

Places of learning: Learning as Pilgrimage

Damian Ruth

Massey University, New Zealand

d.w.ruth@massey.ac.nz

In some cultures person and place are inextricable. In Maori for example, whenua means both “placenta” and “land” and rituals for burying the placenta in the land embody the Maori conception of the land as a mother to the people. In many cultures, the place where the bones of ancestors lie is where the people belong – the earth has the people: the people are the earth. There is also a sense of specific places that gather force and power and where one goes to perform special tasks. Places accrue spirit. This sensibility familiar to indigenous people has parallels and in Western cultures, for example, Celts who still claim places have spirits. The sense of special places is ancient and universal and expressed in cave paintings, stone-age temples, oracles, and the sacred sites of many religions. Often, to learn, to gain insight, to realise, means going to the place, that is to say, going on a pilgrimage. How can this be related to a financial advisor in London whose clients are the global elite and who has more in common with peers in Hong Kong than with a monolingual, monocultural teacher in Birmingham. When postmodernists claim that all sense of belonging is merely a construct, the global financial elite agrees. And how can the inherent meaningfulness of our bodies in a specific place relate to the dematerialisation of practice entailed by digitalisation? Learning as a journey is a familiar metaphor; maybe learning as a pilgrimage to a sacred site has much to offer.