

**Bridging Journeys**  
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Have you ever played one of those Facebook games, one of the ones where you proclaim to all of your friends—and all of the friends of friends who like your post—you proclaim which of the fifty states you have been in? The game is set up as a contest—my 30 (33 if you count ones I have only driven through), I say my 30 states beats your 15, and your 25, and your 29. You have 32? Ok—I do have 33! I win! Indiana—check. Tennessee—check. Georgia—check. I have also seen a similar contest for how many countries of the world you have traveled to. Now that one is a bit more challenging for most of us.

A while back, he lives somewhere else now, I had a friend who was making it a life aim—a serious bucket-list item—to visit every continent and country in the world. He was a master at finding airline and hotel deals, of making friends with folks from many other places who would invite him for a visit. Once, he took an all-expense paid, three-day trip to Paris, France—not Paris, Texas—Paris, France for only 25 cents plus tax. Yes, 25 cents plus tax, you heard me right. All airfare and hotels included for that super low price because of a misprint in an advertisement, a misplaced decimal point in a number. This guy was that kind of a hound for travel and travel deals. I haven't seen him for a while, but back when I knew him his country count was in the high fifties, more than half way there.

These contests, these counts of places visited, they kind of make taking a journey a matter of “acquisition”: I “have” this many under my belt. I “have” this many more to collect. I was kind of horrified to learn about the Buffalo and Erie County summer reading contest this year—which involves “collecting” all the county libraries. Go to each branch, and get a stamp. It is as if folks organizing the event forgot how truly terrible our public transportation can be. People without cars, without means, are going to be seriously challenged to make such a journey, no matter how awesome the programs and offerings in other towns might be. This goes for collecting states and countries, too. Some folks just can't take such journeys. No matter how much they might yearn to do so, it is simply beyond their financial means.

And there are other realities concerning journeys—some are fleeing for their very lives, but blocked by paperwork and prejudice from entering new lands of safety. Some folks can't travel out because they will be blocked, by paperwork and laws and walls and prejudice, from journeying to family in former lands. It is easy to talk about making a journey and often painfully and sorrowfully difficult to actually make one.

Now I have been fortunate to have more than my fair share of traversing the country and the globe, no barriers to my coming and going and with the necessary financial means, for which I am very grateful. But no matter if to New Orleans, Louisiana or Chennai, India, or even to Canandaigua, New York, a journey is an apprehensive event. I am leaving the familiar, the place to which I belong, where my memories run deep, where I am known and loved. Traveling can be scary. Journeying out necessitates a kind of self-recognition—I belong here and I don't belong there. And—who am I exactly, that I belong here and not there?

Once you have asked the question, once you see that who you are is located, at least in part, in where you are, you can fight the fear. Ralph Waldo Emerson tells us—I am paraphrasing a little: “Do not be too timid and squeamish about your [journey]. All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better. What if they be a little coarse, and you may get your coat soiled or torn? What if you do fail, and get fairly rolled in the dirt once or twice? Up again; you shall never be so afraid of a tumble.” The risk of the journey is good for us; every new journey prepares us for the risks of every subsequent one. So what if we are afraid; so what if we get a little dirty?

And honestly, what I am talking about here—the questions of who you are and how that plays out in terms of where you are located—this is not just about traveling to a different county or state or country. Whether we like it or not, whether we have the means for it or not, life itself is always already a journey. Like the little child in the offertory that Helen and Su brought us earlier, as soon as we are on that street car, we are moving. Maybe we know our own name, at the right moment. The conductor might know where the street car is going, and everything seems clear in that instant. But things quickly begin to merge and emerge—the smell of raspberries becomes a face like a macaroon. Exact descriptions meld imperceptibly into a metaphor for our own unfolding lives, a never-ending journey. That street car is more than a street car, and that child is more than his name.

As we head down the road, to the airport to fly across an ocean, or to the carport to drive to Ohio, or into the interiors of our own settled but changeable selves, the journey is hard to take, it is hard to make. Secure in a sense of self in this moment today, well, tomorrow, with its potential pressures and changes, is fearsome. Secure in my sense of self, any journey in time and space is going to jar me. I risk being misunderstood. I want to hear others' stories, sharing vicariously their experiences, but will it be a superficial meeting? Can we really make a full, an earnest connection? In my travels, especially to countries where I don't speak the language, I have often wondered—are we laughing at the same thing when we are laughing? Are we laughing together? When we are talking, are we crossing the boundaries of expression into understanding? Or working at cross purposes without knowing it? Mainly, I'm not sure. We might be on entirely different pages. But the sharing keeps on going, I keep hopeful when going down such roads. The connecting itself matters. It's got to matter, or all I am doing is acquiring places, checking off a box on a list of possible experiences to "have" in this short life of mine.

And, of course, these questions of being on the same page, they don't have to apply only to meeting people from Chennai . . . or Texas. We don't need even to go outside our own houses, most of the time. Tell the truth, please, fear not. Haven't you lifted up your head in a moment, in your own kitchen perhaps, and said to yourself or maybe even out loud to that person in the room with you: What the heck are you talking about? How can you think that? When did we grow so far apart? OK—maybe not so seriously, maybe not so scarily, in a lighter tone of voice: Huh, I didn't know you thought that way. I didn't know that meant so much to you. I didn't at all know you wanted that.

And, really, the other person in the room could be an actual other human being. It could also be you! In other words, we don't even need to leave our own houses to know that we are journeying, interiorly changing, even while we sit stably in our place—a house, a neighborhood, a social location, an identity. Shifts within us, and shifts within those in our intimate circles, they just happen, unbidden and often uncontrolled. And this is true within our larger circles as well—our places of work, our towns, our country, our church community. We don't need to go outside our familiar locations to take a journey.

Within ourselves and within our circles of community, we can explore the terrain, learn what matters and what doesn't, where the points of connection are, where the points of differentiation add more, more than I contain in my own limited self-sphere. With curiosity, we can explore ourselves in relation to those who matter to us, with those in the spaces and places that matter to us. We can explore more fully with reverence, praise and thanksgiving. In our interior journeys, into the reaches of our own hearts and minds and beings, we can simultaneously reach out, knowing that others take, each their own, interior journey, assured in our mutuality. And we can reach out and reach back, together, purposing to journey mutually toward goodness and beauty, toward respect for the diversity of our own ways within the human drama we all share with each other. As we sang together just a brief time ago, we are going, "we," and not just "I." We are going, we are going somewhere, unsure where and unsure how the journey is taking us. But with confidence within and faith in a larger unfolding, "we," not just "I," we will get there. With connection and companionship, we will all get there.

Yet we, all of us, we have to face what can be hard to face: We are less connected than we need to be. Even when we live in the same house, even when we hold the same principles, the same principles and sources and mission, we can hold ourselves in superficial relationship. It need not be an issue of another language, another culture, that keeps us apart, ignoring that we are not laughing at the same things, that we are not experiencing reality in the same ways, though we live in the same houses and cities and counties and countries, that we share the same church community. Each of us is an individual, and our separations from each other—those we control and those that seem beyond our ability to direct—that is painful. Yet simply the acknowledgment that we can be separated, even when we least expect it, that is an act of humility. From a position of humility, we find that it is better not to simply assume relationship. Rather, we position ourselves to build it in deliberate ways.

This building can be understood as a turn to God. Myself, I would say that the building of relationship itself is God. Building relationship is a renewal of our place in the world. Building relationship provides identity for the self and for what is not the self. But building relationship, whether with yourself or with another, can be frightening. Imagine it like rock climbing—careful movement from hand-hold to hand-hold, clinging while carefully discerning what the next move should be, the body itself the bridge. The body

itself the bridge from one idea that we hold onto to . . . to the next. And then, in rock climbing, like relationship building, we let go and swing free to the next hand-hold, the next notion or idea or learning.

We journey through time and space, ourselves the bridge between the gaps of identity and awareness, ourselves the bridges between who we are and who we will become, ourselves the bridges between my place, my location, and that of another person. This is all very scary. I might fail and take a tumble. What can make me brave? What can give me strength to take the climb, to bridge the differences, to grow internally? Thomas Merton says, "Compassion is the keen awareness of the interdependence of all things." Compassion will serve me on this journey to bridge the difference between one sense of self and the new self I grow into. Awareness will enable my change. Compassion will show me that I am not alone. It is love that is needed for the journey through and within our lives. Compassion, love, the only thing really needed, absolutely crucial because it takes away fear and pain and aloneness.

Building relationships, building connections, building community, all of this is a journey within ourselves as well as between ourselves of the moment and all the rest of the interdependent web of life—all the beautiful tragic world and all her people. When we are willing to take the risk, when we trust that love and compassion will hold us safe even when we fail and tumble and muss ourselves up, then we shed old selves, old perspectives, old ideas. We can die to the prison bars of fear and stagnation, of prejudice and hatred, of isolation and disconnection. We can let go and reach out, we can fly away and be reborn as connected selves, always already on the celestial shores of the holy, always in the midst of the singing hallelujah of the glorious creation of the planet and the universe, the glorious creation which includes our breakable, broken selves, myself and all my companions in this journey. Let us fly from weak and divided imaginings of ourselves. Let us die to these images, let us fly from them, let us celebrate the joy all around us, holding fast to each other so that we can escape those prison bars of our own consciousness and know the glory that is around us and in us and among us, especially among us.

The truth is, friends, at least as I see it, the truth is that we, each of us, we are not "done," we are not complete. The journey continues, and we are not alone in it. And we are not contained within circles either, or not only. We have our circles and we can

widen the circle, make it more inclusive with our compassionate and loving curiosity. We can remember that the freedom and justice in our land does not apply equally, is not felt equally by all the people of our country. But we are not simply traveling in circles, my friends, no matter how comfortable or how expansive they may be. Our journeys—inward and outward ones—are to the horizon, to the place of dreams, toward the unknown but desired, toward the unfolding future of freedom and justice, of connection and compassion shining like a path of light on water, light from the sun or the moon and also beyond it. And we need that horizon, we need to move out of our circles, we need to be the bridges of relationship because we are always more than ourselves, full of the potential to hold opposites in tension, full of desire to exceed our bonds and our bounds. Together, hand-holds for each other, may we journey together toward the unfolding horizon, limitless and into which we can lovingly and confidently allow ourselves to flow. May you feel it so.