

The Power of Places



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Why is this girl jumping? By the end of this, you will see images of kids near a beach on the coast of the Black Sea in southern Ukraine. They come from families who have been displaced by the war. For ten days, they have been quite happy.

But what I really want to say begins with places.

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In his remarkable book, *Skyfaring, A Journey with a Pilot*, Mark VanHoenacker speaks of *place lag*, "That imaginative drag that results from ... the inability of our deep old sense of place to keep up with our airplanes." Unlike jet lag, *place lag*, as he defines it, does not fade so quickly. Neither does it require crossing time zones or flying in a plane. "Sometimes," he writes, "I've been in a forest, for a hike....then later that same day I have returned to a city..... I know it was only this morning I was in that different place; but already it feels like a week ago."



On Sunday, June 19th, I preached for the last time at the First Presbyterian Church of New Vernon, New Jersey. On Tuesday, July 19th, I boarded a flight at Dulles International for Odessa, Ukraine. In between, I flew to Portland, Oregon for the PCUSA General Assembly, spent six days on a youth mission trip to the Eastern Shore of Virginia, moved household goods to Daytona Beach, Florida, visited friends in

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Cumberland, Maryland, while staying at a lakehouse near Deep Creek in Western Maryland. That last Sunday in New Vernon was a month before; it felt like years.

Places carry memories. Places also provide a different sense of identity, one can only partially claim with upon return. It's not always easy to put those memories down or the concurrent sense of identity. I imagine someone acting in theater may feel the same, changing clothes and character between life, sets and stage, but it is harder in real life to shed one character and take on another. I may, for example, stay focused on time, tickets, boarding gates and grabbing a Tall Pike with cream



and sugar on my way to the plane, but in my seat, my mind wanders back to other places. I also understand we remember things when feelings are attached. Feelings linger, stay and sometimes move in for the long haul, for better or worse, as they are attached to memories, and as they are

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attached to places.

The place I have been most recently, is a Peace Camp for refugee families from Eastern, Ukraine. Above and below are pictures. This is the second year This Child Here has funded the Peace Camp.



There was time to swim, to play, to dance, to make crafts or make friends or photos or puppets to put on a play. There was time for programs they designed themselves. The camp has a specific purpose: to give time for these families to rest, to talk with each other, to separate themselves from painful memories and make new ones. In the right conditions, the sea serves as a place of healing.

I arrived eager to interview people about their experiences of the war and status as refugees, but soon learned that these people are tired of such conversation and not so willing to dig into those



memories. I learned only generalities: a boy is here who underwent heart surgery for a valve not developing; his dream was to go to the sea; a grandmother was reunited with daughter and grandchildren after two years of this war. Families left homes because they were forced to abandon them. The father of a family with three teenage sons showed me video of their home near the battle

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zone of Donetsk. A explosive landed in their back yard. With great pride, he told me that no one had looted his home. He showed a second video of where they now live in a large building with other



families outside a city named Kharkiv, a former shelter for children turned into a dormitory. They can't afford gas for heat in the winter, so they survive the cold with firewood.

I learned of their gratitude, as these people came individually to me to say "thank you" for these ten days by the sea. It's a remarkable thing we are doing for these families with children. Many asked me why Americans give money to help in Ukraine and who are Presbyterians? I suppose it's good PR in both cases But the real benefit, as the conflict still simmers, will be the healing between individuals, of Russian and Ukrainian origin, character, and identification that is already beginning, in a place called Ukraine.

Robert Gamble

Now do you see these two ladies below? The one in white, Alla Soroka, created, organized and managed this project. Katya in orange is part of the team.

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Now why is this guy jumping and scaring all those people???

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Here's some happy people.... some beautiful people with flowers in their hair... and more...



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Here above is our camp doctor.



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And here's a bunch of happy people:)