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Ecstatic Places

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Fifteen autobiographies from a larger random sample were selected for examination in this article because they exhibit the type of intense environmental encounter described by Edith Cobb in her essay (1959) and book, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (1977). These autobiographies are analyzed for insight into four questions: Are autobiographers who record memories of this kind distinguished by any special characteristics? What types of places inspire these memories? Under what conditions are these places encountered? What effect are these memories reported to have? The analysis did not support Cobb's contention that an intense experience of simultaneous relatedness and discontinuity with nature is a universal childhood experience. This experience was reported only by authors who were artists by vocation or avocation, under conditions of freedom in expansive natural or urban settings. The benefit most frequently attributed to these memories is a center of calm that could be tapped for stability amid adult stresses.

This article reports a study of ecstatic memories of childhood places. If we are fortunate enough to have a fund of them, by itself the phrase *ecstatic memories* should release a cascade of associations. We do not need to consciously preserve these memories; we know that we can never lose them. They are like radioactive jewels buried within us, emitting energy across the years of our life. On each occasion when we dig them up, repolishing them as we reclaim them, they reendow us. An eloquent writer, composing an autobiography, may impart these memories with such force that they radiate across a reader's lifetime also.

Memories of this kind may be properly termed *ecstatic* in keeping with the word's derivation and primary definition (*Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language,* 1975): "a state of intense, overpowering emotion," so that we can speak of "an ecstasy of fear" and "an ecstasy of delight." In contemporary usage, the word is usually treated as a synonym for *delight,* but its ancient Greek roots justify the more general, flexible meaning—*ek stasis* ("out standing" or "standing outside ourselves").

When we stand outside ourselves, we stand in the place that surrounds us. In some ecstatic memories, the place is taken up by the presence of another person. In many memories of this kind, however, what we are enthrallingly attuned to is not another person, but every particular of the place itself. Stephen Spender (1951) wrote:

> My childhood was the nature I remember: the thickness of the grass in the pasture fields, amongst whose roots were to be found heartease (the small pansies which are the colour of the iris in a golden eye), speedwell of a blue as intense as a bead of sky. There were scabious and cornflower and waving grasses and bracken which came as high as my shoulders.
>
> Sometimes, stuck as though glued to the stem of a flower, just below the cup of the petals, there was a chalk-blue butterfly—milky blue its widespread wings; and pale russet chalky color the short underwings, with small copper rings and spots as though stamped on to them by a minute hammer. In the sun the butterflies expanded and then shut close their wings, with the exact movement of a hinge. (p. 323)

This article examines the landscape qualities and social and psychological contexts in which memories of this kind have been recorded. Recognizing that ecstasy may involve shivers of fear as well as delight, the article reviews memories distinguished by the general characteristic that the narrator is taken up entirely by the experience of a place. It is not loved or feared for its associations with other inhabitants. It is intensely felt in response to what it contains in itself—so that, for this moment at least, his or her childhood was this place.

Memories of this kind are one aspect of environmental autobiography, or the recounting of important places in one's life. The general subject has been analyzed by Cooper Marcus (1978), Helphand (1979), Horwitz, Klein, Paxson, and Rivlin (1978), and Riley (1979). In this special issue of *Children's Environments Quarterly,* Dovey focuses on memories of places that afford refuge and free scope for the imagination, Sobel on memories of child-built forts and

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houses. This article takes as its point of departure an often quoted statement by the person first to bring attention to environmental autobiographies, Edith Cobb.

An avid reader of autobiographies throughout a long lifetime, Cobb collected her observations in an essay (1959) and book, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (1977). Emphasizing the importance of remembered encounters with the landscape in middle childhood, she summarized her findings in the following suggestive claim:

> In my collection of some three hundred volumes of autobiographical recollections of their own childhood by creative thinkers from many cultures and eras, ranging from the sixteenth century to the present, it is principally to this middle-age range in their early life that these writers say they return in memory in order to renew the power and impulse to create at its very source, a source which they describe as the experience of emerging not only into the light of consciousness but into a living sense of a dynamic relationship with the outer world. In these memories the child appears to experience both a sense of discontinuity, an awareness of his own unique separateness and identity, and also a continuity, a renewal of relationship with nature as process. (Cobb, 1959, p. 539)

This conclusion has intriguing implications. If it is true, it traces a line of influence in which the nature of the outer world that creative thinkers encounter as children and the nature of their encounter profoundly affect their thought as adults. Their thought, in turn, affects the course of our culture. At the root of creative advance, it suggests, are the conservative effects of remembered landscapes. For, if memories of an emerging sense of relationship with the outer world serve as a touchstone for creative renewal, it is reasonable to expect that part of the effort they inspire are attempts to perpetuate the essential conditions of this relationship.

The present article systematically reviews Cobb's claim in the context of 20th-century autobiography. Cobb's collection, which she deeded to Columbia University Teacher's College, predominantly records 19th-century British childhoods. Does her claim hold true of 20th-century autobiographies, representing more diverse backgrounds? It does, this study found, but only sometimes, within a specific cluster of conditions.

METHOD

To reconsider Cobb's conclusions, 38 autobiographies by men and women born since 1900 were gathered to represent three broad categories of professions: the arts and humanities; the sciences; and law, journalism, and politics. Within these categories, books were selected at random from university and public library lists. The method of analysis and the different forms of environmental memory that emerged were described in detail in Chawla (1986). The present article focuses on memories that express ecstatic communion with the environment.

Based on a close reading of the autobiographies, definitions of seven types of memory were derived. Three independent judges and I then matched definitions to a sample of passages, with close agreement (coefficient of reliability = .92, calculated according to Holsti, 1969, p. 137).

The most common form of memory (18 authors) was simple affection for a place where one had felt comfortable, secure, and well loved, where place affiliations and social affiliations happily overlapped. Ecstatic memories of heightened attention to a place were second in frequency (15 authors). Other forms of memory were ambivalence (3 authors) when childhood ties were complicated by family weaknesses or social stigma; outright rejection when a place failed to meet needs (11 authors, all recalling adolescence in this case); the idealization of an imagined rather than concretely lived-in place (3 authors, also recalling adolescence); detachment (7 authors); and the omission of all but brief allusions to where events occurred (11 authors).

In identifying passages that revealed "the experience of emerging not only into the light of consciousness but into a living sense of a dynamic relationship with the outer world," the distinguishing characteristic that judges applied was that descriptions showed intense responsiveness to an individual place, which itself appeared imbued with life. More than recording simple comfort or affection, these passages documented an experience that was an event.

Using this collection of ecstatic memories by 15 authors, the following questions were addressed: Where there any characteristics that distinguished people who recorded such memories? What types of places inspired them? What were the conditions under which authors encountered these places as children? According to these writers, what effect did these memories have on them?

RESULTS

In response to these questions, this small but randomly chosen set of autobiographies presented the following regularities.

Characteristics of People Who Recorded Ecstatic Memories

Evidence that certain characteristics distinguished people who recorded ecstatic places was decisive. Eight of the 15 authors who revealed memories of this kind won their way in the world as artists, and,

although the remaining 7 made their name in other professions, they all also showed serious involvement in the arts, either by pursuit of an artistic career early in life or by a lifetime of committed amateur engagement.

It was not the case that all artists recorded ecstatic memories. Descriptions of this kind and artistic interests did not invariably coincide. An artistic turn of mind, however, was always associated with ecstatic memories. Among the politicians and scientists, some grew up near scenic seacoasts, forests, or fields or inhabited renowned cities of Europe and the Near East; unless they wrote poetry, painted, or frequented concert halls in their spare time, however, they left no word about ecstatic memories.

That ecstatic memories were found only when authors showed an artistic turn is not surprising. Roy Pascal (1960), in his book, *Design and Truth in Autobiography,* observed that what constitutes a memorable event differs from occupation to occupation. The lives of artists include stories of how the imagination is kindled by occurrences that may extrinsically appear quite insignificant. Confrontations with an orchard in bloom, snow on the ocean, or a city street—rather than a battle or a closing on a business deal—may be events that resound in their lives. In Pascal's words, imaginative writers "are the people whose work and life centre in and evolve out of this type of attentiveness; they are pledged to it" (p. 314). In the fields of politics, business, and science, achievements worth recording are measured differently.

The lines of connection between achievement and memory are unclear, however. Beginning in childhood, different dispositions may already lead us to focus our attention differently, so that people who go into contrasting professions may carry memories of contrasting kinds. Alternatively, upon reaching maturity, we may selectively remember, or retell, only those incidents we judge to be significant. Either of these two reasons, or both, might explain why ecstatic memories were always associated with an artistic temperament.

Only 8 of the 11 professional artists in this sample reported ecstatic memories, however. Three omitted them. To explain when these memories appeared and when they were absent, other questions must be addressed.

Inspiring Places and Conditions

Ecstatic memory was reported under conditions so constant that they appeared inflexible. In my interpretation, these conditions combine to constitute multiple dimensions of environmental freedom. Freedom was evident as a physical fact and as a state of mind.

The environment itself offered freedom in the sense of potentiality—an openness to exploration and discovery in a place that beckoned enthrallingly. In most cases, this quality belonged to the natural environment: gardens, the seashore, a lake, prairie land, forests, and fields. Usually it was open space that the child could move through untiringly. For example, North Carolina beaches and woods fostered Howard Thurman (1979), a fatherless Black boy who became a minister:

> The woods befriended me. In the long summer days, most of my time was divided between fishing in the Halifax River and exploring the woods, where I picked huckleberries and gathered orange blossoms from abandoned orange groves.... I was usually with a group of boys as we explored the woods, but I tended to wander away to be alone for a time for in that way I could sense the strength of the quiet and the aliveness of the woods. (p. 7)

Three cities were accessible urban versions of such a setting—the Santiago and San Francisco that Pablo Neruda (1978) and Maya Angelou (1970) haunted as adolescents and the London of C. Day Lewis (1960), which he learned lamppost by flower box as he bicycled through the city:

> With this bicycle, at weekends and during holidays, I extended my demesne. It was never a large one, being bounded at its most extensive by the south side of Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, Shepherd's Bush to the west, the Edgware Road to the east, and the northern purlieus of Bayswater: but in this part of London I knew every road, street, and square; and when I went to live on Campden Hill thirty-five years later, it was like returning to the heart of a country diminished, altered, yet deeply familiar, so that walking among the blind, dank, stuccoed terraces, melancholy and seedy now after a second war, I seemed to see them opening out before me in vistas of what they were to my boyhood—flowering shrubs, geraniums in window-boxes, barrel-organs, white paint, sunshine and spaciousness—and the Portobello Road market was lit again with the naphtha flares of those far-off winter evenings. (p. 78)

Ecstatic places were usually outdoors; in this respect, they did not differ significantly from other forms of memory, which as a whole showed a ratio of outdoor to indoor places of 4 to 1 (cf. Cooper Marcus, 1978). Even those authors who recalled ecstatic indoor experiences said that they had had ecstatic outdoor experiences first; further, in their indoor memories, the room was always washed by an influx of light, air, and exterior noises.

Although the remembered place was usually expansive, it could be as confined as a sleeping porch edged by a clump of weeds set afire by the morning sun, as described by Phyllis Theroux (1980):

> "Cockleweeds" is their proper name, although I thought they looked like bumblebees quivering on harp wires, their papery husks dangling in a bright swarm, which trembled in the morning sun. They were golden, translucent, amazing sheaves of wheat. The light drove down the shafts of the stalks, making a cool fire of the dew that collected at the roots. My eyes would contemplate the cockleweeds without searching for the adjectives that even now elude me. I would simply hang off the mattress, staring at the sight, getting my bearings, not knowing why. (p. 54)

In addition to being associated with the physical freedom of multisensory discovery, ecstatic memories were always marked by the psychological freedom of undisturbed encounter. In contrast to memories of nostalgic affection, which were often filtered through a sociable "we," ecstatic places were always recorded by a solitary "I." It was not always clear whether the child was alone because no one else happened to be near, because he or she had made a point of going off alone, or because absorption in the environment left the child oblivious to others. Whatever the case, the child was free from intrusion, distraction, surveillance, and prohibition—free to encounter the place spontaneously.

A sense of appropriation was another psychological freedom. The child belonged to a place because the place, in some way, belonged to the child. This mutual sense of belonging always had a socioeconomic basis: The land was family property or public property; it was wild or unclaimed; or it was part of a summer resort or a boarding school where the child's family had a secure social standing that ensured "belonging." Ecstatic places were never the territory of a vigilant other, where the child felt like an interloper. They were places the child could claim.

Familiarity with the autobiographies revealed a final unvarying psychological freedom: The child enjoyed the basic emotional security of his or her family's love. Regardless of family troubles, some relative provided a fund of unconditional love, freeing the child from self-preoccupation so that he or she could give full attention to the place itself.

Effects of Memories

When Cobb first directed attention to ecstatic environmental memories in autobiographies, she introduced them as the special gift of middle childhood to creative maturity and the primary source of lifelong inspiration. On the whole, in this contemporary collection these claims did not hold. Treasured memories originated during early childhood and adolescence as well as during middle childhood, and different effects were attributed to them. Only two authors argued, as Cobb did, that there was any necessary connection between ecstatic memories and adult creativity. Instead, authors repeatedly named two other benefits: a fund of strength and stability and a sense of the integration of nature and human life.

Seven authors identified ecstatic memories as a fund of strength within themselves. Theroux (1980), remembering the cockleweeds, explained their effect in day-to-day terms:

> Could it be, and this is the question of a speculative, unmarveling adult, that every human being is given a few sights like this to tide us over when we are grown? Do we all have a bit or piece of something that we instinctively cast back on when the heart wants to break upon itself and causes us to say, "Oh yes, but there was this," or "Oh yes, but there was that," and so we go on? (p. 55)

In the words of Spender (1951), the exceptional harmony of his childhood setting "enabled me to retain throughout life a central calm and happiness, amid violent divisions of my own nature" (p. 311). In the words of Lewis (1960), to that harmony he owed "a certain fund of calm within myself ... which I am able to draw upon in an emergency" (p. 36).

Perhaps more eloquently than any other author, Thurman (1979) expressed his sense of the integration of nature and human life and indicated that this sense of integration was his foundation for a firm footing in life. As a child, he walked the mid-Atlantic seacoast by day and by night, during murmuring stillness and during wild storms:

> I had the sense that all things, the sand, the sea, the stars, the night, and I were one lung through which all of life breathed. Not only was I aware of a vast rhythm enveloping all, but I was a part of it and it was a part of me. (p. 226)

These experiences

> gave me a certain overriding immunity against much of the pain with which I would have to deal in the years ahead when the ocean was only a memory. The sense held: I felt rooted in life, in nature, in existence. (p. 8)

Holding this talisman, even "Death would be a minor thing, I felt, in the sweep of that natural embrace" (p. 8).

In making her claim, Cobb implied that communion with a place evokes elation. Elation is the mood of the examples cited here, and these examples are representative of most of the autobiographies. The archaic root of the word "ecstasy," however, is qualitatively neutral. In the beginning, it meant no more and no less than standing outside oneself as one was lifted from a mundane state of mind and set in communion with divine forces. In most of these autobiographies, as these authors entered into communion with their surroundings, their integration with nature or the city brought profound peace or delight.

Two contrasting qualities of ecstatic memory, however, must be distinguished. For three authors, this experience was grimly sobering.

"A renewal of relationship with nature as process" (Cobb, 1959, p. 539) means openness to a process that deals from two hands. Nature is death and darkness as well as life and the brightness of day. Because the word *ecstasy* suggests the bright side of life, experience of the dark side of life may be better termed *foreboding.*

Three authors expressed an acute sense of this dark side, of the fecund transience upon which life balances. They were Erwin Chargaff (1978), a biochemist; Loren Eiseley (1971), a paleoanthropologist, and Richard Selzer (1979), a surgeon—three scientists. This observation provokes reflection regarding the uses of memory.

One of the contributions of ecstatic memories to later life that the autobiographies consistently displayed was that they served as dramatic images that could be used to express adult conclusions. The mood and value of the memories corresponded to the authors' mature philosophy of nature. This correspondence is to be expected, considering that an autobiography is a creative composition that sets a life in order and accords it significance. In this process of giving life coherence, however, is it true that childhood memories significantly shape adult musings—or that adult musings significantly shape childhood memories? When Selzer was a child, and not a surgeon, did he already see his Hudson River as an embodiment of the forces of time and death? When Eiseley was a child, and not a paleoanthropologist, did he already know that the dirt beneath him was the dust of bones? Did Chargaff perceive nature as genetrix and graveyard of the universe, before the Holocaust had taken his mother? From autobiography alone, it is impossible to distinguish whether influences run predominantly from childhood to adulthood or vice versa. It is plausible that they run both ways.

Stability, integration with nature, core images—ecstatic memory leaves these residues, but what happened to its serving as a point of return "to renew the power and impulse to create at its very source," as Cobb (1959, p. 539) predicted it would do? Only two authors explicitly connected memories of this kind to their adult creativity. Eiseley believed that these memories predisposed him to an openness to the potentiality of the unknown. Lewis (1960) believed that they were evidence that he had the quality essential to poets, "the gift of passively accepting and conceiving, with the will in abeyance, which allows them to absorb whatever they may need in the world around them" (p. 57).

In both statements, these memories contribute to creativity in two ways. In themselves, they may serve as raw material for poetry or reflection. In addition, they represent a practiced way of perceiving the world—a habit of being. As these two authors understood this habit to be vital to their work, it can be said of them at least that their memories of their childhood relationship with the world preserved "the power and impulse to create at its very source."

DISCUSSION

In reevaluating Cobb's claims regarding environmental memory, this study has come to differing conclusions regarding its form and its significance. Cobb attributed universal values to remembered childhood experience of the world; the present analysis of randomly selected 20th-century autobiographies revealed various forms of memory and various attributions by authors themselves regarding the influence of memory. Whatever the source of the power and impulse to create may be, it appears more complex than Cobb proposed. It appears to vary with the type of creativity demonstrated and with childhood opportunities. Even when this report focuses on the type of memories that Cobb herself emphasized, this variability remains.

From a conclusion that the connection between childhood memory and adult creativity is more complex than Cobb suggested, it does not follow that environmental memories are less important. The legacies of ecstatic memories alone are impressive: meaningful images; an internalized core of calm; a sense of integration with nature; and, for some, a creative disposition. Most of these benefits are general human advantages, whether or not we make our way in the world as creative thinkers.

In reviewing the conditions of these memories, I was struck by the fragility of their setting. They did not originate anywhere, under any circumstances. They required space, freedom for appropriation and discovery, an extravagant display for all five senses. Through them, even in cities, the presence of nature was felt. Behind them hovered that difficult-to-define yet effusive quality of loveliness. As the absence of these memories in most of the sampled autobiographies suggests, this combination of conditions cannot be taken for granted. Given the contemporary crush of urbanization and rising population densities, with their accompanying infill of "waste" places and privatization of space, they can be less and less taken for granted.

Landscape designers traditionally combine natural elements to provide the sensory diversity, play of light and atmosphere, suggestions of mystery, and opportunities for discovery, movement, and solitude that these authors prized in memory. Enlightened planners have tried to preserve lively city streets for pedestrians and bicyclists and public spaces where people of all classes and backgrounds can feel comfortable. To

this extent, these practitioners already work to create the conditions that made these authors' memories outstanding. As public design replaces undefined open space, more elusive to secure are places that children in particular can appropriate as their own, where they can feel safe yet unconstrained by surveillance.

Beyond the scope of the design professions, another ingredient of ecstatic memories was an artistic disposition, shown through professional or amateur involvement in the arts at some stage of life. It was not clear whether an artistic orientation was necessary to direct the child's attention to the details of his or her place, to articulate the emotions aroused, or to judge them worth recording and sharing. Arts education has been the domain of parents, schools, libraries, and other institutions. This education, however, is usually conducted in groups. Necessary as this background may be for environmental appreciation, according to the testimony of these authors no educational program by itself can take the place of undistracted encounters with places themselves.

At their best, ecstatic memories shine like jewels within the casing of our lives. They speak to us of the best that we know regarding how to live as bodies within the world and as spirits within bodies. An experience of this kind that came to Lewis (1960, pp. 120–121)) on his boarding school lawn found expression many years later in two lines of a poem in celebration of the value of these memories:

> And I began to be flooded with a ravishing sense of peace that flowed from the whole scene, rinsing away all impurities, gently rising and rising till I seemed to float, at one with the lawn and the sweet peas and the gramophone music and the blue sky, on a deepening ecstasy where everything was to be loved, from which nothing was excluded but time. I do not know how long this experience lasted. The flood subsided as gently as it had risen, leaving no wrack behind it, no aftertaste of disillusion or melancholy. There had been a physical euphoria in it; but, overtopping this, lapping all round me, the sense of broader harmonies: *The truth of flesh and spirit, sun and clay / Singing for once together all in tune!*

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