Sheltering Well, In Place, On Earth

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'Shelter in Place' is now a familiar phrase and executive order familiar to most of the world's peoples in light of the covid19 pandemic. Many people have taken this edict in a negative sense; indeed, we are currently seeing a rightwing reaction against governor's orders in the US and other places. Even liberals are feeling caged, quartered, and constrained by having to shelter in place. Such negative feelings for being constrained to the locality, context, and property that one is living upon has not always been the case. Indeed, anthropologically, we have evidence of thousands of cultures around the world who are quite happy to live within the confines of their territories and households, engaging in local life, uninterested in much domestic or international travel outside of the places in which their lives and livelihoods take place (Ingold 2002). Since the 1970s the back-to-the-land and bioregional movements have explicitly advocated 'sheltering in place' and living within the confines of watersheds, bioregions, communities, and households as an antidote to centralized power, environmental destruction, and social injustice (Lockyer and Veteto 2013; Snyder 1995, 1990; Berg 2009). If living and sheltering in place has been so widely practiced and advocated by a significant number of Indigenous cultures and important socio-environmental movements, why is it that we are seeing such widescale reaction and negativity now that we are forced to do it? Could it be that our places are not good shelters in which we can carry out meaningful and fruitful human lives?

From the perspective of Indigenous peoples who have been practicing sustainable livelihoods within their territories that have been demarcated since their cultures originally arose or migrated into the area thousands or tens of thousands of years ago, sheltering in their places looks healthy and inviting. Their households are multi-generational and extended and they keep their populations relatively low and below the carrying capacity of their landscapes in order to live in balance with myriad non-human living beings (Bodley 2020). The primary threat to such cultures is not that they should have to take shelter in their places or that their subsistence economic systems will collapse as a result, but that they will be colonized by state peoples and that their places will be taken from them or exploited for mineral, timber, and other resources, or that their populations will collapse due to the introduction of pathogens, bacteria, and viruses (currently a major threat from covid) introduced by outside invaders. Indigenous, tribal cultures are the oldest and most stable form of human organization. Every single person on the planet was Indigenous until around 5200 years ago when the first 'civilization' (state-level society) arose in Uruk in the Middle East (Scott 2017). Since that time, wherever states have developed or expanded, there has been nothing but tribulation and persecution for tribal peoples. Today, only 5% of the world's people are Indigenous, and many thousands of cultures have been wiped off the planet forever (Bodley 2020). Those of us who grew up in 'civilizations' have been indoctrinated with the belief that they are the most stable

and long-lasting types of human social forms. This is a categorically false assumption. The various Aboriginal cultures of Australia have been ongoing for 60,000 years or longer (Bodley 2020). The oldest continuously existing human civilization is that of the Chinese, which has been around for about 4000 years. 98.5% of the human experience as a species has been carried on within the context of tribal cultures. Civilizations last, on average, for 100 years (Tainter 1988). Australian aboriginal culture, 60,000 years old. The average lifespan of a state-level society: 100 years. The evidence from anthropology is clear. Tribal societies are much more stable than civilizations, and those cultures are typically quite happy to shelter in their places, with some trade and travel to other bioregions as warranted, but nothing even close to the scale of the travel and trade occurring in the globalized world that many of us took for granted until relatively recently.

Bioregionalism is an under-appreciated movement that grew out of countercultural environmentalism in the 1970s. In contrast to reformist environmentalists who aim to tweak modern capitalist systems to make them a bit greener and carry on with 'progress' and 'growth' as they had been doing since the Industrial Revolution, bioregionalists argue for a radical reordering of modern life. Taking inspiration from Indigenous cultures, bioregionalists encourage commitment to local watersheds, foodsheds, and bioregions as opposed to arbitrarily drawn political boundaries by powerful interests elsewhere. For example, in my locality, we have replaced our allegiances to the modern states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia in southern Appalachia, instead recognizing the 14,000 year-old Cherokee name for our place, Giduwagi. The name Giduwagi in the Cherokee language means 'soil that was placed here by a higher power.' So instead of belonging to places with names derived mostly from European women (Virginia, Carolina, etc.), we instead become 'people of the soil that was placed here by a higher power.'

'Sheltering in Place' is a delightful exercise for me. Currently, I am subsisting on 30 or so species of plants and mushrooms on my 27-acre agroecology farm, drinking fresh spring water, gardening, foraging, hiking, and genuinely enjoying every day. The view from the Appalachian Institute for Mountain Studies (AIMS; the non-profit farm institute I direct) looks a whole lot different than the view from a flat in New York City right now. Urban people with modernist assumptions have created a situation in which their places aren't good shelters. They work somewhere else, they dine out, they go out to clubs, movies, gyms, etc. Most of the activity of their lives takes place outside of their households and their households are landless. Much of this is by choice but of course many of the worlds people have been forced into urban slums by the forces of colonialism and development. I would suspect that many urban dwellers would consider my life quite dull. I don't own a cellphone. I talk and sing to plants a lot. I'm not on social media. I delight in digging my hands into fresh black soil. I eat plants and mushrooms straight out of the earth every day. I drink directly from mountain springs. I meditate on rock shelves.

From my perspective, I am never bored. I tell my friends and students that I could spend the rest of my life never leaving these 27 acres and would never run of things to study and delight in. Plants, animals, lichens, liverworts, ferns, flowers, salamanders, birds, insects,

butterflies, earthworms—the list of my non-human relatives never ends. During the current pandemic, I have no need to visit a grocery store or restaurant. Everything I need is right here. My place is a good shelter.

So, what would it take for the mass of the world's people to create good, self-sustaining, healthy, clean, and rewarding places to find shelter in? It would take a lot and the steps are many and beyond the scope of this essay. I have addressed this question elsewhere in some depth (e.g. Veteto and Locker 2008, Lockyer and Veteto 2013) and there is a plethora of literature and media resources out there on permaculture, natural building, agroecology, ethnobotany, carbon farming, composting and related subjects. The first step though would be a change in mindset, a desire for a different kind of life, an appreciation of simplicity and for other creatures and the beautiful earth we are blessed to live upon. Perhaps this wicked virus has given humans on earth an opportunity to hit the pause button, to reconsider our current social systems and livelihoods, and begin to dream of a better way of living our brief human journeys. Perhaps we might consider how to make our places on earth better life-sustaining shelters—when, or if—we find ourselves on the other side of the immensely challenging circumstances we are currently enduring.