A Pine Says Thank You: On Finding Agency in Relationships with Places

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In narrative practice, we often associate the concept of re-membering with human relationships that have been significant in a person's life. But Michael White actually reminded us that places, too, can be members of our life stories. A particular place can serve as a witness to life, choices, and hope, and we can explore how we are not only shaped by the place but also contribute to it. Through practices such as therapeutic letter writing, these relationships can be given voice and presence in new ways.

This article explores how the relationship with nature and places can become a path to restoring agency—the sense of being able to act—especially for people struggling with feelings of powerlessness.

The Sunflower at the End of the Road

As a young social work student, I worked in community care. Part of my job involved visiting an elderly woman daily who was struggling with mental health issues. Together, we drank coffee and rated her mood on a scale from 0 to 10. She often had difficult days, but occasionally she was happy. When I asked why, she would say things like, *"The sun is shining today."*

At first glance, these seemed like random and somewhat passive reasons for her better mood. But when I asked for a little more, it turned out that it wasn't just external factors like the sun's rays that made a difference. She actually did a lot herself to make it a good day: she'd put the coffee on so she could go out and drink it in the sun. And she'd go down and check on the sunflower at the end of the road where she lived. It grew a little every day; she kept a close eye on how tall it had gotten and how it turned toward the sun.

Looking for Signs of Agency

It became an early example for me of how people, even in vulnerability, are doing agency through small but meaningful actions. These actions may not always be immediately apparent until we look for them.

Since my encounter with the elderly woman and the sunflower, I have worked on listening for and amplifying signs of agency in the people I meet in my practice. I see it as a kind of mindfulness practice: noticing the small actions and initiatives that are all too easily overlooked, but which people nevertheless undertake in their attempt to live a meaningful life.

Agency as a Counterforce to Powerlessness

The word *agency* refers to the ability to act and influence one's own situation. In narrative practice, we seek to amplify the stories that bear witness to precisely this agency. Opposed to agency is powerlessness—a state that the Danish psychologist and author Dorte Birkmose has described as one of the most draining for both professionals and citizens.

When powerlessness takes hold, we can easily end up shifting it away from ourselves. For example, we might say, *"This is also one of the most difficult families we've had."*

This makes powerlessness easier to bear, but it shifts the burden onto others. In doing so, we keep other people trapped in hopelessness and define them as beyond our reach.

A House That Takes Care of Someone

Several years after my student job, I was standing one day at my summer house in West Jutland to hand over the keys to a man who had rented it. He told me he was a former soldier, now on early retirement with PTSD after multiple deployments.

It wasn't the first time he'd rented my summer house. He told me he kept coming back because it was a place where he found peace and could breathe. A few months later, when I went up there myself, I felt a quiet sense of pride. As if the house had actually taken care of someone.

I started thinking about my childhood. When my father sold our car, he was happy that the new car could do more than the old one. But for us kids, it was sad. The car held our vacation memories. It had been something and carried traces of us.

It struck me that things and places *are* not just things. Through our use and our presence, they become imbued with meaning. They become co-narrators in our lives. And in that lies a form of agency—not just within us, but in the relationship between us and the place.

When Nature Has a Voice

In my therapeutic work, I often experience how people who are struggling describe how they find peace in nature. Sometimes I invite them to explore their relationship with a particular place in nature. A place they describe as something that "does something for them."

But as we delve a little deeper into the conversation, it often turns out that they, in fact, also *do something* for the place *themselves*. They choose to go there; they decide on that specific spot; they seek out the silence and feel the earth beneath their feet.

Sometimes I write a short, heartfelt letter *from the place* to the person. A letter that might go something like this:

"Thank you for cherishing the forest's tranquility. Thank you for looking after the animals and keeping an eye on the light filtering through the branches."

It's not about poeticizing or romanticizing the voice of the place, but about giving attention to what would otherwise remain invisible.

It's about making the passive active.

When I write such letters, I often see how something shifts in the person receiving them. They realize that they *are* actually *doing something*. That they have an impact. That they matter—even to a place. I thus find that the letters can open a new narrative about the people I speak with as active human beings, even in the midst of vulnerability and discouragement.

Re-membering as a Practice

When we talk about *re-membering*, it is about re-inscribing oneself in communities one has had an impact on, and not just those from which one has received an impact.

White spoke of asking: *What place have you held in the lives of others?*

I sometimes expand the question to include places as well: *What significance do you have for this place?*

It may seem like a poetic device, but it has a clear therapeutic function: it shifts attention from passive reception to active participation.

When a person discovers that they *have* mattered to another person, an animal, or a place, there is renewed movement in the story of themselves.

A Pine Says Thank You

As I write this, I find myself thinking of a pine tree near my summer house in western Jutland. When I go out there, I feel a sense of calm. If the tree had a voice, I imagine it would say:

"Thank you for coming out here. Thank you for taking a break and cherishing the silence."

The moment I think of the tree's voice, the relationship becomes mutual. I am not merely someone seeking peace. I also *contribute* to peace. I become part of the life of the place.

Finding agency in relationships with places is therefore not about romanticizing nature, but about discovering the movement that is already present. We do something with nature, and nature does something with us.