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# The Long Way Home

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One of my earliest memories is of sitting on my mother's lap in my great-aunt's farmhouse, a whitewashed colonial overlooking the snowy Missouri River bottom my great-uncle farmed. Our family's generations pivoted quickly—young marriages, swift pregnancies—so I remember this little home as a lively place where three or four generations gathered: a teeming flank of men and women whose faces echoed one another, whose laughter rang with the same cadences.

In this memory, it is Christmas. I can't be more than two years old. There is a bright tree and a great rush of voices. Everyone gets one gift, something simple. I can see mine: a cardboard puzzle with alluring yellow and blue pieces in the shapes of a rubber duck, a bubbling bar of soap. I lean against my mother's soft body and take the puzzle pieces to my mouth, rub their stiff weft against my lips. I feel her voice reverberate in my body as other voices rise around me.

As a woman, I look in on my people in this farmhouse and I love them. My heart flares with a child's wonder at belonging, of encountering love in the generations knit together. That flare is so strong that even now, more than thirty years later, I feel it: a kind of vibrant pagan happiness, predicated on blood ties that stake a body to its begetters and the near earth.

But my heart grows sober, too, knowing how the human predicament yokes every happiness to the dim mystery of death. I consider my family in the kaleidoscope of all that has transpired in the years since that Christmas Day: the natural trials of illness and loss, and the unnatural traumas of abuse and abandonment—especially the succession of divorces that estranged spouses and siblings, cousins and grandparents, and transmuted our shared sins of anger and avarice into weapons for civil waging. Every generation dies, but somehow, in the circumstances of our time and place, we were enticed to wound and discard each other, to renounce our blood ties in favor of a costly kind of freedom.

I see now that the blood-tie happiness I once tasted was an encounter with the primal givenness of family relationships, the givenness that cannot be recreated in any other circumstance. The bond of the body guards the unique spiritual work of the generations: tending a set of sins refracted among the members in varying degrees of vanity or violence, abhorrent to the victim and sometimes invisible to the transgressor.

We pass those roles back and forth. If we hate the transgressor, we may in some very real way hate ourselves. But we often love the transgressor, too, for all the humor and quirks of his heart, for the memory of his childhood or the care he gave us in our own, for the way his face and voice catch familiar contours and sounds. In this affinity, we find a bare light to coax us to love.

I have not seen my great aunt's farmhouse in nearly twenty years. As a young woman, I moved away from home—on a whim, at first, expecting a short-lived sojourn. But then time shifted and our family splintered. The dramatic losses and conflicts of that event cancelled our common understandings of right and wrong. In this painful confusion, I found God asking of me an exile that I asked him to take

away. He refused.

Exile is at once a protection and a loss. Living at a physical distance from one another, encounter is no longer assumed, but orchestrated—awkwardly, sometimes, but often with a mannered care and love, in the hope that each encounter, whether fruitful or painful, will win back a bit of what has been lost. In this way, distance spurs temperance, and temperance urges me on in repentance and forgiveness regarding my part in the common generational sins we share. But at the same time, distance stokes a grief for the old ease of our affinities, our common joys.

In exile, friendship has become very important to me. Deep consonance—in humor, shared ventures, the quest for God—is sometimes so strong and so radically contingent that a friendship feels like falling in love, a recompense for blood-tie affection denied or deferred. But affinity alone is little comfort. In the depth of our hearts, we want not only affinity but rigor, the sober work of formation promised but not always realized in the permanence of blood.

I think about a dear friend God gave me a few years ago, mid-exile: a woman with a sober heart, very steady, regardless of the fact that her family's splintering was perhaps more dramatic than my own. God matchmade us in a Mary garden, a tiny plot of green and trees abutting our white stone city church, a thousand miles from the river of my childhood and the ocean of her own. Lingering in or walking by that garden over the years, we have marveled over the fact that no sorrow, betrayal, or shame can tamp the desire to love and be loved by the people who created us.

We have marveled too at the joy we have felt in pressing past friendships' affinities to confess to one another our own complicity in our families' generational sins. Sometimes these confessions come almost by accident; sometimes they are readied and rehearsed. And sometimes, in moments of fatigue and fear, they well up in the kind of quick, pained reactions we might offer only to a sibling or a parent. The friend marks right and wrong, but she is gentle: quick to listen, ready to forgive, eager to accompany. Together with St. Paul, we bear all things, believe all things. We do not want to fail.

In an age of family turmoil, our closest friendships may offer us not only consolation but little arks in which to make the grave passage from a child's desire for love to an adult's desire for truth in the inward parts, as the Psalmist says. Truth begs purgation, and purgation offers us a progressive, often painful coming-of-age that gives us eyes to see and ears to hear ourselves as we truly are—and God as He broods over us.

In His generosity, we receive friends with whom we can taste a different kind of happiness: less the fraught allegiance of blood-borne givenness and more the radically dispossessed self-gift of the Spirit. This is a happiness that can hold both life and death, because it can receive and relinquish all. And if we are lucky, it is a happiness that will seed deeply in us, form us, and strengthen us: so that when we return to the primal work of our blood-ties, we go with great freedom and gaze at our family members with the same eyes of hope that we give to a friend.

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