

Postcards of the Familiar: A Meditation on Memories, the Magical and Self-Realization

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Sometimes the decision to choose a destination is practical and other times travels come about quite magically. During my 2010 sabbatical, I traveled to several destinations including Armenia, India, Greece and Italy. Unlike other trips, this particular journey caused me to think a bit differently about new places and how I engage with them. In the process of exploring these places I purposefully bought postcards for they portray more than the daily lives of people; these sometimes iconic pictures often portray the more idealized images of places. Often postcards reflect a country's milestones, history, and cultural legacies. I am intrigued by the portrayals reflected on postcards because they urge me to shift the pace with which I navigate the world.

When I returned home it was to the familiar. But, my camera caused me to re-focus somewhat differently on the everyday, as though it was a postcard. Suddenly, I found myself exploring the meaning of the familiar for I realized I had been engaged in a meditation for more than 34 years. It took leaving the familiar and encountering the new to realize this. My vision was now directed towards Mills Hall, the heart of the meditation. From earthquakes to student rebellions, this iconic structure has withstood hardships, loss, and the pains of separation by students, staff and administrators. The elegant strength and endurance represented in this 160-year-old centerpiece of the Mills College campus reminds me of many of the buildings on those postcards I purchased while traveling.

Mills College is a place where I lived my student life and now, where the trajectory of my professional life has expanded my intellect, teaching and leadership skills. It is also the place where my vision of education has been informed and transformed.

Mills Hall comes into my view with multiple layers of the familiar, but even though it is the framework around which my daily life is centered, I still meditate on the question: How do I seek meaning in the familiar? Is a lack of reflection, a lack of meaning? As I follow the meditation, I see new reflections and details in what is almost taken for granted as the familiar. As a result, I enter new portals related to sites that are part of my daily life. It is as though a new door is placed on an old building, and there is a renewal within me.

My son, Lucas, a photographer, insisted I become familiar with Martin Parr's work after viewing my photographs of the Mills College campus. Parr, a British documentary photographer, is an avid collector of postcards. Martin Parr's book *Tutta Roma* depicts postcard like photographs of Rome.¹He documents Rome through the sites, as well as the millions of visitors who cast their gaze on this historical city. His work also reflects how visitors become part of the city and make it, to some degree, what it is. In this way, he forces the viewer to look at more than just the sites by turning the lens back on the visitors.

After I studied Martin Parr's work, I looked at my photographs again and realized although I may have intended to turn the photographic lens back on myself, I had not done so. As I continued roaming around the Mills campus, I had placed myself in the role of a tourist, venturing through a most familiar place. Perhaps this is something we all do as observing is easier than participating.

I look at the photograph I took of Mills Hall and I am struck by how it is centered, with equal parts of sky and lawn. There is a balance in this photograph that often is not achieved in life, for imbalance is more familiar and more of a driving force in the daily course of our lives. Even though this terrain is the axis on which my daily routine turns, there is always the possibility that I will lose myself in the landscape. I am reminded of the lyrics from "Feel Like a Stranger," a song written by Bob Weir and made famous by The Grateful Dead on their 1990 *Without a Net* album:

*Inside you're burning
I can see clear through
Your eyes tell more than you mean them to
Lit up and flashing
Like reds and blues
Out there on the neon avenue
But I feel like a stranger
Feel like a Stranger²*

I wonder if I actually always see my surroundings. Does the formality of my picture indicate a feeling of alienation or a lack of reflection? Are new, exotic places really more likely to inspire me to reflect? While I want to experience that level of inspiration in my daily life, I still often feel like a stranger in my own skin as my professional and personal evolution continues. I am a purposeful traveller who has experienced foreign lands only to realize I can be a stranger in the familiar. In this way, everything I encounter can become a postcard.

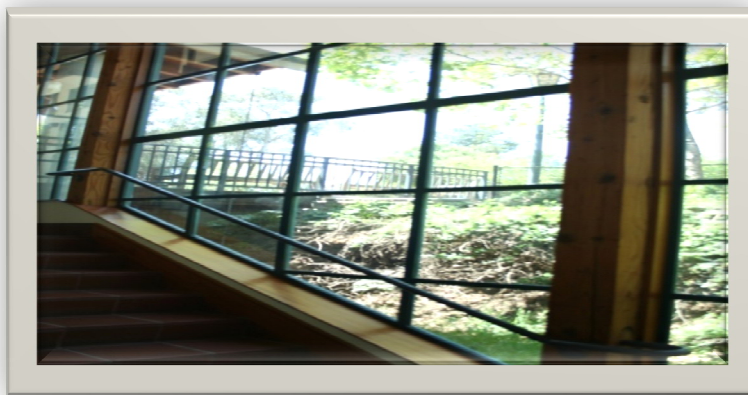
Photographs of my familiar world allow me to observe my surroundings in relation to myself through a new and often clarifying lens. The exercise of seizing and freezing such moments calls up the past and creates new memories in much the same way. My life is transformed into traces of postcards placed in the photo album of my mind where I re-order my life so I may reside within it. I want to capture time in perpetuity in order to author my narrative, reordering images and experiences. I go deeper and deeper as I explore how meanings change over time. I flashback to when I was a high wire walker in the circus. There is a familiarity and comfort that comes with high wire walking for me. I do not feel like a stranger in my skin when I walk the wire. Ultimately, what other's perceived as death defying is familiar, and one of my most treasured postcards. High wire walking seems so simple to me now, the lessons learned were carried forward into ever increasing complexity. Mental postcards drift through my mind.

¹Martin Parr, *Tutta Roma* (Rome: Constrasto, 2007).

²The Grateful Dead, *Without A Net* (song: Feel Like a Stranger) (New York: Arista).

In the first image I am a child standing next to my three sisters, in the next I am a grown woman and then I see myself as teenager running long distances. All of these images merge in an instant to give shape and purpose to my life. My quest can be lonely as I search silently through caves within myself which hold my dreams and experiences. I am recreating understanding in order to reveal possibilities.

My next photograph represents my stop on the interior steps of the School of Education, my academic home. As I look out of the familiar windows, I long to capture the feeling I have about this place and hold onto it. My life in education began when I was a student of Jane Bowyer and Anna Richert on the Mills campus. Jane, an accomplished scholar and now retired dean of the School of Education, played a formidable role in shaping me. Anna, whose primary work focuses on teacher reflection, is now my colleague and friend. Her influence is ever present in my work. These women encouraged me to write powerful polemics, take risks, and brush myself off when I failed. The history I share with these esteemed scholars and colleagues is ripe with the familiar, but still calls me to forage for new meaning.



Why do I desperately long to go places despite the many obstacles that must be negotiated on any given trip? John Urry would argue I long to travel in search of visual experiences that differ from the everyday in time or culture, an activity that expresses itself in the creation of illusions.³ The *tourist gaze* according to Urry is the tourist's, the traveller's, most important activity. The tourist is constantly preoccupied with collecting and comparing symbols of tourist spots by means of constant photography. It is through experiencing the new that sites become sights, land becomes landscape, and scenes are framed as picturesque. Busloads of tourists visit churches and museums in order to separate themselves from the familiar. I too was a tourist, visiting churches, museums, and monuments with busloads of others. I am now situated in familiar locales that can be made new through reflection.

Am I sometimes an emotional tourist? Do I find a certain strange comfort in the unfamiliar, the same kind of comfort I find in walking the wire? As an emotional tourist, I travel through time using my gaze to construct my emotional self. These emotional postcards are embedded within me and become a tapestry woven with the threads of emotional understanding I have built over a life time.

My next photograph records the walk to my office, the third door on the left. This hallway is sometimes busy, sometimes quiet, but always a part of me. The beauty of the building, especially the ways in which light filters in creates a magical mosaic of dancing shadows from which meaning often emerges along with a lens of clarity.

³John Urry, *The tourist gaze* (London: Sage, 2002).



In Anne Tyler's 1985 novel, *Accidental Tourist*, Macon, the protagonist, is a man so disengaged, so submerged in the familiar, and so afraid of the new, that he lives his life in a cocoon.⁴ The photographic images surrounding me are by no means a cocoon, but they do allow me to retreat and reflect in ways that help me craft a narrative with deeper meaning. Macon writes travel books that outline how Americans can find all they are familiar with in foreign countries. He seeks the kinds of places where facing challenges for a tourist will not be an issue. He instructs the American businessman in Paris where to find Burger King or the Marriott. Like Macon, I find solace in the familiar, but unlike Macon I am willing to take risks beyond the familiar reflected in my postcards, as well as the touchstones of my daily life.

I enter my office. A charcoal drawing is a sentimental keepsake. This is the place where I work, talk with colleagues and students laugh and cry. This small space is more than a room; it is a home, a refuge, a part of me. Not visible in this photograph are the over stacked bookcases and file cabinets. Out of view, those elements fill the office and reflect my exploration of ideas and thought.



From my naissance as a young student on the Mills campus, to a place of achievement as a tenured faculty member and former associate dean of the School of Education, I ponder how to create my future. The tourist is positioned as a voyager setting out to understand the world, to mold experience into a sequence, a route. Ultimately, I am a seeker longing to unfold the mystery of myself.

⁴ Anne Tyler, *Accidental tourist* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

I look beyond Facebook, Twitter and technological gadgets. I can make genuine connections to places and people even though it seems nearly impossible in a world that moves at an insane pace.



I leave the School of Education and walk across the campus. The next photograph is of the campanile. It was designed by late nineteenth early twentieth century architect Julia Morgan and has a definite elegance. The chiming clock tower sections my work day into fifteen minute increments. I am forever appreciative.

My photographs as they were re-seen, re-placed me in familiar settings, but in so doing, the same visuals re-instill the past through a process of re-ordering. In this way, I was allowed to re-author past mistakes, actions and even hard learned lessons emerging with fresh ways of viewing what my life has meant and may hold moving forward.

As if waking from a sleep my meditation concludes, having learned about myself I become like the molten lava flowing from an active volcano. I create new earth under my feet. The act of turning the camera lens on to elements of my daily environment, the things which due to their familiarity have become near-invisible to me, caused me to create postcards that provided an opportunity to re-envision the stills in my life thus creating new meaning, a personal history that helps to place me in the context of the social and professional spheres. Mylife, in this way, became a meditation that needs to be investigated to be kept relevant and real.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Daphne Muse for detailed critique and recommendations at several stages in the development of this manuscript.

References

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