

Just to Be There

...she had this way of talking about Florence...that always bothered me. She talked as if just to be in Florence were enough to make a person happy. As if you didn't need anything else. Just to be there.

Robert Hellenga *Philosophy Made Simple*

My brother and I had agreed to meet in Lucca. It was June of 2001. I was on my way to a writing workshop and he was going on another balloon trip over Tuscany. He had not been well at all and had been going to Italy ever few months, as if in a final splurge before the end. It was one of those perfect days in Tuscany. After I arrived, I went looking for him. I had no doubts I would find him, although I was not very familiar with Lucca. I simply left the hotel where I was staying headed out down the main street, turned left at a large square and kept going. In retrospect it seems as if I was simply following a beam that would automatically lead me right to where he was. Eventually, I came upon him at an outdoor café in the Piazza Napoleone. I remembered it from a previous visit long ago. Then it was a tree-lined parking lot. Now it was the same tree-lined square surrounded by cafes *sans* cars. He and his wife were at one of them reading the newspaper on the café's terrace in the late afternoon sun.

I watched the two of them for a while. It was a wonderful scene. She was reading him something from the *International Herald Tribune*. He seemed interested, even smiled a bit. I can still see them clearly. Eventually, I walked over to their table, stood there quietly, listening to the tale being read. Then he saw me. He seemed elated, rose and we embraced. The warmth of that greeting had not come to us in years. It didn't hurt that it was a surprise.

We visited there for a while and then we moved on to another café on the nearby Piazza San Michele. The warm afternoon was drawing to a close. The buildings glowed in that late afternoon Tuscan light. And he started to tell to about what he saw in some of them. He had never done that before. He saw things that I did not even notice until he pointed them out. It was like that with each building. The object. Its meaning. Its historical importance and why it was placed there and not somewhere else. He went on and on for some time. It was dazzling.

He did know a great deal. But above all he wanted to tell me about it, wanted to communicate something to me. I had never heard him so spontaneously expressive or interested in what he was talking about, to say nothing of the fact that he was describing all this to me. It turned out to be our last day together. We never had a better one.

When I returned to Lucca on my own six years later, I went back to revisit the places we had been—Piazza Napoleone, the café there, and the one on Piazza San Michele, and the trattoria we had dinner that night. Now I wonder if I didn't return to Lucca to try to recapture that day and the unexpected pleasure of our last time together. The mind, our desires, the choices we make work in such mysterious ways, none of which we have the slight knowledge or awareness of.

Lucca is a reserved, bourgeois city that shuns ostentation, it is predictable and has few excitements...one of the most beautiful cities in the world...the ideal of a perfect city, spiritually and economically autonomous, defended from the dissipation in Italy...the people of Lucca have done the most extraordinary thing that has ever happened in Italy, they have conserved their city.

A Guidebook of Lucca

The guidebook doesn't exaggerate; the village of Lucca is an exceptionally beautiful town in Tuscany that has been preserved over the centuries by whoever was ruling over it. It took centuries to build the wide, high ramparts that encircle the town and have kept invaders at bay. Even though it is small, Lucca it is filled with piazzas, churches, and wide open squares. I spent hours walking around the narrow, curving streets from one section of the town to the other. Everything is close to everything else. You have to go outside the walls for anything really commercial. But inside there are the very "best" shops, too many, in fact, numerous trattorias and osterias, and cafes. It was sunny and warm the week when I was there and so I spent much of the day sauntering from one place to another and eating *al fresco* in fine trattorias in the evening.

One afternoon I took one of the bikes in the apartment I rented and went for a ride around the walls. What a treat! I biked through the narrow streets dodging strollers, dogs, and other

miscellaneous barriers to get to a wide ramp leading up to the walls. Trees on either side line the 3 mile bike/walking/running path and at various points along the way there are areas of parks, children play areas, a botanical garden, great stretches of lawn and open meadow-like areas. It was Sunday and it appeared all of Lucca was meandering along the walls. Couples, children, solitary walkers, runners, many bikers, a great many parents with children on bikes or in strollers. It was the place to be on Sunday in Lucca.

It is not a difficult ride. And it is fun and entertaining and gives you a good idea of the extent of the walls and how they have been preserved over the centuries and expanded from time to time. At some points they are quite wide, with an acre or two of lawn and park-like area. Perhaps they brought in some extra soil or perhaps that is the way the land was originally carved out. Regardless, those who designed the walls and have preserved it over the years deserve a very big prize.

One more note about Lucca; it is very, very clean. On every street there are waste-baskets attached to posts that are placed every few yards. Residential trash is picked up each day but Sunday. All you need to do is tie your bag and leave it outside your front door. The little garbage trucks, mostly electric powered, run around the streets throughout the day. We could all learn a lesson or two from the trash collecting program in Lucca.

It was Sunday, in the early afternoon on a warm sunny day in Lucca. I was casually moseying around the Piazza Napoleone, not doing or thinking much of anything. Perhaps, it was after lunch and I was heading back to the apartment for a nap. Or something like that. I came across a couple, actually it turned out to be two couples ambling about like myself. One of the women in the quartet seemed to be off by herself, some distance from whoever it was she was with. Or maybe she wasn't with any of them. I couldn't be sure. Maybe she wasn't either.

I walked by her. She seemed to be looking intently at me. I didn't know why. Attractive women simply do not pay the slightest attention to me. In fact, most avert their eyes the moment they see me coming their way. And then when I passed by her, she did the most remarkable thing. She smiled. Did I smile back? I don't think so. More likely it was a simple

acknowledgement but nothing more. It all happened in a flash, of course. But in continuing on my way, I did wonder what could have possibly led her to smile so directly at me. As I turned the corner, I glanced back. She had rejoined the quartet who continued ambling around the Piazza. I didn't give the incident a second thought.

But then, a few days later, I saw her again. She was alone this time. She saw me. I saw her. We practically stumbled across one another. Both of us smiled at each other broadly. But we were at the train station. I was on my way back to Florence. It appeared she was returning once again to Lucca. We were headed in opposite directions. Yes, surely in more ways than one. I was in a hurry. She seemed to be looking for something. The moment passed quickly, too quickly in retrospect. I still don't know how to respond in these moments. Should I have stopped and forgotten about the train waiting on the tracks? Should I have even smiled at her when we saw each other again? She did. What was I to do? Pretend to be blind?

It seems in these situations, these moments that pass quickly before me, my real character is revealed—naive, ineffectual, indecisive. Will I see her again in Florence? What a silly question. And yet what was the likelihood that I would ever see her again after the silent exchange in the Piazza Napoleone? There won't be another time. That is the way these things go—fortunately.

It was uncommonly chilly when I arrived in Florence. Moreover, the prospects for warmer weather were not great. I thought what is one to do? Head South? Fly to Abu Dhabi? I assumed the weather was simply expressing its discontent with another terrible year-- yet another unconscionable war on in a far off land where we should never be in the first place. Madness everywhere you looked--foolish, trivial, horrible events in every nook and cranny, each and every day. Where have all the good people gone? I hoped most fervently that they had fled to Florence

I spent many hours walking all over the town once again. Mostly it was a nostalgia trek, going back to the old places I've been to so many times, retrieving memories, thinking this might be the last of my Florence-going days. Eventually, as it always does, it warmed up as the month went by. My mood changed at once. Yes, it is the warmth that keeps bringing me back and feeds my

thoughts about living here, at least living here for that part of the year when it is so warm. And yes the center is so very congenial, a truly walkable community. Walking the streets of Florence is a perpetual art gallery too. I dream of a place where it is always like this. Dream on, Richard.

I thought what would I do if I lived in Florence for any length of time. I would have to have something to do. Otherwise I would perish. Soon I will anyway, so what does it really matter? The question is not the same as the one I asked in the days when I was teaching and doing research in psychology. Those days are over now. What I do now is try to write. But what could I write about here? What kind of project would sustain me for a year or two? Actually I am presented with that question no matter where I live nowadays.

Over the years I have been reporting on all the things I see in Florence. This year it occurred to me to think about what I didn't see. You don't see any obese people in Florence, not Italians anyway. However, there are some significantly overweight tourists promenading the streets. Guess where they are from? You don't see any four-lane roadways crisscrossing Florence. In fact, on some of the streets you don't see any cars at all. How sensible! You also don't see many people walking their dogs in Florence. Maybe they have dogs in other parts of the town, but they are a rarity in the Centro Storico. You don't see many tall buildings either. But those you do see are never more than a few stories high and are often works of art in themselves.

I have been really working well again here. What is it? Less distraction? A simple change of scene? I had an idea for the piece I am writing now, an idea that has helped me finally to bring some coherence to material that I've been working on for months. It came to me here. Again, why? I thought it surely must be the olive oil. Would it have occurred to me at home? It is impossible to know. It is enough that it occurred and the fact that I thought of it here in Florence is of minor importance.

As I was about mid-way through my meal at Mama Gina's one night in Florence, a young woman entered the restaurant alone. She seemed interesting, unadorned, without a book and not at all punkish. She reminded me of one of my best students. Whatever happened to S? She had such promise. The young woman was seated with her back to me at a table not far from mine.

In front of her was a long table where a group of students from what I took to be a university campus in Florence were having one jolly fine time.

I wondered what the solitary young woman was thinking. Was she embarrassed to be by herself in the midst of a lively group of students? Was it difficult for her to be there alone? I thought of going up to ask if she would like to join me or asking if she might enjoy a dinner companion one night while she was in Florence. But of course, I didn't. I thought she was pretty gutsy to come alone to Mama Gina's--a first class trattoria that isn't cheap. That appealed to me a lot too. Eventually I left without speaking to her. I thought that was probably wise. At least, I didn't make a fool of myself.

Lo and behold, the Commune of Firenze mounted a series of exhibits this year in honor of Leon Batissta Alberti. Leon was quite a Renaissance talent. Not only was he a creator of great architectural buildings, including the Palazzo Rucellai, where I am staying once again, but he was also said to be an exceptional artistic theorist, painter, and urban planner. All year long they worked at restoring the Palazzo (and other buildings of his design), so that now the interior courtyard is open to the sky and other sections of the building have also been superbly reconstructed.

Across the way from the Palazzo is another Alberti classic. This one interests me particularly because the restoration process included a tasteful, modern feature. Bang and Olufsen, the classy high-fidelity audio company, occupy the entire first floor of the building and have opened up the display of their equipment by placing huge glass windows the full length of the three open arches.

Each day I linger over my bag lunch while basking in the sun on the ledge outside the Palazzo that looks out upon the Alberti restoration. I pay attention to the people passing by on the via della Vigna Nuovo. I like doing that. I look at them and wonder about their life, where they are from, what they do during the day, and how they like it. The variation between them is enormous--the wealthy out shopping with their overflowing bags, the over-dressed, the simply

dressed, the undressed. I judge—she is too fat, she is wearing too much makeup, how wonderfully thin she is, why doesn't she look at me, what does she see in *him*?

In response to a question about what do you miss most when you leave Florence, a local *carabinieri* replied: “The sheer beauty of Florence, the buildings and the ambience that it creates. To me, there is no where else that gives me the same feelings.” That says it all as far as I'm concerned. Earlier he had said: “I love being in the historic centre—it makes me think of the Renaissance, the period I believe to be the greatest in Italian history. That period of time gave us the great art and architecture that we see today, and it evokes amazing feelings in me.”

I am not familiar with vespers other than as a church service that takes place toward the evening hours. There are said to be a few prayers and psalms. At San Minato al Monti it was almost entirely a series of chants. The service was held in the lower chapel of a Romanesque church built high atop one of the hills of Florence. It is quite a trek and I mean quite a trek to get there. It is something like climbing up to the top of the Empire State Building. The trek is worth it for if you survive, the view overlooking Florence, if you will pardon my cliché, is rather breathtaking. Can there be any doubt that this is one of the world's most beautiful cities? Day or night.

I found the chanting soothing. There is a steady dialogue between a small group of monks on one side of the chapel and a few others on the other side. Heaven knows what they were saying. I guess Heaven does know, actually. Nevertheless it was semi-musical dialogue that put one in a reassuring peace of mind. Afterwards on way down the stairs that brought me up, a bride and groom were posing for their wedding photos. How charming on such a pleasant day.

Would I come to Florence in June if it wasn't warm? Clearly not. The warmth is necessary. Nothing else really is. I have learned one thing by coming here each year. My way of being is to be where it is warm. Most of the year, I am not in such a place and, as a result, I am often out of sorts. Does that give me an edge that I would lose if it was warm all the time? Surely not, for whatever edge I have is scarcely a function of cold and cloudy days.

Why Florence then and not Rome or Portofino for that matter? Florence has everything but not too much of it. In Florence all that you need is but a short walk away. Florence has English language bookstores and the *New York Times* at the newsstands every day now. Wonder of wonders, I saw *The New Yorker* on one of the newsstands on the very same day I get it in Portland. This is something of a miracle! I know Florence, I know it well. There are people who recognize me when I return each year. It has become my second home, my real home, although I am only here but a short time each year. And don't forget that the fields and hill towns of Tuscany a stone's throw away. It is a very special place and that is why I keep coming back.

I have also learned there is a sense of place here that I've never seen anyway else. I think this town must be an urban planner's dream. The people here care about preserving the genuine essence of its history and culture, restoring the ancient buildings, keeping cars away from the Centro as much as possible. There are very few in new buildings in the Centro. There is a vibrant life on the streets, on every street, especially now that you can't smoke inside and cell phones work do not work very well inside. The old gathering places, the piazzas the trattorias, and coffee bars are filled much of the day with people who clearly know each other well. They are glad to see one another and spend time together in these familiar gathering places.

In the beginning of my sojourns to Florence, I had dreams of living the rest of my life here. I was taken by the beauty of this place and its people, the long days of summer, and the ease of getting about by foot for almost everything I needed. I also succumbed to the Tuscan countryside and I knew that visiting the many villages and hill towns would be an important part of my life here.

But it soon became clear that my dream was impossible. I could not settle there alone and that is the way it would have to be. So each year I dream of returning, make plans for my visit, look for a place to stay. And doing that sustains me through the many long cold and raining days in the place that I call my home. I would like to call Florence my home but because it isn't and never will be, it has become the home of my fancy. Like a wonderful work of fiction, this imaginative

home is really better than the real one and not a day goes by that I am not here in one way or another.

As much as I love Florence, I suspect I will never return this way again. It seems I've been saying this each year of late. But age is catching up with me now and the aches and pains will eventually make traveling here impossible. Perhaps I should begin to think about moving on anyway. I have been here enough and know what it is like down to each cobblestone on the pavement. But, as usual, I am of mixed-minds about it. When it is warm and I hike up into the hills on the other side of the Arno or take the bus up the winding road to Fiesole and from either setting look down upon this city and surrounding countryside, I start having second thoughts. I view the oleander, bougainvillea, olive and pine trees and well nourished hillsides. Beautiful villas and mansions around every turn. It is idyllic, a place to live and have your home. The perfect place without a doubt.