

What Kind of Roots Are We Really Looking For?

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Quite frequently you hear idioms like “search for your roots” or “search for the roots of tradition,” musical or otherwise. In a music group, my Slovak colleagues often said, “This is the root, this is the root matter.” We all knew what it was about, or better, we felt that we knew. Nevertheless, what are these roots like? What do they look like? Can you find them anywhere? What do we mean when we say “roots”? We use the term both for physical matters and the matters of psychology. The shift in the meaning, from a specific level to an abstract level of description, never happens at random. It is based on rules, which cannot be simplified into mere rational, logical concepts; they are also based on the world of imagination and feelings.

Let's work with an analogy, imagining for instance the physical roots of a tree. After removing the earth around the trunk, we get to the tree's root system. Underground, the roots reflect the trunk branches reflect of the aboveground system. Individual roots grow narrow, split further into a system of capillary roots, and finally disappear in the earth. Evidently, their real endings are almost invisible to the eye. This net of subtle roots is not covered by bark; its soft surface is permeable and allows the tree to draw water and dissolved nutrients from the earth. Through its roots system, the tree is continually linked with a nurturing base (where are its limits?), one of the fuels for life development. At the same time, roots give the tree a kind of anchor, stability, and solidity for its existence. A healthy tree would not grow where there are no adequate conditions for its roots. Of course, there is also the air and the sun, which draw upward...but this is a theme for another paper.

Does the root of a tree have anything in common with a human being and his psyche, man and his root? There is no casual link, but there is an absolute link, which is based on a principle of analogy. Invisible reality is always a reflection of visual reality.

Where are my roots? How do I recognize them? What is the thing which provides me with nutrition? What things allow me to live and create? How does a man without roots look like? Can he live at all?

I don't believe there exists a man without roots. Even a homeless person has tiny roots: in the form of memories that please him, and make him feel stable in uncertain times. This is his psychic nutrition. It gives him it at least a small will to live on, to survive. For some reason, homeless people do not look for further

roots and other links to sources. In extreme cases, some people decide to cut off all their roots and finish with their lives.

Searching in my own heart, I ask what, in the most general sense of the word, can be considered – or better perceived – as my deepest and life-giving roots. I find boulders, ridges and trees in the Highlands; brooks in the woods; walls of old farm houses; small village churches and places of pilgrimage; yellowish photographs of ancestors; and drawings of my great-uncle, a gifted artist, who died tragically as a very young man during military training near the Danube in the 1930s. When I was a little boy I discovered in the attic of our farm a file of his sketches and designs of decorated textile ornaments, among farm utensils, alongside a box of grout. This was my first fascination with fine art. Then there is my grandmother and her memories; the flavour of blackberries, arnica balm, and potato pancakes. And my uncle, who was a restless jack-of-all-trades; he loved wood in all its shapes and forms: the whole world came to him through decorated objects that he carved out of roots and branches of trees. He was also an honest man who was afraid of no work and no life troubles. My grandfather was a blacksmith; he revealed to me the secret of how to forge an axe that can cut a nail without damaging the blade. Then there was the shop of an old master engraver. I used to visit him for years, and learned to perceive his art through my hands, and become open to the world of ancient masters. And even more, I used to feel the Middle Ages in the presence of candles, old stoves, a perpetually heated little vessel with glue, and the smell of dammara resin. It was a mysterious, rough, and at the same time God enlightened world.

I cannot omit the strong experience that made me cry while listening to musicians who played in ways that I would never manage. Nevertheless, my desire was strong, and I spent years of my life on the road with my journey to music, searching for experience again: this time for inner experience, inside me. I have also met songs that arrived, almost unnoticed in my life of a musician, publisher, and editor: browsing hundreds of pages of collections, selecting songs like fruit, sorting out apples and pears, it is pleasant, but still you miss something...and all of a sudden, like a miracle, there it is here unexpectedly, a song which resonates with you and shines! It is a word, tone, or a poetic phrase. And you know that it has come! From where did it come, and why? You cannot get rid of it, it plays in your head for several more days; it fills you inside, and returns on special occasions, when it addresses exactly what you feel at the moment.

I could continue in this exploration of the maze of my roots. If I did, I would certainly better recognize a deeper sense of what I do and where I am heading, as well as the influence of tradition, even if I didn't admit it on the surface. But that

is a topic for a book, and perhaps beyond my capability. Nevertheless, there is even something else, which words can hardly express. I cannot forget the dreams and desires of my parents, which I perceived as a boy almost unconsciously in everyday life, perhaps most in such moments, when my parents stopped being responsible educators and became what they loved. It is difficult to reveal the dreams and desires here, because they are still alive, and I cannot say how exactly they will be fulfilled in the end. Partly, these have also been my dreams, unfinished.

You may be wondering why I deal publicly with such personal things. Each of us would discover something else from similar "archaeologies." Still, there is something permanent in the principle, and I dare to say even eternal, which is a key to the understanding of the concept of roots in its universality. It cannot be reached, except through sincere self-reflection. It is an experience of an unusual quality, a quality that we do not always publicly admit. Such experience links us with certain things and situations, symbols and rituals, which create our root system. Basically, this is a symbolic system, in and through which we can meet other people. Various fields were developed for the study of different levels and spheres of such symbolic systems: psychology in the area of individual experience, and sociology and ethnology at the level of social existence. There is a certain risk here: after gathering a statistically important amount of knowledge, we may generalize and claim that some people are closer to some depicted and orderly traditions and roots, and on the other hand, some people are cut off them. They claim—and it is very easy to make such a conclusion unconsciously—that they are in a way less valuable for the society. They are not! They just open a space for the future, which is unknown.

A view from the position of reflected and respected personal experience allows us to see things in a meaningful and full perspective, which creates no prejudice or obstacle, which does not judge and censor, but which can see things and allows to explore them within a higher whole. What is the difference between a festival of alternative culture in Boskovice, and the present festival, here in Náměšť nad Oslavou? And how do the two differ from the folklore festival in Strážnice? Basically, they all deal with music and culture, don't they? We can try to formulate a message for each of the above mentioned events, and to do so, logically, to quote from an introductory word of each festival. However, such words often touch intellectual aims only. I believe that these festivals share one innovative and exciting idea to the same extent: they explore real roots, which visitors of each particular event set out to discover. That is, they are interested in the links and substances they look for, and the sense of stability and self-identity they desire. This search for the roots is embodied in messages of performers, put

together according to the sense or judgement of each particular program editor, who honours the spirit of the festival. What does Lucia Piuksi, singer and lyricist from the group Živé kvety look for (and the audience with her), when she sings her soul out on a stage: "Freedom is something that makes you angry, that irritates you, that your soul does not understand," or "You cannot wish to give more than you get; you will cause more evil than good!" (She sings in Slovak.) What does Zuzana Novak, a Czech adopted by Britain, look for when she plays an African mbira, when she finds strong elementary experience and life philosophy in the culture of the people of Zimbabwe? And what I am looking for? And what about you?

I have noticed the real purpose of research of many ethnologists and anthropologists: it not the primary desire to gather and depict outer manifestations and relationship of a traditional society but rather a strong inner motivation. They want to discover something important for themselves. I can feel the certain fascination with people who are strongly rooted in the world of rituals and their life philosophy, which provides them with support, peace, and authentic expression. In scholarly works, nobody admits these aims. You will learn about them in the backstage of conference rooms, in pubs, in personal encounters. Don't hesitate to ask. It seems that the real purpose of these sciences is, apart from a precise description, also the finding of a system of symbols and rituals, which can provide a quality and meaningful life. This can even be an encounter of science and things deeply religious. There is no coincidence that you can feel an effort, especially in works that map important characters of old folk tradition, to find an archetype of a Wise Man.

So what are we really looking for? I leave this question intentionally unanswered, because as I noted earlier, it is a theme for a book. Here I have tried to focus on just one of the many possible points of view.