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Wandering and Wondering: Composing an Itinerant's Guide to Appreciation of Place

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Abstract

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One of the defining characteristics of pastoral (non-deacon) ministry in the United Methodist Church is itinerancy. In an itinerant system, pastors are subject to being appointed to a particular church and community each year at the discretion of the presiding Bishop of their area. Often times, pastors are appointed to areas where they are not familiar with the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the new place. As a result, some pastors in itinerant systems struggle to feel as if they belong in the place that they have been appointed to. Many clergy members in itinerant systems, especially those in places they find foreign, long for the day that the Bishop appoints them to a community more familiar, thus making certain communities (often times rural communities) mere training grounds for other pastorates in other places. Ultimately, such an approach to certain communities by clergy persons is detrimental to the appointed church, the community itself, and the pastor.

With a vast number of training resources already available to pastors in The United Methodist Church in North Carolina, I recommend and construct a guidebook that can be used as additional curriculum in trainings that seeks to promote a theological understanding of all places in an appreciative fashion.

Wandering and Wondering:
Composing an Itinerant's Guide to Appreciation of Place

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Wandering and Wondering: Composing an Itinerant's Guide to Appreciation of Place

Introduction

When I was a boy, my friends and I knew little about geographical limitations or boundaries. Our favorite way to pass the time for many years was to head off into the woods, across steep hills, and through rolling pastures on adventures of discovery.

Wandering and wondering,
exploring and imagining,
journeying and appreciating.
Being fully present;
fully alive.
In the place;
We were.

Often times, my friends and I would stand in awe of where we would end up in relation to where we began. From the little plot of land that my Uncle Elwood and I, and later, my Paw-Paw and I would tend as a garden, we could end up in a neighborhood within town limits that sat across from the hospital. Take off in the woods behind Adam's house and you could come out a number of places; even Old Robinson Tract by the water tower that Keith used to climb. Up behind WInky's house, and across from Michael and Keith's, right at the intersection of Snider Lane and Veteran's Hill we would roam through the small patches of woods, and over little ridges until we came out near Carriage Hill Apartments, or the Oakwood Cemetery. One of our

later discoveries that I enjoyed a lot was heading up behind the "Red Barn." Behind that old barn was some of the prettiest wooded land around, and if you meandered through a particular way you could end up by the Dolphin Swim Club and the Bowling Alley.

Each trip to any of those places was an explorative and imaginative time of wandering and wondering that was unique in itself. On these trips we would encounter wild things, dead things, edible things, conflict, conversation, debate, mischief, the occasional marijuana plant that a local grower did not conceal too well, and lots and lots of fences. Never once did we meet a fence that would keep us from getting to the other side, although humanity seems enamored with putting up fences in places where it seems fences do not serve any purpose. More than anything on these trips we would encounter life, each other, and the place that we called home.

As my journey through this life continues, it has become apparent that each wandering/wondering undertaken cultivates some level of appreciation and knowledge of the place wandered. When I speak of appreciation here and throughout this work, I am defining it as a sort of knowledge that sees things in a particular place or situation in a way that encompasses not just a surface understanding of the way things are, but a contemplative understanding that is born only out of experiencing the way things are in a critical fashion. I choose to use the term "appreciation" as opposed to "understanding" to describe this type of knowledge, as Thurman pointed out in his landmark work *Jesus and the Disinherited* "understanding" can often be weaponized to cement one's misguided preconceived notions which ultimately lead to harm; namely an unsympathetic view of those you are coming into contact with and their life experience.[1] With that said, it needs to be mentioned that appreciation void of understanding can be equally harmful. The sort of appreciation that I am advocating in this work can be likened to

[1] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 66

what Orr described as "slow knowledge."[2] It is an appreciation born out of a knowledge that is in turn born of intensive, immersive, wandering and wondering one's way through the shared life of a place.

I have realized that the appreciation extends not only to the place, but also to the people you journey with in and through the place. As Randy Litchfield pointed out, "place encompasses human and nonhuman dimensions of the world.[3]" To know a place in which people are present, one must also know people. To appreciate the one requires an appreciation of the other. To discuss, or to ponder place without a consideration of the membership of the place is not possible; the two are dependent upon one another and thus intertwined.

Half of the journey partners that I have come to appreciate from the place of my childhood now journey towards eternity in the presence of God. The other half, so much as I can tell, try like I try to make the most of the life we have left with all of its challenges and celebrations, victories and defeats, trials and tribulations, joys and concerns, getting lost and being found. What I would give to wander with them all again.

Nearly 30 years after those daily journeys, I now find myself wandering and wondering in a different land. Itinerant ministry has a way of introducing one to new places. My current place, and my place for the past 10 years in ministry and in life is Faison, North Carolina in rural Duplin County, which is located in the southeastern portion of the state.

Faison is an agricultural community. A large percentage of our land is used for the production of row crops such as soybeans, cotton, and corn. The soybeans and corn are used to supply the feed industry for our largest farm endeavors, which are the growing of hogs, chickens, and turkeys. There is also a large amount of produce grown in Faison in the form of crops such

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[2] David Orr, *Hope Is an Imperative: The Essential David Orr*, (Washington, Island Press, 2011) p. 13-20
[3] Randy Litchfield, *Roots and Routes* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2019) p. ix

as sweet potatoes, strawberries, cabbage, squash, and eggplant. The produce aspect of our agricultural economy brings to Faison a large number of migrant agricultural workers from other countries. These folks share in the community from the months of March – November. Many other families from Mexico and Central America have migrated to our area in recent years and now find their employment at some of the local meat production factories.

As a United Methodist pastor in the North Carolina Conference, I am appointed to a church and a community by the Bishop. In 2011, it was Bishop Gwynn who appointed me to Faison to be the pastor of the United Methodist Church there. When the time comes it will be Bishop Ward, or some other Bishop who will appoint me to another church and another community. This "appointment" process is the defining characteristic of an itinerant system of ministry.

In 2011, as our family packed up and moved 250 miles out of the hills and into the community of Faison, we embarked on a journey of wandering and wondering that is still ongoing today. This land we now occupy is flat land. This land also has wild things, dead things, edible things, conflict, conversation, debate, mischief, green things that grow from the soil, and lots and lots of fences. People tend gardens here, just as Elwood, Paw-Paw and I did back in the former times. There are new journey partners these days, and over the course of 10 years of being here there have been many wandering companions who now join my old friends in the journey toward eternity in the presence of God.

There is much in the current place that is worthy of appreciation. Much of the appreciation I have for the current place has come through years of explorative and imaginative journeys; wandering and wondering. From the wooded land off of Warren Road, to the old produce market, to all the places where the town roads intersect, to the cemetery, to the pond out

past the pickle plant, to popular spots like Ms. Nhut's where folks gather to eat, from place to place I have wandered and wondered my way through this land that folks now call Faison.

Just as the former place was and is

this place is my home.

I am someone who has two homes.

As mentioned previously, as an itinerant United Methodist, chances are I will come to know more homes. When it comes to living and dying, home and place making, itinerant pastors face a far greater challenge than those whose roots can grow deep and wide. A mentor once asked a question that continues to challenge me, "How many of you know where you are going to be buried?"[4] The words of bell hooks offer more challenge to my soul trapped in this itinerant body, "If one has chosen to live mindfully, then choosing a place to die is as vital as choosing where and how to live."[5]

Can a place be a homeplace if I am not willing to be laid to rest there?

When the day comes, will I be seed or mere ash?

It may depend on whether or not it's home soil.

For years, especially in recent times as my parents age and as I age, and as I spend more time reflecting on what has been and what can be, I have found myself confronted with a longing

[4] Question posed by Norman Wirzba during a workshop at the 2019 Convocation and Pastor's School at Duke Divinity School

[5] bell hooks, from her essay *Kentucky Is My Fate* found in her book *belonging: a culture of place* (New York, Routledge, 2009) p. 6

for the first home, while still fully in love with the current homeplace. To put it another way, in light of the preceding reflection, I wish to become seed in both places; when the time comes. The wrestling within my spirit will only be further complicated when the day comes that the Bishop calls and I am appointed to a third place that will become my home. Still yet, I expect to wander and wonder, and aim to gain appreciation for that new homeplace; such is the nature of this itinerant life to which God has called me to.

Itinerant Placemaking: Problems and Possibilities

My research and experience have shown that I am not the only itinerant pastor who has had to wrestle with the concept of home, as it pertains to the places they live and the places they have lived, and the place that they may die. As one itinerant North Carolinia pastor put it, "My first appointment was in a foreign environment for me and my wife; we never learned how to feel at home. There were local families that knew each other and had a strong vast history together - becoming a "local" never seemed like an option. As Midwestern transplants, my wife and I found the transition to rural North Carolina a bit jarring and mysterious. In our four years in that place, we always felt like outsiders who didn't know how to become locals."[6]

For this pastor and others like him there are at times a longing for a home that was, because the home they are in doesn't feel so homely to them. Others, like myself, love both the current home, and the former home, longing for one from afar but loving and appreciating the other on a daily basis as a result of a call to ministry being lived out. I also suspect, and my experience mostly affirms, that within theological and denominational trainings for new and prospective pastors there is a lack of focus placed on matters of place and home, and the

[6] Interview with Kyle Burrows

understanding and appreciation of places as necessary for not only fruitful ministry, but also for spiritually fit pastors who are at peace in a particular place; in the seminary there is only so much space for electives that address such matters[7].

Again, the words of a colleague speak to this point, "I have seen very few opportunities to engage in conversations about place and environment. Being that Duke Divinity School brings a lot of future NC clergy from places outside of North Carolina, it seems that this place could use a solid resource to help people learn about their new "place" or tools to help someone learn and explore on their own. Any tool that would help me wrap my mind around the process of engaging a new place would be helpful."[8]

I believe to be a good pastoral leader in a place one must learn to be present in that place, while maintaining at the very least some understanding of the place. Ideally, to be truly fruitful, the pastor must move past a point of mere understanding of place to the point of appreciation and perhaps even love. To take that thought a step further, I would say that for a pastoral leader to be fully alive in terms of their mind, body, and spirit in a ministry setting, they must come to view their place as homeplace. Before such homeplace making and fruitful ministry can occur, as was the case in Orr's experience in seeking to establish an educational center in the Ozarks, the newcomer must become first a student, while the place itself becomes both tutor and curriculum.[9]

As a rural pastor who has spent years immersed in the life of the collective "rural church" in North Carolina, it is my experience that this need for becoming student and embracing the

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[7] Ayers rightly states in her essay on place-based pedagogy, that seminaries already have a full plate of priorities that they delicately balance. Ayers, *Memories of Home*, as found in *Grounding Education in the Environmental Humanities* (New York, Routledge, 2019) p. 51.
[8] Interview with Kyle Burrows
[9] David Orr, *Place as Teacher, The Essential David Orr* p. 218

place as tutor and curriculum is especially the case in rural places, where often times pastors from places designated as "urban" or "suburban" enter into ministry in the rural church with little to no experience with rural places, people, and life, such as the case of my friend from the Midwest referenced above.

My experience in the rural community of Faison has shown that where there is appreciation of the place as homeplace, a pastor's ministry has a greater chance of thriving, regardless of the geographic setting or the pastor's familiarity with said setting upon arrival. Much of the work that we have undertaken together as pastor and church has been deemed fruitful by many throughout our United Methodist connection and beyond because of the relationship between the place and myself, which has been cultivated by my wandering and wondering which has led to a deep appreciation of Faison.[10]

The Innovation

Two of the most pressing questions that have guided my thoughts and led to this being the focal work of my project are: How might wandering and wondering, exploration and imagination contribute to an increase in understanding, appreciation, and love in places of ministry? And, how might a viewpoint and practices that affirm a current ministry place as homeplace transform the shared life of pastor, church, and community?

In consideration of these questions, and the other thoughts considered up to this point, what I offer in terms of an innovation is the composition of an itinerant's guide to appreciation of place. The intention is for the guide to be used by the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church as a training aid for new pastors, and/or for those in the commissioning

[10] The mini-documentary found at the following link provides a good look at my approach to ministry in Faison: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1d-mwpUpPGw&t=12s

(Residency in Ordained Ministry) process toward full ordination. Additionally, the hope is that the guide will also be used in other areas of the state through the Thriving Rural Communities Initiative at Duke Divinity School.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the innovation as I intended would involve an immersive experience for those participating in the training. Because of COVID, as is the case with most things, those plans had to change. Thus, the guidebook as a training aid that can be used by a broad group of individuals such as the ones listed above was born. The 25 page guidebook (approximately) will be made available and distributed in the Summer of 2021.

It needs to be said that what I am constructing is a guide, not a blueprint. The purpose in naming this work a "guide" is to allow any who encounter it the flexibility to allow their own experience and context to shape how they encounter this work and how it influences their approach to life and ministry in their place, while maintaining an acknowledgement of the necessity of appreciation as integral for an effective pastorate that is also life giving to the pastor.

What my innovation offers is not intended to be a comprehensive, failproof formula for any intended outcomes for itinerants. If our experience with itineracy and the training of pastors has taught us anything it is that there is no failproof formula for effective, and life-giving ministry. Both Lowe and Plyler have written comprehensively about well-intentioned, yet flawed pastoral training programs for the rural church over the past 100 years. In both cases, the writers historically highlight the difficulty of providing a comprehensive training effort for rural pastorates that consider the diversity and challenge of each place in an appreciative fashion.[11]

What I offer is a guide, that can serve as a starting point, or at the very least a means for thought provocation on topics that we who itinerate seldom consider while in our academies of

[11] Kevin Lowe, *Baptized with the Soil,* (Oxford, Oxford Press, 2016). Larsen Plyler, *Fertilizing Faith* (Ann Arbor, Proquest LLC 2019).

learning. I do this in the hopes that whatever place the itinerant finds themselves in, they can have some assistance in coming to understand that place as a place worthy of their appreciation and love; a place worth being.[12]

The hope is, the guidebook will serve as a companion for itinerants entering into new places where the geographical change is extremely disorienting, such as the case of my midwestern friend moving to rural eastern North Carolina. As he mentioned in the previous referenced interview, he longed for such a companion or training aid that focuses on a theology of place and matters of homemaking and belonging. I hope the guide will provide such a resource.

For the purposes of this paper, having established the rationale for the guidebook as an innovation, I will now shift to a more in-depth look at the framework for the guide. I will do so by focusing on the sections that the guide will lead readers through in the process of coming into an appreciative knowledge of a place. The sections are: The Moment of Arrival, The Process of Discovery, The Identification of Connections and Disconnections, and Immersion.

The Moment of Arrival

The night before my family and I moved to Faison I stayed up until 4:00 a.m. loading a large moving truck in Pulaski County, Virginia. 10 hours later I exited off of Interstate 40 at Exit 355 and turned left, and then right to enter into the Town of Faison. Although the geography had been gradually changing on the trip I had not paid must attention to the ways in which it had

[12] Wendell Berry's essay "God and Country" offers a scathing, but necessary critique of the way in which the church in rural places in America has been thought of as nothing more than a mere training ground for new pastors. The byproduct of this training ground approach is that the people and places and churches in such rural areas remain underappreciated sources for the sake of strengthening institutions in the city. Berry, and myself will argue that such a mindset does a disservice to the place, and the pastor. Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (Berkeley, Counterpoint Press, 1990) p.95-102.

been doing so. However, once we turned on the long strip of highway that leads into Faison from that direction, the flatness of the place was overwhelming. I must say, as someone who hated mowing grass on hillsides, a part of me was relieved on that last stretch of road to know that this summer would be one where mowing would be an easier task.

As we pulled up to the parsonage, numerous folks came bursting forth from inside of the house to greet us. To their surprise, I already knew each and every one of their names. The previous pastor had provided me with a church directory and I had spent a couple of months studying it and praying over the families that I had not yet met.

There was a lot of food waiting on us at the parsonage that day of our arrival; enough food for a couple of lunches and a couple of suppers (or dinners if you prefer to name it as such). There was also presented to us a gift basket of sorts, compiled with favored local products, many things that I had never heard of, but things that I have come to delight in.

A theme in Stewart's ethnographic study of Appalachia is the, at times, overwhelming nature of the foreignness of the place to one who is from somewhere other than there.[13] In those first few days and perhaps even weeks, I felt that foreignness in Faison, it sat like a weight on my chest, even if I could associate names and faces. I was challenged by what roads lead to where. What roads would I be driving on each day? What roads were nonessential? Where is the school? Where is the hospital? Which Wal-Mart is the closest?

Arriving somewhere new is disorienting, and such disorientation is overwhelming.

On that first day in Faison, after the initial pleasantries and directing of where the items I loaded myself were to go as they were unloaded by a team of church members and migrant workers, I had my first worship planning meeting with our church organist; the meeting took

[13] Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996)

place in the front yard beside of the moving truck. She inquired about whether or not we would share Holy Communion together on that first Sunday. Upon hearing of my desire to share in the supper our first Sunday together, my beloved friend said with a tinge of surprise, "Oh you're brave." Apparently, going to the table together on the first Sunday in town was an unexpected move. We did share in the meal that Sunday, and have shared in many days since. As time progresses, and as we come more and more into the knowledge and appreciation of one another (all things considered) I find the bread more filling, and the fruit of the vine sweeter.

After worship and that first experience around the table, we headed to the back into the fellowship hall for a "Welcome Luncheon" for our family. It was vast array of many different edible items, many of which I was familiar with, some I had some familiarity with yet I had not quite seen it presented in such a way, and other items were quite foreign. Take for example, "chicken pastry." Chicken pastry is a dish that encompasses shredded chicken, chicken base and/or salt, ground black pepper, and thin strips of "pastry" (a fair amount of butter added is good too). In my other homeplace, this would be likened to chicken and dumplings. In Faison, chicken pastry is a staple; I try to eat it once a week.

As I am encountering the tasty goodness of the chicken pastry for the first time, Doris approaches with a platter full of hot dogs. Some of the hot dogs are bright red in color, while the others are a more familiar (at that time) brownish color. "We bought some other hot dogs because we didn't know if y'all liked red hot dogs or not," Doris said. Red hot dogs are the norm in these parts. If they wanted to, the pork processors would probably be able to make them any color they wanted. For some reason, the red aesthetic seems to work well here. Although not a fan of various animal parts being combined into an edible form dyed a particular color, I have grown to accept that red hot dogs are better than the brown ones that Oscar makes. Still

today, from time to time, I will sneak out to my grill and place a pack of beef franks or brats on; most preachers in small towns that I know go to out of town markets to buy craft beer, or fancy wine, some also go to buy brownish beef hot dogs.

As disorienting of an experience as it may be, coming to delight in the tastes of the place is just as important as coming to delight in the other areas of life in a new place. In some cases, because of dietary restrictions and other spiritual or health practices this may be difficult. However, whenever possible, the things that physically and spiritually can be embraced, should be embraced; even if it is an acquired taste. Much of the most important work that takes place in ministry takes place not around a board room table, but around a dining table; such was the case with Jesus' ministry too. In fact, Jesus spent so much time with people around tables, he came to be known as a glutton and a drunk (Lk 7:34, Mt 11:19).

In my first full week of homemaking in Faison, L.S. took me on a tour. We meandered our way through the church directory and through the various back roads and intersections that comprise the greater Faison area. We drove past each home in the 28341-area code that the people of Faison UMC "stayed at." At the conclusion of our journey, L.S. asked me if I had ever experienced traditional southern soul food as cooked by a Vietnamese woman. The answer was obviously "no." What resulted was my first experience with Mrs. Nhut and her café; it has been a dietary staple ever since. At the initial visit, L.S. inquired several things regarding my food preference. He did so with a level of intrigue that was funny to me. He genuinely wanted to know whether a boy from the valleys and hills of Virginia knew of such delicacies as field peas, butter beans, collards, and okra. I knew of all of them, yet I did not have an appreciation for them. Honestly, I had never tasted any of these things, as they knew them. Presently, I don't go many weeks without the taste of most of them.

I have come to notice, and in reflecting on my childhood I have come to remember, that the vegetables that are appreciated the most are the ones that the soil and climate seem to naturally promote the growth of in gardens. What thrives, or what thrived at one point at least when more people tended gardens, is what folks desire most on the table and on the plate. A good pastor, when able, should always try to keep a garden. An itinerant pastor must face each planting season with the realization that they may plant seeds that will grow into something they will never be able to harvest.

We plant anyway.

The planting, tending, and harvesting that a healthy and successful garden requires is a good image for pastoral ministry. The moment that the till comes into contact with the soil is quite similar to the moment of arrival for an itinerant pastor in a new place. It is a moment of disruption, a moment of disorientation, a necessary moment where the way is made for something new to happen; for new life to begin to grow.

The itinerants guide for appreciation of place will focus on the disorienting that occurs when one arrives in a new place. The guide will seek to encourage the disoriented to embrace the newness with the fear and nervousness that naturally accompanies disorientation, but it will also promote practices such as eating together, the sharing of communion, and soil tending as practices that orient or re-orient us as One in Christ; sharers in life and humanity, regardless of place.

<u>The Process of Discovery</u>

Tolkien was right when he said, "Not all those who wander are lost."[14] However, those who wander in places still unfamiliar must do so with an acknowledgment of their ignorance. To wander through a new place with an unsympathetic premeditated understanding of the place is not to wander at all; such wandering will always lead to one being lost.

Embracing ignorance is not something that most of humanity is particularly comfortable with. The embrace of ignorance leaves us with a level of vulnerability that we are not accustom to welcoming with consent.[15] Yet, the only way we get to knowledge of a place (and then later to appreciation) is to begin internally with a vulnerable recognition of our lack of familiarity. To frame it another way, as our wanderings begin in new places, as we try to answer the question of "Where am I?" we need to come to an understanding that an acceptable answer at the onset of such journeys is, "I don't know." Far too often, itinerant pastors feel it necessary to project a level of certainty to try and avoid an immediate loss of perceived power in a new place. This may be especially true for pastors who enter into a place of ministry where they already feel a lack of respect due to their gender, race, sexual orientation, lack of education and experience, or age. With this in mind, it needs to be said that the embrace of ignorance never has to be a public declaration; instead what I am suggesting is that it be more of an internal posturing toward the place upon arrival and in the process of discovery.[16][17]

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[14] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York, Houghton Mill, 1994)

[15] For more on the topic of vulnerability see Brené Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*: https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability/transcript?language=en

[16] I often hear stories of disgruntled pastors straight from the academy who have bad experiences in their first pastorate because the people are resistant to change. I wonder, how often the same can be said about the well-educated and well-prepared, and well-intentioned pastor?

[17] A suggested must read for the pastor that helps to address the often played out disconnection that exists between leaders and individuals on polar ends of divisive issues, often times revolving around race is Will Campbell *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York, Continuum, 2009) Also see, Tex Sample *Blue Collar Resistance and the Politics of Jesus* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2006).

In Ayi Kweh Armah's novel, *The Healers,* set in the West African Asante empire (now Ghana) the main character Densu feels called to be a healer. Healers tend to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs of people and communities. One day, while wandering through the unfamiliar eastern forest, Densu comes into the knowledge of his own ignorance of the forest. That acknowledgement leaves him with an ache, and a longing:

> "The forest was not hostile. It could have been friendly, except that as yet Densu did not really know the forest. He felt happy walking under its trees, on the soft humus of its earth, hidden under fallen leaves…But when he really looked at the trunks coming toward him and up at the roof of the leaves softening the sunlight above, he did not know what particular kind of tree he was looking at in every case, what it was like, in what way its spirit differed from that of other trees, and in what ways it was similar…Around him were all the small, subtle sounds of the forest. But there were few he recognized without a doubt, and he felt his ignorance like an aching hollow in his being…Once, he took deliberate note of all the trees he knew, and it depressed his spirit to see they were so few and far between. He wished for time – time in which to open his eyes and ears and nostrils and the taste buds of his tongue to the whole world about him."[18]

To come into the knowledge of a place, to the point of appreciation, one must learn to be fully present in that place; to have one's eyes, ears, nostrils, and taste buds fully alive there. In the case of Densu, he longed for more time in the unfamiliar forest so that he could come to know the trees, the sounds, the place as it was. Densu longed for the time necessary for his eyes, ears, nostrils, and taste buds to encounter the new place around him. Densu longed to move from ignorance to knowledge. Densu was not afforded the time necessary for such a time of discovery that would lead to his knowledge and appreciation of the things in the forest. What I am suggesting is that itinerant pastors do have the time, and indeed must make the time to utilize their senses in their moments of discovery after arriving in a new place.

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[18] Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Healers* (Popenguine, Per Ankh, 2016) p. 73-74

Having already mentioned the ways that my taste buds awakened in Faison, I will now spend a moment talking about the ways in which my vision aided my process of discovery of the place I came to know as home.

After wandering in Faison for a couple of years, trying to discover the place and my place in it, I finally got to the point that I started to take notice of things worth noticing that I had previously overlooked:

The Presbyterian Church has the most beautiful dogwood trees along the corner of their building; they bloom in the spring about 2 weeks after the Bradford pear trees. These trees are visible reminders for many in the community that Spring and new life are always around the corner.

Curtis makes it a point each day to take the newspaper to Mrs. Joyce when he and his mother are finished with it. Their families migrated here around the same time so that the patriarchs of each family could gain employment at the pickle plant. Although they are no longer viewed as transplants, they still have a deep connection with one another due to their origins in this place.

Unless it is a time of great sadness, Jimmy smiles each and every time he makes eye contact with another person. I have come to learn that this is a genetic trait, as you can tell who is kin to Jimmy because more times than not they smile too.

Thomas tends the graves of those he worked for all those years with a reverence that goes beyond mere duty. Although he worked for a small wage, Thomas loved those he worked for, and I know that they loved him too.

Speaking of graves, some are tended to better than others; although most of the last names are the same, as I have wandered through the burial grounds I have wondered why this is the case; I still wonder.

The man who lived under the old train depot had the softest and kindest eyes; his name was Francisco Mendez Rodriquez. He wanted to make sure that everyone he talked to knew that was his name. His name was basically all he had left.

Some fields drain water better than others. Not all soil is the same.

Coming into the knowledge of these things through actively seeing has contributed to my being able to appreciate the place I call home, with all of its beauty and all of its brokenness. The intentional act of taking notice makes possible for me to see and delight in the place as God sees and delights in it; such a thing may be one of the primary purposes of this life. As Wirzba put it, "We all learn to look differently with the eyes of God."[19]

Having the ability to see all of the people, other creatures, objects, and various other forms of being that all together come together to comprise a place is a gift and it is a necessity for coming to a point of understanding and appreciating of place.

This "seeing" however, cannot be relegated to mere glances or the physical act of having eyes focus on a particular person or thing. The seeing that I am advocating is a seeing that allows the wanderer to enter into a space of wonder. A "seeing" that can lead to many sorts of wondering questions.

This type of seeing is a contemplative seeing; what Ellison refers to as "beholding."[20] "The earliest accounts of the word "behold" refer to "regarding or contemplating with the eye." Such seeing is not circumstantial…As beholders, commuters not only see with their eyes; they

[19] Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath* (Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2006) p. 63
[20] Gregory Ellison, *Fearless Dialogues* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2017) p. 49

also contemplate with them, creating story lines about jobs, schedules, lives."[21] Beholding, as an imaginative form of seeing, can allow the wanderer the opportunity to see connections in the place that may go overlooked in a task-driven society.

In part of his formation as a healer, the aforementioned Densu engages in a conversation with a friend and mystic by the name of Anan. Densu inquires of Anan as to what one thing in life makes him the happiest. Anan's response was prompt and simple, "Seeing."

> "Seeing what?" Densu asked.
> "Seeing. Just seeing," Anan had said.
> "Talking in riddles again."
> "You understand me, Densu."
> "Just to sit and look at things?"
> "That's not seeing, that's just staring," Anan said sharply. Look with the eyes only. Idiots can do that. If you look at things that way they're always separate and you never really see any sense in what you see. It's all right to look at things that way, separate. It's relaxing. But after that I always want to see what brings them together so they make sense. Then I understand. Seeing like that makes me happiest."[22]

Although beholding may be a gift endowed to us by our creator it is not a practice that most of us find to be second nature. The pace of our task-driven world does not provide much space for a contemplative look at the world around us. Learning to behold all that constitutes a place require intentionality and practice.

As Ellison has pointed out, "Once you see, you cannot not see."[23] This is a very important observation to consider as we engage in the process of discovery of place as we encounter the various forms of diversity that are found in that particular setting. It is imperative that itinerants in the process of discovery of place do not rely solely on discovery of people and areas that are "like" them. A friend in the first year of his pastorate recently told me of the

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[21] Ellison, *Fearless Dialogues* p.49-50
[22] Armah, *The Healers* p.29
[23] Parker Palmer quoting Gregory Ellison in the Foreword of Ellison's *Fearless Dialogues*, p. ix

difficulties of his adapting to a new community that has not been receptive of him due to his political beliefs, although they share the same racial and ethnic identity as him. When asked what has been the most life-giving thing for him in this experience in the new place, the pastor spoke fondly of making friends with a local family who operate a number of black owned businesses in the community. "They take me around and tell the story of the place from their perspective. And in doing so, they help me to better understand not only where they are coming from, but also where a lot of the folks in my church are coming from as well. They help me to see the community more fully and it's so cool."[24]

As my own discoveries have often shown, and as the discovery of my friend has shown, often times in coming to know a place, we encounter places of hurt, brokenness, injustice, racism, fear, and disconnection. Such discoveries are hard. Yet, for those called to preach and to lead in the church they are necessary. The pastor would be well served to use another sense, that of hearing, to take in the varied stories of the community to identify the places in which breaches may be repaired. While in the process of discovery, when brokenness is discovered the pastor is encouraged to lament such brokenness as a first step prior to seeking to engage in any repair.

The itinerants guide to place will promote the practices of wandering and wondering in such a way that stimulates the senses to see and hear the experiences of all who make up the place, with as little premeditated expectations as possible. The guide will promote a "beholding" approach to the people and things that the wanderer comes into contact with during their process of discovery. The guide will also seek to introduce emotional responses such as lament as a response to any brokenness discovered, and gratitude as a response to any beauty noticed; these

[24] Interview with Steve Murphy

emotional responses will pave the way for actionable responses as the itinerant engages community further.

The Identifying of Connections and Disconnections

To continue on with the sensory response most recently mentioned, that of hearing, one of the ways that I have come to further my discoveries of place is through the identification of connections and disconnections through the hearing of stories.

In rural places such as the one's I have called home, the art of telling and hearing stories is a fundamental aspect of community. The majority of discourse that takes place, takes place in the form of narrative. For those who are used to more transactional forms of communication in their interactions with community, it may be quite a shock to have conversations in which the other party begins by saying, "Well, this one time…" or "You probably don't remember Bobby, but he had this old motorcycle, and one time…" or "Back when Pug had his store…" or "When I was a boy working at the produce market…" There is much to be learned sitting around hearing the stories of folks like Speck, Smutt, Brunetta, and Helen.

The art of storytelling is integral in the communities that I have called home, in part because it plays an instrumental role in the community remembering who they are. The re-told stories of the past help orient the direction of the people in the future; it is not mere nostalgia. With that said, in communities such as Faison, where the ethnic demographics have changed drastically in the past 15 years, storytelling and reliving the past now must be interpreted through said change to prevent dangerous idealizations of the past, the time before all of the ethnic diversity came to be. Much of the challenge in communities such as mine, with such diversity, is sifting through the stories heard to determine what is idealization and what is identity. In my

experience, with some of the most harmful cases within the white community, the idealization of how things used to be becomes the centerpiece for identity; such a understanding of self ultimately leads to a harmful disconnection within self and to others. When such idealization is identified the pastor is then able to address the issue; hopefully, to be effective in influencing change, with a good story. It also needs mentioning that hearing the stories of the migrant community may be a vital source of appreciation for the itinerant pastor who is also subject to migration.

Listening carefully to the stories told also helps to identify areas of deep-seated pain, and also places of connection and disconnection worth knowing. Tim Ingold has said that the social life is a life of lines. According to Ingold, each individual puts off their own line, and that line begins to wrap around and intersect and weave with other lines, forming what he refers to as a "meshwork."[25] In the places that I have known, that meshwork is revealed most clearly through the clear hearing of the stories of the people. In my experience, there is no greater tool or method for understanding the connections (and disconnections) that exist in a place outside of the hearing of story. Sometimes it is necessary to hear multiple versions of the same event to be able to rightly interpret the connection or disconnection; some meshwork is easier to discern than others.

All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw, an autobiography narrated by sharecropper Ned Cobb to historian Theodore Rosengarten is a shining example of the meshwork that is life as discovered through the gift of storytelling. With that said, in relation to the point made above regarding the discernment of stories, there is no doubt that Nate Shaw's story-telling and version of events would be far different than the stories told by the white land owners of his day.

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[25] Tim Ingold, *Life of Lines*, (London, Routledge, 2015) p. 3

As Shaw recounts his life as a black tenant farmer from Alabama who grew up immersed in a culture shaped by the shared lives of former slaves and slaveholders, he relies solely on story. Each story is a captivating recollection of people and events. With that said, what stands out the most in my reading of Shaw's autobiography is the naming of people. In each case, those people are not simply characters in the life of Nate Shaw, but they are real people whose lives intersected in the life of Nate Shaw and he feels it necessary to call them by name; over and over again.[26]

A similar dynamic plays out in Fred Chappell's novel *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You.* In the novel, a young character recounts hearing the stories told by his grandmother who is one room away on her deathbed. In each case, the young one remembering finds himself transported back into a day and time in which he never actually knew. He finds himself alive in the stories of the mountain women of North Carolina that he had heard his grandmother tell time and time again. Through the recalling of her stories, and through the finding himself alive in those stories, the young one remembering finds himself connected to his grandmother as she approaches death, and in a way that will continue once her breath draws to an end.[27]

The naming of individuals in storytelling is one way in which the community remembers, but it is also a way in which the community honors, and in some cases, it is also a way in which the community laments. In each case, each name matters, not just for a particular story, but for the shared story of the place that needs to be discovered, remembered, and lived into.[28]

As the wandering and wondering itinerant becomes more and more familiar with their place, the guide will promote their utilization of their hearing in addition to their sight as a means

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[26] Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1974)
[27] Fred Chappell, *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You* (New York, Picador, 1996)

to recognize areas of connection and disconnection. The guide will encourage an active listening to all of the voices who constitute the community as an integral part of knowing the place as an early step in the process of placemaking and appreciation in a critical fashion. The guide will promote and encourage such practices through the utilization of written resources and the sharing of experiences of myself and others who have come to value such listening.

Immersion

Once I became aware of most of the identifying characteristics of the place called Faison through a process of discovery brought about by wandering, wondering, seeing, smelling, tasting, and hearing, I then felt comfortable enough to begin the process of immersing myself into the shared life of place in a way that could be authentic, critical, and useful for the purposes of life and ministry. The itinerants guide will promote this same sort of immersion given that the disorientation caused by the moment of arrival has mostly faded through the process of orientation, through the discovery of place and the awareness of the meshwork that exists and the discovery of the lamentable disconnection that exists in said place.

In my case, immersion has looked like a plugging into a various number of community groups and networks in an effort to make connections that are present yet not visible, visible, and to work to repair places of disconnection. In my time in Faison I have been a part of the volunteer fire department, a member of a childcare board, a co-creator of a preschool, a co-creator of a community soccer field, a member of the town recreation committee, the leader of and a member of the ministerial association, a youth sports coach, an active voice in town board meetings, a co-creator of a thrift shop that seeks to operate as a "sharing shop," among other things.

In all of these immersive roles and activities I have sought to define my role not only as a pastor of a church, but as a pastor of the community. Such a role can only be embraced and/or accomplished through an immersion into the shared life of a place. The immersion is what Wells refers to as ministry (or being) "with" or "incarnational ministry."[29] In his book, Wells outlines four models of social engagement: working with, working for, being with, being for. Through a thoughtful deconstruction of each of these four models and the potential problems with each in ministry, Wells concludes that the "being with" model is the most promising for ministry. In my experience, I believe he has concluded rightly.

"Being with" suggests an immersive relationship that conveys a hope that can only be fully manifested through actual presence. In my framework, in which immersion is the proper response to discovery, which hopefully leads to appreciation and perhaps love, "being with" seems to be the only relation to others and place that accomplishes the desired outcomes.

It is only through immersion that discoveries previously made, and problems and disconnections previously noted can start to make sense on a deeper level.

My experience with immersing myself in the Faison community and in regards to the sense of smell highlights further what I mean about immersion being a means for a deeper knowledge of the challenges of the place.

When I was a student pastor I spent a fair amount of my free time at the golf course playing with some friends and congregants who are a few decades older and wiser than myself. Depending on which way the wind was blowing, you could either get a subtle whiff of a hog farm, a constant, yet mild nostril tingling amount of hog smell, or the stench could be almost overwhelming; it wasn't just the wind, the size of the hogs in the houses mattered as well. More

[29] Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2017)

times than not, as we approached that stretch of holes in a given round, one of my playing partners would always breathe deep and make a comment such as "Ah, the smell of money." In a way, he wasn't lying.

Over four decades ago, Wendell Berry in his prophetic work *The Unsettling of America* predicted a severe shift in agriculture that would lead to an industrialization of farming, which would be detrimental to the environment, and to people, families, communities, and in the broadest sense with which I use the term, places.[30] As he has proven to be throughout the years, Berry was correct in his prediction of the many unwanted and destructive impacts of a farming industry. The places and people in and around Faison have been subject to these destructions.

One of the criticisms that Berry has drawn throughout time is that he offers no viable alternative to industrial farming in a modern age. The critique is, he offers no vision for the future that can combat the community degradation that has occurred due to an industrial agriculture. Some have argued that it was inevitable, and now there is no other way. The argument I hear the most is "How else can we feed the world?" Sounds like a great corporate slogan to me; as I recall the world has been feeding itself long before humans and machines inhabited it. Yet, those who literally put food on their own table through industrial agriculture still have stories and struggles that are worth hearing and engaging. The corporations may exploit their stories and struggles for profit, yet they are still people in need of consideration.

The smell of hogs that would have evoked a sense of delight for so many who found their purpose and being in communities such as mine in the past, is now relegated to being nothing more than a slight nuisance for the sake of the ever-powerful economy.[31] All the while, what

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[30] Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (Berkeley, Counterpoint Press, 1977)

[31] In recent years, lawsuits filed in Eastern North Carolina by out-of-state attorneys on behalf of individuals who live within a certain proximity of hog farms has only further divided neighbors and communities. The suits themselves

goes unnoticed and unmentioned in much discourse surrounding "modern" farming is the amount of debt incurred by farm operations that feel their best way to survive is to continue to grow bigger and to do more.[32]

Breathe deep,

breathe slow.

Your senses will not lie.

What you smell is what matters.

What you smell is what makes the world go 'round.

A lot can be determined in regards to a place's priorities for life based off of the way that it smells. In Faison, and indeed in our county and the broader area, the dominate smell is that of industrial agriculture (for a strong immersive introduction into the world of meat "production", I invite you to take a ride close by a pork processing plant).

Growing up in Pulaski, Virginia in the 1980's I became accustom to the smells of factories. These factories produced a vast array of different textile products; most of them emitted an odor that I would equate with poison. Having worked in a large number of these factories in a different set of "wandering" years, I am sure that particles of each of these plants still resides deep within my lungs.

I notice a similar smell to that of my first hometown in the cities I visit, although the sections of these cities I end up in are more geared to the world of academics or retail. I believe

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may be well-intentioned, but "resolutions" settled in courtrooms are little resolution in communities under the strain of economic pressure that few are equipped to understand.

[32] For another look at Berry's thought on the impacts of industrial agriculture (specifically on people) beyond *The Unsettling of America* see his essay, "What Are People For?" previously referenced.

it to be the smell of vehicle exhaust that I notice the most; it seems far more contaminating on a crisp cool day.[33]

Regardless of your perspective on the economics of communities and the smells that are necessary to make life affordable in such places, it needs to be acknowledged that the odors that permeate the air are indicative of the community's efforts to survive. Unfortunately, as Berry, Wirzba and others will point out repeatedly, there is a fundamental flaw in our understanding of the world and our place in it when survival supersedes delight. It is important for the itinerant to be aware of the dominant smells of the place so that they can further understand the underappreciated parts of life that could be experienced when a place and its people are not persuaded by principalities and powers that stoke fear for profit gain.

It is possible.

Pay attention.

The itinerants guide to appreciation of place will advocate for an immersive approach to ministry that focuses on "being with" the other members in the community regardless of their background or perceived status in the community. The guide will also promote the immersion of the senses, even smell, in the appreciation of the life and challenges of life in the homeplace. The immersive piece of the guide seeks to promote a broadening of perspective for the itinerant in their place in regards to opportunities and challenges, not just for ministry, but more generally in the lives of the members of the place.

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[33] For another's descriptive account of the smells of an unfamiliar place, see Norman Wirzba's essay, "Reconciliation with the Land" found in Fred Bahnson & Norman Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land.* (Downer's Grove, Intervarsity Press, 2012)

Conclusion

As Orr and Wirzba have both noted, due to the global economy and quest for "opportunity" Americans are more mobile and prone to move now than at any other time in human history.[34] As a result, the consideration of "place" as something worthy of thought is practically non-existent in our society. The prevailing thought is, "Why worry about place, if chances are I will just move?" Another issue altogether is the isolation of Americans into their own homes, thus preventing them from social interaction with others.

Itinerant pastors like myself are part of a system in which, like many others, we will move multiple times. However, we are called to a different type of life. One that is not based off of the quest for opportunity or the comfort of isolation, but one that is based on making the Kingdom of God more visible in the world. My hope is that through the composition of the itinerant's guide to appreciation, my colleagues in ministry in the United Methodist Church in North Carolina will consider the importance of placemaking and coming into the appreciative knowledge of a place; in its brokenness and in its beauty.

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[34] Wirzba from previously referenced talk at Convocation and Pastor's School. Orr, *Place as Teacher,* p.218-220

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