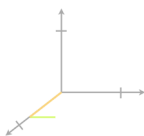


Reflecting on the hard-wired locus of the earliest memories...

Of the Primacy of Spatiality:

Sleepless at 3:00 AM, I did a virtual reality tour of the first house I lived in. It was not so much a walk through, but a crawl around cold floors. Every rise and bump of floorboard aroused awareness of up and down; left and right; backwards and forwards...

Well before I had any notion of a larger template of places—my world was mapped out the rooms of that old house. In its mapping were laid down the indelible lines of the known and the unknown, the mysterious and the drearily familiar...



I began the latest tour on the single step down from the living room to the kitchen. Beyond the trickling cold from the kitchen door frame, the air grew a little warmer nearer the corner water heater. I stopped up by the rocking chair, wary of jamming fingers under the rockers...

Before turning back towards the table, I felt the metal ring recessed in the cracked linoleum. Too heavy for me to pull, I still knew that ring squeaked open the trap door which released smells of damp earth from the cellar where the tin bathtub was kept.

Back up the step into the living room, I crawled over the floor furnace grate and past the corner of the couch. Crossing the bump in the threshold of the other living room entrance, I faced the doorway of my parents' bedroom. On the right, was the rarely used front door of the house and on the left, were steps leading to the upstairs bedrooms. Twisting around, I lifted and slid backwards up the black rubber-treaded steps, careful of the protruding nail heads.

Straight ahead from the top of the stairs was the doorless bedroom shared by my older sisters. High above was the low ceiling beam beneath which visitors were warned to duck. A sharp left along the wooden guardrail led down the narrow hallway. At the end was the unenclosed flush toilet. To the left of the flush was the doorless entrance to my bedroom...

That bedroom was near freezing in winter but in summer exuded a bread-like odour of sweat. The bedroom window faced north. With chin in windowsill, I could survey the village's main road with the crab apple tree in the foreground. On the right of the crab apple tree above a short slope was the trash barrel. In spring, the scents of apple blossom and smouldering garbage, became paired opposites in my olfactory template...



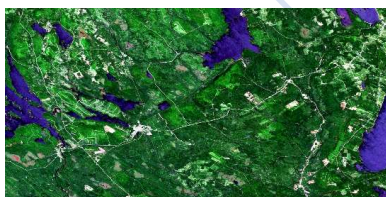
In the evolution from infancy to childhood, my world expanded to the dooryard. On the east side of the house, just a few yards from the driveway were the railroad tracks. One set of tracks was open for freight trains and the other was a siding, lined with boxcars or sometimes an idle steam engine.

To the right of the door was the clothesline stoop and behind it was a granite boulder— a first aerie of seclusion (I was crouched up there on an April day after my father told me that the Russians had put a man into space). The toes can still stretch to the crack where the left foot would go to clamber up to the top.

Around the corner was the path that sloped up to the main road. In spring the path edged past a rhubarb patch and a blooming lilac bush; in summer though unmown grass. To the right was the rusty well cover, hidden in summer by the tall grass.

In a hollow below the west side of the house was the garden. The black soil of reclaimed swamp along with the purity of the well water, were by my father's reckoning— the only redeeming features of the place he otherwise called "the shack by the railroad tracks"...

Around the start of school, that world expanded up the railroad tracks: past the long lines of flatcars, tank cars or wooden boxcars; beyond the patches of leaked grain and flare holes in the snow... The first wild place in my world was about a quarter mile up the tracks— a patch of swamp I called "the duck pond". There, in flog slime in late spring, I first encountered the mysterious and messy stirrings of biology...



Until I moved (near the age of 11) from that first house, *terra cognita* extended north from my village to my maternal grandparent's subsistence farm on the edge of the Saint John River valley. I also knew a little of Fredericton, an hour's car-sick drive northeast from the natal village. The southern edge of my world was the Bay of Fundy where summer camping was synonymous with icy salt water and fog. Much happier memories of summer were of the American side of the Spednic Lake thoroughfare a few miles to the west of the home village...

Beyond those locations was an invisible boundary as forbidding as the green line between Muslim and Christian Beirut. Yet that confined space was more than enough for the laying down of a mind's hardwiring.

For better or for worse, that landscape on the eastern edge of North America, midway between the equator and the north pole, was the territory that formed a template for a wider world.

2009, December

Postscript:

A fascinating podcast featuring a neuroscientist called Jeff Hawkins talking about his recently published '*A Thousand Brains: A New Theory of Intelligence*' seemed to support my old intuition about the primacy of spatiality.

In describing the mechanics of consciousness, Hawkins asserted that thought is a movement in conceptual space which is essentially a counterpart of a motor movement. He contends that all conscious volition is movement within "predictive models"...

Even weirder— yet just as intuitively credible— is the theory that consciousness is a cumulation of tens of thousands of operating models of mapped "loci", generated by algorithmically timed voltage changes within "cortical columns" in the brain... So essentially consciousness is not a single phenomenon but a cumulation of thousands of bits of awareness in ever-shifting integration...

The theory also seems to support the idea that awareness and emergent functionality is hard-wired in an infant's first movements through its confined space. So in the brain's initial programming of its 'software', a child's first bed, room, house, dooryard— or village— really does become its model for the larger world...

2021, June

