THE HOLY HARD SHOULDER

As Liverpool is crowned European Capital of Culture 2008, JOHN DAVIES celebrates the incarnation of 'heaven in ordinary' with a pilgrimage along the M62.

'Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city,' asserts the preeminent London psychogeographer Iain Sinclair. 'The changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself.'[1]

I've enjoyed many sorts of pilgrimage experiences over the years, and in Liverpool have been part of a number of experiments in purposeful drifting, looking for the subliminal spirit in liminal places like Toxteth and Norris Green. But last autumn I hatched a much more ambitious plan: to take a two-month, coast-to-coast meander along the urban corridor of the M62.

This journey was provoked by a curiosity in me to explore more deeply the experience of journeying through urban spaces. I wanted to probe the meaning of *arrival*. I had the idea that travelling back home to Liverpool having spent two months slowly taking in the life and culture of Hull, Goole, Leeds, Huddersfield, Manchester, Warrington, and points in between, might just illuminate my thinking about my home city ready for its elevation this year to European Capital of Culture.[2] This was fed by my keenness to engage with the words of T.S. Eliot, whether 'the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.'[3] I was curious to test the truth in this poetry, seeking a clarity at the end of the journey inspired by encounters along the way.

I wanted to learn some more about how to 'read the everyday'. The idea of this walk had something to do with spending a lot of time in the mundane places of urban life, watching and listening closely to how people there relate to them, teasing out the hidden depths in everyday life. I have felt for some time that the everyday gets overlooked in society's constant attentiveness to the new and the exotic, whilst all of us for most of the time are living *ordinarily*. As Georges Perec wrote, 'The daily newspapers talk of everything except the daily. The papers annoy me, they teach me nothing. What they recount doesn't concern me, doesn't ask me questions and doesn't answer the questions I ask or would like to ask. What's really going on, what we're experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs everyday: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual? '[4]

HEAVEN IN ORDINARY

These are important questions for Christians considering their belief in a God who came to earth, who *incarnated* himself in the ordinary life of a common people, and whose whole project was hymned by his mother who saw immediately that his purpose was to 'lift up the lowly'.

I wanted to give more time to exploring these themes, not primarily through reading books but by getting out into the arenas of everyday life and learning to 'read' what was happening there. I had an instinct that there was enough in the detail of life in Goole to make it quite different from the detail of life in Gilberdyke.

The central idea of Jesus' teaching is the 'kingdom of heaven', which he unfailingly taught by telling stories whose subjects are deeply rooted in the ordinary mundane details of life: the mustard seed, the lost coin, communal meals, exchanges between employers and their workers. My instinct is that once you have learned to 'read the everyday' then you are well equipped to start seeing signs of 'heaven in the ordinary', in the previously unpromising places where people interact, like shopping centres and park benches, in the events which engage them there like unexpected conversations and the minutiae of their daily working tasks.

KNOW YOUR PLACE

I believe strongly that *place* is of great importance in a society which increasingly embraces mobility and networking as norms (as symbolised and facilitated by our seething roadways such as the M62). I am with Walter Brueggemann who sees that concomitant with this addiction to flexibility and movement is a growing sense of displacement and disorientation. He critiques our society's urge for 'space' which is an 'escape, detachment, absence of commitment and undefined freedom' and promotes a renewed appreciation of our need to be placed: 'Place is space which has historical meanings, in which important words have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocation, envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space.'[5]

Western intellectual traditions have for centuries emphasised time and space over place, but amongst a growing number of thinkers of various disciplines the philosopher Edward S. Casey suggests that this should be reassessed. He insists that 'We are immersed in [place] and could not do without it. To be at all - to exist in any way - is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. ... How could we fail to recognise this primal fact?'[6]

I suspected that I might strengthen my understanding of the relationships between people and places by preparing to spend days in the company of people en-route who *knew their place* - people with local knowledge who would walk with me and share that knowledge through our conversation.

SACRED MUNDANITY

And this was the final instinct guiding my steps on this walk. The idea that *ordinary people are interesting*. The notion that, despite what the advertisers and lifestyle programme presenters tell us, the way we *normally* spend our days is endlessly fascinating, once we start to look into it.

'There are more truths in twenty-four hours of a man's life than in all the philosophies,' wrote Raoul Vaneigem, as quoted in the introduction to *Queuing for Beginners* by Joe Moran. Joe's book is dedicated to the challenging task of 'investigating the quotidian ... unlearning the obvious, looking again at what we think we have noticed already.' He points out that 'The smallest details of mundane

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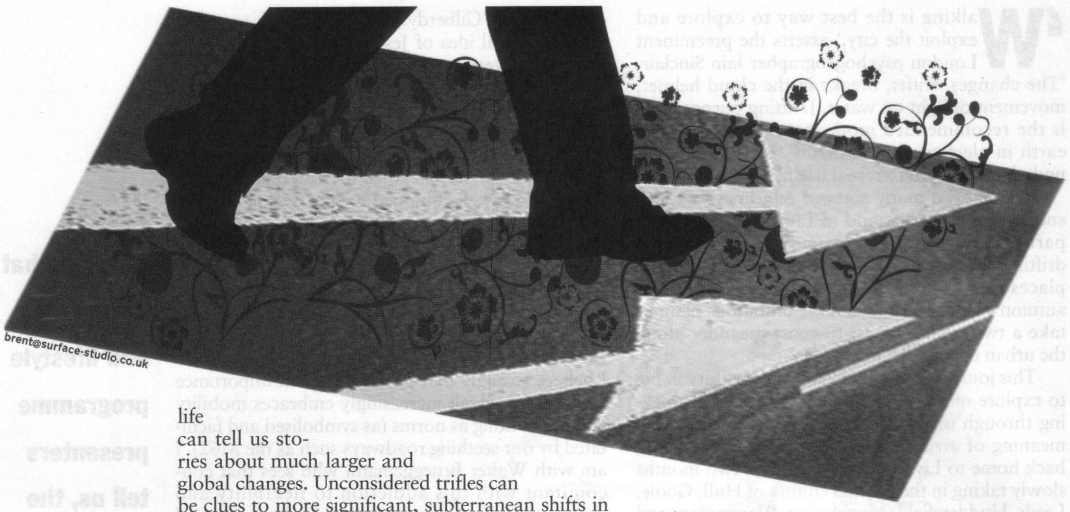

life can tell us stories about much larger and global changes. Unconsidered trifles can be clues to more significant, subterranean shifts in society. There is always a reason why we carry out even the most habitual activities - and those reasons are rooted in history, politics and culture."[7]

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This suggests to me the great value of engaging with the small details of our lives, but this motive is not generally shared by those who powerfully urge us to be restless in our pursuit of the exceptional, to allow them to lift us out of the purported drudgery of our mundane existence. There is a growing counter-trend (pioneered by campaigning groups like Adbusters) which is beginning to call these 'powers' to account for the ever-rising levels of anxiety and mental breakdown in our ill-at-ease society.

Nor is this perspective much heralded in our places of worship, whose liturgies tend to spiral to the high heavens, whose prayers tend to focus on extraordinary events, and whose new songs drip with rootless sentiment, leaving little room for a community's everyday lives and concerns to be affirmed or acknowledged. Yet Jesus, in Luke 17.21, tells us that the kingdom of heaven is 'in your midst', or 'within your grasp'. I imagined that on my walk I might find the opportunities to engage with that kingdom and celebrate its immediacy.

WALK THE LINE

Rebecca Solnit importantly notes that 'Most of the time walking is merely practical, the unconsidered locomotive means between two sites. To make walking into an investigation, a ritual, a meditation, is a special subset of walking, physiologically like and philosophically unlike the way the mail carrier brings the mail and the office worker reaches the train. Which is to say that the subject of walking is, in some sense, about how we invest universal acts with particular meanings."[8]

Solnit is right to separate these deliberate, conscious modes of walking from their everyday unreflective cognate; however in walking urban spaces and making discoveries therein I felt sure that I'd find that the former can illuminate the latter.

In our society the opposite of the slow walk must be the motorway drive, an intensely focussed, often stressful and (to the pedestrian observer) horribly violent high-speed pursuit of space through time. The M25, writes Iain Sinclair, is 'a rage-inducing asteroid belt, debris bumping and farting and belching around a sealed-off city"[9], which is extreme writing nevertheless expressing a fairly prevalent view of that and every other choking major British road. Many would say that the opposite of our beautiful and dramatic landscapes and impressive historic urban environments must be the ugly constructions of our motorways and major roads. These are the modernist 'concrete islands' so starkly depicted in the novels of J.G. Ballard, which express 'the marriage of reason and nightmare which has dominated the 20th century' and have contributed to an emotional numbness in society which he calls 'the death of affect."[10]

I am a motorway driver and enjoy the opportunities the road networks bring to those who are, like me, wealthy enough to run a car for leisure. I also sense the horror of what Sinclair sees on the roads and their dehumanising effects which Ballard writes about so starkly. So I exist in a tension about motorways, and I carried that tension in me as I embarked on this journey.

TARMAC TOURISM

The motorway was my guide across the country, suggesting a route which led into towns and cities previously unknown to me. These visits were the primary purpose of the walk, staying slavishly close to the road was a lesser priority, so some days my journey took me well away from the blue route. Deliberate planning to exclude pedestrians, or the simple absence of parallel footpaths means that some motorway junctions and rural passages are impossible to get close to on foot, so I often found myself forced to take circular routes or ones which zigzagged over and under the motorway over some distance.

On other days though the M62 was so present to me that I sometimes stopped noticing it, for all

its furious sound and motion. Occasionally I was gripped by the beauty of its construction - as in the bridges over the Ouse at Boothferry and the Manchester Ship Canal at Barton, and during two days of joyous discovery around the entirely manufactured landscapes of Scammonden, where the M62 engineers triumphed where no other road builders had, in crossing the Pennines at their darkest, peatiest, and most extreme height. On other days I became possessed by the terror of the roads: in the cameo of a group of workmen strimming the grass edges of a narrow slip road at the viciously tumultuous M62-M1 junction, gripping my camera tightly on pedestrian bridges which shuddered as traffic thundered beneath.

Most of the time, though, the M62 served as a guide, to direct me through parts of northern England which I hardly knew, and also through some which I thought I did know, where the challenge was to try seeing the place through fresh eyes. Often I was on older routes, like the canal towpaths of the East Riding and long-distance footpaths such as the Transpennine Trail which use old railway lines to direct travellers through sometimes forgotten or peripheral places, each route offering fresh views of changing cities. I wanted to spend some time in and around the major cities en-route so I left the motorway corridor for single weeks at a time to investigate parts of Hull, Leeds and Manchester often in the company of others.

TRAVELODGE DREAMS

Memorable parts of the journey included getting lost late-night in the eerie fringes of the North Manchester Hospital site after a curry, a morning spent on top of the Pennines with a farmer, a day spent exploring the spirituality of The Trafford Centre, and a disorientating night journey through the seamier fringe of Leeds city centre where the streets were too unlit to read a map and the only people around to mis-guide me seemed, well, Hogarthian.

I spent many nights sleeping in Travelodges and their equivalent alongside motorway service stations, some for a few nights at a time. I also spent a lot of my time sitting outdoors in public places (blessed, most days, by excellent weather), and I inevitably had for company the sorts of people who do precisely the same, day after day. Each encounter was unique and - I write this without contempt - each was valuable. It probably did me good feeling like an outsider on much of the journey; it has certainly opened my eyes to realise just how many other 'others' there are in our city squares and on our town hall steps.

After I got back to Liverpool I had a few days walking into and around the city centre before ending the adventure with what was possibly the hardest and strangest day of all - a walk around that part of the city which I regard as home, revisiting childhood haunts. I ended on one which is now a well-known stretch of sands, thanks to the presence of 100 metallic Antony Gormleys: Crosby beach.

SHOPPING FOR GHOSTS

Two themes seemed to recur on the walk, both quite surprising to me. One was a developing interest in shops and the complexities of what people are actually doing when ostensibly 'out shopping'. I found myself spending a lot of time in shopping centres because that's where your feet lead you when (a) you're looking for the life and energy of a place and (b) you need a sandwich. And it struck me deeply that 'shopping' involves far more than making purchases: it's an arena for complex social interactions at all levels. This is as true in out-of-town megastores as in more 'traditional' shopping centres, and again is a subject which would repay further, deeper, engagement; related to that it was good to spend time with retail chaplains who shared some valuable insights into the complexities of life in such places.

The second theme is the presence of *ghosts* on this journey. They present themselves throughout the diary in various guises, be they the ghosts of communities no longer physically present in particular places but still active, 'dead roads' which had been cut off by the building of the M62 across them, the contemporary 'spirits of place' (such as my invention The Goodly Spirit of Goole), but especially the haunting nature of motorways and their users as seen (a little fancifully sometimes) from the perspective of this suggestible pedestrian.

Motorway ghosts inhabit the uncanny noises made by traffic crossing high bridges or underpasses where the vehicles can't be seen but their presence is awesome; they are felt in roadside memorials and Police Accident Information Request signs; and they are seen in the eyes of drivers which are (rightly) focussed on the road ahead but seemingly oblivious to anything else in nature: like the undead. On my worst days, when I'd been physically battered by violent air currents, had my ears assaulted by vehicles screaming by, and stood on shuddering footbridges fearfully gripping my camera, my opinion of the motorway as a deathly place came to the fore. On my best days, though, like when standing on the hillside above Booth Hall Farm watching the traffic steadily flowing across the high Pennines like a metallic ribbon glittering in the autumn sunshine, I was won over by the wonder; and since completing the walk and I have driven over 2,000 motorway miles, many of them whilst feeling fairly alive.

There are valid criticisms to be made of my desire to find 'the good' in places like service stations, shopping centres or housing estates. Accentuating the positive can cause a failure to be critical of unjust systems and structures which entrap their occupants and workers. My instinct though is that we don't pay enough attention to the detail of life in such places, we don't value enough the lives of those people who most occupy these spaces. My walk - and the book which came out of it - is an attempt to encourage positive engagement and a heightened sense of vision in the urban. As William S. Burroughs put it, 'The important fact about urban living: the continued stream of second attention awareness. Every licence plate, street sign, passing strangers, are saying something to you.'[11] □

John Davies' Walking the M62 is available at £7.99 from www.lulu.com.

1 Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory*, London, Penguin, 2003
2 More information at www.liverpool08.com
3 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets: Little Gidding*
4 Georges Perec, *Approaches to What?*
5 Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Fortress Press 2002
6 Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place, A Philosophical History*, University of California Press 1997
7 Joe Moran, *Queuing for Beginners*, Profile Books 2007
8 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust, A History of Walking*, Verso 2001
9 Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital*, Granta 2002
10 J.G. Ballard, quoted in www.ballardian.com.
11 William S. Burroughs, quoted in Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory*