

Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute

How Well Do You Know Your Place?

by Dan Wulff



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My wife and I have been living and working in Calgary, Canada for a little over two years now. Sally and I love living here and intend for this to be our permanent home. Much of what we experience each day is new to us (e.g., certain phrases, customs, the mountains so close, the dry climate) and we tend to be fascinated by little things around us that those persons who have lived here their whole lives don't notice. In fact, our colleagues tease us that our questions and interests to know about "all things Canadian" make us more knowledgeable about some aspects of Canada than many Canadians.

In one of our efforts to learn more about Canada, we ventured north to the Yukon Territory (a place more like what people imagine Canada to be than Calgary, a big city just a couple hours north of the US border). On one day of our Yukon visit, we drove a short distance to Alaska. When we arrived in this southeastern part of Alaska, we realized that even though we have lived in the United States for the vast majority of our lives (55 years), we had never previously been to Alaska. It made us recognize how common it is that persons living in a certain place (country, city, or neighborhood) may not have come to experience that which surrounds them. Our experience showed us that just as most Canadians we spoke with about our trip to Yukon had "always wanted to go there but had never been," we had never explored part of our own country, Alaska, until now.

Living our fast-paced lives can have the unfortunate consequence of limiting our human inclinations to be inquisitive about our "place," the surroundings in which we spend our lives. How interesting when a visitor to your place asks you something about your place that you cannot answer (or maybe you had not even thought about)! So a "place" may not be a (singular) "place." We gently collectively/socially construct over time a sense of where we are – and then an outsider comes to "our place" and asks a question about our place that we cannot answer. Interestingly, perhaps the outsider has the ideal place from which to ask a question that can expand our understandings of our own place.

But do we have to wait for an outsider to come along to help us see ourselves in a different way? Every day in our own "places" vast experiences await us. Are we interested and curious enough to explore them? My wish is that all Canadians come to experience the Yukon and that all US citizens come to know Alaska. How about you? What part of *your* world do you not yet know?