

Education for a Sense of Place

Craig Chalquist, PhD

Chalquist.com

Originally printed in the John F. Kennedy University School of Holistic Studies newsletter (Jan. 2010).

One of the goals of our new Master's Specialization in Deep Sustainability is to bring to awareness our complex and largely unconscious relations with the places where we live, work, and visit. The research being done within terrapsychology, the deep study of the presence, character, or "soul" of place, has forced us to rethink these relations on many levels.

As we do, we realize not only that a place can reach deeply into the human psyche, but that our personal story, our "inner" sense of our lives, form part of the story of a place: biography as one thread in the eco-weave around us. Learning this transforms the learner.

For a year or so I've been making trips into California's Central Valley to listen in on the stories, legends, and even symptoms and dreams that simmer out there as they coat the features of the land. I was in Fresno recently, and I stopped by the underground gardens: catacombs dug out by Sicilian immigrant Baldasare Forestier (note the last name). Having dug subway tunnels in New York City, he arrived in Fresno to make money selling citrus trees. To use a Gold Rush phrase, this did not pan out, so, sweating in the heat of a Central Valley summer, he decided to build an underground resort for tourists to cool off in.

What interested me about this was Forestier's response to striking hardpan with his shovel. Hardpan is nature's concrete, and it covered much of the ten acres he had purchased. Anyone else would have sold the land and moved on. Instead, Forestier spent the next forty years (1906 – 1946) shoveling, pick-axing, and drilling his way through, then reassembling the rocky chunks into walkways, grottoes, and arches below the surface. He used no dynamite and no paid labor.

We don't know how he explained this remarkable persistence to himself (the tourists didn't show up until after he died of a hernia), but a cryptic comment of his survives: "My visions overwhelm me."

It is a pity we have so little of his biography. Viewed terrapsychologically, his efforts fill us with wonder. Imagine how powerfully the presence of that place must have pulled at and permeated him. The only tools he had for exploring this presence proved far clumsier than those of image, metaphor, and dream. Even so, I like to hope that breaking through hardpan somehow ruptured and rearranged his inner defenses against the voice of the earth. Without a way to understand that the lands we occupy contain layers of psychic depth to explore, he spent four decades chipping away at literal strata, taking care to fashion circular caves in which sprouted trees reaching for the light like creative insights emerging from below. They still bear fruit.

The tree image haunts Fresno, which on a freeway map resembles the three-branched tree on the city seal. Where the crown would touch soil runs Divisadero Street like an ego membrane dividing conscious from unconscious. Streets above this line run in straight north-south lines; those below run diagonally, their roots tangled with the city's historic core and old firs and pines lining Christmas Tree Lane. Most of the recent development (Vandana Shiva would call it "maldevelopment") has sprouted in the branches above, a civic growth reaching upward and outward. In a strip mall fountain I spotted and photographed an ocular shape that recalled Odin's bargain for wisdom: placing one eye in the well that sat at the base of the World Tree, the ash called Yggdrasil.

Education for a sense of place includes learning its ecology and culture, history and architecture, infrastructure and soil texture where soils yet remain. But at a deeper level it raises an important question: After millennia of transforming the surface of the planet, how much transformation by the planet can we stand?

Before my trip, Fresno was a squiggle on a freeway map. After my trip, Fresno, named after a local ash tree, felt more like a personality held together (as all personalities are) by stories and myths and persistent images full of life, impulse, and color. Fresno matters to me; I have a somewhat more conscious relationship with it now, watching it sprout and ramify in the geographical center of California like Yggdrasil anchoring the Norse Nine Worlds; and because of this, I cannot support anything that diminishes the body or soul of this nonhuman person I've finally met and look forward to knowing more intimately.