



2023

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Emma Mei Kudelka

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Emma Kudelka
Summer Reading Essay
Prompt 2
20 August 2023

The Power of Place, and How it Helps to Shape Our Society

The power of a place is something that many people may tend to overlook or dismiss; however, a place carries much more value than just a location. Furthermore, a place can range from coordinates on a map to one's imagination. But no matter the specific place, the *Power of Place* holds great significance in shaping our understanding of social issues such as education, morality, and culture.

Although a place may not entirely shape who we are as a person, the place that we grow up and learn in is especially impactful to our education and development. In the 2016 article, "Why American Schools Have a Money Problem," it is noted that a student's intellect is not solely determined by where they go to school, but the location of the school can greatly affect their academic standings, understanding of curriculum, and test scores. When students have lower-quality schools, they have less qualified teachers, less individual care due to high-class populations, and fewer opportunities for help. Because of this, students in poorer areas tend to have fewer chances of thriving and may lose the potential to succeed. For example, if a child struggles in class due to not having the proper resources, they may give up on school because they believe that they are not smart. When children feel encouraged to learn, feel smart, and feel supported, they are more likely to pursue higher education, gain scholarships, and choose a professional career path. Although some people may think that just *choosing a good school* is a solution to the problem, it is difficult for poverty-stricken and low-income families to find, let alone afford affluent schools. "Why American Schools Have a Money Problem" explains that the Power of Place can affect a person's educational environment, which could ultimately affect a child's entire future. Unfortunately, some people may be born into unfair circumstances that do not allow for equal opportunities.

In "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" by LeGuin, the narrator describes a fictional place called Omelas where the people live in harmony and peace. A rule in Omelas is that there cannot be negative feelings such as shame or guilt, and because the people of Omelas choose to live that way, they perceive their world as perfect. The perception of a place that you live in matters heavily, because the residents of a place tend to shape their behaviors and attitudes around where they live in order to belong. Because of the profound happiness and innovation in Omelas, it seems like a utopia to those *who live in it*, making it a seemingly Utopian World. However, Omelas also comes with an evil price that some people cannot accept; when people learn about the child who is tortured and suffering, some people choose to walk away from Omelas. The people of Omelas see their world as a place that cannot afford to have guilt, shame, or grief. The people who learn about the suffering child feel like they can no longer belong in Omelas because their false perception of Omelas is shattered. Nonetheless, those who choose to stay at Omelas (upon learning about the tortured child) have acquired a group consensus to *allow* this child to be tortured and neglected, despite that it is cruel. This piece is especially impactful, as it demonstrates that a *place* and the *perception of a place* work cohesively to form the shared social beliefs and values of a particular community. Morality is a construct created by a place, and society follows these rules until they are spoken out against by the masses. In Omelas,

however, no one speaks out against the cruelties of the child, and instead, they choose to flee their uncomfortable feelings rather than face the horrible reality of their “Utopia.”

Omelas is not the only place where certain individuals are treated harshly under a false sense of “justness” or “righteousness.” Throughout American history, white Americans have shamed and discriminated against minority immigrants due to a fear of being “replaced” by foreigners. Racist Americans feel that it is “their place” to put down immigrants and marginalized groups, viewing them as not American or unequal. Which can be seen in images of Angel Island, where Asian immigrants face harsh violence, segregation, and discrimination for simply wanting a better life. Immigrants often perceive America as a place to create a new life and identity for themselves. The drive to seize new opportunities is what motivates them to find a new home and a new sense of place. The Power of Place in this lens can be viewed both negatively and positively; in a negative light, racist Americans use their self-determined Power of Place to try to keep their rights and freedoms for themselves. In a positive light, the Power of Place can be seen as a driving force used to inspire and motivate others to pursue their dreams and aspirations, despite challenging setbacks such as racism.

In photos taken of the IWU Nurses’ Black Lives Matter protests, the Power of Place can be seen through two different lenses once again, both in a literal sense and a moral standpoint. The location of a protest is crucial because it determines the audience, the risk, and the impact that the protest will have. When choosing a protest location, the organizers of the protest must decide what risks they are willing to take to make their voices heard. From a more philosophical perspective, the Power of Place holds extreme significance to how a person feels about their sense of self, identity, and safety in the place that they live. During the Black Lives Matter protests, African Americans, Black Americans, and other people of color felt that their sense of place was being stripped away from them. The images of the BLM protests held by nursing students at Illinois Wesleyan show that all people deserve the right to fit into their home and protect their power of place. In “Hidden Brain,” Shankar Vedantam and Rhaina Cohen describe how different languages cannot always directly translate, and because of this, language barriers can create social barriers between people of different ethnicities, cultures, and communities. The lingual division between people causes different groups to outcast other groups and label them as “inferior” or “hostile” simply for having different beliefs or values. If everyone could respect that each one of us deserves our own Power of Place in this world, our society would be much more understanding and respectful of each other.

The liberal arts allows students to learn through various different lenses, teaching them to learn from many different perspectives. Rather than being narrowly focused on one specific career or major, small liberal arts colleges require the exploration of multiple subjects that could be entirely unrelated to one another. Enriching students with a liberal arts education is crucial to understanding the Power of Place, as liberal arts schools are places that can be both intellectually stimulating and a safe space for making mistakes. Liberal arts schools also teach students to think empathetically and show compassion towards others by creating a curriculum that directly engages them with their communities. Civics projects, philanthropy clubs, local internships, emphasis on second language curriculum, and traveling abroad programs, for example, allow for students of all backgrounds and beliefs to learn together and give back to their local community as one collective, harmonious group.

As a society, we must recognize the Power of Place as an impactful force that influences a person’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences on a daily basis. While some places may inspire creation and innovation, other places may lack the opportunity for equality and lead to bigotry.

Choosing the right place is especially crucial under an academic lens, which is why liberal arts colleges strive to create supportive and academically-challenging spaces for their students. Therefore, the Power of Place helps to shape our identities, beliefs, and social/moral perspectives. If more people took the time to consider the Power of Place when choosing a home, school, or community, we as individuals could benefit from understanding one another better. The liberal arts allows for a better understanding of the Power of Place due to its direct connection to the community and emphasis on diverse forms of learning. Once people are able to acknowledge where they are from, and where they are now, society as a whole will be able to create a more empathetic and diverse place for the future.

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