Sense of place | An investigation into the concept of sense of place

Jeanette Barnes

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A SENSE OF PLACE
An investigation into the concept of sense of place

By
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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Fine Arts, Integrated Arts and Education
The University of Montana
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A Sense of Place (35)

Committee Chair: Dr. Randy Bolton

ABSTRACT

"Sense of Place" was chosen as the theme for my final creative project as I set out to continue my own development as a watercolor artist as well as to provide opportunity for authentic learning on the part of my students. This choice for my own work was based on need to focus my art, combined with an acknowledged attachment to neighborhood and community. "Sense of Place" was chosen as a theme for work in the classroom because I wanted to recognize my students' sense of place. I hoped that by doing so, they might feel a stronger bond between themselves, their school and community. I also wanted to make a connection between my personal art work and my work with students. I hoped that my teaching would be enhanced by my active process of creative development and discovery.

In my personal art I discovered that as I gave myself this focus on place, I did indeed experience a stronger sense of commitment to community. The more I observe, learn and experience my neighborhood and community, the more I want to become involved. I find that there are many questions about place still to be answered and in that regard the work will continue.

My students responded with honesty and enthusiasm to assignments designed with the "sense of place" theme. I believe that learning about oneself, our primary place, and our environment and community provides a basis for learning that is relevant for students of any age. Learning about place and self and believing in the creativity within each individual have become foundations for my teaching. As I carry on in my personal work, I expect to continue to build links between my artistic process and the work I ask of my students.
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PERSONAL WORK

Believing that good teachers are highly creative individuals, I was interested in the Creative Pulse as a program for my own professional growth. It has become apparent to me that exemplary teachers in lively, creative classrooms are good at what they do because they are creative individuals themselves. Creativity by its very nature spills from teacher to students.

As a beginner in the Creative Pulse program I found examples of this principle at work as we had experiences in writing, drama, music, book making, personal performances, visual arts, media arts and poetry. With each experience I felt excitement and great anticipation at finding sources of my own creative energy. At the end of the first summer I chose to give myself time and space to investigate a long held desire to paint.

I bought supplies, technique books, and art books and set myself up with a local artist with whom I could consult about my watercolor paintings. It was an exciting process and after a year of work I had barely scratched the surface of what I wanted to learn about watercolor.

During the second year in Creative Pulse I began thinking about how to bring this together into something presentable, something worthy of a master's project. I knew that I wanted to involve my students and I did not want to stop painting. I also wanted to include some of my poetry as well as try my hand at another short media arts production. Those were two areas that had particularly fascinated me the first year.
I have always held a deep connection to place. I do not think anyone lives in Montana their entire life as I have, without some understanding of how they are affected by place. In the spring of 2003, I participated in a guided discussion group entitled "Sense of Place". The class was part of a series of studies published by the Northwest Earth Institute of Portland, Oregon. Readings from that group and further work done with Creative Pulse during the summer of 2003 led me to use "sense of place" as a theme for my final project.

Over the course of the year with this project ever present in my mind, I sought places that strike me in some deep personal way to use as subject matter. Although some of the places I have chosen are significant as cultural landmarks, my reasons for choosing them were all personal. For instance, I live at an elevation about 6,000 feet above sea level and a short distance from the Continental Divide and there is a unique quality to the air in this place. It is usually fresh and cloud activity is often quite exciting. I find that skies are very interesting to me as a painter. I also find that I have much to learn about painting sky.

In August 2003 I participated in an intense week-long, plein-air painting workshop with local artists. That was a beneficial time for me, working with an instructor who consistently spoke to me as an artist, encouraging me to question formal elements such as: composition, value, color and to always keep in mind the essence or essential nature of the painting.

On some occasions I attempted to express a sense of place in poetry (see Appendix B). I also carried my camera to collect images for the media arts piece. During
the winter I took a class in Photoshop, to learn techniques for using the images as part of creative expression. These images were later used as I put together a two-minute video about place. The video, which played during the presentation of my final project, was a poetic statement about local geology.

While reading *The Re-enchantment of Art* by Suzi Gablik I was taken by the meditative quality of a piece of writing she used as an introduction to a chapter. The writing originally appeared in *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino. Because I liked it so much, I decided to use my neglected calligraphy skills, combined with watercolor and bookmaking to honor the writing by hand-lettering the text. The writing was used with permission from the publisher.

One book led to two more, all with different bindings. Of the two others, one contains handwritten, original poems of mine and the other is constructed as a photo album containing shots that were not used in the video (see Appendix C).

As I come to the end and attempt to bring these separate pieces into one presentation, I must reflect on what I learned. I have learned about the part of me that is a saboteur. This is the part in my psyche that reorganizes priorities. Under the influence of the saboteur, I may find myself unnecessarily cleaning the refrigerator while at the same time avoiding the important work of drawing, painting or writing.

I have learned to deal with that side of myself by being strict about setting aside time periods in which to work; making an intentional commitment to work. The work cannot simply happen when there is time. It is up to me to make time (see Appendix A).
I am learning how to pace my work. If I am working on a painting and find that I must leave it for a few days before resuming work, often I find that I am a different person when I return. Sometimes this can be a problem. If my thinking is fragmented and I fail to sustain a quality or intent in the piece, the painting stands to lose its expressive quality.

I have learned that a painting takes on a life of its own and yet the artist must always proceed with conviction. Sometimes the work is frustrating and usually those are times when I am rigid in my thinking and tentative and cautious in my procedure. Those are times of battle with my medium.

I have learned that the best things happen when I trust my tools and knowledge and proceed with a spirit of curiosity and always keeping in mind the essential nature of the work.

I have learned to deal with plain old mistakes. In these situations I have again heard the voice of sabotage telling me it is not worth it, that there is nothing to be gained or learned. Thankfully, I can see those thoughts for their ridiculous nature and now find that re-doing and re-using after making a mistake are valuable parts of the creative process.

Although I have come to the end of my time with Creative Pulse and to completion of requirements for a masters degree, I know this work is not finished for me. I will continue to draw and paint and to consider my relationship to "place." I like to think a process has begun that will sustain me as long as I live.
STUDENT WORK

Self-portraits

In October 2003 I began sense of place work with my students. I explained to them that I was a student as well and what I was doing with my final project. The first assignment was a self-portrait and it was one in which I would participate along with them.

We started by looking at an abstract, surrealistic self-portrait by Joan Miro and a realistic but fanciful and imaginative self-portrait by Henri Rosseau. We talked about how each artist used elements of design in unique, expressive ways. Students were receptive to thoughts about shape, color and proportional size and that these elements are used expressively. I stressed that we might not know exactly what an artist had in mind but we could make intelligent interpretations.

Next, we discussed Frieda Kahlo and read a Smithsonian magazine biographical piece about her. I emphasized the honesty of her work and use of imaginative imagery. I showed my students a self-portrait I had drawn in first grade. They seemed to enjoy seeing it and pointed out things they learned about my life from that drawing.

Before we started work on our self-portraits, everyone did a self-portrait inventory and wrote "I am" poems (see Appendix D).

This kind of introspective work can be uncomfortable for adolescents and a high level of trust in the classroom is extremely important. Each student had different degrees of comfort in this assignment but for the most part everyone tried their best. A few found it nearly impossible to avoid being negative about themselves. Those struggles were revealing and as a teacher I learned a great deal about the kids with whom I worked.
As the self-portraits neared completion, I brought mine into the classroom to show the students. I talked about what I learned about myself during the process and of how my image emerged in the painting and I had been surprised at what was revealed. I identified parts of myself I was aware of but did not realize until then how evident they were. The painting shows traits of mine that are not compatible with how I like to think of myself. My self-portrait is honest and it exposes me as a less than perfect individual. Gradually I accepted what I saw and became more comfortable with who I am, in spite of my flaws. I realized first hand the value of learning about self. Sharing what I did about myself helped establish a milieu conducive for introspection (see Appendix A).

I am not sure how deeply my students went into their own thoughts about themselves. I do feel that each one went as far as they were able. I know they felt pride in their work and I trust that at some level they all learned something about themselves (see Appendix E).
Weathergrams

In November we studied poetry and once again I worked with my students, writing poems about place. Our final poetry project was a collection of weathergrams as developed by lettering artist, teacher and author, Lloyd J. Reynolds.

A weathergram is a short poem usually written about nature or seasonal change. The poems are written on two and one-half inch by ten inch strips of brown kraft paper. The writing must be done with permanent ink and the initial letter is always red or vermilion. The weathergram is then hung on a tree branch in a park or garden. It is left out between solstice and equinox or equinox and solstice. In this way the writing is affected by all elements of the season as it weathers.

On Friday December 19, 2003 we took our weathergrams to a walking trail and left them hanging on bare branches in an icy wind. In the stark winter air they did not blend in with surroundings and were quite obvious. I worried that a civic-minded passerby might consider them litter and throw them away. It is impossible to say if anyone was tempted to do so. I like to think the unusual strips of brown paper intentionally hung from trees were compelling enough to cause at least a few walkers to stop and ponder their lovely words (see Appendix F).

As the spring equinox approached and students asked about their weathergrams, I was worried again. I hoped that those fragile pieces of paper survived the many days of wind and snow. With some astonishment and much gratitude I found them in their place, waiting to be retrieved. It was fun to get them back and think about students' work hanging in the environment, becoming weathered and possibly being read.
“Kids of Butte” compare/contrast writing

In January at the end of the semester I designed a final writing project which called upon my students to make comparisons between their lives and the lives of young people from the past.

We started by reading the "Kids of Butte" chapter from Copper Camp, a book of local stories compiled by Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration. We spent several days reading and discussing the activities of Butte kids during the early days of mining. Pride in their community and history was evident in these discussions. In evaluating this assignment, the most exciting part came out when kids shared stories from their own lives (see Appendix G).

A day or so after the writing assignments were turned in, one of my students came in with a photo album to show me. This girl can barely read or write and she struggles with many issues in her young life. She is intelligent and often very angry. She is at risk for failure and tragedy. I read everything aloud in class and she comprehends well. She usually pays attention and often makes good contributions to class.

When class was over that day she remained in the room with the obvious intention of showing me her collection of photos. Somehow it seemed important to her to do this. I suspect that she was prompted by our recent discussions about place. I was honored by her desire to tell me some of her stories and touched by her sincerity and confidence in our relationship. What I learned from her that morning validated the entire assignment.
Celtic Lettering

The community in which I live has a rich ethnic heritage, particularly Irish. St. Patrick's Day is an important local celebration. Over the years some of the cultural significance of the day has been overlooked as the emphasis shifted to mindless partying and the spring break antics of college youth. In an effort to broaden my students' experience of Irish history I decided to teach a unit on Celtic lettering.

Traditional lettering and design of Celtic people is filled with fascinating and intricate detail. My students were immediately taken with the beauty and precision of the designs we studied. As we practiced some of the basic elements of Celtic design, students realized the complicated nature of the work.

For the culminating assignment I asked students to compose a design with their own initials using certain elements of Celtic art. An important objective in this work was the connection I hoped they would make between themselves and a vivid tradition and style.

Taking risks is encouraged in an art class. My students often struggle with the risks I ask of them in terms of letting go of their fear of appearing less than perfect. The Celtic design project was one that required concentration and careful execution. I tried to prepare my students with enough materials and skills to allow them to create something of which they could be proud. Everyone from the most disinterested to most perfectionist student worked hard and I think they were pleased with their work (see Appendix H).
Map

The final project related to sense of place came about when a local promotional organization appealed to educators to help compile information and design displays for use during the tourist season. My class created a large map of Butte, pinpointing the location of restaurants in the late 1930s.

Some parts of town on the map no longer exist. The area that was once lively with business and a number of restaurants now contains empty buildings and relatively few restaurants. Students were able to see graphically, one way in which their community has changed over the years. They could see how areas of business have shifted from one region of town to another. They learned a few things about local history and I think they were proud to think their work would be on display for tourists (see Appendix I).
Closing Thoughts

Completing two years of teaching while also working on Creative Pulse projects, I must reflect and ask how my teaching has been affected. I have learned that the foundation for good teaching is the relationship between teacher and student. This is demonstrated time and again, sometimes in positive fashion and I am happy about time invested in relationship. At other times I sense the level of trust is not present and know I must work on building a relationship before learning can proceed. It is a delicate dynamic, one of which I am more keenly aware and careful to address.

The text for much of our class work in Creative Pulse has been *Frames of Mind* by Howard Gardner who, along with others at Harvard University, developed theories of multiple intelligences. Study of the theories has helped me to see my students as possessing singular strengths. I am better prepared to accept the individual nature and intelligence of each student, as opposed to expecting conformity. For one example, contrast two recent students. Intensely intrapersonal are words that describe C. as she quietly works and seems oblivious to others around her. T. who is talkative and concerned with her social life has interpersonal strengths. At different times both presented unique dilemmas to me, their teacher. As I could understand each girl bringing her own strengths and intelligence to the classroom I was able to give them individual challenge and encouragement.

I feel my teaching is in a state of flux. I look forward to deepening my understanding of what it means to be a good teacher and suspect that just as in painting, I am setting myself up here as well for life long learning.
APPENDIX A

Watercolor paintings

Morning Garden

Poppy

Farmer's Market

Lexington Urn
End of Summer

Highlands 1

Highlands 2
Butte Puzzle
pen & ink

Summer Clouds

self-portrait

Westside View
APPENDIX B

Winter Arrives

Darkness withdraws.

Undaunted day advances.

Beneath thick, feathered-filled blanket of warmth
I smell the air
sensing snow in the deep quiet.

Savoring moments of peace between dark and light
curiosity at last compels rising
to investigate the day.

Pale, grey light reveals the altered rooftops
now round, soft, white.

Cold, hostile air outside
moves me inward.

With satisfaction, gratitude and water boiling for hot tea
the Sunday paper is opened.

Walking to Church

Sidewalks deep in snow
plodding steps.

Northern air slices
with emphatic sweep
from near mountain ridge

Astonished by cold
senses rule and minds numb.

With peculiar delight I proceed down Caledonia Street
on this bitter, alive morning.
Saturday Morning Walk to Farmer's Market

On my street, Copper, close-fit bungalows windows stare back.

Two blocks down, Granite, wise, aged mansions elegant observers.

Further on paint peels.

Gutters droop despairing.

Neglected attempts at beauty now accumulated clutter.

Derelict rooms left to memories, ghosts, secrets.

Next door tulips wave brave greetings to the day.

Clay and plastic pots gangley with greens bask in morning sun.

Expansive rose bushes hint at imminent burst of bloom.

Something moves deep inside me.

Recognizing it as hope my heart cries with relief.

On Main Street the market rife with music, movement, voices, greetings, happy commerce

Venerable buildings smile with imperceptible grace and rock to the rhythm of color and sun.
March

Winter's womb sitrs with wind and thawing sun.

Writhing birth amid despair of dirty snow and ice.

Dreariness made apparent with a change in light.

What did I ever love about this place?

Consolation for restless heart in the late evening turquoise sky
tiny, lime-green lacewings fluttering against warm garage window,
spider streaking in from chilly porch,
morning sounds of returning birds.

Gestation of darkness nearly complete
I crave a compulsive release
into light.
APPENDIX C

Handmade books

*top left:* Photo album with Japanese style binding and original paste paper cover design


*right:* Hand-lettered original poetry. Concertina binding with fold-out pages and original paste paper cover design
Saturday morning walk

Something moves deep inside me.
Recognizing it as hope
my heart cries with relief.

On Main Street, the market riffs
with music, movement, voices,
greetings, happy commerce.

Venerable buildings smile
and with imperceptible grace
rock to the rhythm
of color and Sun.
APPENDIX D

*I am* poems which were done in conjunction with self-portraits

I am like sunshine.
Yesterday I was like rain.
Tomorrow I will glow.
I am the sun.
Someday I want to fly.
I am the sun.
I am like sunshine.
why can't I be like the rain?
   ---S.F.

I am friendly.
Yesterday I was ok.
Tomorrow I will be happy.
I am antisocial.
Someday I want to become a super model.
I am creative.
   ---V.R.

I am anxious and happy.
Yesterday I was horrible depressed and sad.
Tomorrow I will be happy.
I am hopeful.
Someday I want to be satisfied with myself in this world.
I am willing.
   ---C.R.

I am quiet and different.
Yesterday I was the same as I am everyday.
Tomorrow I will be the same as today.
I am the person I want to be.
Someday I want to go to a deserted island.
I am myself.
   ---J.R.
I am a confused girl.
Yesterday I was very sad.
Tomorrow I will try to feel better.
I am a confused girl.
Someday I want to go to beauty school.
I am a confused girl.

---A.W.

I am smart.
Yesterday I was awake.
Tomorrow I will be alive.
I am talented.
Someday I want to be rich.
I am human.

---D.Z.

I am happy.
Yesterday I was mad.
Tomorrow I will be mean.
I am happy.
Someday I want to be a dental hygenist.
I am happy.

---H.M.

I am me.
Yesterday I was the same but different.
Tomorrow I will be the same but older.
I am a woman, a daughter, a sister.
Someday I want to know God.
I am still learning.
I am free.

---M.O.

Response to self portrait

What I learned about myself is that I'm so shy and when people are around me I feel like it's still just me. All by myself. I'm happy with myself. But I'm not really quire sure if other people are. I want people to see me as who I am not by what has been done in my past. If I could I would change my sensibility to what people say to me and on my body I would change my weight.

---E.Y.
Self Portrait Inventory

Describe yourself by completing the following sentences.

My name is ________________________________

My face is ________________________________

My hair is ________________________________

My eyes are ________________________________

My complexion is ________________________________

My expression is usually ________________________________

My nose is ________________________________

My favorite color is ________________________________

I like to wear ________________________________

Things I like to do are ________________________________

I love ________________________________

I am afraid of ________________________________

I dream of going to ________________________________

Someday I want to ________________________________

In the future I will ________________________________

I want to live ________________________________

Ten descriptive words that say ME are: ________________________________

Ten descriptive words others might use to describe me are: ________________________________
APPENDIX E

Student self-portraits
Rain falls down
Dropping into puddles
Warm into the ground.

Willow trees whip
And wonder in the wind
Snap.

Birds flutter and fly
Diving and dodging
The trees.
--A.R.

The dry dead leaves
Crumbled when
those creatures
crawl to the ground

Sunny, hot
winter cold
How the
snow gets
so old.
--C.N.

The cold snow
icy breath
Kiss my cheeks
Lonely

The animals run
through the forest
as the lightning
moves closer

The dark dirt
crisp crunch
overlooked by
beauty
yet full of life.

The river runs
down the mountain
and covers all
the rocks.
--A.W.

Whispering willows
deeply bending
in a dance of
spring afternoon.
--U.A.

Lizards
were
lingering in
the lonely
desert saloon.

The sun
beams danced
down to the
dry desert
ground.
--A.D.
Weathergrams hung on a winter day
APPENDIX G

Excerpts from students' compare/contrast paper
written in response to "Kids of Butte" from Copper Camp

"I have traveled many places, I have seen many things, and I have met many interesting people. Although I have been to plenty of different cities and places, I have never been to another place as unusual, mysterious, and outspoken as Butte. I feel the kids or just the people in general are also different than any other kind of person that I have ever met, I do not know why but for some reason people who have either lived in Butte at one time or were born and raised here get embedded with some sort of unorthodox trait or some kind of special yet odd characteristic. I am from Butte, Montana and I am very proud of that fact. Butte is a city that I grew up in, Butte is a place that I love and makes me feel comfortable, but most imperative Butte is the only place that makes me feel content enough to call it home. I think that Butte has altered in many ways and I wish that I could have lived my life in those historical days, but I also think Butte has stayed alike and unchanged in many different ways."

--C.N.

"There are many differences but many similarities as well. If you were to compare the ideals, morals and values of the generations I believe that you would find that the times where things were more challenging and valued to children is the result of more dignified, responsible people. If you were to back talk your teacher, she would whip you in front of the class whereas if you do the same today you are sent to the principals office, given a piece of paper and sent home to veg in front of the television for two or more days. What is the irony in that? Today you can work ten hours a week and spend the money on a new video game or outfit you want, if you worked thirty hours a week back then you were supporting your family's need to eat. Today's youth may be smarter and more educated, but life skills are lacking. The integrity of a man is now measured by what he has rather than what he does."

--U.A

"I for one had a very strange childhood. I was a curious little girl. I used to go to the Berkley pit everyday in the summer. I would throw rocks into the water and I would hope not to roll down the hill and burn to death. I would even spend the rest of my day searching through my basement and field for old artifacts. I found things like old bottles, cans, paper, old lamps, and even petrified wood. I would also go swimming a lot but not in a creek. I would go to stoden parks swimming pool."

--A.W.
"The kids of Butte didn't have any ordinary pets like you and I today. They had cows. I had dogs when I was growing up. The fascinating thing was when I was about seven-years old, our half boxer and half pit-bull dog; Daisy had puppies with our border collie Tommy on my mom's birthday which is June 30th!!! It was really cool!!! The kids of Butte probably raised the baby cows and took really good care of them and brought them to pasture to graze. A cow is no ordinary pet. The kids of Butte also milked cows for milk to sell to neighbors and to bring to their own families. In school, I would drink chocolate milk and was told it was from a chocolate cow. That was when I was in kindergarten when I was five."

--K.C.

"In my life I had good times and bad times but being a Butte kid there was all kinds of stuff to do because there was a lot of places like underground tunnels and old mine shafts and we would play around in them. Luckily no one got hurt."

--B.B.

"I could swear that we spent more time in our forts that we built in the desert then we did in our own homes; the bigger the better, and I would never give up. Our forts were more like houses some were two and three stories high. We would take plywood, blankets, and stuff to decorate our forts, and we would take them miles to our forts, that was like our own little community. We had the good the bad and the evil in the desert at all hours of the night. I know that if I went out there today there would still be remains of what use to be "our community", that is my favorite memory.

My family never went without we always had everything that we needed. The most important thing that I grew up with was discipline, and respect for my elders. Growing up as a kid in Tonopah is indescribable. It gives me a feeling of respect that you would have to live to understand it."

--A.D
APPENDIX H

Celtic lettering designs
APPENDIX I

Historic map of Butte, indicating locations of restaurants in 1939
BIBLIOGRAPHY


