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The Practice of Getting Lost

WILDERNESS

Why, when God's world is so big,
did you fall asleep in a prison
of all places?

—*Jelaluddin Rumi*

When I first moved to the land where I live, I shared it with a herd of cows. The first thing I noticed about them was that they were pure white. The second thing I noticed was how predictable they were. With a hundred acres at their disposal, they had worn narrow paths across those acres to their favorite watering holes, shady spots, and clover patches. When they wanted to get from one of those places to another, they lined up single file and followed the tracks they had made across vast expanses of pasture. Some of these tracks were no more than eight inches wide, which is about one-fourth the width of a cow. Yet the cows knew exactly where to put their feet, even without looking.

Since I soon found myself following those same tracks when I walked the land, I think I understand something about why the

cows use them. In most cases, the tracks mark the shortest route from point A to point B. Where they do not, that is because the cows have found ways to get where they are going without expending too many calories. In these cases, the tracks avoid both steep climbs and dicey descents, choosing long stretches under leafy tree lines wherever possible.

For my purposes, the most valuable thing about the tracks is that I can see where I am putting my feet. This is important when you share land with timber rattlers and groundhogs as well as white cows. The last thing you want when you are half a mile from home is to surprise a sunbathing rattlesnake or step into a groundhog burrow, which can swallow your leg up to the kneecap before you even see it. Did I mention the yellow jackets? They too make homes in the deep grass, and they value their privacy.

So I understand the use of narrow paths through wide swaths of unpredictable territory. I do the same thing when I drive to work, taking the shortest route with the lightest traffic, even when that means I see the same subdevelopments and strip malls every day. I take this track so unconsciously that on the days when I mean to deviate from it—to run an errand or to keep an appointment in another direction—I sometimes find myself a mile past my unusual turn before I come to my senses.

I am convinced that this is normal human behavior, which means that something extra is needed to override it. Why override it? Because once you leave the cow path, the unpredictable territory is full of life. True, you cannot always see where you are putting your feet. This means you can no longer afford to stay unconscious. You can no longer count on the beat-down red dirt path making all of your choices for you. Leaving it, you agree to make your own choices for a spell. You agree to become aware of each step you take, tuning all of your senses to exactly where you are and exactly what you are doing.

When I do this, I hear the buzzing of the yellow jackets in time to take a detour around their front door. I see the gap in

the grass around the groundhog hole in time to step around it. I sing old Baptist hymns to warn the snakes that I am coming. They do not want to see me any more than I want to see them, after all. What I see instead is the tiny wild blue iris that grows close the ground. I see the round bed in the tall grass where the doe sleeps with her twin fawns at night, and the hornet's nest no bigger than a fist, hanging from the underside of a thistle leaf.

Leaving the known path turns out to be such a boon to my senses—such a remedy for my deadening habit of taking the safest, shortest route to wherever I am (usually late) going—that I decide to get lost on my way home from work. I turn left down a road I have never followed before, though I have lived a dozen years in this small county. The road leads me into the ghost town of an old mill on the river, where the hulks of deserted buildings perch at the edge of the river like a herd of petrified mastodons. Turning away from them, I follow the winding road past an old softball diamond, complete with ramshackle bleachers, where the mill workers must have played at one time.

Before I know it, I am lost in the lives of those people as well—living in mill houses, going to the mill church, working for mill owners who paid them in chits they could use at the mill store—which, like the softball diamond, has fallen into ruin. But the road I have chosen to get lost on will not let me stay there. Leading me past the boundaries of the old mill town, it turns to dirt, taking me through a stretch of woods before presenting me with a small neighborhood of consummate country houses. One house has been added on to so often that it looks like a dowager who has had too much cosmetic surgery. Another has so many whirligigs in the yard that I do not register the house at all. A third sits at an unfortunate bend in the road, so that the porch, the windows, and the once-white siding are all covered with fine red dust churned up by passing motorists. A hand-painted sign in the front yard reads, "Slow Please."

By the time this unknown road dumps me back onto a

highway I know, my detour has cost me ten minutes—a fortune, at the fevered pitch of my day—which I gladly pay for the liberating proof that I am still able to leave the thin paths I have worn with my frugal, fearful hooves.

THESE ARE BENIGN FORMS of getting lost, I know, but you have to start somewhere. If you do not start choosing to get lost in some fairly low-risk ways, then how will you ever manage when one of life's big winds knocks you clean off your course? I am not speaking literally here, although literal lostness is a good place to begin since the skills are the same: managing your panic, marshalling your resources, taking a good look around to see where you are and what this unexpected development might have to offer you.

In my life, I have lost my way more times than I can count. I have set out to be married and ended up divorced. I have set out to be healthy and ended up sick. I have set out to live in New England and ended up in Georgia. When I was thirty, I set out to be a parish priest, planning to spend the rest of my life caring for souls in any congregation that would have me. Almost thirty years later, I teach school. The last time I tried to iron one of my old black cotton clergy shirts, the rotted fabric gave way beneath my fingers.

While none of these displacements was pleasant at first, I would not give a single one of them back. I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path. I have lived through parts of life that no one in her right mind would ever willingly have chosen, finding enough overlooked treasure in them to outweigh my projected wages in the life I had planned. These are just a few of the reasons that I have decided to stop fighting the prospect of getting lost and engage it as a spiritual practice instead. The Bible is a great help to me in this practice, since it reminds me that God does some of God's best work with people who are truly, seriously lost.

Take Abraham and Sarah, for instance, the first parents of the Hebrew people. The Bible gives no reason for God's choice of Abraham and Sarah except their willingness to get lost. They were not young. They were not spiritual giants. All they really had going for them was their willingness to set off on a divinely inspired trip without a map, equipped with nothing but God's promise to be with them. Most Sunday school teachers stop there, but if you follow Abraham and Sarah all the way to Egypt and back, you get the kinds of details that mark genuine wilderness time. Abraham passed Sarah off as his sister at least twice to avoid getting hurt by powerful men who found her attractive. Abraham had terrible dreams in which God showed him the suffering that would come upon his descendants. Sarah got so tired of Abraham asking her if she was pregnant yet that she sent him in to sleep with her handmaid Hagar. By the time Sarah had her own baby, Hagar's son was big enough to pose a threat. So Sarah banished Hagar and her boy from the camp, sending them into the desert to die—but that is another wilderness story, to be saved for another time.

Ostensibly none of this would have happened if Abraham and Sarah had just thanked God for the interesting travel suggestion and said no, they thought they would just stay home in Ur where they belonged. By saying yes instead—by consenting to get lost—they selected a family gene that would become dominant in years to come.

Long after Abraham and Sarah's bones had turned to dust, their descendants ended up in Egypt again. The cow paths they followed in that land led straight from their slave huts to the mud pits where they made bricks. They always knew where their next meal was coming from. They never had to wonder what they were going to do in the morning. The cost of such security was their bondage to Pharaoh, who was happy with their labor but not with their birthrate. When Pharaoh started ordering midwives to kill Hebrew baby boys, God's ears rang with the wailing outcry of the people. They cried and cried until

God chose a fugitive named Moses—who had narrowly escaped being one of those dead babies himself—to lead the people out of Egypt.

The people were so happy to leave that they did not ask for any details. As it turned out, they needed forty years in the wilderness to learn the holy art of being lost. They faced not just snakes but also hunger, thirst, and terrible homesickness. Did I mention the wrath of God? There was also that, when they complained bitterly that they would trade their sacred lostness in a red-hot minute for a cow path straight back to Egypt. They did not get it, thank God. Instead, they got food dropped straight from heaven in the wilderness. They got snakebites. They got fresh water that sprang from rocks. They got whacked when they decided a golden calf was a safer bet for getting them back on track again than the God who sometimes seemed intent on destroying them. But God did not destroy them. Instead, God strengthened that wilderness gene in them, the one that made them strong and resourceful even as it reminded them how perishable they were. By the time they arrived in the land of milk and honey, they knew how to say thank you and mean it.

Follow the story with an eye for getting lost and you see how the theme sustains the plot. The prophet Elijah gets lost in the desert while fleeing the fury of a queen named Jezebel, which is how he comes to hear the voice of God in the sound of sheer silence. The people spend decades in exile in Babylon—a cultural wilderness they might never have survived without their practice in the literal wilderness of Sinai. Much later, Jesus of Nazareth consents to becoming lost, to spending forty days in the Judean desert being tested by everything from wild animals to a scripture-quoting Satan.

These are big stories, but all you really need is a flat tire to find yourself thrust suddenly into the wilderness. This has happened to me, so I know. One moment everything is fine. You are on your way home from Atlanta after a satisfying day in

town. The stars are out. "Thistle and Shamrock" is on the radio. Then you hear an increasingly loud noise coming from the direction of your right front fender, while your car begins to list seriously in that same direction. By the time you wrestle the car to the shoulder of the highway, you know you have a flat tire.

Depending on your personality, the panic can begin immediately or you can hold it off for a while, opening the glove compartment to find the chapter on changing tires in the owner's manual. If you are a man, you do not look forward to this. If you are a woman alone on the road at night, your mind starts working overtime. Even if you call AAA, it might be an hour before they arrive. In the meantime there is no telling who will pull over, either to help you or to hurt you. You know you are supposed to stay in the car with the doors locked, but since your compact sways violently every time a semi whizzes by, this does not seem like the best idea.

You are truly, seriously lost, even though you know exactly where you are.

I hope you do not get hurt the same way you hope you do not get hurt. I want you back on the road as soon as possible, asleep in your bed by midnight at the latest. You may not be able to think about it until then, but something is happening to you in this wilderness that does not happen when you are safe at home. Some of it is purely physical. Because you are in danger, all the blood in your body has raced toward your heart, abandoning your hands and feet to an icy tingling. Your senses are on full alert. You can smell engine oil and spent rubber along with your own sweat. You can see the glow in the sky away up ahead, showing you where the next highway exit is. You can hear your heart pounding in the empty closet of your chest.

Even though you would rather not think about it, you are exquisitely vulnerable in this moment. You are vulnerable *to* this moment. Your carefully maintained safety net has ripped. Your expensive armor has sprung a leak. You are in need of

help, and your awareness of this is not a bad thing. If hauling water brings you into communion with people you have never met, then so does sitting in this wilderness. There are people all over the world who know how helpless you are feeling right now. Plenty of them would trade places with you in a minute, to be sitting in a wilderness where there are no bombs going off, no guns being fired. If you listen to these people, they may be able to convince you that the odds of your survival are very, very good.

Even if the odds were against you, there is something holy in this moment of knowing just how perishable you are. It is part of the truth about what it means to be human, however hard most of us work not to know that. Five years ago, before my father died, he filled a glass carafe with water. It sits in the room where he read books in a bentwood rocker, stopping from time to time to pour himself a glass of water. Five years later, the glass carafe and the water are still there, although my father is not.

As unreasonable as this seems to me—that blown glass and poured water should last longer than my father's flesh—I do not look at that carafe without being mindful that life evaporates more easily than water. I do not look at it without being swamped with love for my father, as well as with gratitude for my next liquid breath. Faced with the solid reality of such loss, I know how to say thank you and mean it.

IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION, one of the most solemn days of the church year is Ash Wednesday, when believers enter a season of preparation for Easter by confronting their own mortality. That this season lasts forty days is no mistake. Those who follow Jesus are meant to follow him into the wilderness, where they too may be tested.

For me, at least, the peak of the service comes when the priest invites the congregation forward to the altar rail to receive ashes on our foreheads. Those of us who have done it before

know that we are being invited to our own funerals. Kneeling shoulder to shoulder at the rail, we wait our turn, hearing the priest say to others what will soon be said to us. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," the priest says to me, making the sign of the cross on my forehead.

Because she has just dipped her thumb in the cup of ashes, I get the full dose. Extra ashes fall on the bridge of my nose. I worry for a moment about how silly I will look when I stand up and turn around. Then I get the sudden urge to ask for more, to ask for a whole bowl of ashes on my head. But it is not yet my turn for a whole bowl. For now, all I get is a taste of death, while there is still time to say please and thank you to the Giver of all life.

Popular religion focuses so hard on spiritual success that most of us do not know the first thing about the spiritual fruits of failure. When we fall ill, lose our jobs, wreck our marriages, or alienate our children, most of us are left alone to pick up the pieces. Even those of us who are ministered to by brave friends can find it hard to shake the shame of getting lost in our lives. And yet if someone asked us to pinpoint the times in our lives that changed us for the better, a lot of those times would be wilderness times.

When the safety net has split, when the resources are gone, when the way ahead is not clear, the sudden exposure can be both frightening and revealing. We spend so much of our time protecting ourselves from this exposure that a weird kind of relief can result when we fail. To lie flat on the ground with the breath knocked out of you is to find a solid resting place. This is as low as you can go. You told yourself you would die if it ever came to this, but here you are. You cannot help yourself and yet you live.

A couple of years ago I ran into a tree while I was riding a horse. At least I think I ran into a tree. All I remember is rising in my saddle to take a jump between two trees. Then I remember waking briefly with a saddle under my head, hearing a siren,

and waking again in the hospital. When a nurse saw me open my eyes, she asked me whom she should call. Although my head hurt so badly that even thinking about her question hurt, I recalled that my husband was out of town. So were my parents. "I can't think," I said, and passed out.

When I woke again, I reached up to feel the stitches in the back of my head. When I pulled my hand away, a sticky spider web came with it. I patted my head and felt twigs in my hair. I remembered I had sisters, whose names I gave the nurse. A friend showed up, who told me nothing was broken. She also explained the twigs. I had a concussion, she said, which made washing my head a bad idea. I could get clean later. At the moment my job was to lie still.

I did my job well for the next several days, learning to use a bedpan because I could not balance well enough to stand upright. When I fell asleep, I fell into nightmares so vivid that I fought to stay awake. When I was awake, I struggled to use a brain that did not work the way it used to. I felt as if I had suffered the sudden onset of senile dementia. I could not remember words. To complete a thought took ages, to complete a sentence even longer. When someone came to see me, I had to swim my way up out of murky depths to focus on a face or recall a name.

The first miracle of this time was that people took care of me when I could not care for myself. When I was knocked out cold, someone called an ambulance for me. Someone stitched my head. When no member of my family knew where I was, a stranger brought me food. Since I have made a point all my life of being the one who brings the food, not the one who needs it, this reversal did wonders for me. To receive the hospitality of strangers changed me far more than providing it ever did.

The second miracle was how safe I felt, although not in any conventional sense. My head hurt like hell. I had such depraved dreams that I could not imagine where the vile images in them had come from. Wild dogs ate babies, while skeletons rattled

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their loose bones at me. Had the concussion opened a sewer line in my head? Was a demon messing with me? In the grip of those nightmares I feared I might die, or at least never return to who I had once been. Yet as badly as I was frightened, I was also held. The safety I felt was located far beyond my pain and fear. When I closed my eyes I could almost see it—beyond the foot of my bed, beyond the wall of my hospital room—a second net that I could see through the ripped strands of the first, one I knew would catch me no matter how far I fell. Although my injuries were human, my safety felt divine.

Since I know plenty of people who have been hurt badly, both physically and otherwise, without sensing that same safety, I stay curious about where it comes from. Maybe it is an effect of early childhood experience. Maybe it is a denial mechanism. Maybe it is the grace of God. Whatever it is, I have no control over it. All I can do is pay attention to what happens when I am lost in the wilderness, with no ability to help myself.

At this advanced level, the practice of getting lost has nothing to do with wanting to go there. It is something that happens, like it or not. You lose your job. Your lover leaves. The baby dies. At this level, the advanced practice of getting lost consists of consenting to be lost, since you have no other choice. The consenting itself becomes your choice, as you explore the possibility that life is for you and not against you, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

This rock-bottom trust seems to come naturally to some people, while it takes disciplined practice for others. I am one of the latter, a damaged truster who hopes she has lots of time to work up to the advanced level before her own exodus comes. To that end, I keep my eyes open for opportunities to get slightly lost, so that I can gradually build the muscles necessary for radical trust.

Travel is easily the most pleasurable way to do this, since it is almost impossible to leave home without making a wrong turn somewhere. When I do, I stop to ask someone where I am

instead of pulling over to consult my map. I know this is easier for women than it is for men. (Why does it take thousands of sperm to fertilize a single egg? Because the sperm refuse to stop and ask for directions.) I also know plenty of women who hate to ask for help, which makes this an equal-opportunity exercise. The point is to give up on the sufficiency of your own resources. The point is to admit that you are lost, and maybe even to allow that you are in no hurry to be found.

The French have a word for this. When someone goes for a walk with no particular destination in mind, willing to go wherever the wind blows him, that person is a *flâneur*. He saunters. He strolls. He takes a right out of his apartment building one day, having taken a left yesterday. He walks until the smell of fresh bread leads him to make his first turn, down a side street with a bakery. He continues his walk with a fresh Danish in his hand, until a jogger passes him with a sleek gray dog on a leash. The jogger turns right at the next light so the *flâneur* does too, going about half a block before he finds himself in front of a stamp and coin store that has always intrigued him.

Since he is a *flâneur* he has time to go in. When he comes back out, he knows that Bhutan, of all places, is known for its postage stamps, which include Walt Disney characters as well as commemorative issues featuring the British royal family. After that, he chooses his turns based on his associations with the names of the streets, ending up on one he has walked many times before. This time, however, the window boxes in front of one house are full of freshly planted red geraniums. He knows the smell so well that he does not know whether he is really smelling them or only imagining that he is smelling them. Either way, life is good for this *flâneur*. Because he is going no place in particular, he does not miss a thing. Plus, this pleasure is affordable. So far this morning has cost him \$1.49, the price of a cherry Danish.

When my husband and I married, neither of us had ever

traveled outside of the United States. I planned our first trip to the Yucatan, arranging for a rental car that we would pick up and return to the airport in Merida. In between, we would explore Chichenitza and Cozumel, spending a couple of days in a quaint hotel on Isla Mujeres. It was not until we were trying to find our way out of the rental lot at the airport that we fully focused on the fact that neither of us knew Spanish.

"What do you think 'Salida' means?" I asked Ed, as we passed a sign with that word on it for the third time.

"South?" he said.

After two more times around the parking lot, we learned our first vocabulary word: *salida* means "exit" in Spanish.

We both learned to ask for directions on that trip. We paid large fines to Mexican policemen who stopped us for road violations we never understood, although they did help us understand that if we gave them money, then we would not have to go to jail. We learned important phrases such as "Dos cervezas, por favor," and "¿Dónde está el baño?" We swam in cenotes with blue water as clear as bathwater. We sat out a storm in front of a tortilla shop, eating piles of fresh corn tortillas with our hands while the rain pounded the roof of our rental car. We paid a fisherman to take us on a day trip to an island full of birds, where he cooked us a barracuda for lunch over a fire on the beach. He gave me the head to eat, since that was the best part.

After that trip, Ed and I started traveling with a company that planned all the details for us, including a guide who spoke the language. We have been to all kinds of places that I will never forget, but that first trip to Mexico remains the most vivid. We were lost most of the time. We met people willing to help us find our way. We saw things we could not have planned to see. I know it is a stretch to call this a spiritual practice, but perhaps that is the point. Anything can become a spiritual practice once you are willing to approach it that way—once you let it bring you to your knees and show you what is real, including who

you really are, who other people are, and how near God can be when you have lost your way.

Of course for this last to be true you have to be willing to recognize God in your neighbor. Once, when I took the wrong train to the New York Botanical Gardens and ended up walking through a pretty scary neighborhood in the Bronx, a bus driver stopped and opened his doors just for me.

"I don't have the right change," I said, my eyes huge with fear.

"Get in," he said. God drove a bus in the Bronx that day.

In the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, there is a command that runs through Torah like a hymn refrain. There are many variations on it, given in very many contexts, but the basic gist of it is, "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Those most likely to befriend strangers, in other words, are those who have been strangers themselves. The best way to grow empathy for those who are lost is to know what it means to be lost yourself.

SOME OF THE BRIGHTEST PEOPLE I know have never been strangers. When I first began teaching college ten years ago, I regularly met students who had never flown on airplanes because they had never left Georgia. They could still have gotten lost, of course. All they had to do was go to the Thai grocery store in Cornelia and ask someone to explain the vegetables, or visit the Spanish mass at Saint Mark's Catholic church. Both of these adventures lie within a six-mile radius of the college, although few locals undertake them.

The students are not unusual in this regard. Most of us prefer to remain on our cow paths, where we know the language and we do not need maps because we know the way by heart. Some of us even stay behind our own fences because we do not want to be mistaken for interlopers in other people's pastures. One of my students told me the story of how a Muslim man showed up at her father's farm one day asking to buy a cow. Since her father did not know the first thing about Islam, he did not know

that Muslims keep kosher, much like Jews. The Muslim word is *halla*, but the principle is the same. The slaughter of the animal must be quick and humane. It needs to be done in a certain way, and the best way to make sure that it is done that way is to do it yourself.

But the farmer did not know any of that. All he knew was that there was a whole van full of dusky-skinned people sitting in his driveway. So he excused himself for a moment, got his shotgun, and showed it to the man at his front door. "You go now and don't you ever come back," he said to the stranger. I am just guessing, but I think he did that because he had never been a stranger himself.

One of the best things students do is to go on field trips. Remember lining up to board the yellow bus to the museum? For my students, the trip may be no longer than a ride to Atlanta, where they can visit a Hindu temple or attend a live performance at the Shakespeare Tavern. Leaving their established paths, they discover neighbors they never knew they had. More important, they go as guests, not hosts, so that they are in a better position to notice the kindness of strangers.

The students who elect longer trips overseas come back changed for good. Having gotten lost in Dublin, Madrid, or Cairo, they come home both stronger at the edges and softer at the center. They begin to listen to the news. They can find the Inner Hebrides on a map. When exchange students arrive from Bosnia, Kazakhstan, or Zambia, the students who have been far from home themselves are the first to show them around. They sit with them in the dining hall, because they too have been strangers.

However you choose to do it, the practice of getting lost is both valuable and undervalued, at least by the North American culture most of us know best. In this culture, the point is to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible, even if that means you miss most of the territory, including the packed dirt under your feet. Sometimes this is because you are doing at

least five other things while you are in transit, including talking on the phone, listening to the radio, drinking a mocha latte, checking your text messages, telling your dog to get back in the backseat, and checking out how good you look in your sunglasses by admiring yourself in the rearview mirror.

Once you become lost, everything but the dog and the telephone will become suddenly unimportant—the telephone because it may allow you to call someone who loves you enough to come find you, and the dog to keep you company while you wait. If you are not able to set priorities any other way, then getting lost may be the kick in the pants you have been waiting for.

You had better do it quickly, however, since the growing popularity of Global Positioning Systems may soon make getting lost impossible to do. I think I understand the appeal. Following the instructions of a disembodied voice coming from your dashboard takes less time than pulling over to ask directions or look at a map. Plus, it may be comforting to think that a big eye in the sky can see you no matter where you are, even though this will do nothing to prevent you from missing your turn or running into the car ahead of you. I know a single woman who recently purchased a system for her car, delighted to discover that she could choose both the gender and the timbre of the voice that would speak to her. She chose the honey-coated male voice to give her directions. Even though she knows her way to the grocery store at night, she sometimes uses her GPS just so she can hear him talk to her in the dark.

You will think of other ways to get lost, or to accept that you really have gotten lost through no choice of your own. It can happen anywhere, in all kinds of ways. You can get lost on your way home. You can get lost looking for love. You can get lost between jobs. You can get lost looking for God. However it happens, take heart. Others before you have found a way in the wilderness, where there are as many angels as there are wild beasts, and plenty of other lost people too. All it takes is one of

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them to find you. All it takes is you to find one of them. However it happens, you could do worse than to kneel down and ask a blessing, remembering how many knees have kissed this altar before you.

6

The Practice of Encountering Others

COMMUNITY

Walk joyfully on the earth and respond to that of God in every human being.

—*George Fox*

I was at least thirty years old before I learned that I am an introvert. I paid a psychologist \$75 for this information and it was worth every penny. Before I learned that I was an introvert, I thought I was at least shy and possibly antisocial. At other people's parties, I stayed in the kitchen with the help. At my own parties, I was the help. When the story of Martha and Mary came up in church, no one had to tell me why Martha stayed in the kitchen while her sister Mary sat at Jesus's feet. Martha was an introvert. She found chopping potatoes far less exhausting than talking to people, and besides, she could hear everything they were saying right where she was without having to come up with something to say herself.

It can be difficult to be an introvert in church, especially if you happen to be the pastor. Liking to be alone can be interpreted as a judgment on other people's company. Liking to

be quiet can be construed as aloofness. There is so much emphasis on community in most congregations that anyone who does not participate risks being labeled a loner. This is probably why I was so happy to discover the Desert Fathers, a group of early Christians whose practice of community did not include a coffee hour.

There were some Desert Mothers too, although not many. I am not sure that any of them ever called themselves by those names, but the desert was what they had in common. In the fourth century of the Common Era, just as Christianity was becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire, these pilgrims bailed out of the cities in which they lived. They had no confidence in the volatile mix of religion and politics, being pretty sure which one would rise to the top.

Taking little with them besides their wish to live as close to God as they could, they followed the example of an Egyptian monk named Anthony, who dissolved his parents' large estate six months after they left it to him. He had heard something in church about selling everything he owned and giving the proceeds to the poor, so that was what Anthony did. He gave his land away to neighboring villagers. He sold his goods and gave the money to those who needed it. Then he headed to the mountains across the Nile from his village, where he lived alone for the next twenty years.

In 305, he left the cave in which he lived to found a community of people like himself, people who lived in small cells on bare necessities, just close enough to one another to offer encouragement. One visitor to this earliest monastery said, "Their cells like tents were filled with singing, fasting, praying, and working that they might give alms, and having love and peace with one another." ¹

Anthony's desert experiment became a movement. A hundred years later, similar communities thrived not only in the deserts of Egypt but also in Palestine, Persia, and Arabia. Some were huge monasteries, populated by hundreds of monks, while

others were loose confederations of desert "solitaries" who became known as the Desert Fathers. These holy hermits spent their days making baskets and seeking God, which gave them a lot of time to wrestle with their own spiritual ambitions.

"If you see a young monk by his own will climbing up into heaven," one elder said, "take him by the foot and throw him to the ground, because what he is doing is not good for him." ² Sayings like these are all that remain of the Desert Fathers. Repeated mouth to mouth before they were finally written down in Syriac, Latin, and Greek, they survive in classical collections that have lost none of their piquancy. The Desert Fathers had tart tongues, kind hearts, and no interest in their own reputations. Whether they meant to be funny or not, they often were.

Once, two elders who were living together decided that they should have a quarrel like ordinary men. Since they had never had one before, they were not quite sure how to begin. So one of the elders looked around, found a brick, and placed it squarely between him and his brother in Christ. "I will say, 'It is mine,'" he instructed his brother. "Then you say, 'No, it is mine.' This is the sort of thing that leads to a quarrel."

"Are you ready?" he asked his brother.

"I am ready," his brother said.

"Okay," he said, regarding the brick. "It is mine."

"I beg your pardon," his brother said, "but I do believe that it is mine."

"No it's not; it's mine," the first monk said.

"Well, if it's yours, then take it," his brother said. Thus the two elders failed to get into a quarrel after all.

IF I HAD LIVED in the desert, I would not have had a roommate. Brother Arsenius was more my kind of guy. He lived thirty-two miles from his nearest neighbor in the desert of Scete. As more and more hermits arrived, they moved closer and closer to him, until Arsenius finally left there, weeping and wailing. "Worldly

men have ruined Rome," he said, "and monks have ruined Scete." ³

Yet even the monks who lived all alone came together from time to time, to celebrate communion and share a common meal afterward, over which they discussed any problems that had arisen in the community. Even if they lived thirty-two miles apart, they remained in community. They needed one another and they knew it. This was not simply a matter of physical need, although that was certainly a factor for people living in the wilderness. The deeper reason they needed one another was to save them from the temptation of believing in their own self-sufficiency.

One elder who lived all alone undertook a seventy-week fast, eating only once a week during all that time in order to become more receptive to God. When he was little more than bone and vapor, he asked God to reveal to him the meaning of a certain Bible passage, but God would not do it. The elder, disappointed by how little his fast had done for him, decided to go ask one of his brothers what the passage meant. The minute he closed the door to his cell, an angel of God appeared to him, saying, "Your seventy-week fast did not bring you one step closer to God, but now that you have humbled yourself enough to go to your brother, God sent me to reveal the meaning of the passage." ⁴ Then the angel told the elder what it meant and went away.

I like to think that the elder went on to visit his brother anyway, breaking his fast with him and swapping stories about what a trickster God was. At the very least, most of us need someone to tell our stories to. At a deeper level, most of us need someone to help us forget ourselves, a little or a lot. The great wisdom traditions of the world all recognize that the main impediment to living a life of meaning is being self-absorbed.

One friend of mine, who thinks quite a lot about himself, is never at a loss for words in describing his inner conflicts, his blinding insights, his small triumphs, his relapse into self-doubt, and the self-talk he uses to crawl back out of the pit again.

Fortunately, he also has his own number, which is why he is a great friend. One day, as he wound down from his opening monologue, he flashed a bright smile.

"Well!" he said. "That's enough about me. What do you think about me?"

As often as I think I am seeking other people out in order to get something for myself, the deeper truth is that I am hoping they will draw me out of myself. If you have ever gotten into a conversation so compelling that you could not believe what your watch said when you looked at it, then you know what I mean. If you have ever spent a Saturday volunteering at the Special Olympics, taking Meals on Wheels to the elderly, or picking up trash with the Riverkeepers, then you know that you can arrive back home dirty and tired but also oddly refreshed, with more lift in your heart than you could have gotten from a day at the beach.

Artists and athletes speak of something called "flow." When they are deeply involved in what they are doing, time ceases to exist. So does their sense of themselves as separate from what they are doing. In the case of the artists, they become one with the paint, the chalk, the clay. In the case of the athletes, they become one with the team, the ball, the court. The body moves by instinct instead of thought. Awareness blooms, as the individual self escapes its confines to become part of something bigger than the self.

In the Christian mystical tradition, one name for this phenomenon is divine union. It can happen all alone with God, but it can also happen with other people and sometimes even with trees. It is not achieved as much as it is given—the often fleeting but fully memorable gift of escaping the small self long enough to glimpse a wholeness more real than the most real brokenness. In the light of this wholeness, it can become impossible to make meaningful distinctions between God and other people, trees, or anything else in creation. Everything that exists, exists in this wholeness. Everything that lives, lives in

this light. This is the one community that matters, the one toward which all others reach.

Since spiritual people tend to like to do hard things, I know people who have traveled around the world hunting this experience of divine union. I know people who have eaten magic mushrooms, become nuns, sold all that they owned and given the proceeds to the poor. Insofar as these extreme measures have led them beyond themselves, I imagine that these people have learned a lot from them. Like the Desert Fathers, they know that if you always do what you have always done, then you will always get what you have always got. Extreme measures are sometimes called for, and these measures sometimes even produce results.

The wisdom of the Desert Fathers includes the wisdom that the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self—to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it. All you have to do is recognize another you “out there”—your other self in the world—for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself. To become that person, even for a moment, is to understand what it means to die to your self. This can be as frightening as it is liberating. It may be the only real spiritual discipline there is.

For these reasons and more, the world's great religions have always required communities of people to make them work. Whether they call themselves congregations, covens, ummas, or churches, these communities are the concrete places where the teachings of the religion are tested. Sometimes the teachings explode in people's faces. Other times they save people's lives. Either way, the teachings mean little apart from the embodied practices of the community.

Abbot Pastor, one of the most often quoted Desert Fathers, once said, “If you have a chest full of clothing, and leave it for a long time, the clothing will rot inside it. It is the same with the

thoughts in our heart. If we do not carry them out by physical action, after a long while they will spoil and turn bad.”⁵

Of course, religious communities are not the only communities in which neighbor love is practiced. In the small rural county where I live, people also count on community theater, contra dancing, quilting circles, book clubs, singing groups, Rotary Club meetings, and even a cockfight or two to keep kinship bonds strong. The only problem with any of these groups, as far as I can tell, is that they tend to attract like-minded people, the same way most churches do. However different the people in them may be, and however often they may tangle with one another, they still share central convictions, commitments, values, or disciplines. On the one hand, this is what keeps them together. On the other hand, this is what keeps other people out.

Meanwhile, there are people in all of our communities who do not belong to any of the same groups we do. They do not live thirty-two miles away, either. Some of them live right down the street. Some of them stand right in front of us at the gas station, the post office, or the grocery store, where they remain largely invisible to us. Our community with them is human community—such a broad connection that it is easy to overlook—and yet who could be better equipped to pop the locks on our prisons than people in whom we see nothing of ourselves?

At its most basic level, the everyday practice of being with other people is the practice of loving the neighbor as the self. More intricately, it is the practice of coming face-to-face with another human being, preferably someone different enough to qualify as a capital “O” Other—and at least entertaining the possibility that this is one of the faces of God.

Like the practices of paying attention, wearing skin, walking on the earth, and getting lost, this spiritual practice requires no special setting, no personal trainer, no expensive equipment. It can be done anywhere, by anyone who resolves to do it. A good way to warm up is to focus on one of the human beings who

usually sneak right past you because they are performing some mundane service such as taking your order or handing you your change. The next time you go to the grocery store, try engaging the cashier. You do not have to invite her home for lunch or anything, but take a look at her face while she is trying to find "arugula" on her laminated list of produce.

Here is someone who exists even when she is not ringing up your groceries, as hard as that may be for you to imagine. She is someone's daughter, maybe someone's mother as well. She has a home she returns to when she hangs up her apron here, a kitchen that smells of last night's supper, a bed where she occasionally lies awake at night wrestling with her own demons and angels. Do not go too far with this or you risk turning her into a character in your own novel, which is a large part of her problem already. It is enough for you to acknowledge her when she hands you your change.

"You saved eleven dollars and six cents by shopping at Winn Dixie today," she says, looking right at you. All that is required of you is to look back. Just meet her eyes for a moment when you say, "Thanks." Sometimes that is all another person needs to know that she has been seen—not the cashier but the person—but even if she does not seem to notice, the encounter has occurred. You noticed, and because you did, neither of you will ever be quite the same again.

Simple and maybe even silly as this may sound, it is such a profound practice that those who attempt it often meet with huge inner resistance. I do not *want* to encounter another human being at the cash register, thank you very much. I just want my groceries—in paper not plastic, please, as quickly as possible—so I can get on with my day, which will become interminable if I have to stop and do this tedious eye-to-eye thing with every person who crosses my path. Surely they have other people in their lives to see who they really are, to treat them as more than means to ends. I do not dispute the importance of that, I really do not, but who has the *time*?

Honestly, if you knew how many things I have to get done by six o'clock tonight...

This is such a predictable human response that Jesus spoke directly to it, not only in the gospel of Matthew but especially there.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you...?"

Matthew 25:34-37

Who has the time? In this and countless other passages, Jesus taught the practice of encounter. He taught it not only by what he said but also by what he did. He did not leave any of his clothes in a chest to rot.

Watch how this rabbi practices what he preaches and you will note that his teaching is not limited to people who look, act, or think like him. He does the same eye-to-eye thing with Roman centurions, Samaritan lepers, Syro-Phoenician women, and hostile Judeans that he does with his own Galilean disciples. He does it with slaves and rulers, twelve-year-old girls and powerful men, people who can be useful to him and people who cannot. With the possible exception of his own family, no one is dismissed from his circle of concern, for no one made in God's image is negligible in the revelation of that same God.

In biblical tradition, the practice of encounter shows up most often as the practice of hospitality, or *philoxenia*. Take the word apart and you get *philo*, from one of the four Greek words for

love, and *xenia*, for stranger. Love of stranger, in other words, which is about as counterintuitive as you can get. For most of us, *xenophobia*—fear of stranger—comes much more naturally, but in that case scripture is unnatural. According to Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain, “the Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to ‘love the stranger.’”⁶

Why should we do that? Because we have been strangers ourselves, the Bible says. Because if we have never been strangers, then that is because we have never left home. The people of Israel did leave home, repeatedly. They knew what it was like to hear keys turning in locks and shutters being shut when they walked into a new town holding their thin children by the hand. They were used to knocking on the door of the house with the “Room for Rent” sign in the front yard and learning that the room had already been rented—always, no matter how many doors they knocked on, learning that the room had already been rented.

You shall love the stranger first of all because you know what it is to be a stranger yourself. Second of all, you shall love the stranger because the stranger shows you God. Abraham and Sarah encounter God when they welcome three strangers into their tent. Jacob encounters God when he stays up all night wrestling a stranger by the river Jabbok. When the people of Israel are in exile in Babylon, God anoints a Persian stranger named Cyrus to bring them home. In his first sermon in Luke’s gospel, Jesus gets in terrible trouble for pointing out that God sent Elijah to save a widow in Sidon, and Elisha to heal a leper in Syria, when there was no shortage of widows and lepers in Israel. Why should we love the stranger? Because God does.

Hospitality became a cardinal virtue in the early church, where all Christians were “homeschooled” because there was nowhere else to go. The church was not a place but a people—also known as the household of God—who met in one another’s homes and ate at one another’s tables, often breaking the rules

they had grown up with by eating with people who were above or below them on the human food chain.

But Jesus did not have a home he could welcome people into. He could not cook anyone a meal nor offer anyone a bed, which may be what gave him such a hospitable heart. While others opened their homes to him, lending him a table to preside over for a night, his own *philoxenia* was much more likely to take place in a field or a boat, on a road or a mountain—wherever people who felt like strangers happened to meet the person who made them feel like kin. It was a gift he had, this divine practice of encounter, so valuable to him that he did his best to teach his followers how to do it too.

It is a life-saving practice in a world where religious difference and identity have become more important than anyone could have guessed even five years ago. Turn on the news at virtually any hour and you will hear stories of conflict in which religious identity is key: blue states versus red states in the United States, Sunnis versus Shias in Iraq, Muslims versus Christians in the Sudan, Jews versus Muslims in Israel/Palestine. While I am not equipped to take on the long histories and multiple sources of all these conflicts, I know all about “versus.”

I know that nothing strengthens community like a common enemy. I know that when religious people are feeling overwhelmed by a world with little use for their ancient truths, they can find new meaning by identifying a great evil to oppose. I know that the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are especially vulnerable to the formation of “oppositional identity,” both because the stories of their struggles with their enemies have been made sacred in their scriptures and because monotheists—one-true-God people—have never wasted much charity on those who do not acknowledge their one true God. Here is a law as reliable as gravity: the degree to which we believe our faith is what makes us human is the same degree to which we will question the humanity of those who do not share our faith.⁷

"We have just enough religion to make us hate one another," Jonathan Swift once observed, "but not enough to make us love one another." Because we *are* human, which is to say essentially self-interested, we are always looking for ways to add a little more authority to our causes, to come up with better reasons to fight for what we want than "Because I want it, that's why." If we can convince ourselves that God wants it too—even if that means making God in our own image so we can deny the image of God in our enemies—then we are free to engage in combative piety. We are free to harm others not for our own reasons but in the name of God, which allows us to feel holy about doing it instead of just plain bad.

In his award-winning book, *Exclusion & Embrace*, Bosnian-born theologian Miroslav Volf says, "It may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference." ⁸ Citizens of the United States, which is presently the most religiously diverse nation on the face of the earth, would do well to pay attention to that claim. As children of the covenant and inheritors of the gospel, we might also understand that we have the resources to do so.

WHERE ARTICLES OF BELIEF threaten to set people in opposition to one another, we may embody articles of peace.⁹ Where difference is demonized, we may host suppers with surprising guest lists. Where religious identity is wedded to political power, we may resist, although never by adopting the tactics of those in charge. We may test the premise that God uses the weak to confound the strong, as well as the promise that the God who made others different from us is revealed in them as well as us. "The supreme religious challenge," says Rabbi Sacks, "is to see God's image in one who is not in our image," ¹⁰ for only then can we see past our own reflections in the mirror to the God we did not make up.

Long before I arrived at Piedmont College, the faculty decided that Religion 101 would not be "Introduction to the Bible" or

"Life of Christ" but "Religions of the World," a basic introduction to the major wisdom traditions of humankind. They decided this in spite of the fact that Piedmont is a church-related college—or, I like to think, *because* Piedmont is a church-related college. What better way for Christians to engage their commandment to love the neighbor than to learn what those neighbors hold most sacred? And while they are at it, what better way to learn more about what they hold most sacred themselves?

When I arrived in 1998, "Religions of the World" became my daily bread. I have taught it twenty times now to some five hundred students. Last year I introduced a short version of the class to students at Columbia Theological Seminary. During one memorable week last fall, thirty of us visited five centers of worship in the Atlanta area. On Friday alone, we started out with a morning communion service at the seminary, proceeded to jumma prayers at the Atlanta Masjid of al-Islam, and ended up at Congregation Or Hadash for the celebration of Simchat Torah, where some resident Jews said the sight of so many dancing Gentiles made them resolve to put more heart into their dancing too.

Afterward, our hosts invited us to their home for a sumptuous, kosher Shabbat meal. We Christians were not the ones providing hospitality this time. We were the ones receiving it, the strangers being welcomed in the name of the Lord, which turned out to be exactly what we needed. Because we belonged to the dominant religious tradition where we lived, we were used to being the ones in charge. Some of us were longtime clergy, who were used to presiding over similar meals in our own houses of worship, but we were not the officiants this time. We were the clueless guests, standing awkwardly with our hands clasped in front of us trying not to knock anything over.

There were two loaves of braided challah on the table, some candles, a bottle of Manischewitz wine, and a bowl of cotton balls beside a bowl of water. Our gentle hosts treated us like

small children, explaining what we were about to do and then pausing to ask us if we had any questions. I wanted to know about the cotton balls, bad, but I decided to wait and see. In the very next moment, the woman of the house explained that we would begin by washing our hands, but since there were too many of us to do it properly, we would do it ceremonially, by dipping a cotton ball into the bowl of water and cleaning our hands with it right there in the dining room. It was not really about germs anyway, she explained. It was about coming before God with a clean heart.

Charmed by doing this new ritual for the first time, I stepped up to the bowl and dipped my cotton ball in the water. Then I moved out of the way so that others could follow. As the Christians all stood there quietly dabbing at our fingers with the Jews, I realized that this was one of the bones the Pharisees picked with Jesus, at least according to Matthew.

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat."

Matthew 15:1-2

I could not for the life of me connect the negative associations of the story with the positive thing that I was doing in that dining room. It was one of those revelations you have to be there for. It was an embodied epiphany. I was not *reading* about hand washing or discussing it in Bible study. I was *doing* it, among achingly generous people who experienced life in keeping the traditions of the elders. Because I was doing it with them, I found life in it too, which was the substance of my revelation.

From Matthew's time to my own, the hand washing itself was less the issue than who did it and how they encountered one another—with love or enmity, from the desire to include or

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From Matthew's time to my own, the hand washing itself was less the issue than who did it and how they encountered one another—with love or enmity, from the desire to include or

divide? The issue was not the ritual but the relationships. Washing my hands did not make me a Jew, any more than it kept me from being a Christian. At the moment, it was simply a way of heading toward the edge of my own tradition in order to meet people who were reaching out to me from the edge of their own.

WHAT WE HAVE most in common is not religion but humanity. I learned this from my religion, which also teaches me that encountering another human being is as close to God as I may ever get—in the eye-to-eye thing, the person-to-person thing—which is where God's Beloved has promised to show up. Paradoxically, the point is not to see him. The point is to see the person standing right in front of me, who has no substitute, who can never be replaced, whose heart holds things for which there is no language, whose life is an unsolved mystery. The moment I turn that person into a character in my own story, the encounter is over. I have stopped being a human being and have become a fiction writer instead.

When I first came to Christian faith in college, people I barely knew made a habit of telling me they loved me. They were Christians too, and I guess it was their way of welcoming me to the family. I did not mind, exactly, but since they barely knew me I was not sure what they were talking about. Did they love the way my right foot turned out, so that I left tracks like a penguin on the beach? Did they love my willingness to make handprinted signs for Bible study? Did they love the way my upper lip disappeared when I laughed? I decided to find out, so the next time one of the Christians said she loved me, I asked her why.

She made a surprised face, like I should already know

"Because God loves you!" she said, throwing both hands in the air. "I love you because God loves everybody!"

This may sound small, but I decided that was not enough for me. I did not want to be loved in general. I wanted to be loved

in particular, as I was convinced God loved. Plus, I am not sure it is possible to see the face of God in other people if you cannot see the faces they already have. What is it that makes that face different from every other face? If someone threw a blindfold over your own eyes right now, could you say what color those other eyes are? If you had to send someone into a crowded room to find this person, what detail would you use to make sure she was found?

The Desert Fathers did not see one another all that often, but when they did they knew the encounter would be holy. This did not mean that they always behaved particularly well; it just meant that they knew they were one another's best bets for becoming fully human. Once a brother went to one of the elders, saying:

There are two brothers, of whom one remains praying in his cell, fasting six days at a time and doing a great deal of penance. The other one takes care of the sick. Which one's work is more pleasing to God? The elder replied: If that brother who fasts six days at a time were to hang himself up by the nose, he could not equal the one who takes care of the sick.¹¹

These brothers did all the things you would expect a bunch of monks to do: not just fasting and caring for the sick but also reading scripture, praying, bridling their tongues, and practicing charity. One of the more remarkable things they did was to cover one another's sins. When one of them was caught at something—say, having a girl in his room—one of the others would sit on the basket where she was hiding until the abbot inspector left the room. They behaved the same way with thieves who came to rob them of the little they had.

Once, when some robbers came into an elder's cell and told him they had come to take everything he had, he said, "My

sons, take all you want." After they had stuffed everything they could find in their bags, they started off. But when the elder saw that they had left a little bundle hidden from view, he picked it up and chased after them.

"My sons, take this, you forgot it in the cell!" he shouted. The thieves were so amazed that they brought everything back, saying, "This one really is a man of God!" ¹²

The nature of the encounter is apparently not important. What is important is that at least one person is willing to treat it as holy, capitalizing the "You" as well as the "I." If you have ever been on the receiving end of such an encounter, then you know how it can change you. By covering your sin—running after you with the one thing you forgot to steal—another human being can suck the malevolence right out of you, leaving you buck naked long enough to see another way of being held out in front of you and grab it. Sometimes you get to be the thief. Sometimes you get to be the holy person. Either way, the encounter changes you. It is what life is all about.

This practice is not designed to place you or those you love in danger, although it may help you discover how dangerous your own fear can be. The assignment is to get over your self. The assignment is to love the God you did not make up with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and the second is like unto it: to love the neighbor you also did not make up as if that person were your own strange and particular self. Do this, and the doing will teach you everything you need to know. Do this, and you will live.