

# READING THE EVERYDAY

In a society obsessed by all things new  
and exotic, could it be that greater  
nourishment lies in the deeply ordinary?

**JOHN DAVIES has a street epiphany**

Two and a half years ago I moved into a housing estate on the edge of Liverpool. It was one of those places often described as bland, uninteresting, and monochrome by those who don't live on them – a portrayal which those who do live on them might also internalise and believe. I did at first.

People who knew me from other places would ask me what my

new place was like. And in answer I'd tell them what it *wasn't* like. It wasn't like the edgy inner-city parish where I'd been a community worker; it wasn't like the studenty-artsy area where I'd been a curate, a creative place with a view across the river. It wasn't like the ancient university city where I'd been re-educated into the church at the end of the last millennium; nor the Liverpool suburb where I'd been brought up, with its beach fronting the Irish sea.

There was nothing especially wrong or bad or sad about the new place I was in. But by comparison to these other places it just seemed, well ... so *ordinary*. Standard, typical, everyday, run-of-the-mill, unremarkable, unexceptional, nondescript, humdrum, dull, boring, bland... there are many words for the same thing, and all carry a pejorative sense. For some reason there seems to be something negative about the ordinary.

No wonder, then, that I should have felt this sense in my new place. Like most other people I'm powerfully attracted away from the mundane towards the exotic, the erotic, the sublime. I share in the life of a society which seems to be



seduced by the *extraordinary*. This pervades Christian circles too: in mission, ministry and witness the pull seems to be away from the ordinary towards the new, the exciting and the innovative.

Despite all this, and perhaps because of it, I developed a growing urge to learn to appreciate the ordinariness of the area in which I was now involved; I had an instinct that if we would only scratch the surface of everyday life we would find it endlessly fascinating. I became keen to learn how it might be possible to *read the everyday*.

For my own sense of self-regard and my regard for those around me, I wanted to unearth something of the spirit of the place I was in, to be able to name and celebrate some of the deep life of the area which I felt just *must* be there. Some of this I had already gleaned from conversations with neighbours and locals – which always must be the best way to get beneath the surface of ordinary life – and from some reading of the scraps of local history which were available. But besides talking and listening, reading and reflecting, I also felt I should add a third method to help me in engaging with the everyday life of the area: walking and observing.

### COMMON GROUND

So one day I sat down at the table with a map of the area and a pair of scissors. I took the scissors to the grid-lines on the map and cut it neatly into squares. These I folded into smaller pieces, and placed into a box. I shook the box up, reopened it and took out two pieces of paper. These were to indicate the start point and the end point of the first of a series of what I came to call my Parish Walks.

My epiphany came on walking out into the area with notebook and camera to hand, taking time to observe closely and note carefully the details of the place. I've been greatly influenced in this approach to reading the everyday, by an organisation called Common Ground. It's a British organisation now internationally recognised for various projects aimed at helping people in their own localities to link nature with culture. There have been festive projects such as Apple Day; Tree Dressing Day, or the establishment of Community Orchards. Many communities have produced their own Parish Maps – all of it part of a campaign for Local Distinctiveness.

'Local distinctiveness is essentially about places and our relationship with them,' write Common Ground's Sue Clifford and Angela King. 'It is as much about the commonplace as about the rare, about the everyday as much as the endangered, and about the ordinary as much as the spectacular. In other cultures it might be about people's deep relationship with the land. Here discontinuities have left us with vestiges of appreciation but few ways of expressing the power which places can have over us. But many of us have strong allegiances to places, complex and compound appreciation of them, and we recognise that nature, identity and place have strong bonds.'<sup>1</sup>

Ever since the *League of Gentlemen* hit our screens the idea of the 'local' has been ridiculed. But Common Ground aims to help us to reclaim it:

'Local implies neighbourhood or parish. Distinctiveness is about particularity, it is rehearsed in the buildings and land shapes, the brooks and birds, trees and cheeses, places of worship and pieces of literature. It is about continuing history and nature jostling with each other, layers and fragments – old and new. The ephemeral and invisible are important too: customs, dialects, celebrations, names, recipes, spoken history, myths, legends and symbols.'

This is a reminder that nature and culture are closely linked and constantly changing. Localities are always open to outside influences, new people, ideas, activities, and just as nature keeps experimenting, they must face the paradox of persistence and change.

'We sometimes forget that ours is a cultural landscape. It is our great creation: underpinned by nature, it is a physical thing and an invisible web. It is held together by stonewalls and subsidies, ragas and Northumbrian pipes, Wensleydale sheep and halal butchers, whiskies of Islay and Fenland skies, bungalows and synagogues, pubs and the Padstow Obby' Oss, round barrows and rapping, high streets and Ham stone, laver bread and Devon lanes, door details and dialect. All these things are folded into identity and need reinvigoration by the new.'<sup>2</sup>

The first steps towards the renewal of a place can be in considering and celebrating what is distinctive about that particular area.

### PURPLE REIGN

By way of example, let's take a look at the accompanying picture (right) of a typical English landscape from one of my parish walks. It's an ordinary street in an ordinary housing estate on an ordinary day. But if we look more closely we can make a number of observations about this place. Perhaps it's the minor differences in what were once identical houses, as occupants have modified and extended them; the pavements in need of fixing; the white van, sign perhaps of a new small business success; and there are the bins. A little local knowledge tells me that in this particular area people often help out by wheeling their neighbours' bins back into the driveways once they are emptied – partly because bins left out become 'public' property, adopted by youngsters as (a) racing vehicles (b) things to burn.

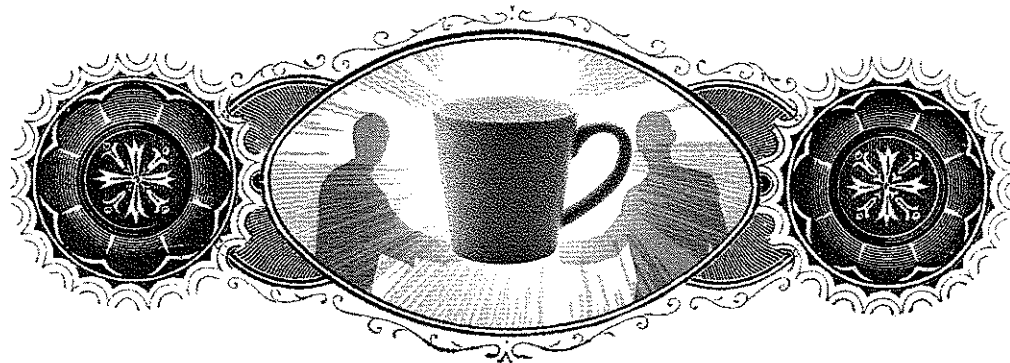
A colour picture would tell us even more about the place – namely that Liverpool has purple bins. Why purple? Because red or blue were considered likely to inflame political or footballing allegiances, while green is inadvisable for a city where sectarian identity is still deep-rooted.

The artist Bill Drummond was so inspired by their colour that he suggested a twinning scheme whereby Liverpool's run-down, inner-city area of Kensington would swap bins with its London namesake in an experimental cultural exchange; while a local MP observed that they were very useful for blocking off streets in public demonstrations. A particular upside of having purple bins, according to a local website, is that we are unlikely to be the target of 'wheelie bin resalers'. Apparently thousands of second hand green



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wheelie bins from Dublin ended up being purchased by a local authority in the West Midlands who were not aware they were stolen.

So, from having spent a few short minutes looking in detail at a most ordinary picture of a most mundane scene we have learned so much about the culture of one particular place, and related it to our own. As Raymond Williams points out:

'Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land.'<sup>3</sup>

### GOD IN THE ORDINARY

I want to suggest that the language which God speaks, the language in which God communicates with us, is the language of the ordinary; and that to know God, and to express God to others, we need to become deep students of, and fluent communicators with, the ordinary. And this exploration of the everyday and the ordinary is linked very closely to a sense of place.

It might seem countercultural, living as we do in a society addicted to the extraordinary; it might seem counterproductive, in a Christian community prepossessed with relocating where and how we communicate ourselves to others. It might also seem counterintuitive, in the face of a growing body of academic writing which alleges that we increasingly spend our lives in so-called non-places - detached from the local in the globalised spaces of airports, on motorways, in fast-food outlets. This line of thought has affinities with recent Christian thinking on mission in a society allegedly more networked than located.

Yet there is creative dialogue to be had between these different understandings of our current cultural climate. It seems to me that an exploration of the everyday, an investigation of a contemporary sense of place, is valid in these all conversations. Because I feel that even the most networked people still need to feel located - that's the reason why the majority of mobile phone calls are of people telling someone else where they are.

Others have noted how even the most globalised businesses need to cluster together in centralised locations - they may be networked but they

also want to be next door to each other, for convenience, for conviviality and for credibility. And more than anything else, perhaps the best reason to be exploring the mundane is suggested by the writer Doreen Massey:

'Amid the Ridley Scott images of world cities, the writing about skyscraper fortresses, the Baudrillard visions of hyperspace ... most people still live in places like Harlesden or West Bromwich.'<sup>4</sup>

As Christians we are interested in human flourishing. It is my instinct that if we can learn to value the ordinary - if we can learn to see God in the ordinary, then we may be strengthened to resist the powerful forces which disempower us, and find creative ways of becoming reconnected to the source of our true selves.

*For men and women are not only themselves,  
they are the region in which they were born,  
the city apartment in which they learned to walk,  
the games they played as children,  
the old wives tale they overheard,  
the food they ate,  
the schools they attended,  
the sports they followed,  
the poems they read,  
and the God they believed in.<sup>5</sup>*

My suggestion is that the Christian project must involve us affirming these ordinary things very deeply, doing our church and our theology and our praying whilst deeply engaged with these basic building blocks of life. And though this is a call for us to deal with the mundane things in our lives, this is not a calling to dullness - it's about discovering new possibilities of being creative, with the ordinary things of life. Henri Bergson put it thus:

'If reality could immediately reach into our senses and our consciousness, if we could come into direct contact with things and with each other, probably art would be useless, or rather we should all be artists.'<sup>6</sup>

### PLAYFUL SPIRITS

Until then, however, there is a real mixed bag of artists, writers, theologians, photographers and creative mavericks who can help us in our explorations of the everyday. In works like *Lights out for the Territory*, for example, Ian Sinclair offers the depth and complexity of urban life, discovered through a combination of reading, listening,

and deeply-engaged walking through an area. His *London Orbital* traces the edges of the M25 to try to locate the truth.<sup>7</sup> Or Bill Drummond and his love affair with the M62, 'the most alluring, powerful, even magical motorway on our lump of an island.'<sup>8</sup>

My cutting up of the local map was an idea from *A Mis-Guide to Anywhere*<sup>9</sup>, which offers plenty of other creative ways of exploring the ordinary spaces of the places we're in – whether walking wherever your dog or child leads or swapping house keys and living someone else's life for the weekend. The title for this article is borrowed from a book of the same name by Joe Moran<sup>10</sup> of Liverpool John Moores University, in which he muses on bus stops, traffic lights, housing and *The Office*.<sup>11</sup>

Musicians often bring ordinary places to light and to life in their songs. I lived for a while on Penny Lane, Liverpool, for instance, which gets coachloads of tourists every day, but – as John Lennon described it – it really is the most ordinary street.

You might sense a spirituality to all this. It is a playful one; it deals with things very clear to the visible eye but at the same time *deep*. It allows plenty of room for laughter, tears and creativity. It's gritty and it's *real*. And it comes from a long tradition.

For instance, the ancient Celtic prayers which have come down to us, relate a spirituality of the everyday. Ever thought of saying a prayer whilst making the bed? Here's one from the *Carmina Gadelica*:

*I make this bed  
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,  
In the name of the night we were conceived,  
In the name of the night that we were born,  
In the name of the day we were baptised,  
In the name of each night, each day,  
Each angel that is in the heavens.*<sup>12</sup>

A contemporary follower of the tradition is Michael Leunig, cartoonist and writer of prayers in *The Age*, a leading Australian daily paper:

*We give thanks for the invention of the handle.  
Without it there would be many things we  
couldn't hold on to.*

*As for the things we can't hold on to anyway, let  
us gracefully accept their ungraspable nature and  
celebrate all things elusive, fleeting and intangible.*

*They mystify us and make us receptive to truth  
and beauty.*

*We celebrate and give thanks. Amen.*<sup>13</sup>

There are communion liturgies which speak of 'the ordinary things of the world which Christ will make special.' It is our joy to pay close attention to these everyday things and to see how they might be transformed in the eyes of our hearts.

I'd like to finish by sharing with you a prayer on this theme – very much influenced by Michael Leunig – which was one of a series of Thoughts for the Day I contributed to BBC Radio Merseyside earlier this year. You'll recognise the subject straight away:

*We give thanks for the purple wheelie bin  
Receptacle of all our rubbish,  
Carrier-away of our cast-offs, unused goods,  
undigested foodstuffs, nappies, wrappers, broken  
electrical items and all the discarded clutter of our  
cupboards and our lives.*

*A blessing on those who make it their work to  
collect these bins together and pour their contents  
into a waiting lorry, labouring through soaking  
rain and stinking heat on behalf of the rest of us  
wasteful citizens;*

*A blessing on those who wheel out the bins for  
their forgetful or frail neighbours, and wheel them  
in again afterwards;*

*A blessing on those who brighten up their wheel-  
ie bins by painting on them pictures of flowers,  
favourite TV characters or cartoonish self-portraits.*

*We give thanks for the purple wheelie bin  
Receptacle of all our rubbish.*

*Give us patience with those who use our wheel-  
ie bins as playthings: climbing on them, racing  
down the road in them like plastic chariots, setting  
them on fire;*

*Give us strength to push our full and heavy bins  
to the roadside, when we are feeling feeble on bin  
collection morning;*

*Keep us calm if in a moment of panic we should  
think our bin has gone, wheeled away up the road  
or into oblivion.*

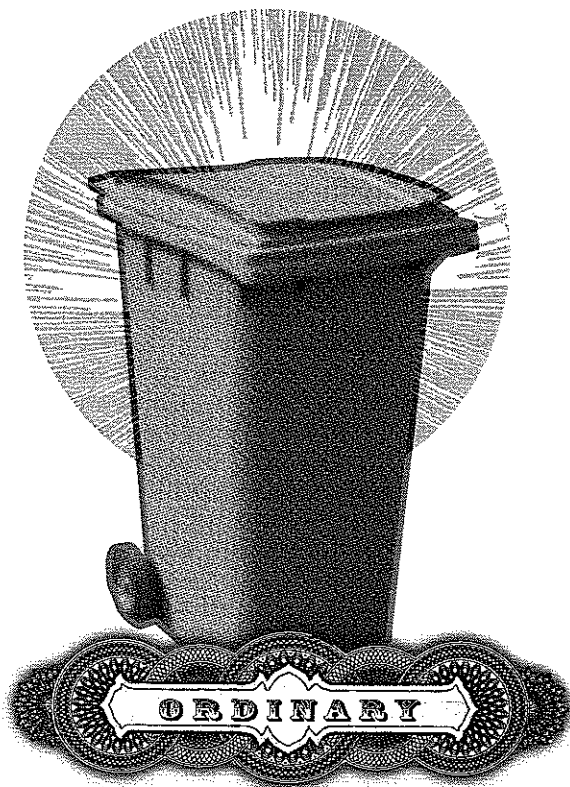
*Help us to forgive those who, years ago, decided  
without asking us, that our bins should be purple.*

*Help us to recycle, and bless those who want to  
help us to recycle more.*

*Help us to use less packaging, and bless those who  
want to sell us things with less packaging on them.*

*Give us grace to care about our waste and the  
way it affects our city's space.*

*We give thanks for the purple wheelie bin  
Receptacle of all our rubbish. □*



- 1 Clifford, S; King, A: *Local Distinctiveness - Place, Particularity and Identity*, Common Ground 1993; [www.commonground.org.uk](http://www.commonground.org.uk)
- 2 Clifford, S; King, A: *England in Particular*, Common Ground 2006; [www.commonground.org.uk](http://www.commonground.org.uk)
- 3 Raymond Williams *Resources of Hope*, Verso 1989
- 4 Doreen Massey *Space, Place and Gender*, Polity Press 1994
- 5 Somerset Maughan *The Razor's Edge*, William Heinemann 1944
- 6 Henri Bergson: *Laughter - An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Dover Books on Western Philosophy (2004)
- 7 Ian Sinclair Books: *London Orbital*, Penguin 2003, *Lights Out for the Territory*, Penguin 2003
- 8 Bill Drummond, 45, Little, Brown (2000)
- 9 *A Mis-Guide to Anywhere*, Wrights & Sites (2006)
- 10 Joe Moran *Reading the Everyday*, Routledge 2005
- 11 There are also filmic meditation on similar lines, notably: Patrick Keiller, DVD: *London / Robinson In Space*, 1994; Book: *Robinson in Space*, Reaktion Books 1999, and Andrew Kotting, DVD: *Gallivant*, 2005
- 12 Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations from the Gaelic*, Floris 2004
- 13 The Handle prayer from Michael Leunig, *The Prayer Tree*, HarperCollins Melbourne (1994) [www.leunig.com.au](http://www.leunig.com.au)