

A Sense of Place

How important is place for you?

I find certain places evoke a strong sense of identity – something solid – a continuity in a world of rapid change. This continuity can be a challenge to the ideals on which our modern world is organized.

Never more was this impressed upon me than on our recent holiday to the Outer Hebrides. We arrived on the Isle of Harris and Lewis in mid-summer and it seemed as if we had landed back in time, even though the capital, Stornaway had all the trappings of any other Scottish town. We arrived on Friday evening and after having been driven through a sparsely inhabited mountainous and moorland countryside we were surprised to arrive in 'rush hour' although that is a bit of an exaggeration. However, when we had a walk around the town in the early evening we wondered where all the people were, it was so quiet. This was unlike a Friday on the mainland, where locals would be out shopping, at the cinema, nightclub or having a drink with friends.

This was nothing like the quietness of the town and the island on the Sunday, with the exception of the churches, which seemed to have no trouble attracting worshippers for their Sunday Services. The people of the island didn't agree with shops opening on a Sunday, defying the decision made on the mainland. Not only was it important to go to church on a Sunday with shops being closed, this was a day when islanders didn't work but spent it with their families.

Whilst I may find the strictness and dogma of their particular understanding of faith not to my taste, I do admire the sense of community which is underpinned by religion which continues to hold the Sabbath, denying a commercialism which none of us in our more liberal understanding can escape from, even for a day. It was significant that churches had car parks the size of which we normally expect for a supermarket.

On one of our tours we visited the Callanish Standing Stones a cruciform pattern with a central circle. The stones were erected in the late Neolithic period and must have been a focus for ritual activity. Within the central stone circle is a chambered tomb. I could sense the importance of place and how this was just another example of the rootedness of the people of the Isle of Lewis. As I touched one of the stones I felt no longer a stranger but a connection to

what had gone before a relationship with the island and its people. In all probability I will never visit this place again but that sense of rootedness feels to be a blessing that can never be taken away.

As a Unitarian, who upholds liberal religious views, it is good sometimes to consider the balance of continuity and change. As I try to ensure that experience and understanding move me forward I must try to hold on to that which is timeless and of crucial importance for wholeness and health. An experience of place seems to offer that chance to tap into a continuity of which I am part, whilst informing the change that continues as long as there is life.