

Searching for Querencia

Away from neighborhood, away from region, away from nation, we become aware of neighborhood, region, and nation as objects of querencia. But the engagement from which all these larger attachments flow is a personal, specific affection for one's own place... for some little corner of the world...that connects us to the world to begin with.

It has been over 20 years since I first read about the Spanish concept of *querencia*. It was in a brief *New Yorker* Talk of the Town piece about the state of mind of an English airline pilot as he approached the shores of England at the end of one of his Trans-Atlantic flights.¹ The deep green English countryside comforted and restored him each time it appeared on the horizon. "He belonged to England. England was home." The author described *querencia* as the affection a person feels for the place one calls home and the sense of well being and belonging that such a place gives rise to. You are glad to be there. It nourishes and informs you. You are said to feel at peace in your *querencia*.

I copied this short Talk of the Town note, filed it in one of the notebooks I keep and read it over every now and then. Its truth, which I was only dimly aware of at first, became clearer to me at each reading. It is particularly relevant to me now, as I think about leaving the city and the neighborhood that has been my "home" for almost forty years.

While many people believe Portland, Oregon is one the most livable places in this country and is doing everything right in planning its future, it is also undeniably cold, wet, and dreary here much of the year. Since I am no longer young and brave, I am growing weary of dealing with it or even thinking about it. Yet, I am ambivalent about leaving. In spite of its harsh winters, Portland still has much of what I am looking for in a city and, other than my favorite towns in Europe, I am having difficulty finding another place that feels like it could become my *querencia*.

¹ December 24, 1979, Volume 55, Number 45, pp. 27-28.

There was a concert in my neighborhood park the other night. I came upon it unexpectedly during an after dinner stroll. A small rock band was playing. People were clustered around the bandstand or sitting on the grass. Some were listening to the music. Others were enjoying a picnic dinner. Some were sipping wine and munching chips. Children were running around everywhere, climbing on the large free-form sculptures in the park. Young couples, families, old couples, singles, lovers, quite a heterogeneous bunch were there. After mingling a while with the crowd, I returned home feeling glad, after all, to be here in my neighborhood that night.

In its narrowest sense, *querencia* refers to the place where one lives, one's home, the place one returns to at the end of a trip. I also think of *querencia* more generally in terms of other places that individuals become attached to--their city, nation or, indeed, their neighborhood. In her book *On Bullfighting* A. L. Kennedy used the term to describe the bull's preferred spot in the ring, "where a matador cannot enter without extreme risk to himself." She reports that a bull will charge, if the matador blocks its return to this place. This usage captures the essence of *querencia*--it is a favored place, it feels safe to be there, and it is comforting to return to.

To be honest, I have never felt much affection for the places where I have lived. Either they were too cold or too culturally impoverished. Above all, none ever felt like home and I knew that eventually I would leave. *Querencia* is not a place you want to leave. During my first visit to Portland, I recall thinking that it was not a place where I would ever want to live. Yes, that was a long time ago and the city has changed a great deal since then. And so quite unexpectedly I find that I have now spent the better part of my adult life in this city and even more surprisingly that I have come to feel a certain degree of contentment here. While I still hope to be leaving soon, I realize that I have become strangely attached to this place.

Until recently, I had never lived in an urban neighborhood the way it is known in Europe and in most of the larger cities of this country. I was raised in the heart of West Los

Angeles, not far from shops and business centers, but still, we always had to get in the car to go anywhere. This has been true of all of the places where I have lived ever since then. Even though they were also relatively close to the city center, I have been as isolated and automobile-dependent as any suburban resident.

I went out to water the plants in the garden the other night. In a moment or two, I heard a woman's voice call my name. I had no idea where it was coming from or who it might be. It seemed to be coming from a passing cloud. How nice your garden looks the woman said. I want to tell you how much I enjoy looking out upon your beautiful flowers. I finally located the voice. It came from a woman peering out of her third floor apartment in the building next to mine. We chatted a bit. She had lost her husband, then a bundle in a business enterprise, as well as her formerly slim figure. But she had not forgotten how to express her appreciation for the colorful flowers growing in my garden.

It was only after I had been to Europe a few times, that I began to appreciate what it meant to be able to walk most everywhere I wanted to go. In the neighborhoods there, I found merchants, homes, and businesses all clustered within an easy walking distance of one another. Eventually I became aware that the inner core of the Northwest area of Portland had gradually become a European-style neighborhood. Almost immediately after moving there, I found for the first time in my life that I could manage my daily affairs without using my car. I would sometimes go for weeks without driving anywhere. The fact that almost everything is no more than a five or ten-minute walk means everything to me now.

There is really nothing special about this area of the city. Indeed, it is shabby in spots and the people are not always so lovable. But I am familiar with it, it can meet most of my needs, and everything is relatively close. Apartments and homes, some with lovely gardens are not far from the shops and bistros, markets, and bookstores that dot the area. Instead of driving, I take to the sidewalk to reach them. When I head out on my rounds, I invariably encounter friends and others who I have seen before and would like to get to know. I develop a bond with the anonymous people that I pass on the street so that

heading out becomes a social event that has transformed my mundane chores into silent attachments.

The other day I walked to Richs Cigar Store to get some magazines for the long weekend. Since I go there often, it didn't surprise me that I was greeted warmly when I entered. The giggling lady at the counter said she had something for me-- a five dollar bill that I had apparently dropped the last time I was there. I was astonished that she had saved it for me all this time. They don't know my name at Richs. So the giggly woman told me they had been saving it for the Paris Review guy. I know they don't carry the periodical, but I always ask for it anyway when I go there. They had been saving the five-dollar bill for the Paris Review guy.

On warm summer nights, the energy of the streets beckons. The cafes are crowded with long lines of expectant diners. A lucky few are seated at the tables outside. The talk is zestful. The bars and markets, the music store and shops are brimming with customers. Young women parade down the street in black sundresses, modeling their tans. It is all very alluring. Who are these people, where they have come from, and why are they there? In her essay, *On the Street*, Vivian Gornick² describes the way the anonymous encounters between strangers on the street turn your thoughts in this direction.

I see, in the air between me and the crowded horizon, the people of the day. I begin revising the scenes, adding dialogue here, analysis there, commentary further on. ...With a start, I realize I am writing the story of the day, lending shape and texture to the hours just behind me. They're in the room with me now, these people I brushed against today. I'd rather be here with them tonight than with anyone I know. They return the narrative impulse to me.

The neighborhood returns much more. Gornick writes:

² Vivian Gornick, *On the Street*. *New Yorker*, September 9, 1996, pp. 72-77.

You are never less alone than you are in a crowded street that at times enfolds you so that you do not feel shut out.....There is no one you want to be with as much as the strangers who jostle and bump you on the street.

I went to Powell's the other day. It is said to be one of the largest bookstores in the country and, wonder of wonders, it is all but three blocks from my home. It was a cool and rainy Saturday. What a crowd, not a single empty table in the large coffee bar, individuals typing on their laptops, others chatting amiably or playing chess. The aisles were filled with book lovers searching intently for their next acquisition or reading one while sitting on the floor. A large group had gathered upstairs for a poetry reading. There were long lines at the checkout stand. It was wonderful to be there. The dreary afternoon was all but forgotten.

Some good friends of mine live in the suburbs now, about two miles from the nearest town in a cluster of homes set back about a mile from an eight lane freeway. Each time I visit, I am struck by the vast differences between their neighborhood and mine. The homogeneity of theirs is conspicuous, with every building a home and every home a garage, garden and shake roof. There are no buses, apartment houses, coffee bars or telecom warehouses nearby. Most of the homes scattered about the hillside in their suburban setting face away from the street. There are no sidewalks and it is rare to see anything like the sort of social life that is everywhere along the sidewalks of my urban neighborhood.

In discussing the importance of Jane Jacob's work on urban design, Malcolm Gladwell describes the urban experiences that are so sorely missing from daily life in the suburbs.

The miracle of Hudson Street, according to Jacobs, was created by the particular configuration of the streets and buildings of the neighborhood. Jacobs argued that when a neighborhood is oriented toward the street, when sidewalks are used for socializing and play and commerce, the users of that street are transformed by the resulting stimulation: they form

relationships and casual contacts they would never have otherwise. The West Village, she pointed out, was blessed with a mixture of houses and apartments and shops and offices and industry, which meant that there were always people "outdoors on different schedules and....in the place for different purposes." ...Sparingly populated suburbs may look appealing, she said, but without an active sidewalk life, without the frequent serendipitous interactions of many different people, "there is no public acquaintanceship, no foundation of public trust, no cross-connections with the necessary people."³

There is nothing like a public square or central gathering place in my friend's suburban enclave. A park that might become one was recently built on the main street of town, a few of miles from their home, as well as everyone else's. I have driven by that park many times--it is well beyond a normal stroll, unless you're in the mood for a lengthy hike. Not once have I seen anyone there or even anyone approaching the place. Nor have I seen an area for people to park the cars they must drive to get there. I admire the park, the trees and benches that have been abundantly distributed throughout. I hope that it will eventually become a popular gathering place. But in all honesty, I have no reason to believe that will happen as long as you have strap yourself in your three-ton utility vehicle every time you want to go there.

In truth, my friends spend a fair amount of each and every day on the road going two and fro on their rounds. In the morning, the kids are driven to their schools, each some distance from the other. At the end of their school day, which is never the same, they are retrieved and then transported to their after school activity, soccer practice, ballet school, or language class. Their market is miles from their house, as is everywhere else they go each day.

In visiting, I have come to understand how the design of homes and streets can so readily give rise to the isolation and alienation reported to exist in the suburbs. The entire setting

³ Malcolm Gladwell. Designs for Working. *New Yorker*, December 11, 2000.

is far removed from the concept of the "city as a human event." Is it any wonder that so many American teen-agers feel disconnected from the larger culture when they are raised in such a world? I know that's the way I feel when I am there.

It is said that everyone knows everyone else in a small town. Things are not much different in my neighborhood. It is not uncommon to encounter a friend on the streets. One night last week, I went out for a late evening stroll. On the way, I bumped into a long time friend who was returning from an evening concert in the park. I treated him to a cone. The next night, as I was returning from the market, I heard someone pounding on the window of a restaurant that I was passing by. More friends beckoned me in. I stayed to chat with them for a while. Every once in a while my neighborhood seems like a small town, even though it is in the midst of a large metropolitan area.

On a recent trip to Italy I was once again struck by the lively public socializing that I observed on the streets of the neighborhood in Florence that has almost become my second home. There the people greet each other with great warmth. The owners stand outside their stores in order to better converse with those who own the shops across the way.

I doubt that the rarity of such encounters in America is because Italians are more outgoing than we are. Rather I think it has more to do with almost haphazard way their cities have evolved over the centuries and the resulting relationship of the buildings to the street. The frequent socializing of the Italians occurs because their cities naturally invite fortuitous meetings between individuals as they stroll along the sidewalks or visit the piazza in their neighborhood.

Now in Florence, when the air is red with the summer sunset and the campaniles begin to sound vespers and the day's work is done, everyone collects in the piazzas. The steps of Santa Maria del Fiore swarm with men of every rank and every class; artisans, merchants, teachers, arts, doctors, technicians, poets, scholars. A thousand minds, a thousand arguments; a lively intermingling of questions, problems, news of the latest

happening, jokes; an inexhaustible play of language and thought, a vibrant curiosity; the changeable temper of a thousand spirits by whom every object of discussion is broken into an infinity of sense and significations--all these spring into being, and then are spent. And this is the pleasure of the Florentine public.⁴

I think a great deal about the design of neighborhoods when I visit the large urban centers of Europe, even though it is not a subject I have ever studied. I know the European model is not everyone's favorite. But it is mine and I can see how humane it is and how readily it gives rise to the active street life that is all but nonexistent in the cities and towns of this country. A person builds their own sense of *querencia* out of those experiences, even when they are *anonymous*.

In his book, *Intimate Anonymity*,⁵ Hillel Schocken defines a city as: "a fixed place where people can form relations with others at various levels of intimacy, while remaining entirely anonymous." Schocken argues that a city should make it possible for individuals to have contact with a variety of people from whom they can choose their intimates. He concludes his essay by noting: "The future of urbanism lies in the understanding that the city is a human event, not a sculpture." I am sure this is the secret to the design of all good cities and the neighborhoods within them. It is surely the secret of my neighborhood in Portland and why, through the relationships that I form here, some of which are personal, others entirely anonymous, I find myself growing increasingly attached to it.

The art galleries in my neighborhood hold an open house in the evening on the first Thursday of each month. It has turned out to be a happening, bringing street vendors, musicians and aspiring artists to the area for the night. Crowds of smartly dressed people promenade from gallery to gallery. The local restaurants are packed. During one such First Thursday the hair saloon across the way held a fashion show that you might have

⁴ Richard Goodwin, The American Condition, *New Yorker*, January 28, 1974.

⁵ *Intimate Anonymity, The Israeli Pavilion*, The 7th International Exhibition of Architecture, The Venice Biennial, Tel Aviv: Kal Press Ltd., 2000.

seen in Milan. This month the Italian "gastronomia" across the street held an elaborate street fair with tables of food, wine and cheese. And to everyone's astonishment the owner had also imported the troupe of Sbandieratori, flag artists of Sansepolcro in Tuscany. The flag wavers were dressed in wonderfully colorful costumes and, after marching through the neighborhood stopped right outside our front door to perform their complex flag waving routines accompanied by the steady rhythmic beat of drums and crystal clear clarions. The party went on through the evening with much dancing, singing, and milling around and a good deal of conversing in Italian.

Increasingly now when I travel, I find myself searching for *querencia*, for a place where I will be able to experience the feeling that it is said to foster. The quest has not been easy. I have also been thinking about why this pursuit seems so important to me now. What difference will it make to me where I live? City or country, town or metropolis, I am not going to be any different. Won't I will still seek the same experiences, find the same pleasures, and fight the same battles regardless of where I live?

I have no answer to that question. Who does? It is only a matter preference. Preference for a place where there is sun and it is warm enough to walk to the places I like to go. Preference for inviting bistros and coffeehouses where I feel welcome to linger for a while; a market with fresh bread, fish, fruit and vegetables near at hand; and a well-stocked magazine and bookstore, and one or two cinemas not far away. Parks and gardens spread about the area and, if I am really lucky, a library and university close by.

They closed off the street in front of our house the other night. Piazza Italia had arranged our first neighborhood Bocce Ball Tournament. Two courts, each one laid out to precision with a green carpet covered the asphalt street. At one of end of the block, a banner of flags from the Sienese contradra had been hung. As soon as I saw them, I dashed back home to collect the ones I had bought there several years ago. In due course, they were taped to the parking meters along the street. It was a lovely warm night, the street was mobbed, music was in the air, groups were eating at the outdoor tables, teams were battling on the courts and the colorful flags from Siena were waving

in the breeze. Even the governor and his wife were there. Other than the Borgo S. Jacopo, this was surely the place to be that night.