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The Importance of Nature in Coping with a Crisis: A photographic essay

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EDITORS' NOTE

The photographic essay by Johan Ottosson is one of the most distinctive and unusual pieces of work to have been published by *Landscape Research*. Drawing upon the author's doctoral thesis, this version derives from a copiously illustrated booklet, published in Swedish, for which the author had prepared an English parallel text. Although it is different from many people's idea of 'research', we feel that it makes an important contribution to the literature on the links between landscape and human well being. It provides a unique revelation of the therapeutic aspects of landscape, and of the instinctive responses of the human mind to landscape cues. Moreover, it is an excellent example of a style of 'short communication'—the photographic essay—which we have been keen to promote within *Landscape Research* for some while.

The Importance of Nature in Coping with a Crisis: a photographic essay

JOHAN OTTOSSON

Introduction

This essay describes the author's perceptions of nature during a period of rehabilitation following a traumatic head injury. The approach is based on 'introspection', where the researcher is the object of study, and where an attempt is made to represent the person's behaviour and reactions in as objective a manner as possible. The essay is written in the third person, which I found the only way I could express myself; it took me a long time to find the right words. Through contacts with many others who also have experienced severe crises, including some with brain damage, I have discovered that there is a surprisingly similar body of experience. Indeed, it could be claimed that, often, things that are deeply personal prove to be surprisingly universal.

Damage to the brain turns one's world upside down. Not being able to do things that used to be second nature and which most people take for granted is a frightening experience. It is like living in a fantasy world over which you have no control, a nightmare where you do not know how it will end—a nightmare that you cannot wake up from.

In January 1991, at the age of 39, Johan was cycling to work when he was hit by a car, and suffered head injuries. He has no recollection of the accident or

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Figure 1. The hospital.

the period immediately after; whether his memories from later on are actual memories or are what other people have told him is hard to say. Some time after the accident he was admitted to Ward 108 at Orup Hospital, a clinic specializing in rehabilitating people who have suffered brain damage. Even now, nine years after the accident, he cannot read or write but, instead, has developed a personal system of symbols and is aided by computers, tape recorders and secretaries.

In the early stages, he knows that he took walks around the hospital grounds—short ones at first, staying close to the hospital—and longer and farther as he began to find his way. One of his problems after the accident was a state of confusion. There was always a risk that he might not find his way home. The need to be out of doors was countered by a fear of getting lost. However, this fear did not stop him, and, although he could not explain it, the daily walks seemed urgently important.

Traces

The landscape around Orup was appealing to him. It was wild, yet there were also traces of human activity, from the past and present. The details from the past—the mossy stone fences or dykes, nearly totally overgrown foundations of former cottages, lichen-covered wild apple trees, the vague contours of a once well-kept crofter's garden—gave him a special feeling of security and familiarity. He could imagine the hard-working share croppers and crofters. His feeling for these people, and their lives which depended so much on to the earth and elements, came from books. Their struggle for survival resonated with his own struggle. He wanted to do battle, to overcome the injury he had suffered, but



Figure 2. Traces.

could not see how to fight against an invisible enemy. He envied those who were able to struggle for their livelihood.

He had no idea how to go about overcoming brain damage. Now and again he got the impulse to move stones and build a wall as a way of fighting back. His frustration and desire to do something about his situation led to surges of adrenaline and, instead of moving stones, he started taking longer and longer walks.

The Stone and the Slab

When he thinks back to the early days, right after the accident, he is surprised by how many of his impressions from the natural surroundings are connected with stones. The untouched stone with its blanket of lichen and moss in various shades of green and grey gave him a sense of security through its timelessness, its calm and harmony. It was as though the stone spoke to him: "I have been here forever and will always be here; my entire value lies in my existence and whatever you are or do is of no concern to me". The stones did not speak to him in words, but in feelings, which made the relationship both deep and strong. The feelings calmed him and filled him with harmony. His own situation became less important. The stone had been there long before the first human being had walked past. Countless generations, each with lives and fates of their own, had passed by.

He was especially fond of visiting a flat slab-like outcrop with its warm, smooth, welcoming contours, especially on warm, sunny days. He would take a bedspread from the hospital to sit or stretch out on. Lying on the warm stone surface and looking out over the forest and up at the clouds drifting by, or



Figure 3a. Stone and slab.



Figure 3b. Stone and slab.

examining the smallest detail, gave him the greatest pleasure. In time, he began looking for carvings in the stone. People long before him must have come here and enjoyed the warmth of the stone. At times he, too, wanted to leave his mark on the stone and, if it had been easier to do, and no one had seen him, he might have done so. The feeling he had about the big stones brought back memories of his childhood. He recalled the stones and 'cliffs' he knew as a child. He wanted to keep the stones to himself or possibly share them with a very close friend, when he felt happy. But most of all, he wanted to be alone with them: the calm an ancient stone imparts is easily lost. It is as though the stone could absorb sorrow, share it without being used up; tears that fall on a warm stone slab evaporate, disappear and, with them, part of the sorrow.

Greenery

When spring comes and greenery with it, Nature takes on a new dimension which makes her richer, but also hides some of her primaevial power. He did not like the greenery. It was the change itself that was unwelcome; it reminded him of his own weakened condition. Spring comes and displays a fantastic power of transformation, which he did not feel part of. His frame of mind was in better harmony with the naked landscape, without the billowing greenery. He perceived that greenery more as one great collective than as its various parts. It was this mass and, above all, the overwhelmingly strong green colour that dominated his perception, rather than individual plants.

The green was so strong that it seemed to blind him. This piercing, blinding green was something new. He could not recall having experienced it before. The greenery was overwhelming and aggressive; the air felt thick and he missed freshness and light. Years later, he is again 'friends' with the leafy greenery and can enjoy its warm, embracing power. The stone slab or the meadow were features of the landscape that felt cooler and less 'agitating'. Once he knew where the stones were, he could visit them: the stones were dependable, regardless of the season.

The first individual plants that he developed a special feeling for were big trees. The similarity between a stone and a big, old tree was something he felt without knowing why; perhaps it was the timelessness. The sensation varied with species of trees. Firs, for example, hardly aroused any feeling at all—they were soft, cool and welcoming, but with no individuality—whereas the old oak inspired the same sense of reliability and security as a big, old stone.



Figure 4. Greenery.



Figure 5. Stone amidst greenery.



Figure 6. The big trees.

Paths and Roads

He liked to walk along paths rather than ramble over the terrain. The path is created through an interplay of creatures (including people) and Nature; it respects the demands Nature makes; it leaves no scars but runs like a natural nerve through the whole. The path gave him practically the same feeling and sense of security that he associated with the stones. Why the path inspired such feelings he did not know. Perhaps it was some innate feeling of belonging that goes back to our beginnings. Paths have always been our friends—strands leading from one secure point to another, a gift passed from one generation to the next. When he followed paths that he liked especially much, it made no difference where they led—he wished the path would never end. Seeing the path before him was a thing of beauty, touching something deep in his subconscious. Especially beautiful was a sense that this preference for keeping to the path was something that had been conveyed to him from past generations.



Figure 7. The path.

Alone, Not Lonely

He preferred to be alone when out in the wilds. The feeling of communion, calm and harmony was too subtle, too delicate to compete with the company of other people. For him, the experience of being 'alone with Nature' was different from when he shared the experience with others. When he had company, Nature assumed a different and more passive role, and the landscape was transformed into a backdrop. The soul of the forest did not want to share his attention with anyone else and, either through respect or jealousy, temporarily retired from him. It was easiest to walk in the company of his own children, especially the youngest. Their spontaneous and uncomplicated reactions were most compatible with his own feelings. The innate, and as yet intact, feeling for Nature, untainted by the need for knowledge or intellectual commentary, suited him best.

Water: the lake and the sea

A couple of kilometres south of Orup Hospital there is a large lake, Ringsjön. The hospital is on the crest of a hill, and the dining room for patients in Ward 108 offers a fine view of the lake. One of his new friends, a fellow patient in the clinic, was a young naval officer. They spoke daily of the lake and the sea, a subject of which neither of them tired. It reminded them of their active lives and it bolstered their self-confidence to talk about something they both knew well. Johan liked walking down to the lake. But it was not until summer that he dared, and actually could find his way to the lake and home again on his own.

Orup had its own little landing and beach. There was hardly ever anyone there. Sitting on the pier and listening to the sound of the water and wind aroused many memories. Many significant childhood memories had to do with



Figure 8. The lake.



Figure 9. The sea.

lakes and the sea, memories which were pleasurable. He especially recalled his explorations of the archipelago in a kayak, and fishing and swimming in a lake. Visits to the beach were not good when he was depressed or melancholy. The beach and the lake gave him no consolation, but they could enhance a positive frame of mind. In fact, the shore could deepen a state of melancholy. The stone and the forest were much more consoling, but hours at the lakeshore became more and more important with the passage of time.

His home is close to the sea at Öresund. The seashore was a prime area for his walks when he visited his home on leave from hospital. Lakes and the sea are alike, yet also different. He liked the sea in all of its moods, but especially in raging storms. He liked walking down to the shore when the wind whipped the sea into a frenzy. The *primaevae* forces of the wind and the sea attracted him. Perhaps it was because the sea gave him a vent for his fury over his weakened condition; with the help of the sea he cursed the gods for having thrust him into such a situation. Without his being able to explain it, his feelings for the furious sea resembled his feelings about the mossy stone and the stone slab. Perhaps *primaevae* force was what they had in common.

The untouched sandy beach, clean and devoid of life, but with the constant motion of the waves, called to him. Once there, he found it hard to leave. The waves that washed over the sand seemed like some eternal pulse, something that had always been there and always would be. The sound and sight of the waves against the sand filled him with calm and a sense of security—like the heartbeat of the mother to an infant child. This feeling was so basic that he could never lose it, and knowing this reinforced feelings of security and eternity.

Nature is Fair

The raw forces of nature appealed to him. In the face of such tremendous power we are all small, helpless creatures. His own situation was not much different from that of others. Face to face with Nature, we are all equal—even the strongest has to give in. While out on his walks he did not feel inferior to anyone. Nature treats us all the same, and he was reminded of his injury less often than when in the company of people. Sometimes he even felt that the injury had given him deeper insight into the meanings of life and a stronger sense of communion with Nature. Many of the difficulties he experienced and still experiences after the accident are due to the demands of our technologized and achievement-oriented culture. Out in Nature—to which people have been

attuned since time immemorial—we experience more basic sensations and we perceive more basic signals that penetrate more directly our psyche.

A Reflection

The interplay between people and their natural environment has been explored by Harold Searles (Andersson & Olsson, 1982; Searles, 1960). Searles' experiences and descriptions of people in crisis and their interaction with the environment strike a familiar chord, and coincide with Johan's own experience. Searles maintained, contrary to contemporary mainstream thought, that Nature plays an important role in our mental health. People in crisis need 'stable' environments in order to feel well. In situations of crisis the individual may need to revert to simpler relations. More complicated relations may be too much to handle. Most complex are our relations to other people, and the simplest relations are those between us and inanimate objects, like stones. Plants and animals fall somewhere in between. Searles argues that an individual in crisis needs to master the simpler relationships (objects, then plants) before, gradually, going on to take on more complex relationships (animals, then people). The higher up the scale, the more difficult and complex the relationship.

Searles' conception of Nature as a link between the conscious and the subconscious appealed to Johan. Contact with animals and Nature can, in Searles' experience, contribute substantially to people's recovery from critical situations of various kinds. It sparks creative processes which are important in the rehabilitation process. This, says Searles, helps to: reduce anxiety and pain; restore the sense of self; improve our perceptions of reality; and promote tolerance and understanding. Searles also draws a parallel to the development of the human embryo, and to the elements of 'animal' heritage which remain in our being. Our brains contain basic prehistoric elements that play a part in our subconscious interplay with Nature today. We receive signals from Nature that are very important, even though we may not consciously perceive them. Discussing with others who have experienced similar injuries and had similar experiences, and relating these experiences to a more theoretical perspective, have been important steps on Johan's 'way back'.

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