

Taking Pictures and Taking Souls



Graphic: Maraka

Drinking wine one recent evening with Florian Winter, an Austrian visiting us on a global survey of renewable energy developments for the U.N., we got into talking about the destruction of European cathedrals by tourism.

Each person came, he said, and took away a little of the cathedrals—in their camera, in their mind, or in the conversation—and now nothing remains.

In that absurdity there is truth.

All places live through the reverence with which we hold them—without which they crumble to pieces, unloved, unmaintained, abandoned and destroyed. That reverence is the glue that in reality binds the stones and the blood that in truth sustains the life of a place.

For the life of a place lies in its relation to the people that share it. And it is that reverence first which is taken away, piece by piece, flashbulb by flashbulb, postcard by postcard, tour group by tour group. Without this reverence, a place has nothing to give to those whose lives it must sustain, and they in turn lose their nourishment and fall into the same dereliction as their cathedral.

It need not be so, for the visit of a pilgrim differs from that of a tourist. A pilgrim brings love and reverence, and the visit of a pilgrim leaves behind a gift of their reverence for others to share.

We scorn the people of other cultures who are angered when we wish to photograph them and cast aside their belief that we take away part of their soul.

Yet we do.

For what we seek—with photographs or our presence—is sought because it is that which we lack, and that lack and our presence only prove them right and us wrong. By our taking we diminish us both.

And we lessen the soul of all places to which we go, and ourselves as well, when we take without giving and come to them without reverence to life and to land, to people and to place, to ourselves and to the creation of which we are part. That is the destruction of which tourism is part and from which tourism arises, and it is there that we again can find the healing power for our land and our lives. (TB)