Memoryscape

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The Brian Joseph Murphy Memorial Preservation Land, Westfield, MA

Site Description

Shade tobacco fields, an abandoned train overpass, dense trees, dirt roads, hawks, deer, and even the occasional moose. These are features in the one-time "romping grounds" of Brian Joseph Murphy, Harold Murphy, and many other children of Westfield, MA — the place known as "100 acres" that is now permanently preserved under the Winding Rivers Land Trust. Harold Murphy worked with three local businessmen to preserve over 30 acres of open space in memory of his brother Brian, who was killed at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (9-11). Harold is a real estate developer with experience in open space conservation and a deep commitment to the historic preservation of his rural, western Massachusetts community. Both he and his brother had a prior interest in preserving this piece of property that was owned by longtime Westfield resident and personal friend, Dick Fowler. After Brian's death, when an opportunity emerged to purchase the property, several friends and associates of Harold and Brian insisted that they do so in Brian's name.

For both aesthetic and sentimental reasons, this land is sacred to Harold and other Westfield residents. The stream, trestle, and patch of woodland are surrounded almost entirely by functioning farms and it takes a four wheel drive or a pair of boots to access this beautiful, hidden landscape. It is a place where kids come for parties, romance, isolation, and other excitement, immersed in densely vegetated nature. As Harold and Brian did in their youth, the current teenagers of Westfield continue to use the land as a wild refuge, a place of privacy out of the watchful eye of parents and a world apart from the everyday expectations of school, home, and community. The site was also the place where Harold and Brian, as adults, would go to catch up when

Brian would visit from New York City. Harold discussed his history with the site:

> "I do consider it sacred, but I guess I always have. As a kid, you come upon times when you really need to be by yourself because nobody loves you or whatever. This is where I would come and sit on the edge of the bridge and think about life and [ask] 'should you fall or not?' You come to your own grips with things. But I know if I come down here and walk around, I'm recharged and I know that the world is good and life is going to go on. I can hear my friends' voices and see the playing around we did down here as little kids. I feel it, very strongly."

The natural beauty of the site and the personal memories he holds from growing up in that landscape are what make it sacred. He continues to use the site as a place for quiet walks and family visits, both with his 8-year-old daughter, as well as Brian's widow and two children. Harold has struggled with depression since Brian's death. Brian's children, in response to the loss of their father on 9-11, have been coping with

Harold Murphy
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delayed onset stress reactions, which makes having a place to go to "center their emotions" that much more important, according to Harold. The family refers to the site as "Brian's land" and takes comfort simply in knowing that it exists, in "knowing that their dad had a *place*." Right now, there is no signage or marker to indicate that the land is a memorial. No one but the family and a few neighbors know the intent of this preservation land; in some ways it is really a private memorial space in the public domain. The site is not used for formal remembrance or ceremony. Instead, it is a space to create positive new memories, while being enveloped by fond older memories that are imbued in that place.

In terms of future use of the forest, the land will remain in a state very similar to its current condition. A landscape architect was consulted on this project, and he advised Harold and the land trust to simply "leave it alone" because of the natural beauty of the site. It will not likely be farmed again, though wild asparagus may continue to grow. The adjacent tobacco farm is still active. The only notable difference in the landscape is a set of housing developments on the bluff overlooking the back portion of the lands, allowing the residents a prized, wooded viewshed. A planned rail-trail will eventually bring active recreation through the site in the form of walkers, runners, and bicyclers. The only aspect of the site that may be developed as more of a built memorial will be three granite benches with the names of Westfield's deceased on 9-11, and stone monuments to "justice, peace, mercy, and love", which — according to a Hebrew creation tale — are the attributes that brought the world out of chaos. These built monuments will be adjacent to a planned peace and teaching garden to be created and maintained by area schoolchildren, to help teach values of stewardship and nature.

Landscape as Memorial

Landscape can support human health not only through direct biophysical services and benefits, but also through social functions that — while sometimes subtle and not easy to detect — remain vital to the health of individuals and communities. Open space and natural resources are often used in acts of memorialization, acts of marking or designating land in memory of individuals or events. These accessible materials of the natural world become vehicles for expression, or ways of "gaining authorship", in Harold Murphy's words. Furthermore, across

many cultures and eras, sacred trees and groves have been used in rituals connected to the lifecycle (Rival 1999). In the context of the contemporary United States, trees and gardens have been planted and parks and forests have been dedicated as memorials in honor of a number of events of national significance, such as World War I, World War II, and more recently 9-11. The Living Memorials Project was created by the Forest Service at the direction of U.S. Congress immediately following 9-11. The Living Memorials Project consisted of a grants program aimed at supporting communities and stewardship groups in the creation of landscape-based living memorials, as well as a multi-year research project to understand changes in the use of natural resources in response to 9-11. Through that research, which was directed by Erika Svendsen and me, I came to recognize some of the deeply sacred ways in which landscape is used as memorial space and healing space. The Brian Joseph Murphy Memorial Preservation Land is just one of the 700 memorials that we documented and the 150 groups that we interviewed.

When thinking of 9-11 memorials, much attention is given to New York City, the Pentagon, and Shanksville, PA, where the physical crash sites are located and where memorials aimed at national audiences will eventually be created. However, the living memorials research revealed a powerful, dispersed network of community-based memorials that spans the country and occurs in all sorts of site types, embedded in the everyday landscape. The Westfield, Massachusetts site of Brian Joseph Murphy's memorial does not have any immediate or significant geographic connection to New York City, but Westfield was Brian's hometown, and he was living in New York City and working at the World Trade Center at the time of 9-11. These sorts of invisible social networks became more apparent and readable through the landscape following the tragedy of that day. Families, friends, and communities, marked their lawns, schoolyards, parks, and town greens with memorials. Clusters of 9-11 memorials are apparent in the Boston area — from which two of the planes departed — and in the Los Angeles area — where two of the planes were originally destined. Other clusters exist along commuter corridors in New Jersey and Long Island, as well as in retirement communities in southern Florida, and the Virginia and Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. (Svendsen and Campbell 2006).

Adjacent land uses: shade tobacco farms and a bicycle plant.

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A small river winds through the site.
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The abandoned train trestle will be converted into a hike-bike trail.
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This forest is not the only memorial to Brian in Westfield. Harold showed the Living Memorials Project researchers two other sites in town: a picnic pavilion at the Sons of Erin (an Irish American social club) dedicated to the three residents of Westfield that were lost; and a prayer garden at the Genesis House church. Harold said,

"It's very bittersweet to come down and see the memorials. To be quite honest, a lot of times you don't want to come and see them. But, it's good. It is good. You need to remember."

Though he is both touched by and proud of these memorials, Harold noted that he is not able to visit these memorials very often, they are simply too painful as reminders of his loss. The same is true to an even greater degree with the Ground Zero site. Although Harold goes back every year on Sept. 11 and some other occasions, it is a deeply emotional and painful trip to make. "It's a good thing and a bad thing to go," Harold said. Not only did Harold suffer the trauma of losing his brother on that day, but also he was a direct witness to the event; he was at Ground Zero when Building 7 collapsed, surrounded by military, paramilitary, and police forces — memories that flood back and return to him in layers any time he visits the city. Harold does not even have to visit the site to be reminded of his loss; images of the New York City skyline, or the Twin Towers, are replayed in the media and repeated throughout the quotidian human terrain of diners, gas stations, and bumper stickers. His personal loss is part of the shared grief of the nation.

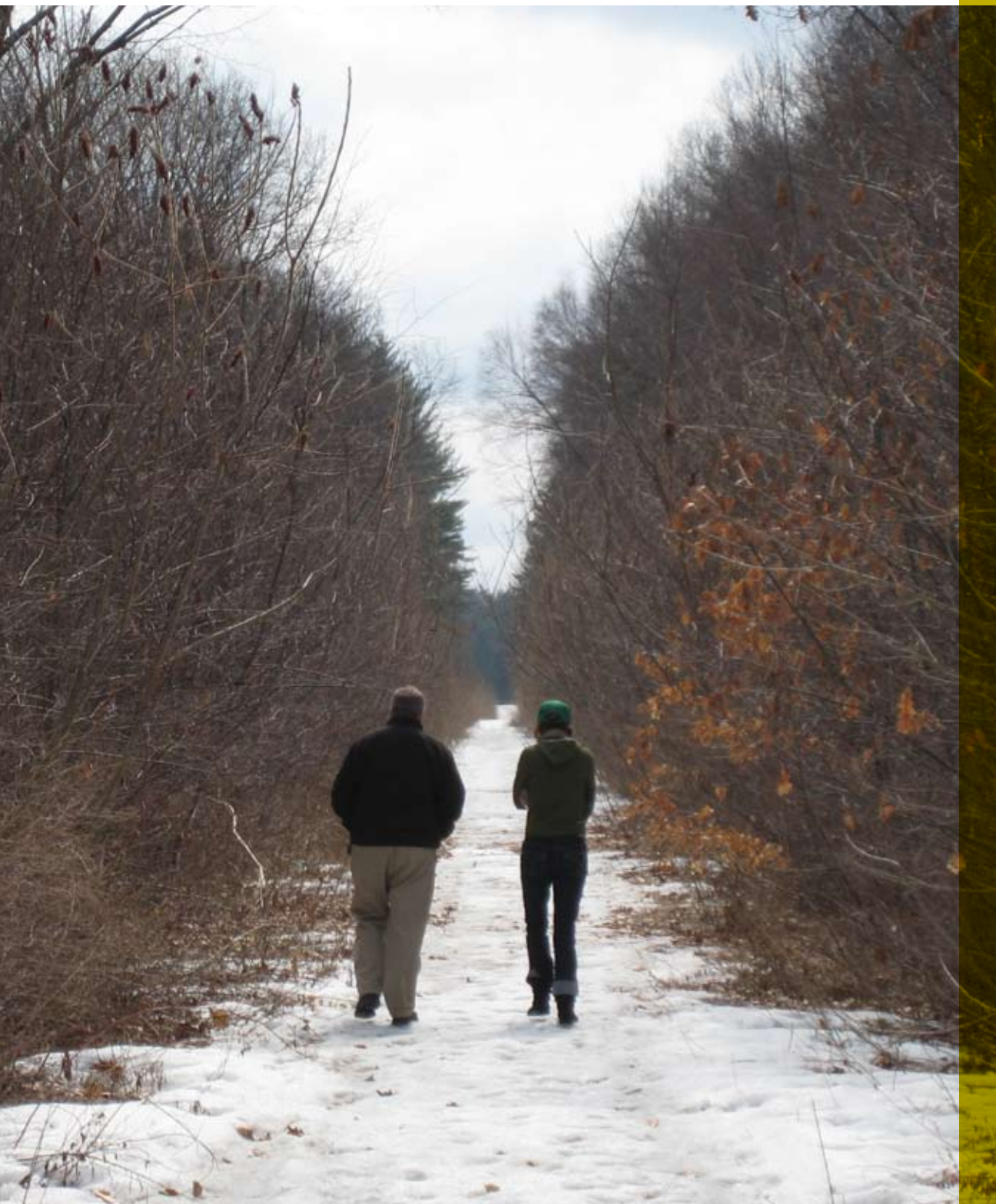
The subsequent design debates and real estate deals that have unfolded at the World Trade Center site have left Harold frustrated and alienated. Along with many other 9-11 family members, Harold believes that the site is sacred, hallowed ground that should never be developed and should be left as passive, open space. He noted that we would never think to build office space and skyscrapers atop Civil War battlefields; but there are no American precedents for a terrorist act of this scale in such an urban center. Furthermore, he finds the claims of "balance" between development and memorial uncompelling. In this case, there is no middle ground for him — "you either do the right thing or you don't." The competing interests and desires for the site set up an almost intractable planning problem. It is no wonder, then, that family members and friends of victims, even in the immediate New York City area, turned

to their own backyards and communities to create sacred places to honor the memory of the deceased. In this way, family members are able to have a meaningful voice in where and how their loved ones are remembered. Thus, memorials are sites for those who live on, though they are created in the name of the deceased. This is — perhaps counter-intuitively — as much Harold's memorial as it is Brian's.

The Stewardship of Memory

Just like thousands of other family members, Harold Murphy devoted much of his life immediately following the tragedy of 9-11 to the public and private remembrance of his deceased loved one. Many families, including Brian's family, were deprived of the traditional rites of burial due to the fact that bodies were not recovered for many of the victims. These same family members were simultaneously thrust into contentious decisions about public funding, land use changes, and memorial design at the national memorial sites. Therefore, it is important to study the memorials that family members chose to take part in creating, maintaining, or using — sites that they embrace as "their own" — to try and understand at least some aspects of the memorial, healing, and recovery processes. The physical sites that family members establish and transform into living memorials will remain as legacies for the future, from unmarked open space, to parkland, to formal sites of remembrance. The ways in which they choose to remember their loved ones are often clear reflections of the ways they live their lives. The memorials are shaped by the physical places, social networks, and value systems of family members, other stewards, and their communities.

As a steward of the land trust and a resident of Westfield, Harold himself is personally invested and deeply committed. Even in its current, overgrown state, Harold enjoys walking the railroad right-of-way from the center of Westfield out to Brian's land. He observes the section as it progresses from commercial center, to residential areas, to former industrial sites, to agricultural land, to woods, providing a tangible, physical connection between his everyday landscape, the history of the community, and the forest. He described his personal history with the site in a narrative interwoven with the history of the town. His family moved to Westfield directly from Ireland in the mid-1800s. In 1904, his



grandmother bought the family homestead that is still in use today. With deep family roots in this small town, he refers to immigration waves, industrial shifts, past residents, infamous tales, and changes in land ownership in rich detail. For Harold, the memorial land takes its meaning not only from its beauty or ecosystem function, but from the way in which people interact with it — in this case from the Irish immigrant families, to the Jamaican and Mexican farm workers on the shade tobacco fields, to the current children of Westfield. Beyond Westfield, Harold is embedded in the entire western Massachusetts landscape. He can describe back roads in vivid visual detail; the act of giving directions becomes both an opportunity for storytelling and a history lesson. He relished the opportunity to describe beautiful vistas, winding roads, and to take this researcher to a local maple sugar shack.

Harold has also come to appreciate one of the greatest functions that environmental stewardship can serve through his local volunteer work with Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI). He serves on the board of this social service organization that supports underserved populations by offering leadership training and organizational support for participant-led community building projects. As **Erika Svendsen** argues in this volume, the need to create or control at least some aspect of one's life (particularly given that much of it is beyond our control) can often come to be articulated through the landscape. Harold shared an anecdote of a severely abused woman (who came to PLTI) who compulsively cleaned and rearranged her home throughout the time of the abuse, as it was the only means through which she could assert that control. Others express this same need in the landscape, through acts such as tree planting, mural making, memorial creation, and community gardening. Indeed, half of the projects that are proposed and enacted by PLTI participants during the 20-week leadership program are efforts that involve community stewardship of natural resources, including tree planting, community gardens, and neighborhood beautification projects. Harold believes that the parent participants are motivated to improve the physical environment in which they raise their children. Natural resources are accessible, all around us, and are vehicles for self-expression as individuals and a collective.

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Lindsay Campbell interviewing Harold Murphy, walking on the train right-of-way.
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Reflection

There is something special in this wooded landscape. For all of my appreciation of urbanity, community gardens, urban forests, and neighborhood greening, each time I visit this rather rural site I am forced to reckon with its beauty, its visceral emotional presence. Perhaps this is simply my experience of **biophilia**; the treed slopes surrounding the railroad right-of-way create protected, linear sightlines; the running water creates a pleasant white noise; the vivid red blossoms of the sumac draw my attention and the fuzzy branches invite human touch. And the rusting railway trestle reminds of "the necessity of ruins," as J.B. Jackson (1980) said. Not only the individual features, but the orientation of the site — off a dirt road, sandwiched between the back sides of properties — gives it a protected and isolated feel, despite its small size. As such, the site encourages Westfield youth to engage in the unstructured, naturalistic play that Richard Louv (2006) so prizes in his book "Last Child in the Woods." It seems that what creates a "Restorative Commons" from a physical, landscape design perspective is site specific; it is difficult to analyze, package, or export to other sites. But what captivates my attention and stirs such emotion in me is my ability to see the site through Harold's eyes, as a place of both respite and adventure. To hear of his passionate love for his community and the deep, shared memories embedded in a site is to understand "place attachment" in a nonconceptual way. Indeed, in the words of Stephen J. Gould, "We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well — for we will not fight to save what we do not love" (Gould 1991).

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While unique sites cannot be replicated or transposed, sound stewardship can be cultivated. Harold's passionate care for the landscape stems from positive and interactive experiences with it, suggesting a role for environmental educators, community groups, and natural resource managers. The story of experiences in nature can be told and retold — both passed down to children and shared with peers, with the implied call to go out and create our own experiences in the landscape. Harold's act of storytelling, his invitation to see the land through his eyes, is truly a "living memorial" to his brother and one with more humanity and emotion than any plaque fixed to the ground.

Furthermore, as issues such as climate change continue to increase in urgency and in the public awareness, it is important to think of natural resources holistically. Trees are not simply carbon sinks; gardens are not simply opportunities to retain urban storm water. Certainly they provide these important biophysical services, but they also shape our lived experience of a place. Landscape shapes our memories, our preferences, and aspects of our culture. And Harold's valuation and memories of his childhood and lifelong home motivated him to help preserve that legacy for future generations.

This environmental stewardship ethic is rooted in a deeply personal experience of place, rather than an abstract value of "nature." Though he is a real estate developer or perhaps because he is a developer, Harold understands the importance of public open space and wants the land to remain whole and accessible to people rather than carved into lots for private and exclusive use. All of his current development projects now have strong conservation requirements in which common lands are set aside as open space to be managed by a private nonprofit made up of landowners. Another legacy that this site is leaving is through the way in which it may inspire other future residents to join in the preservation effort. "It really galvanized people to think about what we could put together and what we could save," said Harold. "We got a lot of good local press and people are coming forward and saying 'I have land we'd like to preserve.'"

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