NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Patterns and the landscape

Donna Schaper | Feb. 21, 2013 Eco Catholic

Editor?s Note: Donna Schaper is a new blogger for Eco Catholic. *A United Church of Christ minister and past contributor to* NCR, *Schaper also runs the blog* ?Grace at the Table [1].?

My favorite book is called ?A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction,? a 1977 publication for architects and designers. It argues for a Western version of Feng Shui.

That is, what is around us matters.

If a house has a window seat in it, that will matter to the psychology, spirituality and freedom of the inhabitants. If a room has windows on more than one side, energy will flow through it. If a room has only one window, energy will get stuck there.

A friend recently told me she would rather have an office with a window than a raise. I understood. She inhabits her office, and *inhabitant* is a wonderful word. She is the one who habits there, who dwells there. She wants the energy to flow. She seeks comfort.

But many of us have become patterned to discomfort.

We imagine the commute will be rough. Traffic, we say, what else is new? We imagine that there will be a Starbucks and a Subway on every corner, and guess what? There is.

I often wonder what has happened to our sensibilities, so stoned by similarity. I wonder what happens to energy left dormant in a cubicle, where the air can?t find a place to inhabit or circulate.

A drive through my beloved South Carolina, the site of my youth, more than a decade ago patterned me profoundly. I went to pick up my deceased father's car in order to deliver it to my son in Connecticut. The experience left me practically in tears the entire trip, though the tears were not just for my father. I had so looked forward to getting the car.

The year was 1997. I took the train south from New York and then drove the car slowly back north. I was on a sentimental journey, and I intended to inhabit it. I sought an energy exchange, as well as a car exchange. I wanted to inhabit the grief of losing my father, through his car, with windows on all sides. I wanted to inhabit the way life goes on, by driving south to north to give my son my father?s car.

The car still had the red soil of the red clay on it ?? a marker of any vehicle frequenting South Carolina?s roads. There was something living about my father and his last car. For moments I could sense his smell in it. But then as I drove up U.S. Route 301 and gave myself the gift of the back way, I realized I couldn't really tell where I was.

Everything seemed the same, even in 1997. Every corner. Every traffic light. Every strip mall.

My eyes began to hurt. My heart hurt. There were no watermelon stands, no silly signs advertising "home cookin'." The familiar icons had disappeared. The landscape had become another pattern. It was McDonald?s, Burger King, Hess Oil, 7-Eleven, and ?Comfort? Inn, stripped into malls, stripped into mall after mall of franchises. And they frightened me.

I know many of these "fast-food" places and "fast-sleeping" motels are franchised. They aren't completely owned by the Great Discomforter. I want to try to like them. I certainly don't want nostalgia -- for my father, his car, the red clay -- to get in my way of being a MODERN person.

On the other hand, I needed help. I needed a window seat on the future. I need to be comforted by the land and its pattern. When blight contaminates our spirits as well as our roads, and our energy gets stuck in cubicles stripped of energy, forced into conformity (that wonderful word that means ?one form?), something happens. It is not good for us or for the land or for the great energy in the land.

What could be different? We could insist on different food options at each exit, in each ?service center.? Spanish at Exit 17, Lithuanian at Exit 18, Brazilian at Exit 19. We could have hostels and hotels, bed-and-breakfasts and camping sites. All overnight lodging need not be in the same box or serve the same waffles.

And if we can?t find these patterns moving us to wholeness on the main highway, we?re just going to have to go deeper into the back roads and sleep overnight in our fathers? cars, while hoping for a better life for our sons.

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[1] http://donnaschaper.com/