



Reflections for My Student-Aged Self

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1 Kings 19: 1–9 John 14: 15–24

My arrival at university, 57 years ago (unfortunately, not this university) was for me, as I think it has been for students throughout the ages, an experience of freedom, a loosening of the tethers of home, a gift of new opportunities. My mother, bless her, gave me a beautiful down sleeping bag to take with me. “I expect you’ll be sleeping around a bit,” she said. I never quite knew whether she understood what she was saying! But that bag went with me everywhere: on the floors of friends and strangers, in people’s homes, digs in hostels and around Europe. University was an opening up of my universe, an expansion of my mind, my relationships, my tastes, my reading and of my faith as a Christian. In short, it did what a university is supposed to do. My untethering was a blessing for me. But it was a blessing which began a process of uprooting which has continued ever since. Unlike Benedictine monks who take a vow of stability, to remain in or connected to a particular monastery for the rest of their lives, Franciscans have no such tethering, no such limitation to one place: the world is their cloister. This has been my own experience over the past 48 years. I have moved or rather been moved from friary to friary, in Dorset, in Worcestershire, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Cambridge (yes, I finally got here!) and now London. There have been many temporary stopping places in between. I have also spent time in the Pacific Islands and Africa. Join the Franciscans and see the world!

I have enjoyed this untetheredness which began in my student days and I continue to value it today. But what I want to say to my student self as I look back is that, while it can be fun to be a world citizen, even a bit of a nomad maybe, the real business takes place at the local level, among particular people as part of a community in the situations where you truly inhabit and belong, where you are not so much tethered but truly grounded in the mundane, the ordinary, earthed in the vernacular.

There was an advert in a posh London magazine a few years back, inserted by a young man who advertised himself as a home concierge service – in effect as a cleaner. The strapline was, life is too precious to have to bother with the mundane. Whereas I believe in fact the opposite to be true: the mundane is so precious that we can’t afford to disregard it or to be detached from it. We only learn the great universal truths about life by attending to the immediate, the local, the particular. What is spiritual is only revealed to us through what is material. And I say this as a Christian, because as a Christian I see that the way God is revealed to us is via a particular place, at a particular time and through particular people. The narrative of scripture is not a collection of disembodied truths. It’s about land and farming, about buildings and politics and contested boundaries and above all about the word,

the *logos*, the meaning of all things becoming flesh and living among us, all within a few square miles of Palestinian hillside. It is sometimes referred to as the scandal of particularity. It is said that if you want to share the gospel of Jesus Christ you need to have in the one hand a world atlas for the message of the gospel is universal: it is for all people, all places and all times but in the other hand and perhaps even more importantly you need a local street map in order to encounter and learn from the people, the material, the stuff through which God is made known to us, through which God invites our participation.

If this is so, if it's through the immediate, the local, the particular, the mundane, that the mystery of life is to be discerned and received, then what I've learnt over the years is that certain practices are necessary. The first is attention – a particular kind of attention, attention with love. When I was living in Cambridge some 20 years ago there was a young guy who was a graduate (I'm not sure it was from Cambridge), he had a university education, and he worked as a street sweeper. He was proud of his work and he used occasionally to give lectures on what he observed, on the rubbish which he collected but also on the railings around the buildings, the different styles, where the metal had been founded, and he did the same for the manhole covers. He was a very entertaining speaker. I've never been able to do that myself but I do regularly walk with a friend of mine who is a broadcaster, a writer, a social historian and a natural historian. He takes me around the streets of London. He teaches me about the stories of the communities which are there but also he shows me the weeds in the pavement.

Now I'm not suggesting that we should all become aficionados of Cambridge's garbage. But proper attention, loving attention, to a particular place, particular people is a learnt skill, especially when so much of what we see these days is mediated via technology. It can be hard to see what is immediately around us. If you're walking along the street looking at or listening to the phone in your hand you're not likely to notice the beggar on the street or even your neighbour next door, let alone the weeds in the pavement. Attention, wrote Iris Murdoch, is the highest form of love. There's another word for that: contemplation, to gaze with love. Learning the mysteries of life requires loving attention but it also needs participation with who and what is around us, inhabiting a particular place. We cannot learn what life is about from a distance. The oft repeated complaint of those who work in the national health service and the care services, particularly those at senior levels, is that they feel out of touch with patients and clients and the same is felt by the clients and patients themselves who feel that they aren't being listened to. It's a sign of this lack of participation or connectedness which seems to lie so often at the heart of our society. Such disconnectedness is also, I would suggest, the root cause of the ecological and environmental crisis because we've lost a sense of belonging to and with the life of the planet on which we depend for our sustenance. We've forgotten that we are of the earth. Few of us, I expect, have any idea where our food comes from other than from the supermarket shelf or the delivery van, or of what is the true cost of what we eat in terms of human labour or the cost to the soil or to the planet.

The Rule of Benedict, the father of western monasticism, places considerable emphasis on manual labour in the life of the monastery, in how the ground should be kept and cared for. It is an essential part of the *liturgos*, which includes the *liturgos*, the liturgy, of daily prayer and worship. Now I don't want to be sentimental or starry-eyed about manual work: it can be boring and back breaking. Thank God for washing machines! But there is something to be learned from regularly getting one's hands dirty. I have a pipe dream that every city financier should undertake one day a month's compulsory labour on the land, picking onions and cutting broccoli in February – at the migrant labourer's pay, of course. That every hospital consultant should be required to do a stint cleaning the wards. That every university professor

should take their turn in the college kitchens, washing up rather than cooking, I would suggest. And perhaps that friars should learn to attend to the drains. I've never had much take-up on that idea.

Attention to the particular, participating in the local, is summed up in the word *abiding*. It is one of the key words of St John's gospel, from which the second lesson came. The Greek *menein* from which we get the word *remain* occurs more than 50 times. Abide in me as I abide in you. In my father's house are many mansions, or biding places. And in today's reading, Jesus speaks of he and his father making their abode with us and in us. Jesus expresses the deep desire of God to be with us and to draw us into fellowship and into community. Deep truth can only be learned in and through community.

Now I've lived in community for 48 years and it can be challenging. I sometimes feel that. The community would be fine if it wasn't for the other brothers. But it is real community – not just living along the same corridor or sharing the same workplace – of engagement, of belonging, of caring for, of loving, which is essential for true learning. St Benedict called his monastery a school for the Lord's service. Yes, a school, a university, in which the mundane is attended to, in which people's lives and the life of the planet is participated in, in what is local. We only learn by being with, by being with people, by being with creation, the stuff around us.

So I would say to my untethered student self, enjoy it! Love it! Enjoy the freedom. But wherever you are, be there. Be there. Attend. Participate. Abide.