

How Places Let Us Feel the Past

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WHAT gives certain places their extraordinary power to move people so deeply?

Many years ago, I met a man who as a teenager had been irritated that the comfortable, middle-class Jews he met in his Northern California synagogue did not take God seriously. He'd see them in the temple on High Holy Days — the only time many of them came to services, he thought — and be appalled at the flirting and the gossip. He would look around at the congregation and think: Who are these people? But he also felt like one of them — ignorant of the Torah, naïve about his faith.

So he went to Jerusalem. There, he met God. At least, one night he had an experience so remarkable, so terrifying, so powerful and so grand that, years later, when he told me about it, he made me turn off my tape recorder and swore me to secrecy about the details. The morning after his encounter, he made his way to a rabbi. The older man listened carefully and told him that while his experience was important, he should keep it private for now, and focus on his study.

Jerusalem has this effect on so many people that experiences like this have a name: Jerusalem syndrome. Roughly 100 tourists a year become sufficiently overwhelmed by spiritual experiences that they end up in a mental health center. They see themselves as biblical characters or as messiahs, or they feel that they have been given a special task, like moving the Western Wall. Often, but not always, they have had previous psychiatric diagnoses. Some seem to lose touch with reality, and then never do so again. The sheer intensity of being in so holy a place is enough to bring some people to an apparently psychotic state.

Locations have always been central to human thought and feeling. Anthropologists have found that in traditional societies, memory becomes attached to places. The anthropologist [Keith H. Basso](#) once overheard an Apache man simply reciting place names quietly to himself. "Those names are good to say," the man said simply. In "Wisdom Sits in Places," Mr. Basso wrote that places became morally powerful for the Apache because they were ways that people remembered their past. "The land is always stalking people," another subject said. "The land makes people live right."

When he did fieldwork with the Ilongot in the Philippines, the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo found that when he asked people what had happened to them in the past, they told him about the landscape. As they recalled the chaos of their flight from Japanese troops during World War II, the words they used were not stories but place names — "the names of every brook and hill and craggy cliff where people walked or ate or spent the night."

We've lost some of that sensibility today, but still our past is given life by objects. That's why we're seized with the need to buy trinkets on trips, so that we can carry home something that will bring memories of the happy vacation to mind. That's also why it can be so hard to shed possessions, because each knickknack, every book, carries the trace of a particular where and when and with whom, and we can feel that when we toss the object, part of who we are goes with it.

Holy places do more. They give an external presence to something that can only be imagined. They make that which has been imagined real, different and, at times, overwhelming. This is also true for places made holy in the imagination. Japanese tourists experience Paris syndrome when they arrive in

the City of Light, a symbol of the glory of the West. There is a Florence syndrome. Visitors collapse in front of the Fra Angelicos in the San Marco Convent, or feel weak-kneed in the Uffizi.

War memorials, of the kinds of deeds we commemorate this weekend, also make the past real to people, and no doubt there are those who come to these memorials for the first time and find that their unexpected feelings seem to drive them mad. But memorials also bring out another response. Rather than buying souvenirs to remember the place, we leave bits of ourselves behind.

When the Vietnam Veterans Memorial opened in 1982, people were startled to find the black gash in the earth and its list of names so moving. And then they started to leave things at the wall — letters, cards, photographs, votive candles, a teddy bear, cans of fruit salad. Some of these items seem like attempts to talk with the dead, but others seem like ways of being present, or ways of making the memorial in some small part something they themselves have made. The objects seem to say: These men are gone, but with this gift we are part of one another.

It is easy in our individualistic culture to think of memories as private and selves as interior. That is an illusion. Our memories and dreams dwell incarnate in the world. Sometimes, they are too much to bear.

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