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Standing Firm

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Abstract

This collaborative autoethnography reflects on the past year in lockdown. During this year we have done a lot of walking. Markers within our physical environment have provoked and inspired us to consider anew the paths that lie ahead for autoethnography and for us, in our collective work as autoethnographers.
Standing Firm

like a pebble to the water
ripples, across the surface of the world
displacement appears, waves radiate
yet the water itself does not move

it just transfers its energies
as the just transfer theirs

water is not pushed
to the edges of the lake
and seas do not creep
to turn oceans into lands

so too we see
the Menhir
Megalith
or Cromlech

standing, still, together, in the round
markers
standing firm
to our future yet to be

It is the middle of lockdown, but we are “allowed” out to exercise, so we do. We exercise our legs, our lungs and our minds. We wander, entwining our conversation in the rhythms of our wanderings. Our legs are strong, we cover much ground, and the earth we traverse gradually becomes less known. It begins to appear unfamiliar and mysterious. We look for clues, we are provoked, our surroundings stir us and stir in us.

One afternoon, as we near the end of a long walk, we come upon a group of large stones, in a seemingly random field. Together, they form a circle. Their countenance is
speckled grey, white and black, shoulder high and rough to the touch. The cadence of our steps increases as we are drawn closer.

A reimagined conversation:

What’s that?
A stone circle.
Where did it come from?
I don’t know. No-one does.
What are they doing here, in the middle of nowhere?
Well, apart from the fact this is not no-where, as we are always some-where, I don’t know. Aren’t they amazing though?
[we stand still, in awe, looking]
Well, yes. But what do they mean?
I don’t know. I think they mean something. They don’t mean nothing. Like, they exist, they are here, aren’t they?

Some background:

A Menhir is a large standing stone, upright in its appearance, positioned by humans. Like the Menhirs, a Megalith is a very large stone that forms part of a stone circle or prehistoric monument, often with other stones. And then we have a Cromlech, which, if you are Welsh, you might consider a megalithic tomb with a flat stone laid on top of the upright ones. While in Brittany, France, a megalith is considered to be a circle of standing stones.

Whatever name we give to the stones and the formation they take, Menhirs, Megaliths and Cromlechs date back to the bronze age, 3000 BCE. Some stories say they were used by Druids for sacrifice. Other stories suggest that they may have been used as territorial markers. While still others believe they relate to ideological systems, mnemic markers or calendars. It is estimated that there are around 35,000 of these across Europe. In some areas they seem to be as common as picnic tables and benches, while in other locations they are more obscure.

In Cornwall there are numerous stone circles and standing stones that, over the passing of time, have acquired names and myths to match. A line of three stone circles on the edge of Bodmin Moor are known as the Hurlers of St Cleer. In West Penwith stand the Pipers. And in a field between Mousehole and Treen you will find Dawns Meyn, the circle
we came across on our walk, thought refer to the ‘Merry Maidens’ who danced into the
dawn.

Speculative futures:

Why might the standing stones have captured our imaginations as we planned for the
2021 Special Interest Group in Autoethnography? How do ‘standing stones’ infuse our
conversation about our direction, our futures, our aims and purposes? The exercise – of
standing still, reflecting, considering – is an important one in a world where so much has
changed and is still changing. Academic life, across the globe, has gathered pace, and it often
feels we are being swept along by unseen forces deaf to our calls for restraint.

For us, autoethnography is not at a crossroads or turning point. Rather, our stirrings
remain; moored to challenging social injustices, poverty, exclusion, stigma and
discrimination through examining, performing and reimagining experiences from our own
lives.

And, like the Menhir, we stand out, we stand up, and we stand together.

But we, as autoethnographers, are being weathered and shaped by the new worlds of
academia, education and research. And these domains are responsive to trends, flavours of
the month, the ‘in’ colour, and political forces at play.

We know we are shaped by our environment and by our histories. And we know the
landscapes in which we live and breathe turn back to shape our identities, elucidating the
stories we learn to tell. Standing stones are important landmarks as they point the way from
the past to the present. They seem to be ever-present, defining and shaping our landscape.
They endure. By the fact there are here, they bring a degree of continuity. The fact they have
stood firm across millennia, remaining un-toppled, un-cowed, demonstrates an unshakable
resistance to adverse weather, against the hostile tides of time. Their very presence inspires
us with the faith and strength to continue to stand against further erosions of social justice,
equity and global responsibility. Still, and yet, alongside all of this, a stone circle brings into
focus a force that cannot be fathomed with, even with the most advanced technology. Still,
they continue to invite contemplation of the spiritual, the mythical. Somehow they have
refused, and they continue to refuse, to be broken, pushed aside or assimilated.
These ancient stones remind us of what has gone before. Not so much of the battles, the bloodshed, or the sacrifices on the altar. But simply that there was a before, a history that leads to now, where we stand. Thus, we may not know what they are, or what they mean, but we know they are something. We can be certain that they are not nothing, they have a physical presence, they are real, they have mass. And from this they take their meaning.

People often ask, “How did they get here?” There are few certainties with which to answer this question. Unlike the pyramids, there are no artefacts of warriors, no templates for design, no detritus of construction. And so precise meaning making remains elusive, captive to myths and legends, and difficult to fathom. Each stone weighs around 75 tons (equivalent to five double-decker London buses). They appear immovable. But here they stand. Mighty Menhir, Megalith, Cromlech.

Might they signal something important about standing firm, standing together, being immovable when it becomes necessary? And might that recognition be important when speculating about our autoethnographic futures? Might we each consider our place in the circle, might we each look to the east and to the west, to the outstretched hand to the left and to the right? Is there not something about standing in a circle? When you walk into a stone circle, are you not rational, still a child of the twenty-first century? But – still – don’t you feel something? As you run your palm over the rough stones surface does it not provoke reconnections? Doesn’t your imagination begin to open? The action of doing do, being “in” the circle, we believe, has some deep meaning for our speculations, for silently, being a presence to each other in our work.

we stand out, we stand up, and we stand together

Biographies:

David Carless is a researcher, writer, and musician immersed in interdisciplinary projects across social science, health, and education using narrative, song writing, filmmaking, and live performance approaches. His multimedia collaborations with Kitrina Douglas are available online and have been published as journal articles, books and book chapters. David is currently a Reader in the School of Health and Life Sciences at the University of the West
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