Alice's Dérives in Devonshire

Phil Smith

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With a Foreword by
Bradley L. Garrett

Extract from the Foreword

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When we think about the spaces around us, the spaces that we inhabit, the spaces we care about, the spaces that matter, we begin to think of them as *places* rather than *spaces*. It's a slimy, smudged, shattered line between space and place, one that can be affected by our own thoughts, experiences and attachments and one that can be equally affected by the actions of others. Over time, often we find that unless we really work at it, spaces we call places begin to dwindle in number. For many people, home, work and the local pub or cafe are perhaps the only places left in adulthood – the rest of the world slips into an ethereal blur of places that could have been. We are, in the end, just too busy to keep trying to explore the world for new places or even to tend to places we know in a way that gives them the required thickness.

What would a world look like where our actions were driven primarily by desire rather than utility? What if exploring and imagining took priority over working, paying the bills and mundane everyday tasks? One vision of this world is perhaps rather dystopic. Here, hedonistic throngs eschew responsibility, wholly depend on the labour of others, eating and drinking, dancing and drifting their way through the world, leaving behind little beyond memories of good times and a few broken objects hastily swept under the rug. This rudderless lot have radically misinterpreted Buddhist philosophy, living not in the present as a state of concern, but allowing the past and future to fall away simply because too little attention was paid to either. In this rather decadent imagination, the credo of all might be "I want" rather than "I must".

Anyone who has children will be familiar with this behaviour; it's the natural state of youth. Why is it then that in our stable, reasonable adult years that we strived so hard to reach, we so often look upon our childhoods with fond nostalgia and a vague

impression of a paradise lost? Could it be that for many of us, we sense that the pendulum has swung too far the other way? What is it that still compels us to yearn for irresponsibility and reckless adventure? Perhaps it's more important than we realise to remember every so often what it is we want to do as well as what it is we need to do.

... In *Alice's Dérives*, Phil Smith captures the wonder of childhood imaginations and reminds us of the importance of continuing to embrace desire, letting it play out through our imaginations. Phil reminds us of the continuing importance of transforming spaces into places. Alice and her friends encounter a world that seems at the same time completely familiar and bizarrely bleary-eyed; they are adept explorers of the everyday, finding the impossible all around them. In transporting us to this world from the perspective of a curious nine-year-old girl, Phil also reminds us that those experiences carry with them a hidden danger, the reason why we fear that rudderless lot: the wonders of the everyday waiting to be found are so tantalizing, so satisfying, that we may never emerge from them. This of course is what many of us are embarrassed to admit in adulthood – the compulsion to run away, to escape, never wholly vanished, we just suppressed it out of supposed necessity.

Even if we step over that line at times to escape into the wonders of the everyday we are so prone to ignore, to speak of the world as one world that we go "out there" to encounter is of course too simplistic a formulation. Each of us builds very particular relationships to the people and places we encounter. Each of us will respond in different ways to the worlds constructed around and within us. And yes, this gets more difficult as we grow older and lose control of time. Yet as the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote, freedom is what we do with what's been done to us. Sartre suggests that even a prisoner confined to a cell can make choices within that cell; the prisoner retains power of consciousness and is therefore free. The prisoner may find that the most alluring freedom then is in the mind, in the imagination, in the thoughts that cannot be imprisoned (yet) – there is always an open door in the mind...