

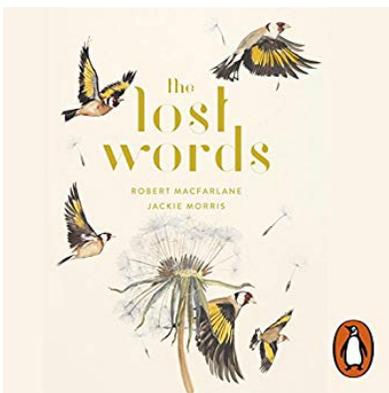
Grounding Ourselves: From Here, This Looks Like Me

by Paddy Bowman

When someone asks, “What is your sense of place, where do you belong?,” what do you conjure? Each of us experiences a place differently based on our relationships, interactions, and memories. We call upon different senses as well. Some might recall sights or smells vividly, while others situate themselves through sounds, touch, or taste. Many of us cast back to childhood associations with place. A sense of place may be shared, as in regional distinctiveness and family identity, or acutely individual, a nuanced personal consciousness.

Social scientists such as folklorists, anthropologists, and cultural geographers are attuned to place as a nexus of cultural, economic, environmental, historical, and interpersonal forces. Writers evoke place as a vital element in many literary genres. Visual artists depict place in myriad fashions. Thus, educators may employ a variety of disciplines to teach sense of place. This theme is valuable to students because they can ground their cultural identity more firmly, learn that others have a different sense of place and thus deepen understanding, and connect the local to the regional and the global whether in literature, history, economics, the arts, the sciences, or folklore studies. Calling upon our sense of place also opens us to ecology, nature, special places, and distinctive terms that enrich us and bind us to others more explicitly.

In addition to the many books, articles, and conversations about today’s children in the U.S. being too removed from the outdoors, at the same time the British nature writer Robert Macfarlane is addressing the loss of words relating to nature. In a recent edition of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*, he found a list of words removed to make room for others (Oxford Dictionaries 2012; Macfarlane 2017, 3). Words like *acorn*, *fern*, *otter*, and *wren*—replaced by *blog*, *broadband*, *celebrity*, and *committee*. Macfarlane writes beautifully, luring readers into arcane categories of words related to what he calls “place-terms,” words that belong to regions, occupations, navigation, agriculture, rambling, weather, science, folklore.



When the head of children’s dictionaries at [Oxford University Press] was asked why the decision had been taken to delete those “nature words,” she explained that the dictionary needed to reflect the consensus experience of modern-day childhood.... The substitutions made in the dictionary—the outdoor and the natural being displaced by the indoor and the virtual—are a small but significant symptom of the simulated life we increasingly live. Children are now (and valuably) adept ecologists of the technoscape, with numerous terms for file types but few for different trees and creatures. For blackberry, read BlackBerry. (Macfarlane, 3)

With the illustrator Jackie Morris, Macfarlane takes on the anti-nature lexicon by writing poems about words lost from that dictionary, poems accompanied by lavish drawings (Macfarlane and Morris 2017).

ivy
I am ivy, a real high-flyer.
Via bark and stone I scale tree and spire.
You call me ground-cover; I say sky-wire.

Terms for elements of nature and geography contribute to sense of place. Such words may be generic—valley or ground hog, for example—and others unique to locals—holler or whistle pig. While a mapmaker may mark a place by one name, residents may know it by another.

Sense of place as a form of inquiry defines our relationships to the environment as well as to others in ways that promote equity. It takes us out of the classroom and into the world, giving young people agency and a voice for what they want for the future of their communities and the world. In addition to calling attention to local geography, landscapes, and ecology, integrating sense of place into formal and informal teaching promotes cultural stewardship. No matter where we live, we have an aesthetic relationship with the land and landscapes, although we may often be unaware of it and the landscape may be vexing rather than idyllic. In the belief that calling upon that relationship to ground young people in a personal sense of place extends our vision into the wider world with empathy and inquisitiveness, we offer three activities to evoke what Robert Macfarlane calls place language, to kindle a pedagogy of place, and to share ways we are alike and different. From here, this looks like me.

Practicing Cultural Stewardship

Culture influences ways of learning and creates and strengthens communities. Understanding the complexity and power of culture gives young people agency. Cultural stewardship teaches students to understand their personal cultural identity as well as that of their families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities. They are encouraged to observe, listen, document, and work closely with individuals and communities. Doing so will help them to identify, protect, and enhance their important traditions, ways of life, cherished spaces, and vital relationships to each other and the world. Cultural stewardship also encourages intercultural skills and tolerance of differences.

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Editors' Note: We would like to share drawings, poems, and other projects that these activities inspire on our Local Learning website. Please contact pbbowman@gmail.com to learn details.

Works Cited

- Macfarlane, Robert. 2015. *Landmarks*. London: Penguin Random House UK.
- Macfarlane, Robert and Jackie Morris, illus. 2017. *The Lost Words: A Spell Book*. London: Hamish Hamilton/Penguin.
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