

LIFE AS A FIELD TRIP

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I taught a course called “Environment and the Quality of Life” for a quarter-century, first at the University of Minnesota, then at the University of Wisconsin. Its basic question was: To what degree does the good life—by which I mean life of a quality commensurate with the human potential and not just survival—depend on the material setting? We examined different kinds of settings, from the least humanly modified (wild nature) to the radically transformed (a great metropolis). At each stop we paused to consider the quality of life, focusing on the good rather than on the bad—on, for instance, the amenities and rewards of city living rather than its hassles. I chose this emphasis in part to narrow the scope and in part because, whereas nature journalism can be counted on to show appreciation for its subject matter, city journalism all too often treats its subject matter with distaste.

One may think that a course of this nature required fieldwork—and if not *work*, then the less sweaty trip or tour. Students expected at least bus tours, and they were somewhat bewildered that none was scheduled. At the first meeting I would try to assuage their anxiety by saying, “Feel at ease, for all of you have already satisfied one basic course requirement, which is a minimum of eighteen years of fieldwork. The challenge now is to make sense of what you have picked up in all that time.” Eighteen years? They quickly realized that I was referring to their life span. They had been in the field all their life without knowing it, except periodically, when they were actively engaged in a project.

“Environment and the Quality of Life” strove to register and understand the subtleties and complexities of human reality. The instrument best suited to do the registering is the human person—the total person rather than, as in specialized undertakings, primarily the eyes and the brain. Unfortunately—and this is the special challenge and paradox of doing humanistic geography—the total person (an instrument of incomparable sensitivity) is easily overwhelmed. It can and will crash unless, most of the time, filtering mechanisms operate to push information not needed for tasks at hand into deep, barely recoverable recesses of the mind.

TASKS AT HAND

In waking hours we live forward, which is to say that we have chores to do, projects to accomplish. Fieldwork is one such chore or project. Characteristic of it is focusing. Before we go, we already start to narrow our field by formulating a hypothesis. Once there, we may be obliged to constrict it further for technical reasons, such as the tools available and their limitations. Any scientific geographical enterprise, be it

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the study of landforms, of biotic communities, or of housing types, follows some such procedure. Sometimes, however, geographers go on “unstructured” field trips, just to see what’s out there, with no prior questions in mind. An undertaking of this sort is believed to stimulate the imagination, leading one to ideas inspired by objects in the field rather than by words in a book.

Does it? Each geographer will no doubt want to give his or her own answer. Mine is no. I cannot say that casual outings have made me wiser, or even much more knowledgeable. My memory of a typical unstructured trip goes something like this. The bus stops on a knoll. Students file out, I among them. Immediately we are bombarded by sensations, from buzzing bees and the smell of hay to the heat of the sun, and images, from garbage dump and church towers to the meandering river. To minimize disorientation and bewilderment we take out our cameras and dramatically reduce the flood of sensations and impressions by looking at a framed landscape through a tiny hole. Our leader, after a brave pause to soak up unstructured experience, proceeds to simplify reality for himself and us by drawing attention to a selection of landmarks.

Field trips of this kind are little different from the rounds that tourists make. They are things to do, and life is full of things to do. What does one gain from them? Undeniably, they provide a change of pace and stimuli. Almost any such change is capable of renewing, if only by a little, one’s interest in life and the world. The field trip is probably more effective than most other changes, for it can be pleasant in itself. That, then, is the principal reward, that and not—at least, for me—a scientific result, or even any genuine insight that one can use and build on.

However, I must enter a proviso, for there is always the possibility of serendipity. We have all heard about the scientist who, while strolling in the field with no particular purpose in mind, encounters a boulder, bird, or plant—not in itself remarkable—that suddenly illuminates a problem long struggled with. Of course, for that to happen much mental preparation is necessary. Still, the scientist did not go out with a research agenda; the reward came unsought. In a modest way, many of us geographers have known this sort of godsend in the field. One reason so much is made of the admonition, “Just get out into the field,” is the hope for a serendipitous result. But it is in its nature extremely rare. Most of the time we return from a walk or a bus tour pleasantly fatigued rather than refurbished with new knowledge and a different outlook.

What about the landmarks that have been pointed out to us? What about the pictures we have taken? They are facts, even new facts, but they tend to be filed away and forgotten because they are disconnected from one another and do not fit into a larger whole that the mind can grasp and retain. Suppose the tour leader goes beyond pointing out oddments in the landscape to providing, as well, an overall framework with which to peg them. Then the field trip will no longer be unstructured; it will be a class taught outdoors. It will simply be another task; and, as I have already said, life—wakeful life—is little more than a succession of tasks and projects, directed to the present and the future, and it can include everything from social chit-

chat (wherein one is engaged in the task of making a good impression) to teaching a class, from making a bed to building a house.

EXPERIENCE VERSUS EXPERIMENT

As soon as we are awake, we are in the field (world), experiencing. *Experience* is a key word in the humanist geographer's lexicon. What is it? Simply put, it is how an animal, especially a human animal, apprehends reality through all its senses and mind. Experience has both a passive and an active component. The passive component is suggested by the word *undergo*: One undergoes experience. An experienced person is one to whom much has happened, whether he or she wants it to or not. The active component is suggested by the root *per*, as in the word *peril*: To experience is to venture forth, to run a risk.

In experiencing, the passive component is predominant. The world is full of forces and stimuli that bombard the individual. Many (cosmic rays or microorganisms that enter the body, for example) are not consciously registered at all; many are fleetingly noted and then forgotten; a few are retained to be reworked into an individual's store of information or knowledge, and this can happen because the "few" have been expected—prefigured in a person's culture. Active, deliberative learning, as in a classroom, makes use of these few stimuli, reworked into visual images, almost exclusively.

If humanists emphasize experience, scientists emphasize experimentation. *Experiment* is a more deliberative and activist version of *experience*. Whereas all higher animals experience, only human beings experiment. In an unstructured field trip, students seek to narrow the spectrum of experience, not for any scientific reason but instinctively, to avoid being overwhelmed. In scientific work, by contrast, the scientist deliberately excludes external forces and agents considered to be irrelevant to the problem at hand. Experiment is uniquely developed in the modern world and is highly valued because its procedures are designed for a rational goal—outstandingly, whether a hunch, an idea, is valid. Experience, on the other hand, is largely happenstance, and if certain images stick in a person's mind it is because they have been planted there by the dominant culture.

IMPRESSIONS REPRESSED

Here is an example of how dominant culture can favor just a tiny set of impressions, consigning the mass of them to the back stage, if not to oblivion. At the start of my course on "Environment and the Quality of Life" I would ask students to jot down the sort of place that had the greatest appeal for them, one that had contributed the most to their quality of life. Over the years I gave this course in Madison—and earlier, in Minneapolis—students overwhelmingly designated a wilderness area or the countryside as their favorite place, almost never a city. Yet most of them were city people. They grew up in Minneapolis, Saint Paul, or Madison, all noted for their fair appearance and livability. Moreover, college-age students are not just passive inhabitants; they are among the city's boldest explorers; they are the ones who discover

the tucked-away coffee shops, the lively taverns, the specialized bookstores; they are the ones who stay up all night, see the city in a blue haze of inebriation and hot jazz, and hours later, after the third cup of coffee, the empty streets bathed in celestial, early-morning light.

Yet they have forgotten the city! They have done “the fieldwork” and made almost nothing of it! They have repressed what they know in order to accommodate what they know about. A field trip in my course would simply have added to the stock of received views and values—mine, this time. Suppose I didn’t say anything at all? Well, to prevent disorientation, students would be compelled to draw on (subconsciously if not consciously) the views of other authorities—from those in picture magazines and on television screens to those in scholarly books. And let us not forget the authority of the route itself. The route we followed—one I, as group leader, was likely to have chosen—provided in itself an organized experience, dominated by scenic highlights that, in a city, would probably have included outstanding architecture and, at the other extreme, egregiously run-down buildings and streets.

IMPRESSIONS RECOVERED: THE QUINTESSENTIAL HUMANIST ENTERPRISE

The English writer-diplomat Harold Nicholson once noted in his diary that life seemed to him like so much “wet vegetable disappearing down a sluice” (loose paraphrase, mine). Any older, thoughtful person would know what he means. “Where has it all gone?” is a common lament. The pictures in the family album are such meager, pathetic survivors of all that we have known; moreover, because they are often dictated by events society deems important (births, graduations, weddings, and so forth), they seem more generic types—pictures that could illustrate a sociological textbook—than slices of reality taken out of our own inimitable lives.

Photographic pictures are a modern invention. How did people in the past salvage their experience? By telling stories—a timeless and universal technique. We need other people for many important reasons, not the least of which is that they provide an audience. However, it is an impatient audience. All want to have a say, so no one is allowed more than a couple of sentences. And these had better be punchy—thus greatly distorting the experience—in order to be heeded at all. For example, a student may tell an audience about all-night carousing in the city—that’s OK, that’s dramatic—but not about the third cup of coffee, which woke him up and led him to observe “the empty streets bathed in celestial, early-morning light.”

If scientists are a special breed because they experiment, humanists are a special breed because they conscientiously and systematically reflect on experience. Reflection may seem, at first blush, a commonplace sort of activity open to all. It does not require, for example, special training and equipment, as scientific experimentation does. Yet it is rare. A variety of factors limit its wide practice. For a start, there is temperament—a biological given. Some individuals (a small minority in any population) may just be more inclined to make sense of what they have undergone. Then, society must encourage—at least should not discourage—withdrawal. In such a society, protected spaces are available into which people can retreat to reflect alone or

in the company of a very small group of kindred, enquiring spirits. Lastly—and here I think primarily of the practicing humanist scholar—he or she needs to have a firm grasp of the socioeconomic and intellectual conditions that promote the savoring of life. With such a backdrop, the scholar is in a position to examine experience systematically, starting perhaps with his or her own, and moving on from there to the thick-textured lives of other people in other places and other times. A special target of examination ought to be how societies differ in making room for pauses in the midst of life, for it is during such pauses that individuals are able to appraise the meaning of what they have undergone. Humanists, as I conceive them, have lived in different societies. They are variously trained; they have diverse skills and points of departure. But, in one way or another, they can all be said to savor life. And they may all agree that the unsavored life is not worth living.