me. I have this idea that at least part of the current ecological situation in which we find ourselves has its roots in our lost capacity to relate to place. Not just 'relate' to place, but LOVE place. And most importantly, to LOVE the place we find ourselves in, right here, right now.

The global ecological crisis is just too big for me to get hold of. Every time I think of it I feel overwhelmed, small, impotent. Any change I make seems insignificant when juxtaposed against the actions of governments and corporations which seem oblivious, if not downright in contempt of, the impact of their policies on the planet. The very infra-structure which supports my materially comfortable way of life as a citizen of the UK is itself in many ways in opposition to a more ecologically sensitive way of relating to place.

But, I have another little seedling of a notion, that loving place actually could play some part in promoting the kinds of changes on the kind of scale which *could* make a difference. I wonder what would happen if we learned to love place, this place, the one that we are living in right now? Would that love provide the emotional impetus we need to be more mindful and choiceful about how we live in that place?

Others seem to be writing about 'love of place' and the possibilities it engenders in different ways. David Orr writes about ecoliteracy. Sawyer writes about bio-regionalism. Freya Matthews writes about 'nativism' Stephanie Mills writes about 're-inhabitation'. Certainly, indigenous peoples seem to engage with the earth in ways informed by a deep knowing, respect for, and love of the place in which

## **'What is the State of Dwelling in our Precarious Age?'**

I do not know the source of the water which flows from my tap when I turn the faucet on.  
I do not know the mechanism by which the water becomes hot.  
I do not know the source of the fuel which causes the water to be hot.  
I do not know where the water goes when it runs down the drain at the front of my kitchen.

I watch the rising and falling of the river behind the house.  
It bears no relation to the pressure of the water flowing from my kitchen tap.

And I am too busy to find out.  
How would I find out?  
Who would I ask?

I am busy, writing my paper about dwelling practices. I am busy cutting vegetables (the source of which I do not know) cooking them on my cooker (what coal is being burnt where, to heat up my carrots?)

The one thing I do know  
Is that the carrot tops which I have cut, tomorrow morning I will bring to the compost heap at the bottom of the steps leading to the garden.

And there, they will combine with the leaves which have fallen from the oak trees, and the other vegetable scraps I deposited yesterday, and the rain, and the bird droppings.  
And, through mysterious processes, (which probably involve Heidegger's Divinities) they will be transformed into dark, friable earth. Which will be spread on the grounds here at the Castle and grow the rhododendrons, and the buddleia and more oak trees. Which will give off oxygen.

Which I will breathe.

Is this the beginning of dwelling?

they live. The tack I'm keen to pursue is that environmentalism (or ethical relationship with place, my preferred handle on this) is not just about saving the Amazon forest (although that is important). It is not about saving endangered species (although that is important, too). It is about growing into a right relationship with wherever a person is, right here and right now. Fundamentally, I am suggesting, such a relationship can be fostered through 'dwelling'.

This article charts the beginnings of my own journey in learning to love and understand the significance of place in my own life. I hope it may act as an impetus for you to think about your relationship with the places you inhabit, and to grow into 'right relation' to that place, right here and right now.

Donna Ladkin March 2004

## **Beginnings**

The following words offered by the Native American educator, Gregory Cajete, remain an important touchstone for me. He writes:

"As you begin your journey to find this ancient indigenous mind-set, think about who you are and who you represent. Understand that each of us, in our own small way is a vital link within the context of creating an educational process that allows for a sustainable way of living. Whether this role you play is large or small, know that it has an effect... And as you move from that mountain down the pathway to begin a renewed journey of ecological thought and action, think about the journey of our life in relationship to 'place'. Keep in view the fact that your journey can be a very important part of the transformation of education that must take place in this next generation."<sup>1</sup>

The two phrases which keep coming back to me are: 'Think of who you are and what you represent,' and, 'think about the journey of your life in relation to place'. I offer you my response to these questions.

### Who I am And What I Represent

I am a 45-year old American woman of mixed racial background—my father is African American and Native American and my mother is of German and French Canadian heritage. I've chosen to live in England for the past 22 years — almost half of my life, now. England very much feels like 'home' now. When people ask why I stay, I say, 'Because of the footpaths!'

I think of Maine as my American home, and that is where I say I am 'from' when people ask, even though I was born in Washington DC and lived in Maryland for the first ten years of my life. The move from Maryland to Maine instigated a total change in the way my family lived. For instance, instead of driving from place to place, walking and cycling became our main mode of transport (or skiing, in the winter!)

We bought a house in the tiny village of Caribou (population 10,000 and falling), nestled on the banks of the Aroostook River, fourteen miles south of the Canadian border. Northern Maine is not the picture-postcard coastal region normally associated with the state. It is a land of gentle hills put to agricultural use, pristine lakes, and trees. The Allagash wilderness, which comprises two-thirds of Aroostook County's landscape, still contains some

of the only virgin timber found anywhere on the North American continent<sup>2</sup>. When we moved to Caribou, we were living in the vicinity of wild places.

And we responded by running wild. Because of my mother's working patterns, the three of us 'Lucas kids' were largely left to our own devices outside school hours. During the winter months (November to May) we ice skated every evening, built snow tunnels and caves, and skied (but this was not the skiing of resorts and chair-lifts, it was the skiing of strap some skies to your feet, find a hill and let rip!). Summers were spent picking wild berries which grew in the field behind our house, swimming in the nearby lakes, cycling, roaming

through woods, learning to live outside. We were poor, monetarily (as were most of the folk who live in Aroostook County). But I don't remember feeling poor. I spent hours sitting in my favourite tree reading book after book borrowed from the mobile library which stopped right outside of our house, a luxury which my currently well-off life seldom provides me.

Life revolved around the weather and changing seasons in Caribou. At that time, the livelihood of the community depended on the harvesting of the potato crop. Harvesting potatoes was a community endeavour. Schools started in mid-August in order that they could close again for three weeks in September and October when school children would take to the fields to bring in the crop. Everyone was involved in this activity, children picked, teachers drove trucks that collected the 150 lb barrels of potatoes, shop owners kept their shops open later hours so that food could be purchased once the sun set.

When I left Aroostook county I remember reading sociology articles about the North of Maine being one of the most poverty stricken areas of the US. I remember the horrified tones in which one article cited the fact that it was a place where children as young as 7 or 8 were forced to pick potatoes each autumn. Horrors! In my view, it was always the few rich kids whose parents didn't allow them out into the fields who missed out. I don't want to over-romanticise the situation either. Four out of the nine children in my mother's family have MS (including my mother) and



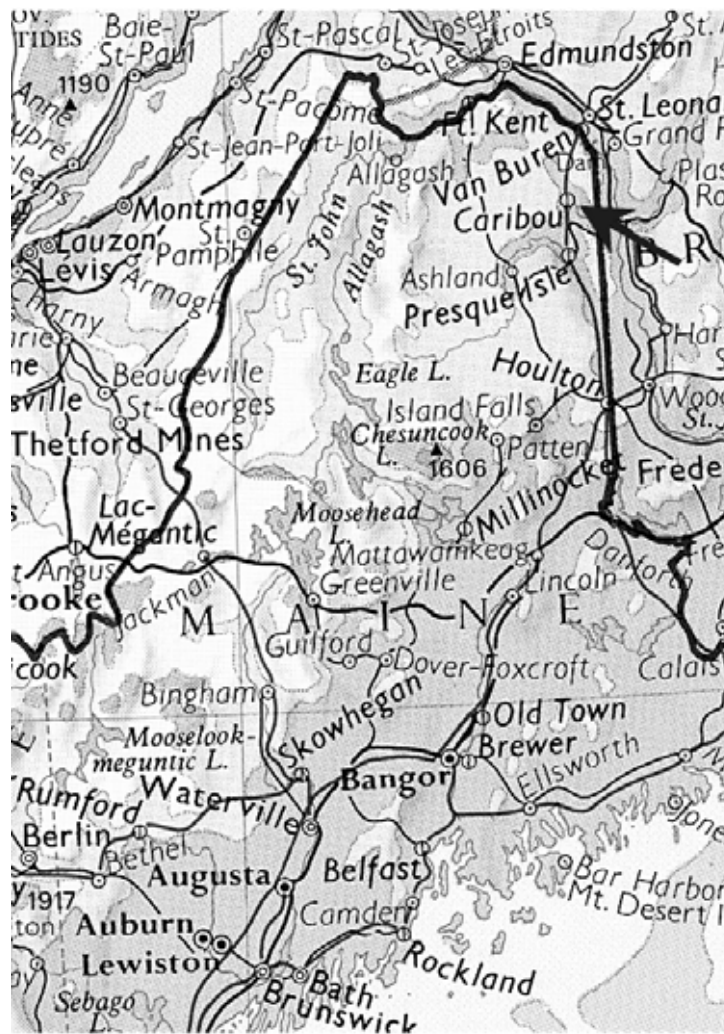
Arcadia National Park, Maine

I often wonder if there is any connection between the development of the disease in them and chemicals (including DDT) which were used to kill the potato tops. During every harvest season there were inevitable accidents, kids were crushed by barrels or trucks, hands were caught in machinery, fingers lost.

The point of telling this story is to notice what it was about this time which helped foster my capacity to relate to place. For certainly, I believe living in Caribou enabled me to develop a strong sensitivity and connection to that place, as well as a way of relating to subsequent places in which I've lived. Thinking back, there are three aspects of that experience which seem particularly important.

Firstly, there was a sense of 'pace' which was important. This operated on two levels, attention to a 'here and now' pace, and awareness of the larger natural cycles of death and re-birth in which the here and now is embedded. Life in Caribou often seemed imbued with a sense of endless hours, unpressured time in which to explore and BE in the places we chose to inhabit (be they trees, fields, or even my bedroom). In my ongoing inquiry into dwelling a recurrent theme both practically and theoretically, is the importance of pace and rhythm for engaging with human as well as non-human worlds. 'Slowing down' (for in our times of frenetic activity it is more often slowing down than speeding up which is needed!) is a key practice any one of us interested in engaging more meaningfully with place can try, right here, right now!

The second key aspect in developing my connection with Caribou



relates closely to pace, but brings with it a different quality – the quality associated with 'play'. Perhaps one of the reasons so often when I speak with people about the significance of 'place' in their lives they recount stories from their childhood is because childhood is the time in which 'play' is a legitimate part of what we do. And playing in place seems crucial in developing a relationship with place. Playing fosters openness, curiosity, reciprocity; all important elements of 'dwelling' and developing the awareness of how place impacts on us, just as we impact on it.

Finally, dwelling in Caribou was a project enacted by the entire community. Together, we charted the rainfall that nourished the potato crop, together we celebrated the first blossom with the crowning of the 'Potato Blossom Queen', together we got muddy and tired and sore from the back-breaking work

of bringing in each autumn's harvest. Such community rituals provided a powerful means by which we jointly acknowledged and remembered the source of our sustenance – the very place we lived.

I'm sure there are other aspects of my personal history which could account for my desire to learn to relate to place in a loving way. However, these three; pace, play and community, stand out as having been particularly relevant. Moreover, I'm suggesting they could be embodied in practices such as:

Paying attention to our pace so that we notice the place we inhabit.

Making time for play and exploration.

Building communities to celebrate together the rhythms and cycles of our particular locality

which might further foster our love for, and desire to care for the place in which we live, right here, and right now.

#### Notes

1. Cajete, Gregory. Indigenous Education and Ecology. in John Grim (Ed). *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology* (Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 619-638.
2. This is particularly significant when you realise that Aroostook County is the size of Wales.

*Donna lectures at the University of Exeter in Leadership Studies, where her research interests include leadership ethics, as well as how 'dwelling' might inform the practice of leadership. Her favourite part of each day is the ten minute walk she takes between her home and her office, through the University's Botanical Garden. If she is very alert and lucky, she spots the kingfisher who makes his home near one of the ponds.*