**Educating for Hope: Physical Engagement and a Sense of Place**

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***My Story***

Five years ago at another AJCU gathering on sustainability, I started to think that teaching by bicycling was the solution, or at least a solution, to the problems I faced as an educator. How did I get to that point? To thinking that riding six to 40 miles and learning about the multi-layered history of the Central Ohio River valley was a good idea for a sustainability course?

Like most of our paths, mine was convoluted, but I was primarily worried about two things: global climate change and my students’ mental wellbeing in face of that and so many other facets of our culture that seem dehumanizing. I was also concerned about my own wellbeing, since as we learned in Chicago six months ago, we can only educate out of the “truths” or wisdom that we have discovered ourselves as we have sought to reconcile the grim ecological and economic realities with the human need for hope, narrative, and wellbeing.

I came to be invested in more sustainable living over the past thirty years through farming and bicycling. I did my graduate work in Madison Wisconsin where I rode my bicycle twelve months out of the year and came to love it. I came to farming and gardening deeply concerned about the quality of the food in the grocery store after my first child was born. But there were significant unintended consequences to both choices: I was putting my body in service to a higher goal, sustainability, yes, but with massive positive implications for my wellbeing far beyond physical health. I wanted to find a way to help my students realize the same benefits.

***A Positive Vision***

Pope Francis has helped us to see that the twin problems of ecological devastation and economic inequality come from the same source: hypercapitalism. It is not just an economy any more but a culture, a way of life. We live as capitalists from sunup to sundown, consuming experiences, food, energy, and relationships. So we need a different way of living, orienting to the world, a different culture and set of hegemonic ideas, in order to solve both problems. But this different way must be a positive vision: a sense of where we are going instead of what we are leaving behind.

Pope Francis calls for an “integral ecology” based on the life of St. Francis of Assisi. He writes that St. Francis’ “response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection (11).” Pope Francis notes a wide variety of ways in which humans are suffering due to our ecological crises: lack of contact with nature; lack of access to places of beauty; lack of employment; growing inequality and violence; and weak politics due to the influence of technology and finance. He continues that—due to the omnipresence of digital media-- people are not “learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously” (47, 54). As a solution, he urges a new culture, an ecological culture, that promotes an integral ecology and “cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources (111).”

Wendell Berry’s *Unsettling of America*, written in the early 1970s, is very much in line with much of Pope Francis’ writing. Berry’s book is a wide-ranging look at the impact of the destruction of small-scale family farms on communities, families, marriage, soil, and politics. Among other things, he argues that the disconnection of families from a particular place and from forms of subsistence production has rendered Americans helpless and depressed. At the very end of his book, he writes that the goal of human existence should be health—health of individual humans, health of their communities and health of their ecosystems, particularly the soils upon which they depend for their food.

Health, fulfillment, communities, ecosystems—these are the terms that rise to the surface for Pope Francis, Berry and so many others. What is it that I, we, our students need to be healthy and fulfilled? I am convinced that the answers to this question are also, fundamentally, the answer to our ecological predicament. And two of the answers are physical engagement and a sense of place. And these ideas are integral to the First Year Seminar bicycling course I teach (and the book that is being written from it).

 ***Physical Engagement***

It is well known that cycling and other forms of exercise release endorphins and other positive-feeling inducing chemicals. Many cycling organizations have a tag line to this effect, that you cannot be unhappy while cycling. Endorphins are neurotransmitters found in the pituitary gland and nervous system. And they are more potent than opium or morphine. The more you cycle, the fitter you get and the more endorphins your body releases.

Being outside, particularly surrounded by trees and greenery, is also a natural anti-depressant. According to the book, *Your Brain on Nature*, Japanese researchers particularly have demonstrated that “forest bathing” reduces psychological stress, depressive symptoms, and hostility and improves sleep and increases vigor and liveliness.

There is also great evidence that using our bodies for meaningful tasks encourages a reward circuit in our brains. Neuroscientist Kelly Lambert has researched using hands for cooking, sewing, building, gardening etc. and found that doing such work initiates such a circuit. Our Pleistocene bodies think that we are active because we need to be for survival and reward us with happy feelings. Without such activity, we become depressed, as many of our students are.

It seems we are at our optimum when working to take care of some of our own needs and for being outside. But not all time spent outside or taking care of our needs is equal. One important component is how much technology is mediating our experience.

Philosopher Albert Borgmann argues that we should be seeking appropriate technology, technology that allows us to achieve a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction or enjoyment at once. Driving a car to the local park does not give us a sense of accomplishment but we likely achieve some satisfaction from it. Bicycling to the park, on the other hand, is more likely to produce a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction both en route and at the final destination. Similarly, when buying a meal at a fast food restaurant, the work that was accomplished to get the paycheck to pay for the meal is distanced from the enjoyment of the meal, whereas cooking a meal in one’s own kitchen, or better yet, with food one has helped to produce, brings both a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction at once. Using this formula, educating students by bicycling brings about this synergy and heightens their capacity to learn as they are “all in” in the learning process. Their bodies are doing something meaningful so they are gaining a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction at once, are mentally and psychologically happy and positive, and are in good physical condition.

 ***A Sense of Place***

The second important component of the course and of moving to a culture of sustainability both for the planet and people is developing a sense of place. This sense of place is something all human communities used to have; it is likely an important part of our success as a species. One can find this sense of place in many cultures that still practice a subsistence lifestyle, growing most of their own food and taking care of most of their needs outside of the marketplace. The Apache of the American Southwest, for example, had and still have dozens and dozens of place names that represented historical events, morality tales and often some combination of the two that could be used as shorthand to keep cultural information and history alive. Many Africans kept a sense of their history alive in their landscapes as well recalling oral traditions that were hundreds of years old, through the location of a tree, a pond, or a large rock. They often walked those landscapes, recounting the history that was written upon it, so that future generations would know it as well.

Preindustrial, or subsistence, cultures moved through the landscape more slowly making it much easier to develop an understanding of it. For thousands of years, humans moved through the landscape on foot, about three to four miles per hour. The next significant invention was riding on horseback or behind horses in carriages and stagecoaches at four miles per hour but not using human energy. Passengers on a stagecoach were in intimate contact with each other in the coach for hours at a time. Frequent stops gave people a chance to talk with locals, pick flowers, and appreciate the smells and sights. Then came the bicycle at six to fifteen miles per hour. With the railroad people could travel at sixty miles per hour by the end of the 1800s. The gasoline-powered automobile can reach up to one hundred or miles per hour. With each successive development, engagement with locals, and flower picking declined. Mikael Hard and Andrew Jamison recount French writer Victor Hugo on train travel: “The flowers by the side of the road are no longer flowers but flecks, or rather streaks, of red or white; they are no longer any points, everything becomes a streak (177).”

With each transition, some things were gained and some lost, but some losses are extremely detrimental to our mental and spiritual wellbeing. Exclusive reliance on automobiles is one of those. The combination of the speed of travel, eclipsing any chance for attention to detail, and the homogeneity of services and landscapes that accompany such transportation, such as highway medians, gas stations, and fast food restaurants, all serve to disconnect us from place. Many find this freedom and opportunity liberating and, of course, in some ways it is. But what is perhaps harder to measure and acknowledge is the price that we pay in terms of our sense of connection as a result of both the freedom and speed of modern travel. According to writer Robert McFarlane, English essayist, soldier, singer, and poet Edward Thomas experienced and wrote about “one of modernity’s most distinctive tensions,” being “between mobility and displacement on the one hand, and dwelling and belonging on the other.” This tension explains why students in the bicycling course respond so readily and heartily to their immersion in their new hometown (or in some cases their old hometown seen from a different vantage point). We are hard-wired to know a place well enough to gain our livelihood and our social rootedness from it, even if many of us do not experience such a phenomenon in our childhoods or early adulthoods any more.

Not living in a pre-industrial culture, we are left to re-create on our own some sense of this deep network of history, culture, place, and connection. Fortunately, there are some people in most places who keep some of this history and culture alive in the stories they tell and in the way they move through their landscapes, evoking events and characters. Each day/ride on the course seeks to introduce the students to someone like MacLeod described below. McFarlane speaks of one such individual in England:

One of the many reasons I enjoy being with [naturalist] Finlay [MacLeod] is his ability to read landscapes back into being, and to hold multiple eras of history in plain sight simultaneously. To each feature and place name he can attach a story—geological, folkloric, historical, and gossipy. He moves easily between different knowledge systems and historical eras, in awareness of their discrepancies but stimulated by their overlaps and rhymes…. To Finlay, geography and history are consubstantial. Placeless events are inconceivable, in that everything that happens must happen somewhere, and so history issues from geography in the same way that water issues from a spring: unpredictably but site-specifically (147).

McFarlane notes that strong landscapes can help us answer two questions:

1. What do I know when I am in this place that I can know nowhere else?

2. And then, vainly, what does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself?

Trying to answer these questions and to locate our own lives within these landscapes and stories is what I hope my students and I will learn. It is my hope that this sustainability course provides students with direct experiences so that they can develop a more appropriate role for technology in their lives in order to bodily engage with their surroundings and develop a sense of place. With a sense of place and bodily engagement in that place, I hope they can see a better future for themselves and the planet, one that is grounded in an integral ecology rather than capitalism.

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