Journeying between home and nature: A geo-phenomenological exploration and its insights for learning

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Abstract

‘Home’ and ‘nature’ are usually taken as two opposite concepts in relation to human geographical experience. However, drawing on the perspective of geo-phenomenology, this paper argues that the meanings of nature and home overlap to the extent that it is possible to experience nature as home. Moreover, it can be shown from the paradoxically interwoven senses of nature and of home that there is a dynamic process of a to and fro journey between nature and home. Fertile educational implications can be drawn out from the invisible journey: first, the dynamic experience between nature and home elicits a learning about differences; and secondly, the experience of nature as home, which can inspire feelings for nature, implies an ethical dimension of learning to treat nature as carefully as home.

Keywords: geographical-phenomenology, home, journey, learning of difference, strangeness

1. Introduction

The escalating environmental crisis arouses increasing concern among educators about nature. One concerning issue is: if we could experience and take nature as home, then we could treat nature with as much care and thoughtfulness as we treat our own home since home is always taken as the most important place to us. Then, it would be possible and desirable to improve our learning and understanding of nature and even exert a positive, more caring influence on the protection of nature. Can we experience nature as home? Can we have a home-like experience in nature? In what sense can these two places be experienced as authentically and significantly related to each other?

‘Home’ is a place providing us with fuller privacy, safety and intimacy than any other place. Here ‘home’ is not defined as a merely material construction or physical house or building but a place embedded with existential meaning, a space immersed in living domestic practice. Tuan (1977: 149) describes ‘home’ as ‘a vertical axis, linking heaven to the underworld … the focal point of a cosmic structure’. In Riley’s (1992: 25) terms, ‘Home is often identified as the archetypal landscape … home is an extraordinarily malleable concept’. Home is fundamentally recognised as an intentional construction, whether materially or mentally. In this case, can human beings take and experience nature as home – if nature is understood in terms of the state or the world that is untouched and uninfluenced by artificiality? John Muir, one of the most influential preservationists and wilderness philosophers, has written that, ‘going to the mountain is going home; that wilderness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life’ (cited in Oelschlaeger, 1991: 2). The descriptions above seem to suggest that it is possible for nature to be taken, seen, felt and treated as home.
References


Bryden, I. 2004. “‘There is no outer without inner space”: constructing the haveli as home’, Cultural Geographies 11: 26-41.


