

## **Chapter 7: Autoethnography: "You're not just studying then - you're living it."**

"I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well".

Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods*.

Autoethnography is an *aesthetic* activity as much as an academic one in that it tells stories that invite the reader "to put themselves in our place" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 751). As such I must create an evocative reconstruction of life on protest sites that remains true to my experience. I have therefore structured material noted over many months at various sites to read as a shorter time at a single camp. Aliases are used throughout and two characters, Holly and Oak, combine more than one individual. Although I've made minor additions to my original material for clarification, all substantive comments are verbatim and events occurred as described.

As autoethnographer, I am "a boundary-crosser" whose writing reveals "multiple, shifting identities" (Reed-Danahay, 1997: 3) that reflexively locate my personal sense of the research process. It thus becomes apparent that "in the field we are in dialogue with ourselves as much as we are in dialogue with others", and how fieldwork becomes a "personal voyage of discovery" (Bruner, 1986: 15). An autoethnographer's work typically reveals the "contradictions they experience" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 738), and such contradictions are an inevitable part of life on a protest site; for example, the road I used to get to the camp was the one we were protesting against. We are inevitably caught in these contradictions, and the extent to which I lacked that awareness while on site reflected my embodied situation. Denzin emphasizes the way autoethnography combines autobiography with ethnography (Denzin, 1989: 27), and I integrate my wider life experience because it "has ethnographic interest" (Reed-Danahay, 1997: 9) and provides valuable material for analysis in chapter 10, 'A "sacred relationship with the world"'.

### **BOUNDARIES**

We usually imagine the border between academic discourse and emotional engagement to be well policed, but I now know it to be frangible. I sit in the lofty white space of 'Humanities 1' in the British Library, sitting dutifully at desk number 2177. But I am not engaged in bookish research. My reading has been closed by a memory of such

emotional intensity that I almost weep. Reading Beverley Butler's<sup>1</sup> account of the M11 link road protest suddenly flashes back the laughter, the pain, the passion and the madness of it all. She visited Clairmont Road as an academic at the moment of its greatest wonder: I visit her written account as an activist long after its demise. Mine is a very different journey, and I am marked by it.

The moment brings to me the slippery nature of this work. It is not head work, all neat and analysed. Nor is it art, an overflow of feeling flooding the page. My work must live in some third space that celebrates emotional involvement yet honours academic discourse. I've glimpsed such a hybrid in the work of others, so I know at least that it is more than mythic.

My supervisor sits back in his chair. "Well, your chapter headings are fine ..." Dramatic pause. "... if you just want to produce a piece of philosophy". He poses like Rodin's *Thinker*.

"No, I want to ground it in fieldwork. I've included an outline of that in Chapter 9."

Oh yeah, I think to myself; after 'Embodied Metaphor in Magico-religious Practice', 'Phenomenology, Embodiment and Ecological Understanding' and 'Knowledge and the Body'.

"OK. If you want to do fieldwork, then this is out of balance. There's too little and it comes too late".

I know that what he's getting at: How much time do I want to spend on theory and how much on fieldwork? I'm really interested in how embodied knowing might tie in with ritual and changes in subjectivity, so I guess that means I need to leave the warm familiarity of the library and get out into the unknown world of fieldwork. Scary!

## **Arrival**

### ***Field notes:***

*A few long days ago I was in London phoning the camp from my flat. Now the flat is empty, my unaffordable lease is done and my material life sits in store. No word from any of the Housing Co-ops I've applied to, so it's up and off. So now I'm on a train going west. It started snowing just as the train left London and the fields all around are now dusted. Not ideal conditions to arrive in! Still, it may delay work on the road. I hope so. When I spoke to Jill on the phone she emphasised how "bloody beautiful" the woods are.*

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, in Harvey 2003.

*It was snowing pretty steadily as the train arrived at my destination and the bus driver joked that I'd need skis in the woods. I smiled through my mixed feelings: I have the usual slight anxiety at heading into an unknown situation, tempered with a certainty that this is where I need to be right now and all will be well. Why am I so certain? My first thought is that this is in accord with the pattern of my life. Not being here would be a denial of how I identify myself. It's living the life I've created.*

Dusk is falling as I get off the bus but within 15 minutes I find myself walking down the rough path towards the camp. A voice hollers out a "Hello!" from the bank above me. "Hi! It's Adrian – I phoned the camp a couple of days ago." I'm aware that at this moment I'm no more than a shadow in the dark, so I want to reassure them that I'm a friend. "Oh, hi! Come on up. There's a gap in the fence over here". A guy who calls himself 'Oak' meets me with a smile and leads me to the fire pit where five others sit huddled round the warmth.

"Hi, I'm Adrian. I'm an old mate of Jill's and she was telling how amazing it is here."

"Hi. Good to meet you. Always good to see new people. You staying long?"

"I dunno. Maybe. See how it goes."

"Cool. Have you got a tent or something? You can always sleep in the communal bender if you like."

"I'm OK. I've brought a tent and stuff. Guess I'd better pitch it before it gets too dark." I head off and find a spot to pitch my tent near a tree. It's not exactly sheltered, but it'll provide some protection from the wind. I hope.

Back at the fire, I get chatting to a young woman of about 20 who's 'site name'<sup>2</sup> is 'Holly'. When I tell her a bit about my understanding of Eco-Paganism she smiles with recognition and says "Oh, I guess I'm an Eco-Pagan then!" I smile with a different kind of recognition as this experience is quite common in Paganism in general. You don't get converted but just realise there's a name for what you already believe. My problem is that the name 'Pagan' doesn't fit me so well these days. I remember how the first draft of my Literature Review became a rant

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<sup>2</sup> About a third of the people I met on protest sites used an alias which they referred to as their 'site name'. Typically this was only used while on the site or involved in a protest action. Although the site name was supposedly to avoid identification by the authorities it appeared to have little practical value.

about how disconnected from the land mainstream Paganism is and my growing sense that it's lost the plot. If it ever knew it in the first place! I keep quiet about my doubts as we chat round the warmth of the fire for fear I might break the spell.

After a few rounds of red wine it's time for bed, so we all crunch through the snow to tents dotted round the camp. The snow is inches deep now and even wearing all the clothes I have I'm cold as I struggle to get some sleep. We must all be crazy.



Next morning is bright and cold. The fire pit is warm and Oak has made some porridge. Joy!

"Hey, Oak, Any idea where that came from?" A spotlight of morning light picks out a Brigid's Cross hanging in a tree opposite. It's woven from corn and tied with a thin red ribbon, just like similar crosses I've made myself to celebrate the recent Pagan festival of Imbolc.

"Oh yeah. A couple of Wiccans came down a few weeks back and put them up".

I'm intrigued now and pleased to see such overt Pagan practice. "Really? Are they around much?"

"No", Oak replies, a little sadly. "They came down for a quick visit and we haven't seen them since."

I share his sadness, but for more complex reasons: I was initiated into Wicca over ten years ago but have seen very little in the way of environmental action amongst those who share that path. It would enhance more than just my ethnography to meet Wiccans on the site.

**Field notes:**

*Jill came over last night and we sat by the fire to catch up over a cuppa. It's been a few years since the last big round of road building, and she had a sense that this marks the next turn on the spiral that started at Twyford Down. Ah, Twyford! Jill and I reminisced about those younger days and how she has a sense that the magic is turning, rising to inspire a new generation of eco-warriors. We're both part of the 'old school', the veterans who were at Twyford and Newbury who thought we'd beaten the Tory road builders only to see a new and smarter foe emerge. But protest is growing and perhaps we can turn the tide.*

*The next few weeks are crucial as the contractors are rattled by the protest and behind schedule. Morale is high and we're building more defences everyday. Jill moved house recently so can't spend much time here now, but she thinks we can win this one. Let's hope so: There are bats, owls, badgers, dormice and toads in these woods.*

Writing up field notes takes time, and it's late morning by the time I struggle out of my sleeping bag and head briskly towards the communal bender for breakfast. A head pops out of a tent: Holly wishes me "Good morning" with a smile. Even after a few days I have a strong sense of what Turner might call 'communitas', forged perhaps by the bitter cold and sharing work.

In the communal bender, more smiles. "Hi, I'm Sam. Cuppa?" Says a bright, friendly woman as we meet over the kettle. "Yeah, love one thanks. I'm Adrian. I don't think we've met?"

"No. I live nearby, in town." She says, by way of explanation. "But I visit every week. Are you living on site now?"

"Yeah. I'm doing research into the spirituality of protest sites - studying what I call Eco-Paganism. Well, that and helping with the protest. I used to be really involved years ago and it felt like time to get my boots dirty again." Suddenly we're talking about the M11, Twyford Down and Newbury. Sam has heard of them but has been more involved with Greenpeace style campaigns which are much less anarchic. "So are you an 'Eco-Pagan' then?"

"Yeah - Have been for years." I say with a shrug.

"Oh." she responds, with a smile: "You're not just studying then - you're *living* it."

I nod, thoughtfully. She's hit the mark of course, and makes me even more aware of my dual status here, the ambiguity of my motives. I try to change the subject a little. "Are there many Pagans involved here?"

Sam hasn't told me much about herself until now, but, perhaps following my lead, shares. Yes there are several Pagans involved with the campaign, including her friend, Millie, who I haven't met yet. Sam tells me Millie might be popping in tomorrow, so we should talk. "I do like the Pagan way of looking at things, but I'd call myself a Christian, though I'm not involved with the Church".

We sit and chat about spirituality for a while until Sam finishes off her tea and gets up to leave. "See you later!" Sam says, as she wraps up in her coat and heads out into the cold.

***Field notes:***

*The activist in me hears that 111 trees are under threat, while the researcher notes that Millie is a Pagan. To be honest I feel more activist than ethnographer, but a 'third position'<sup>3</sup> perceives that there need not be any conflict between the two, and in fact my activist status should enhance my ethnography. I'd really like to talk to someone with experience of this kind of dual role. Maybe Susan Greenwood? I'll call her.*

I wake up and cringe: I've been here ten days now and I'm getting fed up with having to leave site to go to the loo. Most people use the public toilets that are about 20 minutes walk away, though there's evidence that not everyone bothers. So I suggest to Oak that we build a compost toilet. "Yeah. Go ahead. Maybe down the far end of site." For a moment I'm not sure if he realises that I don't have a clue about how to do it. I have all the practical skills of a highly trained academic – zero. But this isn't South London; I can't just phone up a compost toilet builder or ask my landlord to sort it out. We do it or it doesn't get done. So I grab a spade and get digging. Once I've started, Oak is happy to make suggestions about how it might work, and by the afternoon we're both banging nails into the pallet wood walls. As we finish off the compost toilet, Oak explains his next project: He wants to build a really high and well defended tree-house – one that will be really hard to evict. And he'd like me to help build it.

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<sup>3</sup> I'm using the term 'third position' in the sense used in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), where it means "a step outside your view and the other person's view to a detached perspective. There you can see the relationship between the two viewpoints". (O'Conner, 2001: 33)

**Field notes:**

*Several people here – or visiting regularly – are ‘Pagan’ in some sense. Millie celebrates (at least) some of the main festivals and attends the local Pagan moot. I asked her about the moot, and she said they weren’t very interested in environmental activism. I let that pass without comment. Still, I get the impression from talking to people here that some form of intuitive spirituality is common. I know Andy [Letcher] said as much<sup>4</sup>.*

Time passes strangely on site: days feel short yet looking back over a week it seems like a fortnight. My second week has been enjoyable, though I’ve become increasingly confused about my role at the camp, so it’s been a joy talking to Susan about my fieldwork. She doesn’t just know the issues academically – she’s been there.

“I sometimes wonder whether I’m doing what I should – As it is the University just paid for me to build a compost toilet on a road protest site!”

I’m making a joke of it, but my quandary is serious.

“Don’t worry – That’s all part of your work. I learnt how to bake cakes during my PhD fieldwork”. She grins, and then goes on. “All that is part of your ethnography. You need to live the life to really understand it.”

Fine, but that’s not really why I’m here.

“But I get confused about my role there. It’s just the kind of place I would have been anyway a few years ago, but now I’m not there as an activist, but as an academic. Or am I? I dunno. I feel like I need to keep ‘switching hats’ from one to the other and it’s been doing my head in.”

Susan shrugged: “It’s simple – You’re *both* all the time.”

It was like someone turned the lights on in a room at dusk. “Ahh! I see! So it’s not a problem – being one or the other - I’m both”.

“Well, you decide, but it sounds like it from what you’ve said. You’ve been mixing the two for years anyway. We can’t split ourselves up into boxes – How you feel will obviously influence how you think, so own that. You might be able to actually use it in your research. Note down how you *feel* about living there. Given that you’re researching embodied knowing you might get something useful from it.”

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<sup>4</sup> Letcher, 2000.

I leave Susan's place with a smile. Realising I can be both activist and academic without compromising either is the best news I've had in ages. Back at the camp, I'm welcomed with hot food and as I sit down to eat I'm aware of a sense of real belonging.

## **THE TURNING**

### **Enchantment**

I slept like a log last night and get up early, keen to get to work. First things first: The compost loo is a real boon and gives me an odd sense of pride every time I use it. That feels a bit peculiar, but I guess I've never thought of myself as being remotely practical, so helping to build something so fundamental to our lives here is significant. That's all great, but I can't help wondering how long I can stay here just on the principle that I'm doing good work for the campaign! I really need to make some progress with my ethnography or I can't justify being here. But then Susan did say just being here is all part of the ethnography. Might as well enjoy it then!

"Fancy a cuppa tea?" I'm doing myself one and always ask round. "'Yeah - Builders, please" says Oak. "And a herbal for me", Jan adds. They're chatting away in what serves as our lounge when it isn't a crash space - a small, slightly better waterproofed area where we keep extra bedding. I wander over with the tea and sit on an old sleeping bag. Then my ears suddenly prick up:

"I'd like to do a Land Blessing. We've been here a few weeks now and no-ones done anything for the site yet". Oak isn't particularly talking to me, but to Jan. They're old mates who've done ritual before, so she's the obvious person for him to share the idea with. I listen for a moment, and then chip in. "I'd really like to be involved if I can."

"Oh right, yeah, you're Pagan aren't you? Sure. Have you done anything like this before?"

I realise that I've kept fairly quiet about my own practice as I wanted to give space to hear other people's voices. In fact I have some ten years of experience and have facilitated several rituals on protest sites in the past. But the last thing I want is to be seen as some kind of expert, so I keep the details to myself as I say: "Yeah, some."

"Great! Fancy inviting an Element or something?"

Perfect! "Yeah - Cool! When?"



After some discussion we agree that a week on Sunday will give us enough time. "Excellent! Looks like we have a plan!" Says Oak with a grin.

**Field notes:**

*I met Jo today. She'd visited the site before I arrived, and I've seen her e-mail messages on the 'Pagan Warriors' e-mail list. She's just read an article in the latest 'Pagan Dawn'<sup>5</sup> about our escapades at the G8 last year, so that got us talking about Pagans and activism. We agreed that it was great that Pagan Dawn was publishing more about activism now, but Jo didn't think it would make any difference to most Pagans. She sometimes goes to the local Pagan moot, but she doesn't think they are interested in our campaign. Worse, one of them told her we were wasting our time. Jo went off on one then, and went on to describe a Pagan fair she'd been to in London where everyone was wandering around clad in black velvet robes. She couldn't understand why they weren't more interested in the environment and implied they were quite shallow. I told her I'd come to accept that some Pagans were not environmentalists, which isn't quite true: I understand that academically, but still can't embrace it emotionally.*

I wake up and give a broad grin: That's one of my last nights in my cold, cramped, tent. I'm building myself a place to live, so Oak, Ray and I are headed over to some nearby woods to cut bender poles this morning. With that happy thought, I wander down to the communal for breakfast to find Jan is also a very good mood, despite piles of washing up.

"You look happy this morning!"

"Yeah, I'm going to plant seeds today. I love doing that." I look vague, wondering why. She give me a big smile as she explains. "It makes me feel like I'm talking to the Goddess."

I'm still pondering the profundity of Jan's joy as we arrive at the woods where we'll cut the bender poles. Oak and his partner live here in a wooden house he built for them. Ray and I both need poles, so Oak shows us what to look for: The poles need to be straight, not too thick and nice and long. It looks easy enough, but it's not: I just can't see the wood for the trees! After a while looking far too hard for the right poles, I begin to get the knack: It needs a particular sensory acuity that feels like I'm relaxing into it and opening myself up to the space. Now I'm looking less and seeing more.

I seem to be doing OK, but then Ray starts going on about how "Oak made it look so easy" and we can't find the poles like he can. I begin to

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<sup>5</sup> *Pagan Dawn* is the magazine of the Pagan Federation.

loose my confidence as I take his doubts on-board and suddenly the bender poles disappear into the trees again. Still, all's well, as when it comes time to leave we have more than enough.



Sitting outside my new bender watching the waxing moon, I think, "This is my Paganism!" To worship something you have to be separate from it, but I don't feel a need to worship nature. Actually, it's stronger than that: I don't feel it would make sense, because I *am* nature. My Paganism is an expression of a deep love for nature that doesn't seek to reify it. In the trees over by the railway I hear crows squawking. On the opposite side of the Camp the road drones by. The contrast seems poignant: Life in place, as part of a sustainable ecology sits opposite an oddly pointless series of individual journeys.

***Field notes:***

*I'm still not sure how to describe the bodily feelings which arise during spiritual work. Last night we talked about how the site 'felt' to us. Dave said he had a strong feeling from the site in the first few days. I 'felt' a strong 'energy' when I held 'Mr. Pointy' [Oak's antlered stag skull] and I had a different feeling when I was opening up my senses to the woods while looking for bender poles. But how can I articulate those feelings? They are the very essence of the work I want to do, but they are so outside conventional language use.*

*Are Eco-Pagans more ~~conscious~~ aware of using embodied cognition? Is that what I mean when I say that the most important thing I've learnt from Paganism is how to listen to my intuition? Note that I crossed out 'more conscious of' and used 'more aware of'. I am mistrustful of the conscious/unconscious duality. I suspect it will turn out to be an illusion, or at best, a misleading oversimplification.*

Before I came here I had all kinds of notions about keeping academic distance during fieldwork. Ha! Such ideas are now lost amidst the rush of life here, and I find myself sitting in the communal bender helping Debbie come up with a way of inviting the Spirit of Fire to our Circle this afternoon. My being here inevitably has an impact and trying to artificially minimise it seems naive and insincere. So I leap in and behave exactly as I would have years ago at the M11 or Twyford.

"So what does fire mean to you?" I ask. I am careful not to impose my ideas, but try to help Debbie find a calling to Fire that works for her.

"Heat, flames, passion, red, ..." Debbie has an affinity with fire anyway, and words and half-expressed feelings are quickly sparking. Before long we've forged a short but powerful calling that Debbie can truly own. And not before time, as Jan looks in to call us to the Circle.

***Field notes:***

*Ritual went well. I nearly wept after Jan's short and very simple invocation of the Goddess though it wasn't much more than one line: "Welcome to the Goddess of the Well". Oak suggested that this was because she expressed such a strong belief. That resonates.*

*Ray wept openly at the end and I did a grounding meditation with him. He found the Elemental callings very moving, but isn't sure why. I did some interviews after the ritual. Fascinating!*

I wake up with the remains of a dream. All I can remember is a man saying to me that answers don't come in a simple moment. He didn't say any more, but the implication was that solutions emerge over time. Mulling over my dream, I wander down to the communal for breakfast. I need some food before getting to work on what I suspect will be a long day.

Looking up into the branches, I forget myself for a moment and speak my thoughts out loud. "God, that looks sketchy!"

"Yeah. I don't like going up, but it's gotta be done". Ray gives me a crooked grin, and starts to climb. Building work on the tree house hasn't been going well. It's pretty high and getting a shape, but it's really not safe. It occurs to me that no-one bothered to check with the tree before sticking a house in her branches. We should at least do a simple ritual or make some kind of offering. I'll get a bottle of something and go up this evening when the day's work's done. But right now I need to give Ray a hand. Oak is planning to leave the area to do some travelling in a few weeks, so we need to get as much done as we can while we have the

numbers. Whether we get this finished by then or not, I'll really miss him.

By late afternoon work on the tree house is done for the day so I gather my stuff into a small rucksack: a bottle of wine and a Dragon Tree Rune<sup>6</sup> on a cord. I've opened the bottle and stuffed the cork back in - I don't want to be fiddling about with a corkscrew up there. It's a beautiful afternoon - cold but bright without much wind, for which I'm most grateful. I can cope with the height, but if the wind is up it gets a bit hairy. The climb is easy today. That bodes well. I get up high to where the platform will be and settle in as best I can. Laying back on the branch, I sink into myself and beyond, into the tree. I can sense anger at the intrusion. We've been careful not to damage the tree but it's used to birds not hairless apes! I spend some time visualizing two possible futures: one with the tree house and maybe many more summers here; the other without our efforts and probable felling within the next few months. I get a sense of understanding from the tree and come back to my usual, 'sitting 20 metres up a tree' awareness. I tie the Dragon Tree Rune onto a small branch near my head and share some wine with the tree. Though I probably enjoy red wine more than the tree does, the symbolism feels right. With a sense of something having been settled, I carefully climb down to earth and head off to the communal fire. No point wasting the rest of the wine!

***Field notes:***

*When I lived in London I used to do a brief ritual to greet the Elements. Why aren't I doing my Elements ritual anymore? 'Cos it's all here! Everyday I go and collect water, everyday I light a fire; I walk on the bare earth and spend most of the day under the open sky. In London I needed to make an effort to stay connected – here it just happens.*

It's Sunday, so wandering into the communal space at 8.30 I'm surprised to see people already up, clutching mugs of hot coffee. It turns out the Jehovah's Witnesses came this morning. "Bastards!" Says Dave, with a good natured grin. "They turn up at 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning with a magazine called *Awake!*' Gotta laugh I suppose."

Ray kicks off with a bit of a rant about their last visit and how they'd said God would sort everything out. "I told them don't believe in God – well, not their God anyway. I believe in the Earth, not religion".

After breakfast Paul and I wander down to see if there's any construction work going on. Thankfully, there isn't. As we walked and just admired the woods, he says, "There's an energy you get living outside that you don't get in a house." I smile. I know just what he means, but wonder

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<sup>6</sup> The Dragon Tree Rune is symbol used by the Dragon Network as an amulet.

how I'm ever going to translate it into my PhD. Later, as we chop wood enthusiastically, he returns to his theme. "That energy I was taking about is what keeps you going when there's loads of work to do".

Even munching on lunch I still need to be attentive, as a simple comment can be profound. Jan reflects on life on site: "I feel free here. I'm back to being myself."

Free. Yes, I've felt that myself. A feeling of lightness, sense of openness. It's great to hear other people express that too - It's not just me then! Once again, my own unspoken experiences are confirmed in apparently quite casual moments. There's certainly something special about this place - A sense that anything is possible. Yesterday when a car drove past shouting abuse, I joked that "The inmates are restless."

Dave laughed, but we both knew that my joke had a more serious edge. I later commented that when I'm not here I see it as a 'bubble of sanity'. Jan laughed at that, but she understood what I meant. I then explained how I see this as the staff room of the asylum. Perhaps the subtlety of that escaped some of those gathered, but others chuckled with approval.

While cleaning my teeth tonight I watch the cars drive past. I stand on grass, beside a tree in a space lit by the light of the half moon. They sit in a metal box, closed off, closed in. Although we are only separated by a short distance – maybe 10 metres – psychologically we occupy different worlds. The fence that surrounds this camp draws a very significant line between a self-created space of freedom and one of control. Lighting my wood burner tonight I think of Thoreau at Walden. Although our lives are quite different in many ways, I suspect there are deep resonances between us. That evocative phrase from Robert Greenway that 'civilization is only four days deep' comes back to me, and I suspect it is even more fragile than that: removing just some of the trapping of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century can profoundly shift our awareness. That is a powerful phenomenon, and it is perhaps what lies at the heart of the protest movement.

***Field notes:***

*I'm feeling a bit rough. I read recently about how hard ethnography can be, and I'm feeling it today. So much to juggle! The demands of life on the site, work on defences, the emotional intensity of this place, my own spiritual puzzles, plus the constant need to watch myself and others for ethnographic data. That is an emotional strain of a quite unique kind.*

*There have been quite a lot of changes here lately. Oak's gone and better weather has brought lots of new people on site who are still an*

*unknown quantity. More people are good for the site in lots of ways, but it has cranked up the intensity. It's a bit like living in a soap opera here sometimes; there's always some minor – or not so minor – crisis. To be expected I guess. Large numbers of people passing through a liminal space will interact at a more intense level.*

## **Feeling and Focusing**

“Hey, Adrian - Wanna beer?”

“No – thanks.” I smile politely. Just sitting round the fire pit with some of the crew tonight, but feeling a bit odd. Bored and a bit restless.

Probably need a bit of time out. “Just going to get a fleece from my bender,” I lie, and wander away from the glow of the fire. What’s up with me? Wish I knew. Then I remember a book I just got on *Focusing* (Gendlin, 1981) that’s supposed to help you get to stuff like this. Seems like a good time to give it a try.

After a quick read over the instructions, I lie on my bed and I close my eyes.

1: Clearing a Space.<sup>7</sup>

OK. So what’s here, inside? Somehow I’m missing how the site was a few weeks back ... And I’m missing Oak ... Unsure about the new people ... I don’t get any feeling like ‘bored’ though ... Maybe that wasn’t it at all ...

2: Felt Sense.

... sense how it feels in your body when you think of it as a whole ...

Oak going has left a hole ... a kind of emptiness ... but sticky ... and dark.

The felt sense is the holistic unclear sense of the whole thing ... It is murky, fuzzy, vague.

It’s changing now and is more than emptiness ... It’s wobbly ... no ... sort of unsafe, like standing on rotten floorboards that aren’t quite safe.

3. Handle.

What is the *quality* of the felt sense?

Yeah – ‘standing firm on rotting floorboards’. Mmm. That *feels* right. I’m feeling better, but can’t remember what the next step is. I pick up the book again.

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<sup>7</sup> The instructions on Focusing that follow are from Gendlin, 1981

4. Resonating.

Oh, yeah. I guess I've just done that. Next comes:

5. Asking.

Now you can ask *it* what it is ... One of the most important procedures in focusing is this asking of 'open questions'.

Ah. Kind of like an interview. "I'm curious to know what you might be about." A sense like 'falling' comes to me. "Are you about fear of falling?" A twinge – Yes, it's a kind of 'fear'. That unsafe feeling comes again. "Is 'unsafe' right?" Another twinge, but that's not quite it either. It's like playing 'hotter-colder' when I was a kid. There's something not as strong as 'fear' but not just 'unsafe'. Yes – my felt sense twinges again like it's saying "yes – warmer."

Circling patiently I slowly get the sense of it: There's my own feeling of insecurity, but mixed with that there's a need to be strong for the camp, to help hold the space safe. When Oak was here it was easier, partly as he was really grounded and partly as things weren't so unpredictable then.

Cool! A grin comes across my face. Weird – How come I'm smiling but haven't sorted anything?

The body shift is mysterious in its effects. It always feels good, even when what has come to light may not make the problem look any better ...

Oh, OK. And finally:

6. Receiving.

Whatever comes in focusing, welcome it. Take the attitude that you are glad your body spoke to you, *whatever* it said.

God, that feels better! I think I'll just lie here for a bit and ponder this. I had no idea that something so simple could work so well. A moment later my mobile chirps: I have a text.

[You OK? Hol x]

I smile and text back:

[Yeah. Fine. Back in a mo. A x]

## Changes

My mobile sings. I have a text from an old mate in one of the Housing Co-ops I applied for. With a shock I read that they have a vacancy in the house – Can I come for interview? Well, yes ... And before I know I'm booked for Wednesday night.

“Looks like I might be offered a place in a housing co-op. Some old mates have a vacancy.”

“Oh. Great ...” Says Jan in a tone which translates that into “Oh. Shit ...”

I've been both dreading and looking forward to this. I've been finding it increasingly stressful here trying to manage needs – my own, other peoples, my research. But I know this won't be an easy transition for any of us.

Wednesday comes round fast and here I am, back in London. The 'interview' is more like a reunion as we've all known each other for years. As the room is already empty they're keen for someone to move in soon – and even keener that it's me! On one hand, I'm delighted as it means I'll have a stable base. Writing up is a nightmare on site and here I can get my books out of storage and get down to trying to make sense of what's going on. But somehow I don't feel ready to return to this more conventional life and feel strong emotional ties to the Camp.

“I'd love to move in. But if I do, I will be spending a lot of time at the Camp. Is that going to work for you?”

“That's fine! We thought you might say that ...” Smiles. “When can you move in?”

It needs to be soon or I'll lose my chance, so a day next week is agreed. Smiles and hugs all round as I leave to head back to the Camp.

Thankfully I get back late so no-one can ask me how it went. I need a nights sleep before telling everyone here what they pretty much already know – My 'exit strategy' has begun.

The next week drags on, and finally I wave a temporary goodbye to the Camp. “I've told them I'll be spending a lot of time here and I'll be back in a couple of days”. That seems to have eased the way and I get a sense that people are really pleased for me. Still, it feels very odd getting on the



train for London knowing I'll be sleeping in bricks and mortar again tonight.

And so it's done. The wheel turns again and I'm back living not very far from my old flat, where it all looks so very familiar. But everything has changed and there is no simple return.

### **RE-TURNING**

Life is as strange as ever. I'd imagined that having a base in London would somehow make it easier when I'm at the Camp, but it hasn't worked like that at all. In many ways it's harder now, as one mode of life rebounds off the other, echoing through the days. The result is an oddly dislocated time, and I often wake up wondering whether I'm about to open my eyes to four square walls or the curve of a bender.

I'm reading about the M11 again in Butler's article, and as before I have to stop for a moment. My eyes water, as emotion rises in a flood. I recall an awkward moment in the British Library when I almost bust into tears reading this same article. Butler tells the story of Crow, the Shaman, but I just can't read it now. I *lived* that story: I was one of the Dragon people Crow speaks about, so I'm part of that myth. I guess I still am, as past and present are caught up in my long journey: First realising the paradoxes at the heart of Paganism, then finding another Paganism on protest sites, and now beginning to articulate it from my own perspective – one which I hope will be true to our shared experience.

Reading about approaches to fieldwork now makes me smile: My experience makes nonsense of any naive assumption that there is a 'field' we enter and then later make a dignified 'exit' from. It's become clear to me that in some fundamental sense I never left the field – or ever 'entered' it. I *am* the field and at the heart of my research methodology lies a heightened reflexive awareness of my life world that enables me to sense the process of embodied knowing.

### **Proverbios y Cantares 29**

Walker, your footsteps  
are the road, and nothing more.  
Walker, there is no road,  
the road is made by walking.  
Walking you make the road,  
and turning to look behind  
you see the path you never  
again will step upon.  
Walker, there is no road,  
only foam trails on the sea.

(Machado, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

In addition to providing a vicarious experience of life on a protest site, and thus enhancing felt understanding, this autoethnography develops several of the thesis' themes. It contributes to my ethnography of Eco-Paganism by providing details of how it *feels* on a site: for example the physical exposure, the camaraderie and the way time passes. The gradual influence of the place on my own spirituality is also apparent. The chapter problematizes several conventional dualities, including academic discourse versus emotional engagement and entering/leaving the field, thus developing an ongoing theme. My spirituality, my relationship with mainstream Paganism, and my activism, are all relevant to how I approach and interpret my fieldwork, so this chapter also provides a reflexive frame for the ethnographic chapters that follow.