

# Materiality as Resistance

Five Elements  
for Moral Action  
in the Real World

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Foreword by Jim Wallis

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## Chapter 5

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# PLACE

*“How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father. . . .” So he set off and went to his father.*

—Luke 15:17–20

THE SON IN THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS WANTED OUT; he wanted to cash out his share of the family legacy and depart. His father agreed to his request. We do not know why the son wanted to leave home. Sometimes sons are like that. Perhaps he was simply venturesome and imagined an exciting life that was alternative to his settled home. Or maybe he found his father too demanding. Or maybe his entitled older brother was too much for him to bear. In any case, he left to a “distant country.” There he lacked the disciplines and restraints of his home environment, and he promptly lost his inherited purse by “squandering” in “dissolute” ways. He had departed home with *u-topian* (“no-place”!) imagination, that is, he dreamed of “no place” of belonging

or accountability, certainly not the expectations of his home. He wound up *placeless*; he discovered that he was *homeless*. Here I will conflate “home / home place / place” so that we may consider the meaning of “home” and the deep significance of a socially located “place” as an antidote to homesickness.

His abrupt moment of awareness (“He came to himself”) was materially based: he was eating pig slop! This was not his dream; this became his nightmare. He finally grasped the disconnect between *his dream* and *his bodily reality*. He could no longer permit his imagined freedom to override the truth of his hungry body. In that moment of acute self-awareness he got in touch with his body and now could imagine what it would be like to resituate his *body* in the midst of his *home place*, in the presence of his father and his brother. Robert Wuthnow nicely characterizes “home”:

Social scientists conceptualize homes as places in which we routinely interact with people we know and care about, places in which we conduct the most routine activities of our everyday lives and in which we feel or aspire to feel safe. Homes are places of familiarity, memory, ambience, and habit and for this reason are the spaces we can take for granted much of the time and in which we can be comfortable.<sup>1</sup>

The first draw for the son was his knowledge that at home there was bread to spare (v. 17). Like his actions, Jesus’ stories characteristically witness to abundance! The father was a reliable provider. In his imagination, however, the son reached beyond bread to his father because his home place was defined by his father. He

remembered, moreover, that his father had filled his home place with uncompromising expectations. Thus “I have sinned.” He has, he recognized, merited the disapproval and rejection of his father, for his imagined *u-topian* (“no-place”!) life has violated all of the expectations of his home place and his father.

The first wonder of the story is that the son went home. He had discovered that without that home place, its resources, and its expectations, his life was unbearably diminished. Mature materiality is invited to reflect on what it means to belong to a home place with all of its expectations, requirements, demands, and gifts. Such reflection may also lead to fresh awareness of the cost of being without such a place, away from home. The second wonder of the story is that he was, much to his surprise, welcomed home.

The critical reflection of mature materiality concerning place (home place) might begin with a pondering of *homelessness*. Taken in largest scope, Martin Buber has written of the reality of homelessness in the modern world:

I distinguish between epochs of habitation and epochs of homelessness. In the former, man lives in the world as in a house, as in a home. In the latter, man lives in the world as in an open field and at times does not even have four pegs with which to set up a tent.<sup>2</sup>

Buber contrasts modern “homelessness” with the “habitation” made possible and assumed in the Middle Ages for European Christians who lived under a “sacred canopy” of stability. The new homelessness is the result of the modern scientific Copernican

revolution that caused human persons to lose their place in the cosmos:

All the walls of the house were in fact already crumbling beneath the blows of Copernicus, the unlimited was pressing in from every side, and man was standing in a universe which in actual fact could no longer be experienced as a house. . . . The Copernican concept only fulfilled what the human soul had vaguely felt in the hours when the house of universal space . . . seemed too cramped, and it dared to beat on its walls to see if a window could not be thrown out into the world beyond.<sup>3</sup>

Micheal O'Siadhail, to the contrary, takes Copernicus to be a venturesome emancipator who stood over against the church:

By stealth Copernicus has taken root  
when after sixty years of silence Rome  
joins in to forbid this teaching of the Sun.

...

our place between devils and the angels,  
our Earth as centre of God's universe  
all threatened by such a revolution  
that could unhinge the doors of our belief.<sup>4</sup>

Even his affirmative vote, however, witnesses belief "unhinge" with an open question about God and man:

A question rattles in an empty can:  
how here could man find God or God find man?

The son in the parable did not ponder the cosmic question of Buber or the cosmic wonder of O'Siadhail. He only noticed the material void in his life, and he could still remember the rooted resources of his father

and his home place. We may, however, draw the crisis of his *u-topia* (“no-place”!) closer than Buber’s cosmic dismay by considering the homelessness produced by contemporary technology that generates “virtual reality” but no social reality that has staying power. Already in 1974, long before the internet, Peter Berger, Bridgette Berger, and Hansfried Kellner wrote *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*.<sup>5</sup> That new reality of which Berger writes can be viewed as a matter of emancipation from old tradition that was often viewed as a restraint that felt like shackles. Thus modernity took as its great work, with its pursuit of speed, efficiency, and replaceable parts, the rejection of tradition that must make way for the new. Such eager emancipation left the individual isolated in freedom but without any community that provided either resources or restraints. Thus the son, in the parable, in a far country has no companions of any kind. He is alone, abandoned in his lack of resources. He is a hired hand without the protection of a trade union; he is left desolate and desperate. The social reality of abandonment that he experienced is replicated in the “homelessness” of contemporary technology with its capacity to radically displace.

Buber’s philosophical reflection and Berger’s riff on technology are given acute specificity and contemporaneity by the compelling analysis of Shoshana Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.<sup>6</sup> Zuboff traces the aggressive way in which the great research engines, specifically Google and Facebook, have intruded into the most intimate and personal dimensions of our experience. Indeed our “experience” has been transposed into

marketable “behavior,” so that Google and Facebook sell data about our experience to marketers in a way that contributes to the ruthless, uncaring commoditization of our lives. She describes our new social reality as one of “exile” in which we experience a loss of a capacity for privacy and intimacy. We are left, she notes, with an unbearable yearning:

[It is] homesickness and longing of separation from the homeland [common] among emigrants across the centuries. Now the disruptions of the twenty-first century have turned these exquisite anxieties and longings of dislocation into a universal story that engulfs each one of us.<sup>7</sup>

We are left with what she characterizes as a “Requiem for a Home.”

Mature materiality will do the hard work of making a connection between “the homeless mind” and the “homeless body,” so that when we speak of homelessness—loss of place—we will have both in purview. A connection is made by Craig Fuller, who writes of his “bodily homelessness” in Seattle, the home of the great technological engines Microsoft and Amazon. Under the title “The Homeless Industrial Complex Problem,” Fuller describes his own desperate homelessness in his city that is at the head of technological domination but that cannot muster resources to provide houses for those without resources.<sup>8</sup> We may conclude that those with *homeless minds* (generated by the new intrusive technologies) are not likely to notice those with *homeless bodies* (of the left out and left behind who live in economic isolation).

This linkage may lead mature materiality to wonder how it is that we not only live in an economy that

is *occupied by homeless persons*; we live in an economy that is busy *producing homeless persons*. The capacity to produce homeless persons is deeply enmeshed in a privatized, greedy economy of low wages, predatory loan arrangements, and regressive tax policy. It is easy enough, moreover, to imagine that much of our current homelessness is a residue of slavery in which a population of laborers ended a lifetime of work with no resources.<sup>9</sup> So it is with us now with many workers who are not officially slaves but who end a lifetime of work without resources. That systemic production of homeless persons is a direct result of “technological homelessness” whereby the successful in the technological enterprise to some great extent have no interest in, capacity to notice, or willingness to support and pay for a viable social network for those in need of housing. The current inability to deal with student indebtedness is only a recent example of the indifference of the predatory economy to the requirements of the less privileged for a viable life support.

Berger used the word “consciousness” in his subtitle. That term refers to the power of technology to induct into an alternative way of knowing and living.<sup>10</sup> But “consciousness” is also the right word for what happened to the son in the parable: “He came to himself.” He became conscious of his true situation of abandonment and hunger. The consciousness of which Berger writes, however, is very different. It contradicts mature materiality because it is detached from the bodily, the historical, and the social.

The son found a resolution to his abandonment. He went back home to his rightful place. He resubmitted

to the reality of that place, to its requirements, to its expectations, to the expectations of his father, to the irksome presence of his brother, to a place infused with abundance and rootage, the very abundance and rootage from which he had fled. In order to start that return journey, however, he had to acknowledge his hunger; he had to abandon his *u-topian* (“no-place!”) fantasy of being unfettered by his rootage. He had to recognize that his anticipation for a far country was in fact a lethal illusion. Until he came to that “consciousness,” he could not make a move back to a place of human viability.

The wonder for him, of course, is that when he got home, he was welcomed. That was not what he had expected, because he had become inured to the callous indifference of the far country that never welcomed anyone and that made every relationship transactional. It turned out that his home and his *homecoming* radically contradicted his experience in the far country of *homelessness of mind and body*.

The Bible knows about the crisis of homelessness and expects that adherents to covenant will resist such predatory behavior. On the one hand, the remarkable mandate of Isaiah intends to counter homelessness by home making:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

.....

[To] bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Isa. 58:6–7

The Hebrew word translated “kin” means “flesh,” the extreme articulation of solidarity. Lent, when this text from Isaiah is usually read in church, is a wondrous time to consider faithful effective strategies to respond to homeless persons. The covenantal response to homelessness is responsible solidarity that mobilizes resources sufficient for home making. In addition to such charitable investments, Zuboff urges resistance to and disruption of the uncontested force of the dominant research engines. She issues the imperative “be the friction,” and concludes:

The Berlin Wall fell for many reasons, but above all it was because the people of East Berlin said, “No more!” We too can be the authors of many “great and beautiful” new facts that reclaim the digital future as humanity’s home. No more! Let this be *our* declaration.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the covenantal tradition is aware that the predatory economy is busy “making homeless,” by the ways in which the powerful prey on the vulnerable. The classic case is the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kgs. 21), in which the power of the crown preys upon a vulnerable peasant.<sup>12</sup> The covenantal tradition is at pains to preclude such predatory action undertaken by smart lawyers, aggressive real estate agents, or the exercise of eminent domain. The code language in Scripture concerns “moving boundary markers” whereby property is legally seized from those who cannot defend themselves and thereby wind up homeless:<sup>13</sup>

You must not move your *neighbor's* boundary marker, set up by former generations, on the property that will be allotted to you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess. (Deut. 19:14; italics added; see Prov. 22:28)

Here it is the property of a “neighbor,” the neighbor who is exactly in purview in the final of the Ten Commandments:

You shall not covet your *neighbor's* house; you shall not covet your *neighbor's* wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your *neighbor*. (Exod. 20:17; italics added)

In Proverbs 23:10–11, the matter is more acute, for it concerns “orphans” who lack a patriarchal defender:

Do not remove an ancient landmark  
or encroach on the fields of *orphans*,  
for their redeemer is strong;  
he will plead their cause against you.  
Prov. 23:10–11; italics added;  
see 15:25 on the boundary  
marker of a widow

These are provisions designed to protect vulnerable people from becoming displaced and homeless. A covenantal community (like the ones to which mature materiality pertains) aims to refuse and resist the *u-topian* (“no-place!”) displacement of replaceable parts, replaceable persons, and replaceable places.

Mature materiality, like that of the son in the parable, knows that a faithful life requires participation in, attentiveness to, and loyalty to a place. The son came to know this; upon his return he finds his rightful place defined

by adequate food, festive welcome, and a gracious safe-making father. Embrace of such a life-giving place presents us with two generative questions about place.

First, *where am I supposed to be?* To ask this question is already to acknowledge that there is a “right place” to be that should not be confused with the bright lights of a “far country” of *u-topia* (“no-place!”) that is anti-human. A vacation in *u-topia* may be in order but, as the son discovered, it cannot become one’s “continuing city” (Heb. 11:14; NRSV “homeland”). For good reason it is high praise to say of someone, “He never forgot where he came from.” Everyone comes from somewhere. Everyone comes from a particular place with its particular hope and particular resources and particular social protocols and particular foods. These particulars may be amended and critiqued, but they cannot be safely scuttled in a wholesale way for the sake of rootless imagination. Thus the “right place” to be is a place that is infused with particulars that impose costs, give gifts, and offer rootage. We are not meant to be and finally cannot be rootless, placeless occupants of “nowhere”; finally we must be obligated, contributing partners in a time and place.

The vow of “stability” taken by some monks is instructive. That vow means to spend one’s life invested “on location” without the illusion that elsewhere, any elsewhere, would be preferable. Thus a “place” is an actual human venue in which one puts down one’s buckets in durable ways. For many persons the liturgy of a particular religious community lends staying power to a place. This is true in Christian liturgy, and no less true in other traditions as well.

Second, we may ask about our right place, *how is it that I should inhabit that particular place of home?* Well, NOT as *user, consumer, possessor, exploiter, or predator*. These are models of occupation that are appropriate for a commoditized society in which those with “homeless minds” are unable to care about those with “homeless bodies.” Mature materiality rejects and refuses all such convenient modes of habitation that are marked by indifference, apathy, fatigue, or selfishness. The intention of mature materiality is to identify and enact more appropriate forms of habitation. Here are four markers for such responsible habitation:

1. Mature habitation of one’s right place is as an *heir*. The son in the parable was an heir, but he had forgotten that as an heir he not only owned the land but the land owned him. He belonged to the land. When he forgot his role as an heir, he could depart into a far country. When he returned to his father, however, he reentered his legacy and knew, from that moment, that he belonged to the land and it was his place of being and belonging.

In his narrative, Naboth is an example of a responsible heir (1 Kgs. 21). The royal power couple, Ahab and Jezebel, regard Naboth’s vineyard as a fungible piece of property for buying and selling. They think about every place through the lens of commodity. Naboth, however, knows better. He knows that his vineyard property is not fungible. It cannot be “transacted” but, as he asserts, it is his “ancestral inheritance” (v. 3). It has always been the home of his family. It is where he belongs. He must work and protect the vineyard because he belongs to it. This narrative is a

stark example of two modes of habitation that clash (see Buber). Here, in this narrative as almost always, the force of *commoditization* seems to have the upper hand, a fact that makes habitation as *inheritance* difficult. The narrative attests, however, that the God who gives a livable place is fully on the side of such habitation that can so readily be overturned by usurpation. Wendell Berry has educated us all about the land as inheritance that cannot be traded as fungible property.<sup>14</sup> Mature materiality requires a full commitment to such regard for one's right place and equal regard for the right place of the neighbor, including the vulnerable neighbor. In our society it is the aggression of gentrification that most readily puts vulnerable inheritance at risk.<sup>15</sup>

2. The right way to inhabit one's right place is as *neighbor*. The role of neighbor pertains not only to next-door folk with whom we may feel comfortable. It means also to recognize all the inhabitants of the community as companions in a common enterprise. It means to acknowledge gladly that they are entitled to respect, safety, and viability that are guaranteed by common concern and common investment. In a commoditized economy, there are no neighbors with whom we can make common cause. There are only isolated individuals who live private lives and who are at bottom rivals and competitors for scarce goods. Neighborliness refuses every part of that formulation: not isolated, not rivals, not competitors, and not scarce goods. The neighborhood depends on an expectation and practice of generosity and a readiness to share what one has for the sake of the common good. Such

generosity pertains not only to those whom we like and with whom we feel comfortable. Such sharing, moreover, consists not only in face-to-face generosity, but in sustainable transformative charity and, beyond that, in acceptance of taxation that is appropriate to the needs of the neighborhood.

The mandate to “love your neighbor” (Lev. 19:18; Mark 12:31) is defining for mature materiality. This commandment, Paul declares, is “the whole law [Torah] summed up” (Gal. 5:14). The biblical tradition, moreover, continues to expand the scope of “neighbor” until it includes all the vulnerable, for whom “widow, orphan, and immigrant” are representative persons.

3. Mature materiality requires that we inhabit our right place as *partners with the place*. Thus rather than the place belonging to the “owner,” in partnership the place and the owner belong to each other and are cast together in a long-range destiny. It follows that the owner is assigned to a purpose not of maximizing production, but rather of enhancing the well-being of the home place. Wendell Berry writes of “kindly use” of the land that depends upon intimate knowledge of the terrain of the property.<sup>16</sup> The purpose of such “kindly use” is the prospect of durability in the right place, an assumption that coming generations may inhabit this right place. Thus the owner of the right place is not the final occupant but in fact belongs to a long chain of those who have inhabited and who will inhabit in time to come.

4. Mature materiality requires that one be alert to one’s role as *citizen*, that is, having active responsibility

for the public good. This responsibility evokes participation in the political life of the community and a readiness to engage with other neighbors in the demanding work that submits private interests to the public good.

I should add a note about the right place being variously rural or urban.<sup>17</sup> It is an easier case to make one's practice of habitation as *heir, neighbor, partner, and citizen* in a rural community where institutions are more accessible, where the population is more likely to be homogeneous, and where face-to-face interactions are more readily available. Such a portrayal of rural habitation may be tempted to romanticism. But to refuse romanticism about rural life (as Wendell Berry refuses) one must recognize that rural life is not on offer for everyone. Many persons will, for a variety of reasons, be urban dwellers. In densely occupied urban habitats, the same call to be *heir, neighbor, partner, and citizen* is sounded. Only there it is more complex and in some ways more demanding. But these same markers for the right place pertain, even if on a different scale. In urban settings one can more feel detached from such a summons. For that reason the insistence of the urban church on right habitation is all the more important. The church community can vouch for a narrative of responsible habitation and be a body of companions engaged in good work for the "right place."

In both urban and rural settings there will be many who are "homeless" and lack a right place. For some it will be a *homeless mind*, a life of focused on virtual reality rather than on the real neighborhood. For many others it will be *homeless bodies* that are

rendered destitute by a predatory economy that willfully “leaves behind.” In the face of such dual “homelessness,” mature materiality is to be engaged in home making. As we do so, the best affirmation is this most direct one:

'Tis the gift to be simple,  
 'Tis the gift to be free,  
 'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be.<sup>18</sup>

The operational word is “gift.”<sup>19</sup> Being in the right place is a gift, not an achievement. If it were an achievement, one could imagine one is entitled and owes no one anything. If, however, a right place is a gift, then the appropriate response is gratitude, a practice that sends us passionately back into the neighborhood in a way that notices the *homeless* (*homeless minds, homeless bodies*), and that does *home making* after the manner of the home-making God:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 10:17–19)

I will end with the wise counsel of David Brooks:

We are bound together by our affection for our place. . . . Out-radicalize the left and the right by offering a different system of power, a system in which power is wielded by neighbors, who know their local context and trust one another.<sup>20</sup>

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### The Bible

Brueggemann weaves two primary biblical texts throughout his comments in this chapter: Luke 15:11–32 (parable of the Two Sons) and 1 Kings 21:1–16 (Naboth’s vineyard). Consider reading both at the start of the group’s discussion, inviting participants to be mindful of when they can inform their responses to the material in the chapter.

### The Book

Consider beginning with the ending: recall the chapter’s closing quote from David Brooks: “We are bound together by our affection for our place” (p. 86).

- What in your experience makes that statement ring true? Or false?

Key points in Jesus’ parable of the Two Sons are (1) the prodigal son *went* home, and (2) he was *welcomed* home.

- What does it mean to belong to a home place?
- What are the costs of being away from a home place?

In citing the writings of Zuboff (pp. 75–79), Brueggemann calls attention to her description of our

present social reality as a kind of exile, “in which we experience a loss of capacity for privacy and intimacy.”

- To what extent do you feel as though you live in exile? What other images might better convey your experience?

Brueggemann appeals to Isaiah 58 to call for “home making” to be the proper response of mature faith to the homelessness of mind and body in our society.

- Where do you see evidence that we live in an economy that is both occupied by and produces homeless persons?
- What attitudes, actions, and resources are needed for us to counter homelessness with home making?

Just as the son in Jesus’ parable found his rightful place when he returned home, Brueggemann claims that “a faithful life requires participation in, attentiveness to, and loyalty to a place” (p. 80). Two questions follow:

- Where are you supposed to be? What is the place you are rooted in and contribute to?
- How should you inhabit your “right” place to be?

The question about how we should inhabit our home places invites further discussion around what Brueggemann identifies as five “models of

occupation” and “four markers of responsible habitation” (pp. 82–85).

- How do you inhabit your home place as *user, consumer, possessor, exploiter, predator?*
- How do you inhabit your home place as *heir, neighbor, partner, citizen?*

Close your discussion by reciting together the familiar Shaker hymn lyric on page 86.