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Being Here, Now

POSTED BY: MARGARET CRITCHLOW
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Why retreat centres matter more than ever

The news that Saanich's Queenswood Retreat Centre is closing after 40 years comes at a time when retreat centres matter more than ever. Why? As an anthropologist studying the culture of retreat centres for the past five years I have been asking: What is the value of holistic centres as the second decade of the 21st century begins?

In my research, I have visited nine centres, mainly on the west coast of North America and attended three Holistic Centre Gatherings, annual conferences for owners, managers, and staff. Some centres are religious, many are not, but all participate in a global, holistic movement, seeing all beings, the planet, and universal energy as interconnected and interdependent. (Holism, a concept also important to anthropology, is the idea that any system is greater than the sum of its parts and that the parts make sense only in terms of the whole.) In the best anthropological tradition I have participated in the culture of these centres, taking workshops, talking with several hundred people, and learning the local "language." I've done a lot of what we anthropologists call "deep hanging out" overlooking the ocean from a hot tub, chatting with guests under shady trees, sitting in meetings and in meditation with staff. This has been some of the most enjoyable and deeply rewarding fieldwork of my career. And, I suggest, it is has profound significance for understanding the human condition.

That significance comes down to one simple question: What is the value of being there? This is not to question the value of being here. The power, indeed the necessity, of being fully present in the here and now is indisputable. The precious, impermanent beauty of the present moment is all we humans have. But what I have touched is the power of retreat centres to disturb the comfortable "here" of day-to-day life. Centres create a "there" in which to be fully present and from which to envision and ground that most precious and elusive goal, a positive future.

Some non-residential centres have always served a local urban clientele. Today, more remote centres such as Cortes-based Hollyhock offer some programs in Victoria and Vancouver to accommodate busy lives and reach people where they live. In that sense, these centres are "there" for the people who may need them most. But it is also valuable to transport guests to the alternate reality a holistic centre offers at the other end of a ferry ride to Salt Spring (e.g., the Salt Spring Centre) or Gabriola (the Haven), or just a few kilometers down a highway to a spot such as Queenswood that feels a million miles from nowhere and makes you go "ahhh."

Centres are precious partly because they are not here. Being there allows you—may even force you—to disconnect from our wirelessly wired lifestyles. Managers discuss how permeable their centres should be to cell phones and internet, trying to find a balance between the needs of guests to stay connected, and the value of silence. They try not to lose track of the point, which is to be there. For the moment, it is not supposed to be business as usual.

Centres celebrate the power of place. Humans have always spent time in extra-ordinary places that nourish the spirit. These are vibrant spaces for rituals of renewal or transformation, spiritual places with an inherent sacredness. Centres hold the space, protecting their land from development or resource extraction. Being there may be a chance to dip your toe in an ocean you know has fewer fish, more toxicity, and less salinity than it should. Contemplate all this, and at the same time, experience the wild froth of icy energy with both feet. Being there will change you, and you may be part of the sea change that is needed to heal the planet.

Workshops at holistic centres teach skills essential to more fulfilling and more sustainable living. These skills range from how to deepen contemplative spiritual practice to how to apply permaculture principals to community-building. Imagining positive futures requires all this and more. For activists, the most important skill can be to learning to pause. Renewal can be as simple as allowing yourself to do absolutely nothing, in silence.

Without a chance to be there, can we fully be here? Perhaps. But holistic centres provide places, in their language, "to show up and be yourself." Being there can help us step back into daily life and make a difference: a difference to ourselves, to those whose lives we touch, and to the world. As Margaret Mead, the iconic anthropologist, put it, "a small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only group that ever has." Like repositories of knowledge in the middle ages, or wisdom passed from an old Pacific island navigator to a young paddler, holistic centres are essential cultural resources. They nurture small groups of thoughtful people and the positive futures they envision. We need those now more than ever. That is why the loss of Queenswood diminishes us all.

Margaret Critchlow is a PhD and Professor of Anthropology at Toronto's York University. She currently lives in Sooke.



Sign of the times: news of the Queenswood closure does not sit well with one writer
Credit: John Threlfall

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