

FINDHORN---A GEOGRAPHICAL STATE OF MIND

By modern reckoning, Findhorn is not prohibitively far away-but then again in the jet age little is. Prohibitive today are contrasting cultural norms, especially if the traveler is coming from a monolithic 'information' society such as the United States, monolithic despite the blending together of various ethnic strains here. Language is often a major barrier to cross-cultural understanding, at the least an important sign-post to the particular tone of a people, as their cultural horizons lie encoded, a mystery, in the language of the land. Even if many are able to converse in English, when the language of the land is another, its constant backdrop makes the visitor conscious of a further important aspect to the life there. Findhorn is not far away in this regard either--it is a small village in northeastern Scotland, where Pictish, Gaelic and Scots have all given way to English, though all may have somehow contributed to its lilting melodious quality. Standing on the delta formed by the Findhorn Bay and the Moray Firth, about 30 miles southeast of Inverness, you can see the cliffs far across the firth bathed in a pink glow on a clear day. A young villager told me how he sailed out to those cliffs in his grandfather's catamaran to have porpoises dart through the middle of the boat, between the two hulls. On the Findhorn side the gentle curve of the coastline to the right ends at Burghead, first founded in the 5th century, which seems to command the ocean and the firth. Across the bay to the left is a line of firs with such a breadth of landscape behind them you could imagine being in the wilds of Canada, or Wisconsin.

From the delta it is a short walk through the sand dunes and wild sea oats to the local inn. A first glimpse of the cultural landscape is provided by this former stage-coach house, for instance on a winter's day when the colorful patterns of Shetland sweaters, hand-made locally and in the Hebrides, form a mosaic with the dark interior woodwork and the tiled stoves.

To see the surrounding countryside in the Shire of Moray, I would recommend going down to Alan's stone fisherman's cottage with its typical sun porch and tubular chimneys, situated on the main road just before you leave the village of Findhorn. If his taxi is in front and provided his mother is faring well enough for him to leave her, he'll drive you around on an afternoon for ten quid. His brogue is broad but not impenetrable. Alan knows that the real beauty of the land lies in the cultural heritage. While driving past the magnificent Gothic ruins of the Elgin Cathedral, 12 miles away, he'll explain how the bastard Earl of Buchan, the wolf of Badenoch, burned down the cathedral in the 15th century and was responsible for many other ruins in the area.

Should you travel in another direction from Findhorn, along the narrow bay, in about four miles you'll arrive at Kinloss Abbey. Here Edward the First stayed and forced the abbey to supply his troops from their prosperous holdings while he conquered the Scottish for England at the beginning of the 14th century. Today the abbey lies covered with ivy in the middle of a

cemetery. The interior of the second story is exposed through the collapse of the tower at some point. The main downstairs chamber can be seen through three adjacent angular windows. Each window consists itself of three obelisk forms, the tallest in the middle and two smaller ones of equal size to the sides. Venturing inside, you will see that the windows are set back in a window bay, also with the pointed angular forms. There are two ribbed sandstone beams crisscrossing in the middle of the ceiling and ending in the four corners and on two pedestals near the front. At the back is a door to an adjoining room about half the length of the building. Its one obelisk window faces out towards a grove of trees and hedges in the back.

Following the bay to its source, the Findhorn River, you come to the town of Forres, three miles away from Kinloss. From here it is possible to take an outing to Darnaway Castle on the Earl of Moray's 20,000-acre estate. The woods of the estate are full of pheasant and rabbit. The castle stands in a glen, and is raised above its surroundings on a hillock. The back part resembles a cathedral, complete with stained-glass windows. The sides and front are ornamented with the conical turrets that all medieval castles should have, though Darnaway was built in the 19th century. Half a mile from the castle, through shade trees and past fields, the pond Black Loch lies partly hidden through the clump of rushes in the center and the marsh between the trees at its edge. Another half a mile brings you to the entrance gate of the estate. There is a low stone wall and hedges line the road. Outside the gates, tall poplars line the broad private gravel drive. The iron gate is beset with a coat of arms containing a golden and red crest. Next to the stone wall, the gate-keeper's house is a beautiful two-story stone cottage whose two A-shaped roofs are trimmed with wooden scrollwork.

When I visited Findhorn in January, 1986, Alan drove us past Elgin to another extensive farm and wooden estate. When we arrived at Blackhills, we were greeted by a skeen of geese, to use Alan's expression, that stood out against an intense, unspeakably so, shade of blue. The most varied rhododendron collection in Britain gave only a hint through snow-bent boughs of what splendor must be unveiled there in early summer. Below the rhododendron, in the midst of rushes and a vast assortment of trees planted in the mid-19th century, stood an iced-over lake. A wooden walkway took us over the lake to a Japanese tea house on a sloping hill above it.

There I remember a small robin with burnt-orange breast and white underbelly hopping from bough to bough and then in the snow on the ground. The Gaelic name for birds, *clann bheag' nam preas*, children of the bushes, seemed appropriate then. At the entrance to the estate, one of the stone gates is decorated with an elaborate and colorful Indian god or goddess. Near the farmhouses there is a small menhir, under a wooden awning to protect it. Engraved on it is a simple Celtic scroll in the shape of an S. An ancient oak nearby complements the scene, evoking images of Druid priests making their sacrifices to Baal.

In Forres, a Pictish monolith, perhaps three meters in height, has an intricate scroll on one side and a battle

scene on the other.

Like the view from the delta or seeing a skeen of geese outlined against the blue of the sky on a clear winter day, sunsets and full moons in the area of Findhorn are experiences that seem to expand and enhance perception so that we become aware of a new dimension to beauty. When the haze is lifted and all the objects that populate the world are more clearly delineated, our eyes and spirit feed upon that rare sight--the world and objects as they are. In the Alps, alone with the stars and the moon as if just carved out of the black nothingness, or the peaks themselves, so clear they are deliciously painful to look at, we experience that same sensation. The items and numerous places of worship around Findhorn are the homages throughout the ages to this experience. Recently, not far from Blackhills, the ruins of a priory have been reconstructed and upgraded to an abbey by Dominican monks. Pluscarden Abbey is a massive Gothic structure in the middle of a dense forest that now houses 25 monks. I attended a vesper service there on New Year's Eve. When we entered, a monk wearing a hooded yellow cape was pulling on two ropes that rang a deep-toned and a high-pitched bell. We were led by candlelight through stone corridors to a small side gallery for the few spectators. In front of us, three monks stood aside a table bearing a large ornate silver cross, the center of which was hollowed out and contained a small object. The two monks on the far side of the table each had a five-foot candle holder positioned in front. An elder monk appeared to place a silver sphere ceremoniously next to the cross. He then gave an antiphonal to the third monk who led the chanting from it for a short while. The rest of the group was out of our vision, including the person who otherwise led the chanting in a plaintive, moving voice. A silver cape was draped about the shoulders of the monk closest to us. When he finished reading from the antiphonal he turned to the alcove we were in and waved the large silver cross in front of us while a light bell rang in rapid succession. Then the antiphonal was ceremoniously put away, the small object removed from the cross and put in the silver sphere beside it. The sphere in turn was carefully wrapped in the cape by the elder monk and taken out, while the monks who had been until that point out of sight formed a procession and left the hall, one by one. The ritual was over. We wound our way back through the corridors to a night made more somber.

I attended the vesper service with members of the Findhorn Foundation. Many are now familiar with the work of this spiritual community through Louis Malle's film *My Dinner with André* or Dorothy Maclean's book *To Hear the Angels Sing*. I would define the task of the Foundation as follows--to dissolve the haze within as it has been done without through the surroundings--both together constitute the Findhorn Experience.

The Blackhills estate has been used by the Findhorn Foundation for summer retreats. It is still run as a farm, but due to the help and motivation of Findhorn members, several stone cottages have been refurbished and can be rented for thirty quid a week. A resident of Los Angeles explained how she had recognized her

spiritual task in life and made the two-year commitment to become a community member after spending a week's retreat in Blackhills. It was she who showed us the oak, alive with its own individuality, by which her resolution had come to her. The variety of trees, of healthy flourishing exemplars of individual character, first attracted members of the Findhorn Foundation to the estate, Ever since the community started as three adults and several children living in a small trailer in the early 60s, members have had a close rapport with the unveiled inhabitants of nature. Through communication with the devas, the spirits of plants and animals, and hard work, a phenomenal growth of their garden first drew attention to the budding spiritual community and their philosophy. Meditation has always been a key to achieving inner piece, the rapport with the surroundings and harmony in the life of the community. Today the main part of the community is still the trailer park, which it now owns, about a mile down the bay from the village of Findhorn, two miles before Kinloss.

It is not hard to practice the philosopher's skill of suspending judgment at the Findhorn Foundation. Maybe the landscape has already sensitized the person newly setting foot in the community, or the Scottish surroundings made the newcomer aware of the mutability of cultural horizons. The most striking aspect of community life is revealed in the everyday social interaction. As individuals in a mostly anonymous social environment we have been conditioned to treat others with an initial distrust. In Findhorn this is dispelled by an openness and warmth felt to be genuine--for example in the Community Center where two vegetarian meals are served daily. The children move about freely with each other and with adults. They seem less like the children we are used to, playing the role of child in relation to adults, and more like children, the haze lifted. There is an unabashed quality about them. Five-year-old May, whose disposition matched her month of birth, said quite frankly about her mother: "I don't think she'll climb the Himalayas, neither in this lifetime nor in any other!" A child visiting from the nearby village of Forres said about summers at the foundation: "There's not more to do in Findhorn, but it's more fun doing it!"

If you volunteer to help clean up after the meal, or to help cook it, you'll be surprised at the lack of hierarchical friction among the working force--drudgery is transformed into a meaningful, joyous task. All smaller metal wares are put in a drawer entitled 'metal beings,' as if the lifting of the haze without and within gives life even to objects. Some of the terminology can be, in fact, unsettling. When our friend became a member she participated in a ceremony to determine whether the angel had taken her in. The 'focalizer' claimed that one shoe was left outside the 'circle of light,' creating a problem that would have to be addressed. My friend's reaction was to 'attune' to her energy flow and attempt to 'surrender' her individuality to the good of the community.

The last idea seems to clash with convictions carried about by most Americans. Actually, the individual submitting to the will of the community is as basic a tenet of the American doctrine as there is. In his biography of John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Cotton Mather cites Winthrop as stressing that "liberty is maintained in a way of

subjection to authority" in suppressing dissension and ensuring survival of the tenuous holding in a new land.

We've also been taught that there are no devas or angels; Celtic lore, on the other hand, is full of supernatural beings that linger on in Arthurian romances and the lore of Gaelic speakers. To appreciate the sense of community in Findhorn it is not necessary to ascribe to a theory of angels--it is only necessary not to laugh at others for whatever-convention they have chosen for articulating the spiritual side of things. The absence of the haze, the mystery of the Celts and the medieval ruins will help to achieve an open mind.

The spiritual centers at the Findhorn Foundation are called sanctuaries. In the trailer park the sanctuary is a wooden building across from the small reception center and around the corner from the Community Center. It has a small foyer ,for taking off shoes--a light lets you know if people are meditating at that moment and prefer not to be disturbed. In the main room, carpeting and thick drapes filter out the noise of footsteps on the gravel path alongside the sanctuary. There is a small table at the center of the room, on top of which is placed a candle encircled by a simple wreath. Around the table on the floor are velvet cushions and in back of them two or three circles of chairs. Meditating in the sanctuary helps to create the same sense of inner peace felt when standing on the delta at Findhorn village. This sense of peace is even enhanced when a dozen or dozens meditate collectively. The rare phenomenon is experienced of being yourself with others.

It seems puzzling at first that it should be so. Imagine though how many crutches are used to routinely maintain social interaction--the small-talk, the false smiles, the social drink, television--all tools that keep us separate rather than unite us. Normally, to be in a room alone with dozens of unknown people not conversing would produce an intolerable, oppressive atmosphere. Once a goal is set, however, of attaining collective harmony through a process .of individual self-awareness, this oppressive atmosphere quickly dissipates. The positive social interaction in the Findhorn Foundation at large is attributable to such goals and such experiences. Ultimately, the inner peace and the sense of community spirit combine to alter our perception of things. Anyone who saw the film *Witness* will remember the joy in the raising of the barn that resulted from the collective effort of the Amish people. As the reversal of the classical western motif, it is this community spirit rather than the will of the individual that triumphs over evil in the end. Certainly the character played by Harrison Ford found his perception of things altered after his experience on the Amish farm and in the Amish community.

In the summer, especially, Findhorn is a hubbub of activity. In addition to the over 200 members, staff personnel and friends of the community, there is a constant influx of people from all nations participating in workshops and the Findhorn 'experience week.' (In fact, even in January I met visitors from the United States, West Germany, Australia, Denmark, Holland, France and Italy.) As time goes by, the Foundation is becoming more and more integrated with the

surrounding communities. On the road to Findhorn village from the trailer park, you walk by Calerne, a mansion with extensive surroundings also owned by the Foundation. This is where our friend stayed while she tended to the lovely gardens. I remember most fondly the fireplace keeping the spacious living room warm at a Christmas party. Across the road is another mansion, overlooking the bay, owned by "friends" of the Foundation. Above Forres a wonderful Victorian hotel stands in a forest clearing with a view over the Scottish countryside. This is now owned by the Findhorn Foundation and used to hold workshops in and to house visitors in addition to the trailer park. It is fitting that the Foundation should also be involved in a project on the other side of Scotland, near the isle of Iona. This island of religious significance for the Picts was given to Columba in the 6th century, whence Christianity was spread throughout the British Isles. To swear on the Black Stone of Iona used to be the most binding oath in the Highlands. (Today it is in Westminster Abbey, a part of the coronation chair that every monarch since Edward I has been crowned upon.) Within sight of Iona the Findhorn Foundation now maintains a summer retreat on the isle of Earraid, known from the R. L. Stevenson novel *Kidnapping*.

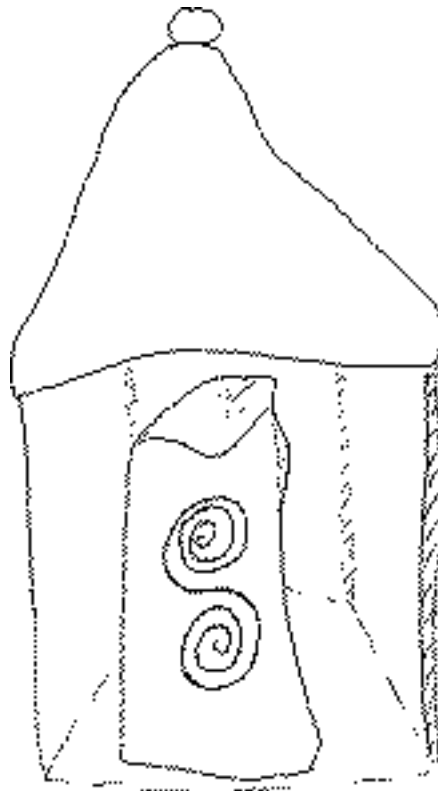
In January, while walking along Findhorn Bay, I encountered an unforgettable work of nature. The shallow waves of the tide had been frozen into myriad sheets of thin ice, patterned like snowflakes. Dorothy Maclean, one of the original three founders of the foundation describes these sheets of ice in commenting on the natural beauty of Findhorn Bay:

Findhorn Bay is tidal and therefore ever-changing, offering many magic moments. One such is to walk straight into the setting sun over the wet sands.. .another incomparable display comes when the rare winter frosts and tides mold the water, ceaselessly hardening it, carrying it, mixing it with sand, leaving abandoned thin ice sheets in all the tiny inlets or on rocks, rescuing them only to convert them into still more frosty shapes, all with the unerring natural patterns that must permeate the ether. Every step on the bay reveals to the eye a new white wonder: a combination of art unseen before, another aspect of the beauty of form, a transparency revealing still more intricate patterns underneath.

New Year's Eve was celebrated by most of the Findhorn members in the main sanctuary, where a vigil of meditation was observed throughout the night. The full moons, unparalleled for magnificence and splendor, are also honored by group meditations in the sanctuary. The harmony with nature is perhaps easier to accomplish when nature presents itself unveiled as it does in this part of northeastern Scotland. The Findhorn Foundation has developed on this principle. Dorothy Maclean writes:

It is not by wanting to experience another realm that we get there, but by being completely aware of every action, every sound and color around us, every relationship. Or, as Don Juan said, apprehending the world without interpretation, with pure wondering perception.

Learning to do this is the significance of the Findhorn Experience. What is taken away from there is a recognition of the unconscious values that create our interpretation of our perception. And in attaining this recognition, we have travelled a much greater distance than Findhorn could ever have been removed geographically. Indeed, then Findhorn becomes simply a state of mind, one attempting to harmonize with others to actualize a system of values based on community spirit rather than selfishness and greed.



Bibliography:

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