

# MEANINGS OF PLACE; PLACES OF MEANING

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*Cole wrote this personal essay as  
part of the "Stalking the Spirit of Place"  
seminar in 2001.*

**I**N MY DREAMS there is a mountain. I get there by crossing a narrow bridge over Peak Creek near my father's church in Pulaski, Virginia. The road curves and rises through a valley crowded with shops and restaurants shoulder to shoulder like a medieval European city. I recognize many favorites from my life in Chapel Hill. The thrill in stopping is picking a spot. The thrill in not stopping is reaching the mountain.

At the mountain's base are two paths. To the right, a footpath slides under the green canopy and climbs the slope. The way is damp and cool, with pine needles underfoot and oak leaves overhead. Leaves chant with the wind's whisper. To the left, the road narrows and swings up and around the mountain's flank, breaking out of tight bends onto broad vistas of the valley below. The way is crisp and bright, with asphalt under wheel and azure skies over sunroof. Sleeves dance with the wind's laughter. The mountaintop is like Table Rock, with fallen logs, thin trees, rocky outcrops, a spring, and the occasional twig snap announcing unseen critters. The spring air and the spring water are clear.

I have made this trip, with different choices, many nights.

I was born in Roanoke, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley, and grew up mostly in Pulaski, in the New River Valley, always surrounded by the gentle Appalachians. Mountains are neighbors, home folk, kin. Nine-tenths of my life has unfolded in Virginia and North Carolina, where all of Gaia is divided into three parts: the mountains, the Piedmont, and the

coastal plain. A day's drive east or west covers the sweetest topography "under the cope of heaven."

I have lived midway between the Pacific Ocean and the San Francisco Bay. I have lived a block from a finger of the Elizabeth River that slips into Hampton Roads harbor that opens into the Chesapeake Bay that feeds the Atlantic Ocean. I have lived scant miles from the Mississippi River at mid-America. I now live 5 blocks from Lake Michigan and 45 minutes from creases of prairie. I have visited volcanoes on islands and tundra in the Arctic and tread lightly upon Asia and Europe and South America. All are beautiful. Mountains are neighbors, home folk, kin.

I am a Southerner and regard myself that way more often than I regard myself as a man or a Caucasian or a professional. Being a Southerner is being conscious of one's place, as defined by soil and by society.

By bloodlines, I am half Southerner and half Yankee—but still defined by my forebears' place of origin. My paternal grandmother was born and reared in Valparaiso, Indiana, where she bore my father, who grew up in Valparaiso, Chicago, and Glasgow, Virginia, his father's hometown, depending on where there was work during the Depression. My maternal grandfather moved from Ohio to Natural Bridge Station, Virginia, as a young man. He married a local girl from nearby Amherst County, known to the television age as the home of "Walton's Mountain."

I am not a Gothic Southerner, drunk on Faulkner and tipsy from Flannery O'Connor. But I have a Southerner's sensibility about place—that place is where people and nature create communities at once particular and universal. As Eudora Welty wrote: "It is through place that we put out roots, wherever birth, fate, chance, or our traveling selves set us down; but what these roots reach toward is the deep and running vein, eternal and consistent and everywhere purely itself."

Perhaps we Southerners love place all the more because it was in the South that war was first waged on place, not just on armies. General William Tecumseh Sherman brought total war to Georgia, just as General

Philip Sheridan brought total war to the valleys of Virginia. Homes and barns were torched, as were schools and stores. “Whatever one might say against General Sherman, one can say in his favor that he recognized the power and the significance of ‘place,’ ” A. J. Conyers, a theologian at Baylor University, writes in *Modern Age* (Spring 2001). “And he was intent on leaving his enemies as few of those places as possible.”

And still we wage war on place, with agricultural, industrial, commercial, and residential practices that scorch the earth with chemicals, monocultures, and bulldozer blades. And we sever our roots. And we unweave our communities.

There is no escaping responsibility for this, no mountaintop and no dreamscape secure from what must follow degradation of place, roots, community. There is work to be done. Wide awake.