

Director's Report

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Losing One's Place

"Knowing where and who are intimately linked." — Gary Snyder

When I sent out a message to our MWP-connect list-serve in late summer regarding the impending move of the MWP offices from Hawkins Hall to Lida Lee Tall School, Cheryl Foreman sent back this note:

My sincerest condolences. I'd rather forgo a day of eating rather than move; however, since you have no choice may I suggest the following: (1) Accidentally, on purpose, leave behind all those desk ornaments you graciously accepted but secretly find unappealing. (2) Pray for good-looking men to assist with the move, for with pain must come pleasure. (3) Be sure to have snacks on either end as a reward for trekking back and forth. (4) Changing your "seat" changes your perspective. Here's hoping your new viewpoint yields unexpected revelations.

Cheryl has given me lots of good advice over the years, the most important of which is her remonstrance to "be like water." With this particular move, however, my "go with the flow-ness" had evaporated. I was not taking this move well, even with the idea of rewards of food, good-looking men, and renewed perspectives.

"You have agita," said Mary, one of our administrative assistants, imparting the advice of her Italian ancestors. She was right. I pictured the agitator in my washing machine. That's what my guts felt like as I packed up my books and files and family pictures. I remember when my children were little and didn't want to take their baths, my husband would say to them, "You don't have to want to take a bath. Don't want to take a bath and take a bath." Somehow that worked for them, but it wasn't working for me. I felt as if I were losing my place.

Have you ever lost your place? You're waiting in line at the grocery store and pick up a copy of *People* to browse through. You look up and you're sure that senior citizen who is now in front of you was not there before. Maybe you're sitting up in bed reading and you doze off. When you wake up, your book is splayed out upon the floor and your bookmark has somehow ended up in your pajama pocket. Once again, you've lost your place. Or maybe you've been driving along I-95 and you find yourself at the Millard Tydings Bridge and you're not sure how


you got there. It's a disorienting feeling. You're not quite sure how you got to the Susquehanna. Weren't you just in Towson?

Maybe I am giving away a little too much information here about the private life of your director, but sometimes I do lose my place. Maybe the key word here is loss. The MWP offices have moved, temporarily, into Lida Lee Tall, a good-enough space, but when we first arrived, I experienced the emotional symptoms of placelessness: homesickness and disorientation amongst them. I would get into work and couldn't quite remember just what it was that I was supposed to be doing. I had literally and figuratively lost my place.

A place is a location of experience. It evokes and organizes memories, images, feelings, the work of the imagination. I seemed to have temporarily left those experiences back in Hawkins Hall. I felt as if I were roosting on a precarious perch, a bit anxious as to where we would be going next. I was experiencing what Edward Casey refers to as "place panic." Casey says, "The very idea...of no-place-at-all occasions the deepest anxiety..."

Human beings are among the most mobile of animals, always on the move between places, but in our travels there is always that underlying anxiety, the danger of getting lost. I suppose that a transitory place such as Lida Lee Tall is better than no place at all, but it is scheduled for demolition in the spring. Where will we go before the wrecking ball strikes? We don't yet know. There are rumors, of course, but no one is saying where—or when—for sure. I have deep empathy at this current moment for the refugee.

The Buddhists (and Cheryl Foreman) advise us to let go of everything, because it is as futile to try to hang on to experiences as for the trees to hang on to their leaves in the winter. Yearning, say the Buddhists, "heaves the sigh that does no good." Excellent advice, but I have learned from reading Mr. Casey in his book *Getting Back into Place* that where we are has a great deal to do with who and what we are and that threats to this stability are also threats to our entire sense of well-being.



All of us are on journeys, moving in and between both physical and emotional places. Perhaps it will help me to think of the MWP at this point as on an archetypal journey, one in which the hero or heroine starts off at a time of innocence, comfort, and of naïveté (not quite an accurate description of Hawkins Hall, but work with me here). Once the heroine survives a series of tests (packing and unpacking, dealing with mice both live and dead, swarming wasps, bad smells, hooking up computers and telephones), she then has the opportunity to consider the lessons learned and become a contributing member of society. Casey says, “Instead of being devastated by a rapid or forced departure, we may manage to achieve an ultimate reconciliation with our ill-starred fate, learning to live with displacement...if not to triumph over it.” We have to adopt an attitude of being open to the future, constructing a place where we are able to grow, a place

that provides the possibility of learning, of contemplation, of reflection, of growth, of a continued sense of family.

“Give me a place to stand,” said Archimedes, “and I will move the world.” Wherever the MWP ends up on its journey, you know that we will dig in and continue to do this important work. Right now, that place has not yet been named. I will keep you informed as to where we will settle. In the meantime, remember that we may need snacks at the other end.

MWP-ily yours,

Barbara

P.S. We just got word -- our new offices will be in Hawkins Hall 107. Stop by and say hello

Thanks to all of you who have sent your good wishes... especially to Joe Bellino and Beth Edelstein, who offered to come and help us pack.