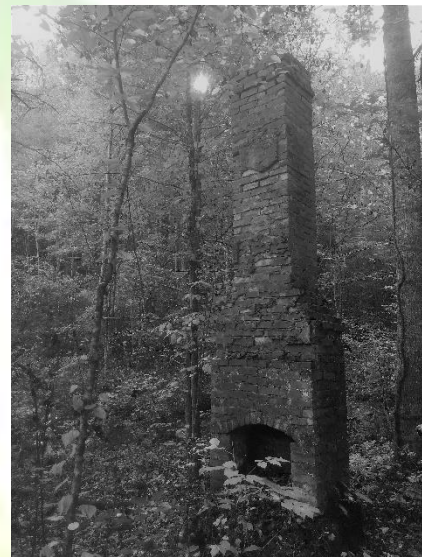


Venturing into the Borderlands: Self-Reliance and Self-Containment

We in Europe often struggle to understand the USA. We are perplexed by the wanton use of firearms; the tweet attacks of Donald Trump; the reluctance to provide universal healthcare; the seemingly unfettered domination of large corporations. But behind these headlines there is a society which has much strength in it, in particular a distinctive and deep value of self-reliance. This and other strengths may have lessons for us all individually and corporately as we struggle to cope in a confusing world in which may feel powerless. However, these strengths wrongly played may also be the cause of further breakdown.

We live in strange times. It seems we keep getting caught off-guard by events: Brexit, Trump, the 2017 election, the threat of nuclear war which we had assumed had receded into a bad memory, cyber-attacks on the NHS etc. And with this uncertainty the way we work is rapidly changing. The world of the gig economy, temporary contracts and zero hour contracts have shifted work from being about employment to being about employability. In such times we truly enter the 'borderlands' between the assumptions and expectations of the old world and the potential of a place where nothing makes sense - a kind of psychological wilderness. **How we deal with this individually, organisationally and nationally may be one of the great challenges of our times.**



Towards the end of last year, I headed off with a companion to spend 4 weeks trekking and rambling through the southern states of the USA. Part of this was about two weeks out in the forests of Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina. We had to carry all our supplies, filtering water from streams and keeping a lookout for aggressive bears and rattlesnakes.

Occasionally in the seemingly never-ending forest we would come across the solitary chimney stack of failed homesteads where the forest had taken back its own, or the lonesome graves of one or two families. After eight, for me, gruelling days, we reached the little settlement of Reliance where I stopped to rest for a couple of days. The name of the town seemed resonant. As a young man I had been very taken with an essay called Self-Reliance by Ralph Waldo Emerson. This is a call for individuals to trust their own judgement, to take responsibility for deciding for themselves about things and pursue a life of not 'fitting in' to the expectations of others. One of his most famous quotes, one which I instantly copied out is:

“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines”.

For better, and often, worse, I have tried to steer my life by this. But thinking about it, here in the woods, self-reliance embraced, more wholly means the idea of looking after yourself and probably your family. The people who settled here had

unimaginably tough lives. They had to build their own houses, clear land for crops, grow food, battle the elements, deal with bears, rattlesnakes, poison ivy, black widow spiders, disease and lawlessness. They could not rely on help from outside their immediate community and indeed were suspicious of it as it appeared blind to local needs and feelings. Anyway, communication with the wider world was rare and very difficult. Out here in Reliance, the ubiquitous Fox News more or less is the only real external source of communication and except for the admirable Webb Bros Store/Gas station the nearest supermarkets are 45 minutes' drive away.

This notion of self-reliance is a defining element within US culture and behaviour; **a value that emphasises personal judgement and personal responsibility**. This seems very relevant and topical in terms of today's challenges. In the 'borderlands' that make up our present world a **new form of self-reliance based on a willingness to think, decide and act for yourself; to learn and adapt, to let go of ideas and things that don't work, to accept the inevitability of some failures, to embrace the new technologies and opportunities** that are being created seems once again essential to survival. This is to me so much more positive than discussions about 'coping' and a more passive resilience.

But a dark side exists to self-reliance too. Something you might call 'self-containment'. Although it starts from the same position as self-reliance i.e. I/we can look after ourselves, self-containment is essentially a defensive behaviour. It is about cutting yourself off from the complexity of the situation to reduce feelings of doubt, ambiguity and uncertainty. It is about a refusal to test assumptions, an enthusiasm for self-confirming narratives and willingness to deal in gross stereotypes. **In this defensiveness, old 'truths' will always trump 'new facts'**. And out there in the wilderness there was evidence of this too; in the treatment of Native Americans, in a sense of embattlement, in an unwillingness to engage with the complexity what is happening.

It is a fear-based response. A fear of losing out, of being hurt, of strangers, of losing control, a fear of commitment. This dark side you can see at all levels of society: individual, organisational and social. It can be characterised as a clear identification of who's not-me and not-us – reducing 'you' and 'others' to objects that can be treated with emotional detachment. This defensive posture reinforced by almost closed social-media feedback loops that reinforce, can be seen in the rise of anti-immigration rhetoric, the increasingly virulent political debate in which the opposition must be viewed as evil and deranged and a more general drift towards protecting ourselves. **The events of Charlottesville last year were self-containment writ ugly.** Individually too there is evidence that we are letting significantly fewer into our lives as close companions and confidants and that there is evidence of growing social isolation. People it seems, may be increasingly nervous about committing to others. **Self-containment is about withdrawal, whereas self-reliance is paradoxically about stepping into situations where you might be vulnerable, albeit an open, confident vulnerability in which you are prepared to fail.** Which is of course a prerequisite for dealing effectively with ambiguity.

What Emerson did not highlight so much is the other great element to US Culture - the idea of social capital expressed in communities of mutual understanding, trust and reciprocity. **The self-reliant individual was not an isolated individual but part of a community capable of sacrifice and support.**

It is still alive and well in Reliance. I hitched a ride with old Charlie in his beat-up station wagon when it was time to leave Reliance. We stopped on the way out to talk to a stranger Charlie had met the previous day who had come down from Indiana to go fishing. The stranger told him that he was thinking of moving to the area.

“You come down here in November or early spring “Charlie told him. “We’re too damn busy in the summer, but you come then, and we will all help you move in!”

Self-reliant individuals in a self-reliant community which can reach out and welcome others may a be characteristic of the US at its best. It may well be that individuals and organisations who replicate this, emphasising both the self-reliance and a willingness to engage and collaborate with others will be those who thrive best in the borderlands where the old world merges into a very different new one.

The Vagabond Philosopher

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But Steve is also a musician, author, performer and inveterate explorer of people and place. Something which has led him to being followed by Moroccan secret police down the Draa valley dressed in djellabahs riding Velocette motor bikes, sleeping in hollowed out mound of ice called a quinzee on the frozen lakes of Ontario and riding around Greek islands on a motorbike with his underpants drying on the handlebars. His blog the Vagabond Philosopher, his books, A Little Nostalgia for Freedom and his latest about the madness, myth and magic of the USA, called ‘A Beautiful Broken Dream’, plus his last music releases ‘American Wilderness’ and the forthcoming ‘Moonshine Elegy’ suggest someone prepared to take a wry and different look at the world.

