



The Art of Being in One Place

by Olivia Sprinkel

My answer to the question, 'What is the book that changed your life?' is *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin. At the age of sixteen, the book's central thesis about how we are by nature and design nomadic, confirmed for me that I needed to go on a quest of exploration. A year later, I was in Malawi, Africa.

But I missed the point all those years ago. I focused on the what – being nomadic – and not the how, which is walking. The Australian aboriginal people that Bruce Chatwin wrote about travel by walking. Chatwin describes how the human body is designed for walking. Through walking, the Aborigines are deeply connected with place. And they connect with place through the songlines, the intimate map of the landscape that is passed down from generation to generation and sung whilst walking. Even travelling through the landscape at the speed of a car means that this connection to the land is disrupted, as the song can not be sung fast enough to maintain this connection.

Walking enables the tending of the land, through both actions and song, and keeping the bond alive between human and country. The songlines are the connection not just to the present, but also to the past and future, all part of the same continuum. At different times of the year, Aboriginal people traditionally travelled to different places, maintaining a link between time and place, a rhythm of space.

Aboriginal culture and way of living enables a deep belonging which comes from a connection with place – a sense of the individual's own place in the order of things, and a responsibility to the land to which they belong.

Without this sense of place, we are lost.

So we look for substitutes, those things which make us feel less lost, hoping to find our place in them instead. For some people this is consumerism. For others it is different forms of addiction. For some people, it is travelling and restless movement. Ernest Hemingway recognised the hopelessness of this. 'You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another'. If we knew our place, why would we want to get away from ourselves?

Five years ago, I started a writing project called 'The Art of Being in One Place', determined to understand where I was, and the skills needed to do this. I didn't get very far with the project. My marriage broke down, I moved to another part of London, and I then moved to New York.

My instinct at the time of my marriage ending was that I wanted to go on a long walk. Maybe this was partly escapism, but there was also a deep body wisdom in this desire. Walking is a way of simultaneously being in our bodies and connecting with the world around us.

My long walk ended up being 10 days of walking the South West Coast Path, not as epic as I had been hoping for. But the movement helped all those strong emotions that I was experiencing to move through me. We can't get away from ourselves by walking, but we can get to know ourselves and our place in the world better.