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# Finding Home: An Exploration of Place Through Storytelling

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FINDING HOME: AN EXPLORATION OF PLACE THROUGH STORYTELLING

A Master's Project Presented

by

Devin M. Rigolino

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Science

Specializing in Natural Resources with a Concentration in Leadership for Sustainability

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### **Abstract**

With the increasing rate at which people move between communities of place, not everyone experiences the act of “putting down roots.” For some of us, these migratory lifestyles can hinder the development of connections and deep relationships with the places in which we live. This lack of connection can at times numb our ability to observe the impacts that we have on the places we find ourselves and on others we share these spaces with. By using Chicago, Illinois as a model for demonstration, this project offers insights on ways to strengthen the relationships people have with communities of place. In an effort to discover successful methods for establishing a deeper connection with a place, work for this project explored some of the diverse stories of Chicago over the course of one year. Through historical investigations and community explorations, these stories have fostered community engagement at local levels and created opportunities for sustainable action and community development.

*Keywords:* Chicago; Community Development; Storytelling; Awareness; Relationships

## Introduction

How well do we really know the places we live? How do our relationships with the places we live impact our lives, the lives of others, the strength of our communities, and the fate of our world? These are two questions that originated after I moved to a new community of place and sought to build lasting relationships while also tending to the impacts that I have as an outsider entering a new space. Stemming from these questions, this project has explored ways that we can begin to establish or re-establish a connection, an appreciation, and a respect for the places we live and visit by personally engaging with the stories that arise from a place's history and its present-day communities.

There are many cultures and individuals throughout the world that respectfully and effectively form deep and meaningful connections with the places and communities that they are a part of, and one way of forming these kinds of connections is through the power of story (Chamberlin, 2004). The art of storytelling has been practiced by many cultures around the world who pass down fables, histories, and knowledge from one generation to the next (Strauss, 1996). When properly engaged, storytelling has the power to go beyond imagination or text or art, and can serve as a tool for exploration and relationship building (Chamberlin, 2004). For example, the Mohawk story of Sky Woman draws deep connections between humankind and the natural world, and the stories we hear about the Holocaust connect us emotionally to the suffering of the people persecuted (Olan, 2017; Read, 2012). Consider the stories that are even more familiar; the ones we may choose to share from our own childhoods that are capable of traversing time itself to bridge us with past memories, making us feel connected still many years later. Some stories are literal, others fiction, but no matter their origin, stories can have a very real power to them in the deep connections that they draw between people, places, nature, culture, art, history, science,

life, and death. If nothing else, some stories have the ability to make us stop for a moment and think about our place and the groups and systems that we are a part of (Strauss, 1996). This project draws on the potential that stories have to deepen relationships and create meaningful opportunities for sustainable action and community development that may otherwise be absent for a growing majority of community members who lack place-based connections (Reed, 2007).

My work for this project took place over the course of one year, and was specifically focused on the exploration of place-based relationships using Chicago, Illinois as a model for demonstration. The vision for this project was to explore multiple stories of place, paying particular attention to engaging with stories that are considered to be closely linked with Chicago's history and character. The main goals in carrying out this project were to:

1. Develop an increased awareness of my own impacts on the places I live and visit, and to invite others to do the same;
2. Offer several reproducible methods for exploration of a place that others could adopt in their own respective communities;
3. Instill the core principles of the University of Vermont's Masters of Science in Leadership for Sustainability program deeper within myself; and
4. Discover for myself a more concrete definition of the term "home."

### **Strategies and Methods**

Throughout my entire project, I tried to remain aware of the danger of a single story. As shared by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "It is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place or that person.... and when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise," (Adichie,

2009). With this in mind, my project was primarily carried out through the telling of multiple stories, the methods and results of which are housed on a website that features a variety of creative mediums as a way of offering viewers and listeners differing glimpses into the character and stories of Chicago. This website can be accessed openly by the public via the following address: [www.606home.weebly.com](http://www.606home.weebly.com). Stories posted on the site are broken down into 5 main categories as follows:

*Earth*: This story primarily focuses on exploring the physical landscape of Chicago as well as some historical background that offers insight on the relationship that early European settlers had with the city. The primary feature of this first story was a podcast. This podcast was supplemented with a written narrative in the form of a poem as well. The methodology behind this first story was to gain as much historical context about the city as I could by engaging with existing community resources that specialize in the historical framing of Chicago stories. This includes conducting research and forming relationships via interviews, visits, and more casual conversations with entities such as the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, the Field Museum of Natural History, the Chicago History Museum, the American Indian Center of Chicago, and two local historians.

*Water*: This story focuses on exploring Chicago's water resources, as well as the unique relationship that Chicagoans have with the city's river and shoreline. The primary features of this story are a written narrative and a recorded audio interview. In preparing this story, I visited a local aquarium and the Chicago History Museum, and interviewed a representative from Friends of the Chicago River, a nonprofit organization working to restore the Chicago River. It was

important for me to gain a basic understanding of the role that water has had on the development of the city, so I began conducting research by searching the internet and examining resources at my local library and visiting the city's local history museum. From these resources I formed a foundational basis of understanding on some of the major historical events that took place relating to the city's river and shoreline, and then felt ready to visit the Shedd Aquarium and the Friends of the Chicago River to learn how these nonprofit organizations are working to educate city residents and visitors about the conservation and care of water resources.

*Fire:* After entering into this new Chicago community, it felt critical to first try and familiarize myself with the positive characteristics of the place. Yet in building a relationship with a community that is authentic (and avoiding the danger of a single story), it is important to highlight some of the major community challenges that the city is facing. With this in mind, this story focuses on exploring cases of violence, corruption, and poverty within the city. The primary features of this story are written narratives, supplemented with embedded external videos and a piece by a local Chicago artist. Some of the community resources that were engaged with for the preparation of this story include the Chicago History Museum, the Greater Chicago Food Depository, and the Heartland Alliance.

*Air:* This story focuses on mapping some of the prominent organizations and agencies working within Chicago communities to combat violence, social injustice, crime, poverty, and hunger, and to promote environmental protection and child and animal welfare. The primary feature for this story is an interactive storymap that gives descriptions of organizations, locations of their respective offices, as well as links to external webpages for additional information. I created a

storymap that could be utilized by local Chicagoans, as well as anyone who may visit the city. The storymap lists some of the organizations and agencies that are working to benefit the local community, shows visually where these organizations and agencies are headquartered throughout the city, and highlights ways that people can get involved. Beyond just being a resource for others, this process was also an important part of my own exposure to these groups. It allowed me to learn about community issues and ways of addressing them, while helping me to identify key causes that I want be part of. Some of the community resources that I engaged with for the preparation of this story include Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Openlands Land Trust, PAWS Chicago, and the Center on Halsted. A full list of the organizations that I engaged with in preparing the storymap can be found at: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=a611c8d96a614376ad96e0fcd29ab9b1>.

Sense: This story focuses on exploring the city through the 5 human senses of touch, sound, taste, sight, and smell. Each individual sense is broken down into its own sub-exploration as follows:

- Touch: For this story, I engaged in an awareness practice that was dedicated towards bringing attention to the connections that we have to others within the city.
- Sound: For this story, I engaged in a soundwalk through Chicago's downtown Loop neighborhood to build a greater understanding of the city's audible character.
- Taste: For this story, I attempted to explore the city via food and connect with just a few of the many diverse cultures that are celebrated in Chicago. This was primarily carried out through cooking and tasting recipes that come from a variety of cultures.



- *Sight*: For this story, I engaged with an art project in an effort to grasp a better understanding of the relationship between art and artist. I also explored and researched information about the city's history with art and culture.
- *Smell*: For this part of the project, I chose to shift away from stories about Chicago, and instead focus on my own story and share with readers how this overall experience has transformed my relationship with this city and my understanding of the communities that call Chicago 'home.'

Exploring a place by focusing on each sense proved to be a very personal method for forming a relationship with the city. By "closing off" specific senses so that I could focus more thoughtfully on one in particular, it also opened up an ability to discover certain features of my surroundings that would otherwise get lost when all of my senses are engaged collectively (Paquette & McCartney, 2012).

Creative exploration was an integral part of the methodology for this project. In addition to relational storytelling, I chose to share my relationship building efforts via an assortment of creative approaches. The creative mediums that I engaged with in the production of these sharable pieces include: writing narratives, recording audio podcasts, producing videos, taking photographs, writing poetry, recording music, creating art, and cooking recipes. The theory behind engaging with creativity in this project work is that storytelling, while an effective tool for communication and relationship building, is also a form of art itself (Greene, 1996).

Continuing with a theme of breaking notions of single stories, I also wanted to offer others an opportunity to see how relational storytelling is not limited to only verbal or written means, but can be disseminated via a variety of creative outlets. Engaging with creativity is also a core leadership practice to the University of Vermont's MSLS program, and keeping with my goal of

instilling the program's core principles and practices deeper within myself, I felt that crafting opportunities to embed creative efforts within the project process would allow for the achievement of that goal.

One intention that I had for this project from the beginning was for it to be carried out through an emergent process. In the spirit of that intention, there were several changes that were made during the project process from what was originally planned in my project proposal. These changes included a decision to carry out all of these various stories simultaneously and in a more organically occurring manner (rather than attempting to complete each start to finish, one at a time). I also made the decision to alter the layout of the sense-based stories. I originally had thought about each being a "separate" story, but instead ended up producing them as a combined story called "sense." I made this change because I wanted to be more explicit about how elements are building blocks of life, and how our senses are foundational to our human ability to connect to the world around us. I wanted to organize these stories in ways that offered the audience a sense of the relationship between the elements and our human senses.

## **Results**

Results from this work have taken two distinct forms. The first and primary outcome from this project is the set of actual experiences of engaging with a place, which have led to abundant personal growth and a deepening of awareness within myself about the impacts that I have on the spaces I occupy. This project has encouraged me to listen deeply to others, open myself up to feeling vulnerable, and to remain mindful of the consequences that my mere presence has on the places I find myself. From engaging with these various explorations of place through this project work, I have seen firsthand how one person can have a large impact on a

place and the people living within it, both in positive and negative ways. Perhaps most importantly, the results from this project are very much connected with the key learnings that have come about from this work, which are further described in the evaluation and assessment section of this report.

The second outcome from this project is the creation of the Finding Home website that features the documented stories and reflections that have the main purposes of tracking my experiences as well as being examples of community explorations that others can learn from and/or adjust for reproduction in their own respective communities of place. This website also serves as a record of sorts that I can re-visit over time to remain grounded in this work. Links to each individual webpage can be found in Appendix A of this report.

### **Evaluation and Assessment**

In addition to the story exploration component of the project, there was also a critical reflection and evaluation component of the project. Reflections on the work were recorded in two spaces, a personal journal and a public blog that is accessed through the main published website, a link for which can be found in Appendix A. Evaluation for this project work came from four main sources:

1. The primary evaluation and assessment for this work came from myself via recorded reflections both on the website's blog and in a personal written journal. In these reflections, I tasked myself with asking questions related to power, privilege, and shedding light on systems that I have noticed throughout my explorations. These reflections were also focused on ensuring that the work that I was carrying out was on track with the project's original intentions and leading towards the accomplishment of the project's original goals.

2. The second form of evaluation of this project's work came from my project committee. Each member of my committee was chosen to participate in this project process specifically because of his and her individual areas of expertise that were able to be brought to the process. Evaluations from this committee of professionals took place two times throughout the project process in the form of formative assessments of project work. Additional support was provided on an as needed basis throughout the year-long project timeframe via email and phone conversations as well.
3. The third form of evaluation and feedback that I received on my project work came from my peer support group, as well as from other members from my Master's program cohort. This feedback took place throughout the project process via emails and phone calls, and suggestions were incorporated into the work as part of the overall project's emergent quality.
4. The fourth and final form of evaluation and assessment of work came from members of the local Chicago community that I engaged with as a part of this project. Introducing the project and its goals to community members via club meetings, interviews, and casual conversations at museums, schools, and other places of gathering was common throughout the endeavor. Feedback on project design and execution was received in ways that were both solicited and unsolicited. In both cases, this feedback was considered and incorporated into project work and reflections.

Key learnings that emerged from this evaluation process include:

- When I am entering into conversations with individuals, such as during interviews, it is important to have something to offer in an effort to make the experience more of an exchange and less of a taking;

- It is important that when I engage in any kind of relationship building work, that my relationship with myself is in a strong place, and that I am showing up as my own ally;
- Having the ability to call issues and systems out in my local community is an example of having a form of power and privilege. I am privileged to have had an education that enables me to identify certain systems and dynamics that represent power and privilege disparities that other people may not have, and it is also a form of privilege for me to even have the opportunity and time to engage with this kind of work; and
- The quality of relationships developed is likely more important than the quantity of relationships developed. I have discovered that for myself, having fewer deep relationships roots me to a place in a more influential and meaningful way than having many shallow relationships does.

### **Recommendations and Next Steps**

The completion of this project has led to several revelations that will likely spark continued work moving forward. While the explorations of Chicago throughout this project have created several opportunities for learning more about the city and participating in new community groups and organizations, there are still many more stories for me to discover and new partnerships and relationships to be built. It is in this spirit that I view the closing of this project for the MSLS program to differ from the end of work on community exploration. It is my intention to not only continue my own personal journey exploring Chicago as a place, but also to engage in similar practices in places that I may visit and live in the future. With this in mind, one path moving forward that I can envision would be to grow the Finding Home website to not be focused solely on Chicago, but to also have pages dedicated to each community of place I live in and/or visit.

Engaging in this project work has also led to several recommendations that I would give to anyone who might be interested in engaging in any practices that work towards building a stronger relationship with a certain community of place:

1. It is important to stress the need for flexibility with this kind of work. While it is useful to have a rough plan of action when trying to determine the best course for exploring a place, it is also important to be adaptable and open to changing needs. The more that was revealed through these explorations, the more information I had to inform my continued path forward, which ended up being quite different than what had originally been anticipated, but also ended up being even better than I had originally anticipated.
2. Changing how I engage with a place really meant changing how I think and feel, and shifting my focus into a deeper awareness of how I impact the spaces I occupy. This kind of work takes time, and can be draining, and therefore, it is important to ensure that well-being is always placed at the center. Caring for well-being includes allowing myself to celebrate small successes and being forgiving of myself when goals are delayed or rewritten. This kind of self-care also involves not allowing this work to take away from other responsibilities and commitments that have been made in other aspects of my life.
3. Caring for well-being is not just about my own well-being, but caring for others as well. When meeting with people and learning about their communities and stories, part of caring for their needs involves not holding expectations or assumptions, and being prepared to offer something as part of an equal exchange. This kind of reciprocity not only is a way to care for the well-being of others, but works towards building strong relationships with others as well.

4. Lastly, I would encourage anyone interested in practicing this kind of work to begin from a place of openness, and to remain willing to be changed by the experience and the relationships that come about from it. For myself, the desire to engage with and explore a place was very much embedded in a desire to also learn from and adapt to the needs of the place. Declaring a conscious openness to growth enabled me to more easily recognize smaller learning opportunities that may have otherwise gone missed.

While one of the major goals of this project was to inspire and invite others to also try some of the methods for relationship building and creative exploration that I engaged with, I want to emphasize that there are countless other methods that can be engaged with that I have yet to try as well. Some individuals who are interested in engaging in this kind of community exploration work may choose to try to replicate the methods that I have outlined in this project, while others may wish to use other methods and tools. The methodology that I used for this project (exploring a community of place via research, engaging with art, connecting with neighbors, volunteering at local organizations, and exploring via the human senses) were developed as a part of an emergent process, and were for the most part, not pre-determined. There are, however, certain guiding practices behind the selection of the methods that I did choose to use as a part of this project. I wanted to be sure that all of the methods utilized encouraged me to feel responsible for my own actions and outcomes, and to have a willingness to expand my awareness to encompass larger systems. I also wanted to consistently feel encouraged to ask powerful questions, and attend to the impacts and consequences of those questions. I wanted to feel encouraged to have fun, and be spontaneous with the work, and finally, I wanted all forms of community exploration to be centered around deep listening and conscious communication, (Meadows, 2001; UVM, 2016).

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### III. Appendix A

#### Relevant Links

Project Homepage: <http://606home.weebly.com/>

Earth Story: <http://606home.weebly.com/1-earth.html>

Water Story: <http://606home.weebly.com/2-water.html>

Fire Story: <http://606home.weebly.com/3-fire.html>

Air Story: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=a611c8d96a614376ad96e0fcd29ab9b1>

Sense Story: <http://606home.weebly.com/5-sense.html>

Reflections: <http://606home.weebly.com/harvests>