Homegoing

In April of this year, the writer and naturalist Peter Matthiessen was called home after a long and fulsome life sharing the wonders of our beautiful, suffering earth in lyrical, painterly prose. Courtesy of his lucid descriptions of spiritual practice, he had been an occasional conversation partner in my pilgrimage toward understanding and on a particular Friday early in the month, I had been meditating on the Zen master Dogen’s wisdom of enlightenment ‘unfolding’ to support my writing of a particular text. At the time, the arc of my contemplation proceeded thus:

... unfolding ... ah, Dogen! ... yes! ... mountains and rivers without end ... yes! ... hmmm ... how did I first come to Dogen? ... ah, that’s right ... it was through Peter Matthiessen ... Peter ... yes ...

I have several of Dogen’s works in my library but for some reason that Friday, I decided to return to the master’s words via my original source. I pulled Nine-Headed Dragon River down from the bookshelf and left it on the work pile for the following week. Monday arrived and I opened emails – the New York Times weekend magazine headlined an article titled: Peter Matthiessen’s Homegoing. How coincidental, I thought, clicking on the link, I wonder if it mentions Dogen. Then read beneath the author’s byline: ‘This article was printed in the Magazine before Mr Matthiessen died on Saturday April 5’. My wandering of Dogen’s wisdom would have to wait; now I simply wanted to re-read Matthiessen for the joy of Matthiessen himself.

The article, by Jeff Himmelman, was generously written, a fitting final chapter to an extraordinary life. But I was confused by its title – Homegoing – and penned the following note in my journal as tears trolled my cheeks: Vale truth-seeking-speaking spirit. How beautiful your homecoming would have been! Because yes, we know, don’t we Peter, that no matter what a journalist conjures for a headline, it really is homecoming ...

Only later, reading again in The Snow Leopard, did I come across this snatch of text: ‘In the longing that starts one on the path is a kind of homesickness, and some way, on this journey, I have started home. Homegoing is the purpose of my practice’ (Matthiessen 1980, p.234). Hmmm. I said a mental apology to Mr Himmelman and continued reading Mr Matthiessen for further hints on why he was attracted to this particular way of expressing his return to source.

More than twenty years further on, in The Birds of Heaven, he describes his musings while on a plane crossing the Bering Strait: Mightily stirred by the unmarred emptiness of land and sea beneath, I could know with Goethe’s Faust how “it is inborn in every man that his feeling should press upward and forward” when “over precipitous fir-clad heights the eagle floats with wings outspread, or over flatlands, over seas, the crane sweeps onward toward its home” – in German Heimgang or “homegoing”, the return to the lost paradise at the source of all man’s yearnings’ (Matthiessen 2001, p.6).

Yes, now I appreciated how the distinction between homegoing and homecoming could be made. It was a matter of perception, of how one defined the journey from a starting point deemed ‘not home’ to an endpoint – not yet found, this paradise ‘lost’, but somehow imagined – called ‘home’. However I could not see how this related to the cranes’ journeying – both ends of their migration were home, as well as each nomadic ‘stopping place’ (an expression coined by Richard Long whose art literally is walking) in-between. For me, such journeying was synonymous with a perpetual homecoming, in German Heimkehr, in the sense of returning home. Indeed it invoked a Nietzschean sense of ‘eternal return’ to a place long-known, its contours already lived in like the depresions of a well-worn couch – older than memory, and seemingly fused with one’s very sense-of-self.
Thus did I wonder that I had never felt similarly the distinction between going and coming – was it that a sense of home was less an unknown concept for me? I wondered too if my felt-sense of what constitutes home (never ‘lost’) was ancestral, a genetic memory or embodied knowing akin to the tight-binding of indigenous cultures to their lands, one bespeaking a nomadic practice of cycling between different homes, each equally as sacred. Or, for that matter, was my feeling even more ancestral – could it be tracked to different species’ patterns of migration, such as Matthiessen’s majestic cranes, which housed the instinct of always knowing their way home? Even if this meant to the source, the Ground of Being itself?

Hello the House!

One of the most-treasured films in my personal halls of memory is Out of Africa, based on Isak Dinesen’s memoirs. As well as the usual suspects of sweeping landscape cinematography, a deeply inspiring love story and the sheer exultation of witnessing early bi-planed flight, one of my favourite scenes involves neighbour Felicity calling out: ‘Hello the House!’ from horseback as she arrives at Karen’s homestead.

A cinematic moment lasting no more than a few seconds, somehow these three words triggered ancient memory in my soul. Regardless of the mores cited for the founding of this ritual greeting in different cultures, to me it spoke deeper, evoking the scent of homecoming, the joyous announcement of return from however great or small a journey. Concurrent with this thought was an image of shedding outer skin, of leaving travelling cloak, boots and staff at the door, entering ‘sanctuary’ to rest at a metaphoric fireside. In my reverie I even feigned to hear a reciprocal sigh of greeting arise from the subtle bones of the hearth. We announce: Hello the House! And the resonance of the ‘House’ purrs in response: Welcome, it’s good to have you home.

In the moment, it is as if our soul presence has tuned into the house’s own identity or ‘presence’, the resonant hum which is our soul’s breath, our inheritance, vibrating in concert with the place we name home – ‘where the heart is’, as the old adage holds. Homes created with loving intention, infilled with love, develop their own energy, their own resonance or heart-breath of life. That which brings them into being in the first place now rests within their very ‘self’. It cannot be otherwise, for to its owner or (as I prefer to think of the relationship to place) steward, a house is sacred space – our ‘castle’ as another adage states.

The reader should not take ‘House’ too literally, however. For indigenous and nomadic cultures, the land itself is home – something Western thought must rediscover if we are to make any significant inroads into transcending the destructive relationship our culture has with dear Mother Earth. To be frank, ‘Hello the House’ takes on a fuller, more powerful meaning if one calls it aloud from a mountaintop to all other mountaintops around; it becomes a greeting infused with the spirit of ‘I see you’ in all its myriad forms.

It is the selfsame spirit of reciprocal recognition by which Aboriginal Dreaming ‘sings’ the land into existence, by which human existence is also assured. Tsurunga-tracks, or songlines, crisscross this vast land: ‘In theory at least, the whole of Australia could be read as a musical score. There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung. One should perhaps visualise the Songlines as a spaghetti of Iliads and Odysseys, writhing this way and that, in which every “episode” (ie. sacred site) was readable in terms of geology … Aboriginals could not believe the country existed until they could see it and sing it – just as, in the Dreamtime, the country had not existed until the Ancestors sang it’ (Chatwin 1988, p.13-14).

In Chatwin’s illuminating text, his interlocutor, Arkady, describes how the distance between two such sacred sites can be measured as a stretch of song: ‘It was one thing to persuade a (railway) surveyor that a heap of boulders were the eggs of the Rainbow Snake, or a lump of reddish sandstone was the liver of a speared kangaroo. It was something else to convince him that a featureless stretch of gravel was the musical equivalent of Beethoven’s Opus 111. By singing the world into existence, he said, the
Ancestors had been poets in the original sense of *poesis*, meaning “creation”. No Aboriginal could conceive that the created world was in any way imperfect. His religious life had a single aim: to keep the land the way it was and should be. The man who went “Walkabout” was making a ritual journey. He trod in the footsteps of his Ancestor. He sang the Ancestor’s stanzas without changing a word or note – and so recreated the Creation’ (Chatwin, ibid.).

In Aboriginal Dreaming, ‘Hello the House’ is a continuous greeting, a conscious expression of shared existence, of sung oneness with the land – all of which, and each unique expression of which is the equivalent of home. No need for coming or for going – every where and every thing is home, just as every time to sing, to praise, is the present moment. A profound sense of stewardship pervades this way of seeing the world, one which ensures each member of a community has responsibility for his or her ‘own country’ even if said country is only ‘an empty stretch of spinifex’: “‘To wound the earth,’” (Arkady) answered earnestly, “‘is to wound yourself, and if others wound the earth, they are wounding you”’ (Chatwin 1988, p.11).

This same intuition, of kinship with all life, together with the sense of oneness underlying the all, can be found in Buddhist practice: ‘Contemplate seeing yourself outside of your bodily form. Contemplate seeing your bodily form present before you – in the trees, the grass and leaves, the river. Be mindful that you are in the universe and the universe is in you: if the universe is, you are; if you are, the universe is. There is no birth. There is no death. There is no coming. There is no going’ (Nhat Hanh 2008, p.90). Mindfulness is ‘putting each foot down on the earth … knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality’ (Nhat Hanh 2008, p.12). With such a philosophical foundation, the Buddhist tenet of ‘do no harm’ is as perfectly logical as the Aboriginal principle of not ‘wounding’ the earth.

In fact, it seems that as cultures forfeit direct bipedal motion overland for pressing ‘pedal to metal’ (and more), the potential grows for their increasing detachment from a spirit of place. This sense of separateness from what is perceived to be ‘not us’ or ‘not home’ (which prevails in the Western mindset, at least) raises the potential for wounding or desecrating the earth, for doing needless harm to Mother Earth and the places her children live, of which we, as humankind, are only one amongst more than eight million brother and sister species in the world (if one holds with the intuition of interconnectivity, that we are all kin with an equal right to living space).

For his part, American writer Paul Salopek has embarked on a seven-year odyssey to walk the world – out of humanity’s Ethiopian birthplace to the furthest reaches of our migration ‘home’, a journey of some 21,000 miles. Continuously asked: *Why?* his equally continuous answer is: ‘I want to relearn the contours of the planet at the human pace of three miles per hour. To slow down, to think … to repair certain important connections burned through by artificial speed, by inattentiveness’ (Salopek 2013). ‘Burned through’ – a graphic word-image for the extent of our detachment from the land, for our neglect to put each foot down on our wondrous earth mindfully, attentively. How easy it is to forget, to overlook, the miracle of which we are part when our connection is blurred by artificial speed!

In writing this text, I begin to see that a sense of homecoming can extend as far and as wide as our literal sense of home potentially extends. When we are prepared to walk, to sing, to recognise our participation, our co-creation and shared responsibility in the miracle of existence which is our world, becoming the landscapes we traverse as surely as they become us, then shall we truly be at home. Likewise, when we feel the earth’s wounding as our own, the same shaft going straight into our own
hearts, our bodies wailing with pain just as keenly, then shall we truly be at home. To paraphrase Matthiessen: Homecoming is the purpose of my practice – ‘Hello the House!’ a moment-by-moment greeting to Gaia’s wondrous All, my voice a gift to the earth in a shared song of praise, no more than a humble human heliotrope in love with life itself with joy as my healing mantra.

Ma Vlast

It is probably no coincidence that one of my favourite suites of music is Smetana’s symphonic homage to his Bohemian homeland. It is probably also no coincidence that Smetana composed these six lyrical poems of landscape and legend after he had gone completely deaf. Home was within. Like Beethoven before him, his most spiritually uplifting symphony was a completely interior endeavour. The overriding sensory faculty on which music depends – audition – had been silenced so that he may (as is my conjecture, similarly, in this essay on Beethoven’s 9th) touch the Void directly, the divine silence in which the Harmony of the Spheres may be apprehended and translated into the ‘felt-sounds’ and ‘tone-paintings’ of our sensory world.

Of course, Smetana had spent a lifetime of attunement to the land on which he could draw in his silence and contemplation. He had infused, absorbed, drunk deep of each stretch of the Moldau, explored each crevasse of Mount Blanik (at the very least, imaginatively), interrogated his myths and histories to the nth degree. And from this wealth of head- and heart-knowing he could bring outer and inner worlds together in orchestral song. By the time Ma Vlast was complete, he had reached a point – even without the cultural heritage enjoyed by indigenes – of singing his ‘own country’ into existence, of ‘hearing’ the full spectrum of its resonant score within if not without, a songline he gifted to an entire nation.

In Smetana’s experience I had found a conversation partner. Although my process of creation involves literature rather than music, still it is an art-form where a score is penned, and still an experience conducted in surround-sound silence, guided by an inner tuning-fork – soul resonance: ‘Literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist … made at the frontier between the self and the world, and in the act of creation that frontier softens, becomes permeable, allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist to flow into the world (Rushdie 1991, p.427).

As a thematic motif, ma vlast has been a strong red-thread running through my writing since the earliest days of putting pen to paper – a gradual process, I see now, of ‘softening’ the frontier between self and world. Simply by reviewing the hard data of stories penned over the years, I find the inner coming out onto paper years before any conscious thought seems to synapse between writerly self and surface-conscious me. An ongoing experience of living inside-out, this tends to twin Nietzsche’s eternal return with a deep-seated desire to merge with the spaces that resonate with my sense-of-self – in Rushdie’s words, for the artist and the world to permeate each other. Here an example:

The snow fell outside but in, inside it was warm. Warm from the heat of the crackling wood stove, warm from the glow of two dozen candles, warm from the feel of contented limbs and cozy hugs. Him of her and her of him. For he had just returned. Crawled back into the cocoon of their silent existence, the one in which souls could be heard breathing in time with the rhythm of the world, in time with the ancient metronome of the earth … For once upon a time there was a girl who lived in the country. She lived in the country with her love. In an old house that had breathed life for many hundreds of years before they came. To live. To simply live … And if you listened closely to their breathing, in time, in company, in rhythm, it was the same asleep as awake, such was the state of perfect peace they had created, built, divined, simply by existing. Simply by existing. Together. As one. With the world.

This decades-old text documents how my writerly self perceives home to be any space, any time, any presence which conjures an experience of deep-seated peace, a notion of emergence for which I had no lexicon at the time, and taking place in a location ‘foreign’ to outer non-writerly senses. At the time of writing, any notion of homecoming to an alpine land was far in the future, an unexpected catalytic event in the spirit of Emerson’s observation that the soul already contains in itself the event that befalls it, ‘for the event is only the actualizing of its thoughts’ (Emerson 2003, p.21).
Perhaps, then, it is our ignorance of the path needing to be travelled ‘home’ that leads to the longing or homesickness Matthiessen describes. Perhaps such emotional responses are the ununderstood surface perceptions of our soul’s energy to homecome. I can certainly attest to a feeling of homesickness for the Australian bush in those early years of European migration, the damp salty air and shrill joy of lorikeets returning to their literal home-trees each afternoon while my symbolic eucalypt remained accessible only through the prism of time distilled, another of the migrant’s partial and ‘broken pots of antiquity’ (Rushdie 1991, p.12). But I can also attest to a feeling which seemed to issue from a place deeper than my emotions – going in, I discovered a buzzy energy far beneath, a soul-level restlessness to put down roots in this adopted country, to be able to homecome rather than continually gnash my teeth at the inability to homego.

The search for such a place, one which would welcome me to this land as surely as the one to which I was born, took time, yes, and patience. I had to trust there would be such a place to mirror my sense-of-self, my soul resonance, as completely as I reflected its. But I remained persistently surface-ignorant that the data of years-old literature had already lain paving stones along this pilgrimage path, standing ready – in divine silence – to sing my ‘own country’ into existence, creating a songline that traverses the world.

**Eterno ritorno**

If the literature I made years ago was at the frontier, to see things plainly, according to Rushdie, the migrant needs to cross their frontier (Rushdie 1991, p.125). In my case this literally involved a doorway, a threshold between two rooms ‘in an old house that had breathed life for many hundreds of years before they came’. I was forced to cross this threshold countless times courtesy of a toddler who had decided on a special game to pass the time while his father chatted away in a foreign language to the custodians of the ‘House’.

It involved going into a small dark bedroom, closing the door, babbling away for a while before re-opening the door, stepping out into the main room, closing the door again. This cycle was repeated ad nauseam but after the first few circuits, I noticed something. The air was denser, closer, thicker in the small dark space – energy-dense with silence, a silence which veritably drowned out my boy’s babbling, the murmur of conversation beyond the door, even birdsong through an open window. Several more times I mentally noted this, wondering also at the attraction this room had for my son. It was very dark and ‘gloomy’ at a level of surface perception but I trusted his intuitive knowing that it was a ‘good’ space worthy of entry (as an aside, it is well-documented that the veil between the worlds is especially thin in young children, gradually becoming more opaque with age and ego assertion). Thus, I also took note of my own sensory responses – a quickening pulse accompanied by a ‘buzziness’ asserting itself in my consciousness. Until, finally, the silence revealed itself, and spoke: *People have slept well here, at peace.*

Concurrently (or synchronistically) my boy tired of his game and I followed him out of the house and into autumn sunshine. Yet no more was needed than those few words. The frontier had dissolved, my soul-knowing – complete, intact, sufficient unto itself as demonstrated by its uplift in literature – had become reality in time and space: ‘And if you listened closely to their breathing ... it was the same
asleep as awake, such was the state of perfect peace ... simply by existing ... As one. With the world'.

With what I understand now of universal resonance, the silence which spoke, which contained the words that formed in my mind, was a simple case of my soul’s resonance connecting to the ‘foundation-breath’ of the space, both of which contain the ‘pulse’ of the Ground of Being, both ‘breathing in time with the rhythm of the world, in time with the ancient metronome of the earth’:

Silence fills my self.
In each home You reach to me
in sound full and round.

Thus did my understanding evolve that places open us to ourselves – the spirit of places open us to ourselves. And the songlines we write, we sing, become the guarantee of our – and their – continued existence. Nietzsche knew it. He, the philosopher, knew it; and he, the wanderer, knew it, believing his ‘Muses’ lived in the Swiss Engadine. It was a resonance felt-sensed and reflected in his literature: ‘As far back as The Wanderer and his Shadow, I wrote that there are surely many things in nature that are more grand and more beautiful, but this region is intimate and familiar to me, related to me by blood, and by more than blood’ (Krell & Bates 1997, p.151). He crossed his own frontier with ‘the thought of eternal return’, a thought which belonged, he wrote, to the month of August in the year 1881, a thought jotted onto a page that bore the following signature: 6,000 feet beyond humanity and time (Krell & Bates 1997, p.133). At a towering pyramidal boulder not far from Surlej, his resonance merged with the antiquity and longevity of the landscape, his eterno ritorno felt as embodied knowing – a ‘belongingness’ in, of and to the world, his relationship to place ‘by blood, and by more than blood’ – and written into existence as surely as the sculptural homage hewn by Marco Belotti in 2011 (recorded in the above image).

It is an embodied knowing I share, blessed to steward two homes at either end of the world, each a ten-foot-square hut in its own right, each a peace-sink of earth-deep and heaven-sent energy twinned. Each year, blood, and more than blood, induces my cyclical migration, 30,000 feet beyond humanity and time, 10,000 miles distant like a majestic Matthiessen crane. At artificial speed (granted), it is nevertheless with a deep sense of wonder at the miracle of flight that I make the crossing, feeling at one with the sky as much as the earth, ‘sweeping onward’ through home to home, a wide-winged bird of Goethe’s heaven. And each year the annual ritual binds me closer and closer to the world I traverse, tight-weaving me into the fabric of the Gaiasphere, as I sing up the land, make ‘the country come up quicker’ (Chatwin 1988, p.14), ‘Hello the House!’ my perpetual invocation.

Whether the ochre-slashed landscapes and heat-haze-stretched horizons of a sunburnt country, or the clear blue heights and cragged snow-strung cliffs of alpine dreaming, I am home, every where and every thing a becoming-song in my heart. Finally I understand Walt Whitman’s Song of the Rolling Earth: ‘I swear the earth shall surely be complete/To him or her who shall be complete’ (Whitman 1891); finally I know the miraculous and mysterious reality of walking our wondrous earth.

And I know Peter Matthiessen knows, has always known. In the end, it is simply a question of vernacular, and one redundant when we finally know there is no coming, there is no going. There is just this, our one life in time and space, Dogen’s mountains and rivers being and flowing without end, and perfect peace unfolding ‘simply by existing ... As one. With the world.’