

The View from Here

By Hayley Marshall

A Sustaining Transaction

It's high summer; and as I walk up an old road towards the moorland of the Goyt Valley, the land is responding to the persistent sun by releasing a dusty haze. The going is slow and arduous, with the bedrock here pouring from the land to reclaim its prominence. The track is strewn with gritstone boulders and rubble.

I cut across the moor to the left, my destination; a sonorous drone in the distance. The glowering mass of Axe Edge is an eminent ridge that local people are drawn to in order to witness the June solstice. This apex of the year is one time when significant connection to local landscape is distinct in people's minds. Today a recent loss in my life is on *my* mind, and I too feel an urge to connect with the solidity and consistency of the surrounding land forms, albeit for a different reason. Whilst this is undoubtedly about seeking solace, it also involves a need to incorporate an enduring sense of support. This is landscape as elemental sustenance.

In therapeutic terms I relate this to aspects of the Winnicottian concept of the holding environment, as written about by Ogden (2004). He refers to one aspect of holding as 'the means by which the sense of continuity of being is sustained over time'; and, as 'an unobtrusive state of 'coming together in one place' that has both a psychological and physical dimension'

Clearly, I am broadening this concept beyond the intrapsychic and interpersonal spaces concerning the human to human relationship, to include sustaining interactions with the wider context of the natural environment. In this instance, I bring to the foreground the ongoing presence and structures of landscape, as enduring reference points; functioning as a 'gathering place' for parts of us that need integrating; and that can, over time, be incorporated in the body-mind as an internal holding environment.

Back on the moor, I lean in to the gradient and my physiology fires up as I engage with the strain of climbing. I begin to breathe fast, and reflect on how one aspect of the development of this holding environment seems to involve an internalization of the shape of the land. This is a kind of embodied storying (storing), achieved through walking the local topography into my body-mind. I am absorbing the contours as I walk, building an internal structural map. It forms part of a practice I term 'minding my landscape', and one that I find immensely sustaining. In my view this perspective is important for thinking about mental well-being generally; in terms of how some people may develop and access a more expansive sense of relational support in their lives, via forming an embodied connection with their local terrain.

A related process is evident in nature based psychotherapy, where clients can explore different aspects of the landscape to match and illuminate their internal experience. This is

an intervention that is important in terms of the client feeling supported by the environment that the therapy takes place in. What is less apparent is that the therapist too will usually experience the place as providing a significant holding for their counter-transferential experiences and for the therapeutic work. For both members of the dyad, this typically results in the formation of a strong bond with the 'therapeutic place'.

Arriving on the summit I sit, relaxing in the presence of permanence; the hills steadily asserting their authority. I savour the panoramic view of the peaks cradling my home; this wonderful visual metaphor instilling a more expansive sense of my feeling held by this environment. I am also mindful that direct contact with what Robert Macfarlane calls the 'grand vistas of time and space', offers me an opportunity to reach for new perspectives, not least on my experience of the loss I walked out with.

On a final note, it occurs to me that the view I express here entails understanding the physical environment much more as part of our identity; a way of being that in westernized cultures we seem to have lost touch with, certainly on any conscious level. I believe that 'minding our landscape' also has implications for us developing more reciprocal relationships with the natural world; for, as a connective practice, it inherently invokes care for the place. Overall, this amounts to what I would term a sustaining transaction, where both individual and environment are potentially nourished by the contact.

References

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Ogden, T. H. (2004). On holding and containing, being and dreaming. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 85; 1349-64