

## LIFE AS A FIELD TRIP

YI-FU TUAN

I taught a course called “Environment and the Quality of Life” for a quarter-century, first at the University of Minnesota, then at the University of Wisconsin. Its basic question was: To what degree does the good life—by which I mean life of a quality commensurate with the human potential and not just survival—depend on the material setting? We examined different kinds of settings, from the least humanly modified (wild nature) to the radically transformed (a great metropolis). At each stop we paused to consider the quality of life, focusing on the good rather than on the bad—on, for instance, the amenities and rewards of city living rather than its hassles. I chose this emphasis in part to narrow the scope and in part because, whereas nature journalism can be counted on to show appreciation for its subject matter, city journalism all too often treats its subject matter with distaste.

One may think that a course of this nature required fieldwork—and if not *work*, then the less sweaty trip or tour. Students expected at least bus tours, and they were somewhat bewildered that none was scheduled. At the first meeting I would try to assuage their anxiety by saying, “Feel at ease, for all of you have already satisfied one basic course requirement, which is a minimum of eighteen years of fieldwork. The challenge now is to make sense of what you have picked up in all that time.” Eighteen years? They quickly realized that I was referring to their life span. They had been in the field all their life without knowing it, except periodically, when they were actively engaged in a project.

“Environment and the Quality of Life” strove to register and understand the subtleties and complexities of human reality. The instrument best suited to do the registering is the human person—the total person rather than, as in specialized undertakings, primarily the eyes and the brain. Unfortunately—and this is the special challenge and paradox of doing humanistic geography—the total person (an instrument of incomparable sensitivity) is easily overwhelmed. It can and will crash unless, most of the time, filtering mechanisms operate to push information not needed for tasks at hand into deep, barely recoverable recesses of the mind.

### TASKS AT HAND

In waking hours we live forward, which is to say that we have chores to do, projects to accomplish. Fieldwork is one such chore or project. Characteristic of it is focusing. Before we go, we already start to narrow our field by formulating a hypothesis. Once there, we may be obliged to constrict it further for technical reasons, such as the tools available and their limitations. Any scientific geographical enterprise, be it

---

✪ DR. TUAN is the J. K. Wright and Vilas Professor Emeritus of geography at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin 53706-1491.