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“Let’s See if we can go a Whole Day on the Road Eating Free Food”: Encountering the Divine with Claire Dwyer in the Private Spaces of Richmond’s Highway to Heaven

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Abstract: This article recounts the development of the author’s positionality in studying religion in a Canadian suburb through a collaborative project with the late feminist geographer of religion Claire Dwyer. The field site was No. 5 Road, the “Highway to Heaven” in Richmond, British Columbia with over 20 religious institutions on a three kilometre stretch of road. Building from Dwyer’s writing on “encountering the divine” through field work from 2010 to 2012, the author offers an account of a personal shift from evangelical religious exclusivism to an understanding of the plurality of interreligious experience. Using a reflexive writing style, the article works through the discovery that each of the religious communities on the road saw themselves as private spaces into which the collaborative researchers were invited. “Encountering the divine” therefore tended to take place over meals inside the various religious buildings, leading to the personal transformation that the author describes. This article contributes to religious studies by offering an account of how the act of ethnographic field work can lead to a shift within a researcher’s own positionality, which must be brought reflexively and explicitly to the fore through the practice of research.

Keywords: ethnography, feminist, positionality, reflexive

Abstract (French): Cet article relate le développement de la position de l’auteur dans l’étude de la religion dans une banlieue canadienne grâce à un projet de collaboration avec la regrettée géographe féministe de la religion Claire Dwyer. Le lieu du terrain d’enquête était la route #5, « Highway to Heaven », à Richmond, en Colombie-Britannique, avec plus de vingt institutions religieuses sur un tronçon de route de trois kilomètres. S’appuyant sur les écrits de Dwyer sur “la rencontre avec le divin” à travers le travail de terrain de 2010 à 2012, l’auteur offre un compte-rendu d’un changement personnel de l’exclusivisme religieux évangélique à une compréhension de la pluralité de l’expérience interreligieuse. Utilisant un style réflexif d’écriture, l’article s’appuie sur la découverte que chacune des communautés religieuses sur la route se voyait comme des espaces privés à l’intérieur desquelles les chercheurs collaboratifs étaient invités. La « rencontre avec le divin » a donc eu tendance à se dérouler autour de repas à l’intérieur des différents édifices religieux, menant à la transformation personnelle que l’auteur décrit. Cet article contribue aux études religieuses en expliquant comment offrant l’acte de travail ethnographique sur le terrain peut mener un changement de la position du chercheur, qui doit être mis en évidence de manière réfléchi et explicite par la pratique de la recherche.

Keywords: ethnographie, féministe, positionnalité, réflexivité

Claire Dwyer, in memoriam, 1964-2019

Claire Dwyer got in the car and said to me, “Let’s see if we can go a whole day on The Road eating free food.” She meant it. We didn’t do it, but she and I both knew that we could have.

The Road in question was No. 5 Road in Richmond, British Columbia, the proverbial “Highway to Heaven” with over twenty religious institutions lining a three-kilometre stretch of road in a suburb just south of Vancouver. Claire and I were doing research together on it. It was our third research phase in the 2009-2010 academic year. The first had been in November 2009, the second was in late April 2010, and now it was July 2010.

We had plenty of free food experiences on The Road in our previous two runs. We had shown up to an interview at the India Cultural Centre, which was the secular name of the Sikh temple also known as the Gurdwara Nanak Nivas. We were there to ask our usual questions about how the religious institutions on The Road, which represented a spread of diverse traditions and what we presumed to be transnational networks, were aiding in immigrant integration (Dwyer et al. 2013). It was our way of asking how they were making a place for themselves in the city, and in multicultural Canada more generally, and our project was generously funded by Metropolis British Columbia.

It turned out we were interviewing the president of the gurdwara himself. He was flanked by two men who were also pillars of the community. As our interview progressed, they fetched us food, two glutinous balls for each of us, as well as mugs of chai sweetened with condensed milk. We thanked them for their generosity, and they said after the interview that we should stay for the wedding that was taking place that morning. We began to decline politely, as we did not want to impose, but they informed us that weddings were a regular temple affair. In fact, the premises had been booked every Saturday for three years already (interview, 24 April 2010).

No sooner was the interview finished, then, that we found ourselves ushered into the dining area, each with a plateful of more balls and chai. Soon, we made our way upstairs with everyone else, and in the opening announcements, one of the men who had aided the president in his interview made announcements in Punjabi. Suddenly, he switched to English so that we could understand. He said that they were honoured by special guests that day, Dr. Claire Dwyer and Mr. Justin Tse, who were conducting research on the Highway to Heaven and were here to experience the community’s hospitality. Having switched to English, he then continued in it for a punchline we would be able to understand. Turning his attention to the groom, he winked and said, Happy wife, happy life.

Getting free food on The Road became the running gag between Claire and me about our methodology. She had discovered the phenomenon all on her own. The first interview done for the project was conducted by her alone. For some reason, I was not able to join her for a trip to the Lingyen Mountain Temple, a large Pure Land Buddhist monastery that was attempting to expand its building, and not without neighbourhood controversy. She had heard about it and thought that interviewing the monastics would be a good idea to find out more about it. However, the monastic Claire interviewed did not say much about the expansion, besides that it was about the temple needing more space to accommodate more devotees. She spoke mostly about how she envisioned the dharma spreading world peace, including to the young people who came with their parents to the temple (interview, 3 November 2009).

But that interview also set the tone for the rest of our research in another way. Claire was served a delicious and hot vegetarian lunch – free, of course – and she was impressed. Later, she said that she

had spotted a vegetarian restaurant that was walking distance from her hotel. She ate there frequently, paying for her own dinners while reminiscing about that first lunch with the Buddhist monastic she had had, her first research encounter on the road. Indeed, it was based on such encounters that she formulated her working approach to *The Road*. In a lecture she delivered in 2011, she said that she had had to open herself to the creative possibility that, even as a social geographer in the secular academy, she might be “encountering the divine” through the persons we were meeting (Dwyer, 2018). The free food meant access to spaces that might be deemed to be private in a secular age. But in the intimacies of such privacy, she felt that she was also being offered channels to spiritual reality as experienced by those who inhabited them. In this way, the food was not a direct mediator of the sacred. If it mediated anything, it was a welcome into private space. The divine arose from the encounter afforded by that hospitality.

Claire was always telling me things like this about my hometown, especially that there was free food to be had. I lived in Richmond. I drove through No. 5 Road quite often. In fact, at one point, I even went to church there. But, as Claire notes in her writings on the experience of ethnography with me, there were moments that revealed to both of us that I was not very open to encountering the divine on *The Road*, not even through free food. Maybe it was because I held at the time to a normatively conservative Christian position that excluded non-Christian ways to encounter God in my own practice, what might be called “exclusivism” as a kind of shorthand (Tse, 2016). However, at another level, it was probably because, as a religious practitioner myself who lived in Richmond, part of me simply did not want any of these institutions to have their privacy violated by our research. In this way, I was more than a researcher. I was a stakeholder too.

What I am saying is that in terms of ethnographic positionality, the fact that I was supposed to be the insider “from Richmond” while Claire was an outsider from London proved to be much more complicated once we hit *The Road*. In fact, I am only technically from Richmond, because the truth is that I grew up in Fremont, California, another garden suburb known for its interreligious landscapes (Eck, 2000; Lung-Amam and Gade, 2019). The truth about my identity is tricky. I was born in Vancouver, but when I was six weeks old, my father got a job in the San Francisco Bay Area, which is why we moved there. We maintained our Canadian citizenship, and after 9/11 happened, I began contemplating “returning” to Vancouver for undergraduate studies at my father’s alma mater, the University of British Columbia. When I did move to Canada in 2004, the whole family moved with me to Richmond, where my father became the pastor for a time of a local church that was on No. 5 Road. I lived with my parents, which is why when Claire met me, she was told that I had intensive “local knowledge,” as I was “from Richmond.” It was to my advantage, I was informed, to be working with Claire too, even though I was preparing for comprehensive examinations in my doctoral program in human geography and was supposed to be busy enough. The program that I was in did not have its own methodology course, the rationale from the faculty being that geographers are an intellectually promiscuous bunch and that each student should be trained in the methods of their own supervisor. What Claire was offering to do was to take me on a boots-on-the-ground ethnographic ride. It was the chance of a lifetime to learn how to do fieldwork from one of the discipline’s greatest. In turn, what Claire got was a research collaborator “from Richmond.”

To be “from Richmond” in a Cantonese-speaking Protestant household, even though that designation might be dubious, meant that I experienced the road and its geographies of religion as a kind of private stakeholder, if you will. When I first moved to Richmond, I went to my father’s church on *The Road*. I remember two instances there that gave me a sense of the congregation’s stakes on *The Road*. Within the first month, we were asked to pray about our set of church buildings. There was a farmhouse the church had bought in the lot behind the main sanctuary. They learned after the

purchase that if they were to annex the two lots, the back of the church behind the sanctuary would have to be used for farming. This was because what the municipal government called the “Backlands Policy” had just come into effect in the early 2000s. No. 5 Road, Claire and I later learned from the policy’s brainchild Harold Steves, was a set of lots that used to be large agricultural plots that were part of British Columbia’s Agricultural Land Reserve, which had locked in lands for exclusive agricultural use since the 1970s and was governed by the Agricultural Land Commission. The problem, Steves explained to us, was that a new freeway that was built around that time, Highway 99, cut off the No. 5 Road lands so that the farmland plots became quite small. A catch in the policy, we also learned from Steves, was in the city bylaws. “In those days,” Steves said, “a lot of churches [were allowed to] build anywhere where something was acceptable and they just went and built a church in the middle of the agricultural land” (Harold Steves, interview, 2 April 2011). To cover that loophole in the early 2000s, the Backlands Policy was introduced by Richmond City Hall. New religious institutions wanting to build on agricultural land would be directed to the lots on No. 5 Road. They would be dually zoned. At one level, they would be assembly use, but only in the front 110 metres. Whatever was behind that, though, would be considered the “backlands.” These areas would remain zoned for agriculture and had to be farmed in some way. Of course, what they did with the produce, if it was successfully produced, remained unregulated. In this way, the land could stay in the Agricultural Land Reserve, but used by the religious groups that came too.

The trouble, Claire and I learned in our fieldwork, was that most of the religious communities that purchased property on No. 5 Road did not have any farming know-how. In fact, as a community leader at the mosque down the road explained to us, most of their membership could be characterized as “businesslike,” which meant, as he put it, “I don’t think there’s anybody in this community that comes from a background of farming, so it’s been a learning process for us” (interview, 11 November 2009).

The same was true of the church my family was at in 2004. Without knowing it, they had backed themselves into the Backlands Policy, even though the terms were not applicable to them at first because they had bought their property before the regulations went into effect. Now that the policy was in place, there was a chance that they might have to farm the back of the lot, and for this inconvenience to be resolved, we were asked to pray. Their prayers may have been answered. By the time Claire and I got to interviewing church staff five years later, we were told that while they “wouldn’t mind seeing...a nice community garden or something like that” in that space, “we’re not farming anything but grass.” They also told us they were not sure whether it was still zoned as agricultural land, but they didn’t “think it was ever an issue with the city” (interview, 12 November 2009).

Another incident that happened around that time concerned the building of a large Tibetan Buddhist edifice, the Thrangu Monastery, next to the Chinese evangelical church we as a family were at. A large statue of the Buddha was being flown in, and the ensuing celebrations required an extra parking lot to account for all the incoming vehicle traffic that was expected in that weekend. Contacting our church’s leadership, the monastery secured permission for visitors to park in our lot. But then, they went an extra step. As my father told us when he contributed an interview to our project, the monastery went on at the time to proclaim on the Cantonese radio that the Christians “are supporting our work, they are letting us to use their parking lot,” which is how our membership heard about it and “went berserk” (interview, 26 April 2010). A flurry of phone calls happened, some directed at the church secretary, others at the board of directors, and still others to the pastoral staff, resulting in a mix-up of whether anyone was at fault and, if so, who was to blame.

From these two instances in my early experience of the road—The Backlands Problem and The Monastery Dust-up—I would say that my understanding of the Highway to Heaven as a Richmond local was not an interreligious one, not to mention a celebratory multicultural one (Dwyer et al., 2016). If anything, the brush-up of the church with the Agricultural Land Reserve “Backlands Policy” suggests that “we” now in the sense of the congregation our family was part of at the time, since both our family and the church were in agreement about how strange we found what amounted to a public-private land arrangement—understood ourselves as a congregation to be private property owners. As purchasers of land lots, we felt as a church that we should have had the right to do whatever we wanted with it. Learning that we were now subject to a policy that meant that we did not have that right became a matter mixed up with our spirituality, as it was an inconvenience to be prayed away. In this way, what was external to the private governance of the church was framed as a hindrance to our spiritual operations. Similarly, the Tibetan Buddhists broadcasting that we supported them was something that the membership viewed as mixing up not only land lots, but also spiritualities. As the joke was told to me by an outside church speaker when I was still going to the church on No. 5 Road, what to call The Road depended on what one’s perspective was to the road. For those who celebrated its multicultural and interfaith potential, it was the Highway to Heaven. But for the conservative Christians who might believe that their theology excluded the truth of other religious paths, it might have been construed as the “highway to hell.”

By 2010, the “we” had changed. I was not part of any church on No. 5 Road when Claire and I—the new “we,” as it were—began our fieldwork in 2010. After a year-and-a-half at that congregation on The Road, our family had left the church, and in an interesting twist of events, were received into the Anglican Communion. There, I discerned for myself whether my personal encounter with the divine included a call to the priesthood. Through that spiritual process, I became convinced that ordination was not the path for me. That was how I decided to do a doctorate instead in human geography, which meant that instead of studying theology for a future as part of the clergy, I was pursuing the path of scholarship in social science.

With this complicated theological positionality—as an Anglican Christian in personal religious practice, but also as a secular academic in training—Claire and I found ourselves on a Sunday in 2010 in the same church building that my family had departed from four years before.

This time, I was much less of a worshipper, though I still practiced the same religion with a different liturgical sensibility, and was much more of an ethnographer. My college fellowship “counselor,” as our senior leaders were called, was now the pastor of the English-speaking congregation designed to serve the second generation from the Cantonese migrants whose service was the main one. My use of the word “migrant” here is deliberate; geographers at the time pointed out that migration between Hong Kong and Canada tended to be ongoing along the “life course,” which meant that there was constant movement across the Pacific among the members of this church (Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Kobayashi and Preston 2007; Waters 2008; Ley 2010; Tse 2011).

After having been an insider, I was now also an outsider, which made me an item of curiosity for friends who had not seen me for a while. A younger woman, whose older sister was friends with my sibling, greeted me at the coffee and doughnut hour after the service, which was this church’s version of free food. I did not see her sister, so I asked about her. She was, I was told, undergoing the stress of taking a marathon of examinations for her pharmacy degree. After stalking the older sister on Facebook for a few weeks, I asked her for a coffee date, under the pretense that I had not seen her in a long time – in fact, hardly ever, since I left that church. We are now married. Such are the

wonders of staying for coffee-and-doughnut hour at a church I had previously left. Once again, free food was the mediating point from being an outsider to a private space to the intimacy of being inside, with the possibility of something surprisingly divine happening.

What I mean when I say that Claire was always telling me things about my own hometown, such as where to find vegetarian food offerings on and off the road (as left to my own devices, I am rather carnivorous), is that it was complicated to be “from Richmond” and studying the Highway to Heaven. When Claire first arrived in Vancouver in 2009, I was more than happy to take her on what I was advertising in those days as the “famed Justin Richmond tour.” I would drive my willing takers first to the Asian mall known as Aberdeen Centre, where we would shop at the Japanese thrift store named Daiso. Making our way up through the strip of malls called No. 3 Road, we would pause for a dim sum lunch at Westminster Highway. From there, we would take a driving tour of what were called “monster houses,” large new residences constructed mostly by newly arrived Chinese migrants. Sometimes, we might make our way to Steveston Village, a kitschy seaside pier with a historic salmon cannery. Moving down Steveston Highway, we would then take a left on No. 5 Road, which is when I would prepare my passenger with what was coming next: the Highway to Heaven.

The drive down The Road would take about five minutes, accompanied by the usual obligatory expressions of amazement. Sometimes I would get questions about what interreligious activities must be going on in what appeared to be such a dynamic multicultural landscape. I would point out that each institution’s parking lots, though sometimes shared with each other, were closed with gates, just like the church in which I grew up as a child in the San Francisco Bay Area. They were private spaces, I said with conviction, though I did not really know at the time why I felt so strongly about it. Without being fully conscious that I was doing theory with that geographical insight, I would drive my tour participants home.

Claire learned about the Highway to Heaven at her home institution, University College London, when a geographer from our department, Dan Hiebert, showed a picture of it during a talk he was giving on how new migration was reshaping Canadian cities. Claire was immediately impressed. She had started doing some work in the London suburbs on religious migrants and their place in the city, and she felt that No. 5 Road might be an interesting point of comparison. She took part of her sabbatical in Vancouver in 2009, and as we made our way through the “famed Justin Richmond tour,” she told me that she would really love to study the road, perhaps by getting funding through Metropolis Canada, as she knew that Dan might be able to advise on how to secure such a grant. I still remember parking the car in the lot of my old church—transgressively so, I might add, since I was already an inactive member there and was therefore technically trespassing on their private space—and discussing with her my interest in helping with such a project. I could, for example, collaborate with her for the fieldwork that she was doing. The catch, of course, was that as someone from Richmond who had gone to church on The Road, I had my doubts as to whether the research would yield anything productive for formulating policy, celebrating multiculturalism, or leading to creative collaborations among the road’s stakeholders. As far as I was concerned, the place of the religious institutions in the city of Richmond was private, and I was secretly worried about what it might mean for our prospective research to disturb their peace. But she thought that I would be a useful local contact, and together, we drafted a grant with my doctoral supervisor, David Ley, submitted it, and secured money for our project, a sizeable amount of which went to me as the research assistant managing the project locally. In fact, I not only secured interview contacts, but I also managed our transcriber, Airra Custodio, who transcribed all of the interviews that we conducted.

The dirty secret, though, was that my experience of The Road had been quite private, almost restricted to that one church that I attended years before, that I had not really been inside most of the buildings on No. 5 Road until Claire and I started fieldwork in 2010. To the extent that I had, I had done so as part of the Perspectives on the World Christian Movement course offered at the church on No. 5 Road at which I used to be a member. I was not actually taking the course—I was an undergraduate student at the time, with far too much on my plate to be able to spare the time—but one of my friends snuck me in because they were going to visit sites that were not Christian in Richmond for the purpose of getting to know other religious groups that might contrast their Christian beliefs. Always game for a field trip even then, I pretended that I was part of the proceedings and blended in quite well. Because of that, I had been inside of the British Columbia Muslim Association's mosque on Blundell Road, as well as the Lingyen Mountain Temple, the one that had been in the news as it sought to expand its premises. The rumour that caused much of the consternation was that they were going to build a "big Buddha" on the premises that would be visible from the freeway, though the actual truth, which was confirmed by the floor plans that we saw, was that their membership had gotten so large that they needed a bigger building to fit everyone in for their meditation sessions. But because the temple was next to both a Chinese evangelical church (not the one I was going to) and a residential area where residents did not want to have their homes dwarfed by a towering edifice that might also attract heavy traffic, the temple had been the subject of public hearings and news reports. I knew vaguely about this case when we began field work; it later became a key case study of ours as we sought to unravel the celebratory assumptions about the multiculturalism on The Road.

It was while we were doing fieldwork on The Road, then, that I had to reckon with the assumptions, both spiritual and regarding private property, that I had brought to the ethnographic partnership. Indeed, Claire recounted some of my struggles when she delivered the Annual Lecture for the American Association of Geographers' Geography of Religions and Belief Systems Specialty Group in 2011, which was radically revised into a book chapter included in the volume *Spaces of Spirituality* edited by Nadia Bartolini, Sara McKian, and Steve Pile. In the chapter version, she recounts some of her field notes about her first encounter with the Lingyen Mountain Temple. As she came up the steps, she says that she saw a practitioner of Pure Land Buddhism take up incense joss sticks, hold them to his forehead, and bow three times toward the statue of the Buddha within the temple. Turning around, he then bowed three times to the street. She remembers not being sure what this latter gesture meant, whether it was an act of blessing or possibly of proselytization. Then she writes, "Whichever was true, for my Chinese Christian companion this was an undeniably powerful gesture which 'risked opening up metaphysical or spiritual pathways which may not be benign,' a recognition of the agency of these intense vapours as they travelled out onto the highway" (Dwyer, 2018: 114).

That "companion" was me, and it is not the only story she tells, though the other one is more pronounced in the lecture than in the chapter. We were in the Subramaniya Swamy Temple, which houses a Hindu shrine following southern Indian practices and not to be confused with the Vedic Cultural Centre, where the mostly Fijian migrants adhere to rites from northern India. In the chapter, she recounts the words of a woman she met there, who told her that miracles that have occurred in the temple "might be hard to comprehend when you're educated and everything" (Dwyer, 2018: 113). But the story is much fuller in the text of the lecture, where she quotes directly from her field notes:

We have not made an appointment but decide to just drop in to the Subramaniya Temple (a small South Indian Temple) on Number 5 Road. There we meet Guru Reddy, the ponytailed assistant to the main guru-ji who is happy to share the “divine power” of the temple with us. For the next hour he tells us about the lives of the gods in the temple and their miraculous power. We’re shown footsteps which appeared overnight, food that was eaten, a stone that was divinely expelled by the guru-ji. After an hour in his company we’ve been transported and when we stumble back out into the rain an hour later I’m dizzy and confused. As the traffic thunders past I’m thinking about the possibilities of “spiritual capital”—as an actual supernatural and metaphysical force, literally transforming the road, creating sacred space on Number 5 Road and producing transforming encounters. We get into the car and Justin asks me, ‘Do you believe in miracles?’

“Well, no,” I hesitate, because just then I knew that I had. (Dwyer, 2011)

In the question-and-answer session that followed, she recounted what she called “the actual ending of the story.” What I had said, she said, was that I had protested that of course she should believe in miracles. “You’re Catholic,” she said that I had said, and I confirmed its veracity on the spot.

The premise of Claire’s lecture was that she understood her own positionality vis-à-vis the religious practitioners that we encountered on The Road. She was a social geographer, but in doing fieldwork in communities that had a variety of approaches to spiritual ontology, she had to take seriously that she was “encountering the divine,” as she put it, “on Highway 99.” Claire was conversant with Julian Holloway’s (2003) claims that it was the assumed divide between sacred and the secular that did not take seriously the ontological claims of spiritual practitioners that everything might be grounded in the supernatural, a claim that also informed my later formulation of “grounded theologies,” which I describe as “performative practices of placemaking informed by understandings of the transcendent” (Tse, 2014: 202). Because of this, Claire felt that she had to acknowledge that, in a real way, she was encountering not just imaginaries of divinities, but the divine itself, at least as those we interviewed understood reality to be. Still, she declared at the end of the lecture, “I remain an unrepentant social geographer for whom faith identities are always both social and ‘more-than-social’” (Dwyer, 2011). This was a statement of her positionality, that in her encounter with what might be divinity in the field, the place that she occupied was that of a social geographer whose personal practice of Catholicism did not negate her critical engagement with subjects whose identities might be formed by as many secular forces as they might have been spiritual too.

In other words, Claire’s positionality was complicated, probably as much as mine, and her willingness to engage the Highway to Heaven on her terms forced me to confront the comfortable theological assumptions that I had lived with as a Chinese Christian “from Richmond,” as it were. At our visit to one of the South Asian temples, we took part in a ritual that involved chanting and the ringing of a bell before deity figures. I hung back while the members all rang the bell, but Claire, who was no stranger to the study of South Asia in her work, seemed to know what she was doing and participated fully. After the service, Claire and I sat with my discomfort, an affect from her research partner that she did not expect to encounter. I told her a bit about my spiritual sensibilities at the time, that having been raised as a Chinese Christian, my sense of that foreclosed my participation in religious ceremonies that were not in my tradition. “The spiritual is not all benign,” I said to her then, before clarifying, “I do not want to be mugged.” The mugging here was a reference to encountering malicious spirits. This explanation must have activated a free association for Claire to Stuart Hall et al.’s (1978) original work in *Policing the Crisis* (which I had not read at that point), a key text in the making of the new cultural geography tradition in which we both located ourselves. But ever a

feminist geographer, Claire empathized. “I would not want you to feel like you might be mugged,” she said, at which point we agreed that I would only participate in what made me feel comfortable.

We then went downstairs, where we were treated to a delicious meal of spices, vegetables, and basmati rice. My inner Chinese Christian wiring started to sound even more mental alarm bells, that partaking of what might be a sacred meal might open me up to a spiritual encounter that I did not want. But the spinach saag paneer looked so green, so creamy, so warmly inviting, so I gave in. It really was worth it, because it was “spiritual” in a whole different sense of the word, the kind when hot, loving goodness travelled from my mouth and made my entire body feel like it was glowing with warmth from inside out. A mugging this was not. The only mugs in the room carried chai, which added to the radiating sumptuousness from within.

We then proceeded to an interview with a community leader, during which we learned that the centre had been thinking about their internal community policy around leadership succession and how to get their second generation involved in their services and yoga classes, a common concern that we had also heard about from the Chinese evangelicals as well as the two mosques on The Road (interview, 26 April 2010). After the interview finished, we saw this leader’s husband outside. He told us that a soil expert had told them that their property mostly consisted of peat. Not only did he claim that this problem purportedly rendered it difficult to use the farmland in compliance with the Backlands Policy (an issue that we later learned from farming activists was a source of contention between the institution and the city), but the more serious problem they faced was an attempt to run a pipeline under No. 5 Road that would pump gas to the airport. As he put it to us, that peat might catch fire and burn interminably. Having heard their concerns, we then made a move to leave. At the door, the community leader issued a reminder. “Remember how much you have received for free,” she said. “Remember that everything you received in this work, you got for free.”

Here, in this reference that includes one of the “free food” meals Claire and I ate on The Road, is where the free food ceases to be a gimmick. The community leaders would not have known about what amounted to my exclusivist Christian beliefs at the time and the affective discomfort that ethnography on the road posed to me. All they wanted was to be represented fairly in our research, which did not only include their spiritual sensibilities, but also their institutional politics and secular concerns, an unexpected confirmation of Claire’s sensibility as a “unrepentant social geographer” to research both their “social and ‘more than social’” orientations. That orientation, in turn, had little to do with either their ethnicity or religiosity. It had much more to do with their concerns with the secular policies of Richmond City Hall undermining, in their view, the ability of their community to operate, as well as their own internal organizational structures and the problems that they unintentionally engendered for second-generation succession. This disgruntlement with rural planning policy, ironically enough, was shared by the church community that had sought in 2004 to pray what they saw as the inconvenience of the Backlands Policy away too. I may have been scared of a spiritual mugging, but what I did not see at the time was how much the church with which I was familiar and the temple that I saw as spiritually dubious were actually concerned about two very similar points: their ability to be able to do what they wanted as a community on their private property and the anxiety that they shared about what would happen with their community’s young people as they grew.

The free food on The Road, in other words, was no idle joke between Claire and me. It summed up our ethnographic ethic, which was that we knew that we, with our complicated positionalities as researchers and persons, had been invited into spaces regarded by membership not only as spiritual, but also primarily as private. When we said that we might try to eat as much free food as we could on The Road, then, we did not mean that we were going to try to take material advantage of our

research subjects. Quite the opposite, in fact. We knew that in being invited into the spaces of their private property, the privacy of which some felt was being threatened by the policies of the municipal government despite the best of intentions on all sides, it was not just research into their communities that we were going to be doing. We would also have to ask questions of ourselves, to understand the complexity of what it meant to be an insider and an outsider. Our research question for our grant may have circled around the place that these religious gatherings might make for themselves in the city by integrating migrants. But as we ate our free food on The Road, perhaps the inquiry might be better framed as asking what place we as researchers of religion have in the social order about which we ask questions – indeed, what it means to be “from Richmond,” in all the registers that might be hit in this process of self-examination. It was in that way that we found ourselves, perhaps, to be encountering the divine.

*

The last email that Claire sent me was from the hospice. Although cancer was consuming her body, she told me that she was doing well. Indeed, others who had been in touch with her reported that she was “chatty.” She told me that someone had emailed her about the Highway to Heaven project. I should become the main contact, she said. She then asked how I was doing.

I told her that I was in Singapore. I thanked her because, on top of having given me an ethnographic methods course by literally employing me as her research assistant, the last recommendation letter she had written for me on the academic job market was for my current position. “Well done,” she replied, relieved that after years of seeking employment, I had found an intellectual community to call home.

In a month after that email exchange, she was gone. It has been difficult to pin down what it meant to “encounter the divine” beyond merely experiencing the spiritual through those whose free food we ate. But as I grieve my ethnographic partner, I am coming to a deeper understanding of what she might have meant. Indeed, I hope from where she is, shining in the radiance of divine light, she is reading this piece and smiling, knowing that the free food we ate together in the private spaces of the Highway to Heaven was a catalyst for bringing me out of my narrow sense of self as a religious Richmond resident. For one, I think I agree with her now that the subjectivities of the practitioners we talked to should be conceptualized as both “social and ‘more than social.’” But for another, I don’t think I’m going to be mugged anymore. No one, not even a spirit, mugs someone they’ve welcomed into their own home and fed. As I’m sure she knows better than me now, through our fieldwork together, we encountered divinity through sociality.

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