

The Reluctant Pilgrim: Sounds of Silence

The pilgrimage moves on. With Moses, we experienced the burning longing of desire created by the loss of privilege and the exposure to the larger world, suffering of those who were oppressed. With Mary, we experienced the hot tears that come when one's home has disappeared while we wait to hear our name to be recognized again by the Divine. And with Jacob, we have wrestled on that road, wrestled with the dark demons of fear, wrestling long enough to have those that appear to be evil name us new, God's wrestlers.

The journey is often long and grueling. To be on the road, to be a road warrior is exhausting. It is hard to be constantly adapting to environments that are new and changing, and sometimes we wear ourselves out. Sometimes we become so exhausted that we cannot speak. Sometimes we become so limp that we cannot sing. And all we can do is sit. Sometimes it is negotiating the new roads of life that come to us, not by our own choice but by the choice of life itself, negotiating the losses that come because we have loved and because that love has disappeared. But sometimes it is also exhaustion that comes from the loss of a dream, a dream that has been achieved, because when a dream is achieved, it is no longer a dream.

I have a friend who worked for several years on her dissertation. She studied, and she researched, and she wrote, and she talked to her professors, and she went back and rewrote, and rewrote, and rewrote, and finally, finally she finished her dissertation. She walked across the stage and received her diploma, and she sunk into a major depression, for she was lost. She did not know what to do, because her dream had been achieved, and she was exhausted.

Elijah had been successful, and one of the most dangerous things in life is to be successful. Elijah had achieved what no one else could achieve. Elijah had struggled with the gods of the culture, had struggled and invited his own God to come and to transform the culture, and to his surprise, God had come. God had come, and Elijah had achieved his dream. And then, he was depressed. He sat down under a broom tree and complained to God.

We exhaust ourselves, and when we do, be it because our world has changed against our world or because it has changed because of our will, we become exhausted, and our body slows us down sometimes. Sometimes we get sick. I remember my dad, who worked hard to raise five children in a time in which there were very little resources available. He worked hard day and night. He built three Dairy Queens, and we all worked in the Dairy Queen, and he was responsible for managing from 8:00 in the morning til 11:00 at night. And I remember those few vacations we took. They began with a migraine headache.

The body shuts us down sometimes when we are exhausted, and we have to slow down. We have to find a space to slow the pace so that we can somehow restore the strength that has disappeared. In my own journey, it was the car. The car was the place that became my sanctuary, because I could get on the road. One of the discoveries I made on this journey was that I no longer wanted to drive the highways. The interstates annoyed me. What I found myself doing was driving the back roads, even from my house to the church. I would drive through the neighborhoods off of the highway.

When I would go see my mother in Kansas City and then drive on down to Dallas to see my other daughter and her family, I found myself on those back roads where I would go through these towns that had wilted with the heat of an economic boom. These back roads where you could still see those mobile horses on signs. You could still see those faded signs on the side of barns that said “Bare Alignment.” You go through these towns and these sort of sad-eyed windows from Rexall drugstores and Five-and-Dime’s stared at you as you drove by. That’s where I wanted to be.

The highway annoyed me. I didn’t understand that until I was reading a novel by Milan Kundera called *Immortality*, and in this novel which is all over the place, there was this page that just jumped out at me and revealed to me why it was that I was wandering around on the back roads. He said, “The road is a strip of ground over which one walks. A highway is different from a road, because it is merely a line that connects one point with another. A highway has meaning only in that it gets you from one place to another. A road celebrates the space along the way.” And then he said this, “Before roads and paths disappeared from the landscape, they disappeared from the human soul.”

And I realized that in my own exhaustion, I was driven back to the back roads not only of the countryside but the back roads of my soul to the roads where space is not devalued, to the roads that are not simply points that connect one desire with another, but they are spaces that celebrate life along the way. And I realized that so much of my life had been spent on highways, avoiding the gifts that come from slowing down on the back roads.

A lot of the back roads, as one author has said who writes about the roads of Vermont – a lot of the back roads are dirt roads that blend into the environment, and he said, “The back roads and the dirt roads police themselves. They have their own speed bumps. You can’t go fast.” I was out in California recently. I looked at the map and followed the scenic highway. It took twice as long because of all the switchbacks and the stop signs, but we saw twice as much, because we slowed down.

When we slow down, we discover the gift of life that is available, not simply from point A to point B but the gift of life that is available along the way. Annie Dillard in that incredible book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, has slowed down so much that she has seen the incredible workings of the Divine, and the mystery, and the excitement of life in the minutest characters. She talks about a group of experimenters who studied one single grass plant, a grass plant of winter rye grown in a greenhouse for four months and then taken apart and looked at the soil. And underneath the microscope, they counted the root hairs. One does have to wonder.

Four months the plant had grown and had set forth almost 400 miles of root – one plant, 400 miles. That’s about three miles a day. And in this one grass plant, there were 14 million distinct roots. Now she says this is mighty impressive, but when they got down to the root hairs – again one has to wonder – it boggles the mind completely. In those same four months, the rye plant created 14 billion – that’s a “b” – 14 billion root hairs, and those little strands, tied end to end, reached 6000 miles. It’s amazing what you can discover if you just slow down and dig in and listen to the minutest sound within the soul.

Sometimes it is not enough to slow down. Sometimes we simply have to stop. Sometimes we have to find that sanctuary space to silence the sounds around, so that the sounds of silence might sing to us. Sometimes we have to find a cave, and Elijah had to

find a cave to settle the noise, the noise of the wind, the noise of the earthquake, the noise of the television, the noise of the internet, the noise of fire burning, burning the soul. You have to settle down into the darkness of a cave somewhere and silence the sounds, so that the sounds of silence might sing a new life.

In the midst of my journey, I found the silence a gift, a space of healing, a space in which I could be at rest and not be stimulated by the overwhelming demands of the world to pay attention. But when I went into the cave, one of the most frightening things was discovered there, the dark empty space – the emptiness that's there when all those words that once filled my life were not around me, the emptiness. And I became frightened, and I, frankly friends, felt abandoned by God, although there were those around me who suggested that maybe I had abandoned God rather than God abandoning me. But whatever the case, this is not a matter of making judgments about who is at fault. It is simply a naming of the experience of emptiness, of absence.

And for a long, long time I wondered where God was, and then it came to me. Then it came to me that God was the emptiness. God is that empty space. I was looking for the God who makes sounds. I was looking for the God who filled me with spirit, and God also comes by creating empty space, and God becomes that empty space within, ready to reach out and receive the creation of God anew. Sometimes our longing for the God that we have known blinds us to the God who is yet to be revealed. To go into that empty space is to go into a space where one can hear again the music of the soul.

This morning I was listening to the Motet Choir which is not back here right now. It was an amazing experience this morning. You didn't know it, most of you, but the last three days, one side of my head has been stopped up, and I couldn't hear out of one ear. You know, when you can hear the sopranos and the altos, it's so much more beautiful. And I could hear all of the organ, not just that half. To go into the cave is to unstop the other half of your head, so that you can hear in stereophonic sound.

One of the ways that I've tried to understand that in my own journey is that there are the chorus of our lives, the songs of our lives to which we dance, are songs that are four-part harmony. There is that part that, when it is sung, it reminds us of our past. It is the rich tradition of our common memory. It is the stories of our families. It is the stories of our faith. It is the stories of our nation and the heroes of our nation. It is the

stories of the saints of old. There is one whole line in the music of the soul that sings those stories and that shape how we act and how we live by the stories that we hear.

There's also another line of the soul's music that is the sounds and the words of the contemporary communities in which we live. There are those who are around us, our family right here and now, the friends around us who speak to us, the culture, the voices from Asia, the voices from Afghanistan, the voices from Pakistan, the voices from Northern Ireland. These are voices from our contemporary world that shape us, and they are a whole line of the music to which our soul listens.

Then there are those voices from deep within, those bass voices of the soul, those voices that are so deep and so embedded in the bone marrow, that we simply don't know where they came from. They simply function as our conscience. They function as those voices that when our stomach turns, because we are hurting, and we experience something, we have a physical response. They are those voices deep and base within us.

And then there are soprano voices from the future, calling us into that which we have yet to discover and know, those voices that whisper us into a future and invite us to certain spaces, certain actions tomorrow, and the next day, and the next year, and the year after. And in order to be whole spiritual persons, it is listening to all of the voices, and discerning the melody, and discerning the parts until it becomes a song that sings us into our future.

But it requires that we become silent for a while to hear that song, because some of those parts are only whispered. Some of those parts cannot be heard with the sounds that surround. It is in the cave that those whispered voices have a chance to emerge, and to find their own voice, and to bloom.

A few years ago, I was driving up the coast of California and Oregon, camping my way, sleeping on the beach, staring at the stars. When you get up into Washington, the coastal road disappears, and you move inland. I moved inland a little ways and headed on north, and I saw a sign, "Mt. St. Helen," and the car just by itself turned east. I had to go see. And the closer I got to that wounded mountain, the more at home I felt. The evergreens turned to gray ash. The space was barren and moonlike. I went to the visitor's center, and I began to read what that was like – what it was like on the day the earth exploded, and the side blew out of the mountain. I began to read about how the

lava had simply vaporized the landscape, how it had vandalized the valleys, and how the water and the lakes had simply been washed out, and new lakes were created, and old lakes disappeared. The place had simply disappeared under the gray ash of loss and destruction.

But an amazing thing – if you slowed down enough to look, there were some yellow flowers beginning to sprout out of stumps. There were things beginning to bloom, and there were little animals on the ground. And I read that the only thing that survived were the seeds and the animals that were underground.

When we're driven into caves of our lives and struck speechless, we are often driven into the underground where there is life waiting to be born, where there is new life waiting to bloom, and all of sudden that which at one point felt like a tomb, becomes the womb of new life.