

Retracing Our Steps: A Personal Recollection **August 24th – 29th 2013**

Reviewing the pictures of the Emergence land journey brings it all back. It's definitely a live memory in the body and more than an ache of the feet... Walking for five days in company in Wales – in Cymru which means 'the land of comrades'. It seems appropriate and right to be doing this. Such a rich time in every sense. Five days of almost constant sun - and these times are rare, as anyone who knows this country will tell you. Good weather for midges too – sometimes you forget them – more forgettable than the mosquito but somehow more pervasive, demanding, territorial... Making you run for cover as the sun goes down.

'Re-tracing our Steps' could so easily have been a massive anti-climax...a re-walking of a walk already walked before. We walked in the footsteps of those 40 or so people who this time last year embarked on the pre-conference land journey as part of the 2012 Summit. It was a grand design if there ever was one – not just one but two long distance routes – or was it one which held its mirror image within it? The pattern of each walk – an ellipsis, an almost-circle. The pattern of the two together proceeding North and South, together making up the sign for infinity – or number 8, symbolizing a path without end or beginning.

And so the land journey (North route) was again walked in 2013, the conference to which the walkers were walking is now old news. It came and went and is now documented as is so much in this great time of documentation on a website designed specifically to house the Emergence project. This new project – this young upstart: 'Retracing our Steps' an invitation to walk and talk and to NOT immediately after attend a conference which claims to 'create the future'. No claims are made here – just to walk and talk in company. To share where, who and how you are in this time of paradoxical change. Is it a time of development or collapse? Sometimes the answer to this question for many of us changes from day to day or hour to hour. You can't help being inspired by the many creative projects spring up in all corners and you can't help but be overwhelmed by the daily news, which today speaks of mandates to invade Syria. A cycle of having been here before and perhaps knowing we will be here again. How to keep a constant compass within all this – or has that horse already bolted?

Is it all we can do then to reach out and find others – to connect with our comrades and thereby find meaning in what we are doing and if we can't do that then to hold us gently through this time of uncertainty and change. People can of course hold us and the land can hold us too. This for me is what Retracing our Steps was about. Can we, by connecting deeply to the land hold each other even more powerfully?

People came for many reasons and all of us have reasons that we know consciously – perhaps to have a conversation about a particular project, to talk about real concerns about wild Wales versus wind-farm Wales, to perhaps talk about a Zero Carbon Britain and our place within it, to wonder about the relevance of the arts in a time when it might seem a luxury even to artists, to

name plants – tormentil, waxcaps, Himalayan balsam, or to discover and marvel at a lemon scented fern.

The magnetism of this ancient land of Wales – a pull which compelled me to move here aged 18 after a one-off school trip to the mountains of Snowdonia from East London in the late 70's.

Here I was again, in the mountains of Snowdonia – the southernmost part of the national park – deep in the heart of middle Wales. The centre-point of our walk was Cadair Idris (Arthurs Seat), that great and many-faced mountain with its view in every direction so often hidden in mist. The mountain which many know as the one which turns you into a madman or poet if you dare to spend the night. This walk that we were re-walking - was it about re-memembering, re-minding, re-charging...Gary Anderson from The Institute of the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home who along with his son Neal, joined us on day 4 mentioned the power of the 're-' how he was seeing a lot of it about at the moment and how the knowledge of that felt good.

These big 'flag-ship' events and projects that many of us in the arts make – and that many of us were involved in in the Olympic year of 2012 – are often super-human size, ambition and inspiration packed, resource and commitment heavy. It often takes a year to bounce back after organizing events of this magnitude. In the spirit of re-cycling but with a deeper meaning – I knew as Spring came around that there was some unfinished business with this event, the Emergence Summit. Of course I did not get the chance to walk it in 2012 – having been part of creating a design which was so big that it needed two teams of back-up support. I was part of the back-up support for the North walk –and so last year witnessed it 'backstage' with all of the untidy, running about, making-it-work bits...Lucy who was a lynchpin and one of the instigators of the whole event who facilitated the 20 North walkers made me a promise that she would walk it with me if I wanted to walk it again. The idea of re-walking, re-tracing came late...I wasn't sure after the first time that I wanted to do anything this big again (and this wasn't even Olympic size!). Following the event and even after much positive feedback, I had a feeling of 'grand claims and grand ambition and a legacy of what?' How did we 'create the future?' but then of course it doesn't just get created once for all time – we create it and re-create it every moment of every day. Retracing our Steps was an opportunity for me to take part, to experience – not to drive through this land in a transit van full of 20 bursting-at-the-seams rucksacks and food-for-all, but to walk it slowly – to take the time it took – to plant my feet on the ground and to connect my soles and thereby my soul to the earth.

After making the decision to re-walk, I put out an invitation to join me to all who had come before and to many who had not. A trickle of interest came through. I booked a mountain leader, lost him, booked another, lost her and then found Eleanor who thankfully accepted – an artist from the Swansea valley. She seemed to understand the walk and the reason for it – or was happy enough to go forward from a not-exactly-knowing place. Others came forward, some including Lucy had to withdraw at late notice due to unforeseen occurrences and uncanny injuries. Eleven people walked in total – some for one day, some for five. We

became a community of walking practice – this seemingly simple of all activities becoming devilishly difficult as the miles built up and blisters, hearts, knees and feet began to weaken. There was something that carried us through– a collective will – or willingness and it appeared in many forms. It appeared in the form of getting each other up and down Cadair Idris, sharing the cooking of food after fifteen-and-a-half miles, Elfed the farmer from Aberllefenni charging nothing for the use of his field second year running, Sarah dropping everything during an IT meltdown and coming to the rescue on the final day after the wind blew us completely off-track and miles to the east of our intended destination, Lucy and her father arriving with three courses and wine to a wild camp to bless hungry walkers despite a broken foot and eighty-one years. That was enough to bring tears. The kindness of not-strangers, the kindness of comrades. Retracing was an experiment in the making of community. We never had the same community two days running. Some of us, though increasingly foot-sore were constant as the stars, others appearing each day like a fresh wind blowing in with new skills, conversation, interests and questions.

All in all we walked round in a circle for sixty or so miles for five days – or to be more precise and honouring Simon Whitehead, designer of the walks – an ellipsis. In our end was our beginning as T.S Elliot and Mary Queen of Scots have both said before us. It is a constant practice this creating of the future...my original hope for the land journey would be that it would be a pilgrimage to and from the Centre for Alternative Technology – a place of dreams and of dedication in the heart of Wales. A walk does not a pilgrimage make...it takes practise, it takes some who have made the decision to return, to come back and to walk the walk again. It takes others to come in future...we shall see.

Thank you dear walkers Eleanor, Donna, Amber, Isabel, Rosie, Tania, Joe, Gary, Neal and Sian.

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Thank you all those who sent their wishes and were with us as we walked.

Fern Smith
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