

The Silence of Memory

Phyllis Henderson

According to Heidegger, if we are to reveal a true and meaningful existence, we must look to the world around us. We must bring to light what has been covered in darkness and think about the meaning of things which humans encounter in “everydayness”.¹ These are the subjects that are the most overlooked and taken for granted, the average and vague understanding of things that we have become so comfortable with.²

Look to the World Around Us

Looking to the world around us gives us insight to society. Trends, customs, culture and social meanings surround us, but we don't always see them, or better said, we selectively pursue what is more immediately at hand, often leaving the rest to remain as remnants in our memory. Heidegger's idea of shifting focus to that which is often overlooked is compelling, especially when we consider what is being overlooked and the implications of that oversight. This paper examines the relationship between memory, intersubjectivity, nature and architecture with a focus on the ideas of multiplicity and many-sidedness as discussed by Frankfort in *Before Philosophy*.

In the book “In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise” George Prochnic tells us that silence has been forgotten, or more precisely, the need for silence has been grossly underrepresented in today's growing cities. Silence is one of the most important vehicles to personal insight. Prochnic writes about leaving the neighbors, traffic helicopters and all of the sounds that pervade his thoughts on a daily

¹ Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *Basic writings: from Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*. New York: Harper & Row, 60.

² Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *Basic writings: from Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*. New York: Harper & Row, 46.

basis; a place where there are no “leaky iPods”.³ He takes to the road and finds that while there is no such thing as pure silence, there is an essential need for quiet spaces because they “can inject us with a fertile unknown: a space in which to focus and absorb experience.”⁴ It is architecturally compelling that Prochnic’s travels entice him to see silence as space. He defines silence as a place that you go for certain self reflection. For Prochnic, while these first places are monasteries and Quaker meetings, he laments the fact that he has missed trips to places in the country and meditation retreats in New Zealand.

It is true that people turn to nature when searching for solace. Throughout history, there are numerous examples of people who have considered nature a retreat, a place to get away or relax. John Muir sought the solitude of nature as a physical need to rejuvenate; when he left for a hike, he never thought of it as “going out”, rather he saw it as “going in”.⁵ When Muir was in poor health, he sought the clean air of the forest. He would spend several days at a time in nature and come back with a renewed vigor. On one of Muir’s retreats, he was joined by President Teddy Roosevelt, who literally eluded his presidential entourage for a period of 3 days to simply *exist* in nature; an activity that was becoming less and less available to him as President of the United States.⁶

Aldo Leopold, founder of The Wilderness Society called for a “new land ethic” where he oversaw the Native Tall Grass Prairie Restoration and proposed that people and soils should reconsider how they treat each other. As a place of nature, this prairie

³ George Prochnic, “The ‘Pursuit of Silence’ In A World Full of Noise,” National Public Radio. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125511963>.

⁴ George Prochnic, “The ‘Pursuit of Silence’ In A World Full of Noise,” National Public Radio. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125511963>.

⁵ Dayton Duncan, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*. CD-ROM. Blu-Ray, 2009.

⁶ Dayton Duncan, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*. CD-ROM. Blu-Ray, 2009.

was both accessible to urban dwellers and a place of quiet, but in the same sense that Heidegger alludes to above, it was overlooked. Richard Manning remarked that “we never thought of the prairie as nature, we always went to Yellowstone”.⁷ In this sense, we can consider nature one of the patterns of Heidegger’s everydayness that has been overlooked in our urban infrastructure.

Urban naturalist Mike Houck notes that people today simply do not have the vacation time and dispensable income necessary to travel to remote national parks like they used to. He calls for cities that people love, with integrated natural areas that can sustain wildlife and vegetation. He believes that we should integrate the built environment with many more parks, streams and natural areas found in many urban areas.⁸ The soundscape of the city can be layered with machines, cars, birdsongs and running streams. When asked if this integration is really a priority he quotes Robert Michael Pyle who asks “What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known a wren?”⁹ There is growing appreciation for natural areas within our reach, easily accessible and ultimately more meaningful.

Everydayness

Meaningful human experience is so closely related to the act of everyday memory-making that they are sometimes indistinguishable. In a study by Dan Shackner at the Salk Institute, he noted that memory can consist of real occurrences as well as fabricated ones. It is an activity of construction, one image after the next, one experience after the next, layered upon each other within a continuous feedback loop.

⁷ O’Shields, David, Daryl Smith, Annabeth Gish, New Light Media., and Bullfrog Films. *America’s Lost Landscape the Tallgrass Prairie*. Oley, PA: Bullfrog Film, 2005. Videorecording .

⁸ Human Media, “Mike Houck, Urban Naturalist,” Program 107: http://www.humanmedia.org/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=238

⁹ Pyle, Robert Michael. *The Thunder Tree : Lessons from an Urban Wildland*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

It is something that we build upon every day.¹⁰ This focus and absorption of experience coincides with Heidegger's call for reflection and introduces the relationship to human experiences, the key to the study of Phenomenology which was embraced and developed by Heidegger's professor Edmund Husserl. Husserl describes how memory is linked with perception and meaningful existence:

...essential insights unmistakably declare themselves. With every advance from one recollection to another in the clarifying connexions (sic) of memory, which terminate in the perceptual present, the memory gets strengthened. The strengthening is to a certain extent reciprocal, the memory-weightings are functionally inter-dependent, each recollection in its context of memories has a power which increases with the extension of the context, and is greater than it would have been in a more restricted connexion or left alone by itself. But if the development reaches through to the *present moment, something of the light of perception and itself-evidence shines back along the whole series of recollections.*¹¹

Husserl goes on to depict the memory as an inadequate representation of a notion that recedes and explodes simultaneously:

Memory has its own kind of inadequacy in that it can blend what is 'really remembered' with what is not remembered, or again in the fact that different recollections can take place and yet pass as the unity of one memory; whereas through the receding of the horizon of memory which takes place in actual recall, the series of recollections which then open out divide so that the one single memory-picture "explodes" and scatters in a plurality of mutually incompatible memory intuitions.¹²

The capacity for multiplicity in human thought and memory has been explored by Frankfort in the book *Before Philosophy* where the authors discuss the inner workings of

¹⁰ Dan Schacter, "Changing Your Mind", Show 1101, American Scientific Frontiers. <http://www.pbs.org/saf/1101/resources/transcript.htm>.

¹¹ Husserl, Edmund. 1962. *Ideas : General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, Translated by W. R. Boyce Gibson. London, New York: Collier; Macmillan, 362.

¹² Husserl, Edmund. 1962. *Ideas : General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, Translated by W. R. Boyce Gibson. London, New York: Collier; Macmillan, 363.

the mythopoeic mind.¹³ In the mythopoeic mind, that is, the mind of the ancient peoples of Egypt and Mesopotamia, there is an innate acceptance of several avenues of approach with respect to understanding reality. According to Frankfort, mythopoeic thought is a stage of thought preceding modern thought; where ancient man did not think in terms of impersonal universal laws. Rather, he took each individual event at face value. The mythopoeic mind expressed the irrational (memory-making and dreams among them) by admitting the validity of several avenues of approach at one and the same time. Ancients had a tendency to present various descriptions of identical phenomena side by side even though they were mutually exclusive. For example, there was a dualism in the way the ancients regarded death. For them, death could be both willed by a god and/or created by man. There is an ability to allow mutually exclusive ideas to sit side by side simultaneously; this coexistence creates a better represented, more well-rounded, fleshed out consciousness for greater understanding of meaning.¹⁴ This concept of many-sidedness resonates with the descriptions of memory-making by Husserl and Schacter and begins to form a place in the mind where silence and reflection can thrive.

The natural world played a grand role in the lives of the ancients, where nature was a live presence whose qualities cannot be discovered by active inquiry, but only by the presence revealing itself. It is experienced, not merely contemplated or understood. Perhaps this speaks well for Prochnic, who set out to live the experience of stillness, and in doing so, hoped to discover the meaning of silence.

¹³ Frankfort, Henri. 1967. Henrichte Antonia Groenewegen Frankfort, John Albert Wilson, and Thorkild Jacobsen. *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man; an Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient near East*, A Pelican Book. Baltimore, Md.,: Penguin Books, 29.

¹⁴ Frankfort, Henri. 1967. Henrichte Antonia Groenewegen Frankfort, John Albert Wilson, and Thorkild Jacobsen. *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man; an Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient near East*, A Pelican Book. Baltimore, Md.,: Penguin Books.

Think About the Meaning of Things

Prochnic didn't think of quiet simply as a restorative. He was engaged in experience. He was also looking for truth. He needed more than rest and relaxation; he was hoping to find some kind of truth in the silence of the monastery that he could bring back to New York with him.¹⁵ This intuitive need for meaningful existence, for something more substantial coincides with Heidegger's invitation to think about the meaning of things and Frankfort's description of natural discovery. The addition of the need to experience such events, not just think about, them is critical. It is the basis of phenomenology and is crucial to memory-making. It can be surmised that there is a reciprocal relationship between experience in nature and the human ability for self reflection.

Letting nature and city coexist – bringing it all together to be absorbed as fragments that will eventually meld into one memory, incorporating nature into our everyday lives, as Heidegger eludes to and Houck fully condones, will help us raise children who know a wren and will be stewards of the environment as adults. A study was conducted that revealed a connection between frequency of visits to natural areas and the likelihood that one would be able to extract a meaningful experience while there. In other words, the more frequently people visit natural areas, the more they spiritually connect to the landscape and the particular place begins to hold meaning for them. There is also evidence concluding that the more frequently people interact with

¹⁵ George Prochnik, "The 'Pursuit of Silence' In A World Full of Noise," National Public Radio. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125511963>.

nature, on any level, the more likely they are to become stewards of the environment and take seriously the importance to cultivate, protect and nourish the landscape.¹⁶

John Vaughan, Director of the Northwest Forest in London who is interested in how people respond to landscapes and what role those places play in ordinary life, remembers taking people from the surrounding cities and inviting them to visit the forest. He said that many of these people had no prior contact with the forest and that they were pleased with the sense of freedom that they had while there. They were able to let their children play without worry from vehicle traffic, they were more comfortable and relaxed and commented on how nice it was to not have shops around, enticing their children to constantly ask for things.¹⁷

There is a silent understanding relating to intersubjectivity discussed by Husserl in *Ideas* that alludes to the fact that the experiences and memories of one person can never be fully understood by another. This idea is based upon the mutual understanding that there is a shared world in which we both live out our experiences; but that our experiences are inherently different and so our individual perception of the world will be different on a certain primordial level. Our experiences are negotiated by others in the space and the outcome of that experience is influenced by our position in relationship to that other person. Memories and thoughts that occur when confronted by intersubjective experience created fragmented associations. In a sense, there is no access to these fragmented thoughts, as they sit side by side in unity. These bits of memory and experiences are, on some level, inaccessible and can only be expressed

¹⁶ Michael Hughes, "Visitor Attitudes Toward a Modified Natural Attraction," *Society and Natural Resources* 16 (2003): 195.

¹⁷ Ian Thompson, *Ecology, Community and Delight: Sources of values in landscape architecture* (New York and London: Spon Press, 1999), 114.

through revealing more experiences, as we learned from Frankfort's study of the ancients.

The way in which we construct our thought is based on our experience and our experience is directly connected to the world around us, both natural and manmade. It is worthwhile to take a closer look at how our built environment interacts with the landscape. Architecture and landscape have the ability to act together, as a holistic synergy to evoke a sense of exploration and curiosity in its dwellers. Meaningful interaction between these two disciplines is critical. Through literature, writing and a dose of contemplative silence, we can gain insight that will influence the real decisions that come before us. We can look to the words of O'Shields for a naturalistic vision of the future: "The first 7 feet are our ancestors: We need to make sure that the land is still there for our soul."¹⁸

¹⁸ O'Shields, David, Daryl Smith, Annabeth Gish, New Light Media., and Bullfrog Films. *America's Lost Landscape the Tallgrass Prairie*. Oley, PA: Bullfrog Film, 2005. Videorecording .

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