

Re-tracing our Steps August 24th – 29th 2013

I'm sitting at home reviewing the photos I took on the Emergence land journey. Each connects with a living memory in the body and takes me immediately back to the places I took them...Pantperthog, Ynysmaengwyn, Birds Rock, Cadair Idris.... 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 in late August of almost constant sunshine - and this is 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 soon as the sun goes down.

'Re-tracing our Steps' could so easily have been a spectacular anti-climax...a re-walking of a walk already walked before. We walked in the footsteps of forty or so people who this time last year embarked on a land journey whose destination was a conference at the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) called 'Creating the Future'. This was a grand design if ever there was one – not just one but two long distance routes one to the north, the other to the south of CAT. The pattern of each walk, an ellipsis, an almost-circle - the two together making up the sign for infinity, or number 8, symbolizing a path without end or beginning.

And so the original route of the land journey (North) was again walked in 2013. The conference to which the walkers were walking is now history. 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 afterwards attend a conference whose claim was to 'create the future'. No claims are made here – just walk and talk in company. Representing a space 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 changes from day to day or hour to hour. You can't help being inspired by the many creative projects springing up from 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 one another gently through this time of uncertainty. People can of course hold us and the land can hold us too. This for me is what Re-tracing our Steps was about. Can we, by connecting deeply to the land hold one another even more powerfully?

People came for many reasons and all of us had reasons that we referred to consciously –to have a conversation about a particular project, to talk through concerns about wild Wales versus wind-farm Wales, to 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 that making art is a luxury even to artists, to name plants – tormentil, waxcaps, soft rush, 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 1970's.

Here I was again, in the mountains of Snowdonia now entering my 50th year – the southernmost part of the national park, deep in the heart of middle Wales. The deep heart of our walk was Cadair Idris (Arthurs Seat), that great and many-faced mountain with views in every direction so often hidden in mist. The mountain many know as the one that turns you into a madman or poet if you dare 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 four 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 are drawn to making (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 truly begin again after organizing events of this magnitude. In the spirit of re-cycling – I knew as Spring came around that there was some unfinished business with this event we had created: the Emergence 2012 Summit. Of course I did not get the chance to walk it back then, having been part of creating a design which was so big that it needed two support teams. I supported the North walk and so last year witnessed it 'backstage' with all of the untidy, running about, making-it-work bits. Lucy Neal, one of the instigators of the whole event who was facilitator for the twenty North walkers made me a promise that she would walk the route with me if I ever 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 a good dose of positive feedback, I had a feeling of 'grand claims and grand ambition and a legacy of what?' How exactly did we 'create the future?' 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 experience – not to just 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. This time we would be a more 'self-organising' unit. A trickle of interest came back. I booked a mountain leader, lost him, booked another, lost her and then found Eleanor Flaherty who thankfully accepted. She was an artist herself and seemed to understand the walk and the reason for it, or was happy enough to proceed 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 and knees began to weaken. There was something that carried us through, a willingness or collective will 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 our 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-seven years. These were 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 practice, 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.

Thank you dear official and unofficial support team; Rosie, Lucy, Malcolm, Sarah
Thank you to those at Centre for Alternative Technology who welcomed us so generously; Paul and Danielle.

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

Fern Smith
September 2013