Dazzling and Divine

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A Contemplative Journey in Christ

by Mark Sibley Jones

Austin, Texas

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Dedication

To Marlena and Carli

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Introduction: The Journey

With each nightfall Daniel felt more hopelessly lost. Days before, he had embarked on a solo hunting trip in the Alaskan wilderness, feeling confident and self-sufficient. With an unexpected storm and perpetually overcast skies, it was impossible to get his bearings sans the compass he'd forgotten to pack. Would he find his way out before his provisions expired? Emerging from a dense forest into the afternoon light of a clearing, the hunter saw a welcome sign of hope: the back side of a sign post! Nearing the sign, he saw the beginning of a dirt road. With new energy in each step, he came around to the front of the sign just as a motorist slowed to a stop on the road. Showing a relieved grin, the hunter looked upon the exasperated face of the driver, and then at the sign, which he could now read. "End of Road." To one lost man, the sign was a nuisance at the end of a long day of frustrating map searching and wrong turns; to the other, a herald of salvation.

* * *

Life is a journey. This statement is both a popular cliché and a profound truth. The meaning you assign to life's road signs is unique to your perspective. The pages you are about to read reflect the perspective of my soul's journey with Christ and my desire to offer a way for others to authentically discover their journey. This journey of mine over the past several years has been enriched by a cross fertilization of the Christian contemplative tradition and the evangelical movement with the emphasis both bring to a personal relationship with God. The result is a mystical, exegetical syllogism of the spiritual life and its development. Mystical in the sense

that the experience of God is primary; exegetical in that the Scriptures provide the primary basis for interpreting this experience.

Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross were sixteenth-century Roman Catholic mystics who are among the most influential writers on contemplative prayer. In *The Interior Castle,* Teresa described her vision of the spiritual life as a crystal castle with many dwelling places where pilgrims experience the presence of God at different levels according to where they are in their unique relationship to God. These seven "mansions" are "dwelling places" of progressive enlightenment in a person's journey within his or her own soul, culminating in union with God.

For John, in *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul,* the journey in Christ is depicted as emerging through an ascetic purging darkness of faith and eventually coming to a point where one finds his or her own way with Christ. Persecuted as a reformer of his church, the *Dark Night of the Soul* was John's exposition of the "Spiritual Canticles," a poem of his loving relationship with Christ written during his imprisonment.

Though contemporaries of the Protestant Reformation, Teresa and John were in a different theological universe from Protestant and evangelical forerunners. They lived in the context of sixteenth-century Spanish Inquisition Catholicism and were reformers in their own right. I'm reminded of the original meaning of "Protestant," which is "to profess." Though in a different context, Teresa and John carried on a mission similar to the early proponents of the Reformation: to profess the truth that believers may have a personal and direct relationship with God.

The works of Teresa and John have become cherished guides in my journey of relating to God. Their personalities come through in their writings and make their aspirations all the more real. I identify with John's

melancholia and his struggle to find a place in the world. His gift for analysis inspires me. Teresa's bent toward emotion invites me to step beyond mere logic and experience God with my whole self. Her vivaciousness challenges me to step out of my introversion and find connections between my contemplation and community.

This important spiritual task of connecting one's experience to the larger world is the impetus of this book. Here I seek to connect my personal experience to communities of faith. What develops is in some ways a running journal of conversations and readings I have

existent—until you embark upon it. It is your road with your name on the sign.

Distractions are the comets of the night sky. The expert astronomers know the orbits of the planets and the coordinates of the constellations. With legions of huge telescopes they study the heavens nightly. But, every now and again comes a new comet. Some have been discovered by amateur stargazers with mere binoculars. Coming out of nowhere, they evoke our awe and fear.

You don't have to be a rocket scientist or theologian to be encountered by God. In the spiritual universe of the soul, the star maps are drawn by the surveyors of religion, but the most exciting discoveries are made by the explorers of experience. One knows the book of God; the other knows God. One knows the laws of God; the other, the love of God. One knows how things should be; the other wonders how things could be.

Distraction is an intersection of colliding views of God and life. At this crossroad staid predictability gets sideswiped by mystery.

Distraction is invitation. Think back to the precursors of the significant events in your life. Were they planned or discovered? Your first encounter with the person you married. A big break in your career. A turn in your health. First encounters with persons who now are good friends.

Some of the greatest, most inspiring stories I've ever heard are about how things turned out differently than planned. Jesus told one of those stories:

> A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is now ready."
>
> But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, "I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me."

> Another said, "I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me."
>
> Still another said, "I just got married, so I can't come."
>
> The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame."
>
> "Sir," the servant said, "what you ordered has been done, but there is still room."
>
> Then the master told his servant, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet." (Luke 14:16-24)

This parable is steeped in first-century tradition about the Messianic Banquet. After the Messiah sets all things right, the people of God will enjoy eternal fellowship at the Lord's table. Quite a party. All Jews worth their salt longed for the day.

Jesus gives his story a twist. When the servant comes around to yell out, "Come and get it," the invited beg off. What a weird way to respond!

According to invitation customs, the guests had already been invited. The servant is only announcing that the time has come. To decline at this juncture is a faux pas of enormity. You don't just say no at a time like this. What the busy-ness of the guests reveals about their relationship with the host is plain to see. It is thumbing-the-nose time.

A tradition exists about what this story means. It is clear. God invites. People refuse. God gets mad. Moral: don't make God mad. That's the colloquial Christian culture of distraction. Don't do it. It's bad to be distracted. It makes God mad when we get distracted. Stay focused and God will love you and you'll get to go to the party.

Matthew's version of this story is even more harsh: the inconsiderate wretches are condemned. They are also depicted as murderers. Throw the wicked, inconsiderate, distracted, murdering wretches into hell (Matt. 22). That'll teach them to let their minds wander!

Whoa! Jesus has another scenario. God is already throwing the party and along comes an invitation. Wanna come? It'll be fun! Sometimes we're just too engrossed in our stuff to hear the invitation. But, God is a distracting God. God knows how to get our attention, Teresa says:

> For often when a person is distracted and forgetful of God, His Majesty will awaken it. His action is as quick as a falling comet. And as clearly as it hears a thunderclap, even though no sound is heard, the soul understands that it was called by God.[13]

Hear that? It is the sound of music and laughter. You can just barely hear it above the racket of street noise. Among the clatter of banging and hammering rises the sound of . . . a tambourine. Who is singing? You go back to your work. Yet, again you raise your head and listen to the appealing sounds. Go, check it out! It's a party!

I must admit that I identify with the three distracted guys in Jesus' story. It isn't like they were doing evil. They were intent on the stuff of life: land, oxen, and spouse. I feel very creative when it comes to putting God off. I convince myself that I have more important matters to attend.

As Pascal put it, the root of all evil is our inability to sit still. We create objects of our desire and become attached to them and the illusions we create about them. Pascal's theory of distraction, or *divertissement*, is that we are doomed to *activity* itself. According to Thomas Merton, we use distractions to numb our spirits because of our incapacity for contemplation, which is our highest activity. "Only Christ . . . could save time from being an endless circle of frustrations," from the "vanities" of

"ceaseless and sterile activity." It is Christ who distracts us from the vanity of our preoccupations.[14]

When taken in the light of first-century Palestinian life, the three "excuses" were really vocations, or callings. The *field* represents the vocation of finding and making our place in the world. The *oxen* portray the vocation of subsistence and livelihood: career, vocation, budgets, and food. The *spouse* represents the vocation of relationships, of family and covenant. Any person not focused on these things would have been considered irresponsible.

Land, beasts and spouse: each calling to a level of involvement, interaction and interrelationship. A farmer works the land, plowing and digging; planting and harvesting. Driving a team of oxen with hands to the reins—prodding, feeding, watering, bedding and healing—required being up-close and personal. A wife was more than a romantic partner. She would be a companion and fellow laborer, sharing interdependently in the enterprise of life.

The irony of distraction is that we feel Christ is calling us away from our *callings:* our vocations of place, livelihood and relationship. We can't possibly go to a party when there is so much to take care of, so much duty to uphold. The playful cajolery of Christ sounds more like a temptation or a seduction.

Christ is not calling us from our place in the world, our livelihood and relationships, but from seeing these as who we are and finding our highest pleasure and purpose in them. We make it an either/or proposition. Either I follow Christ or my vocation. Christ calls to a both/and. When Christ is at the center of our vocations, he transforms them.

Distraction is counter-intuitive. We may feel that distractions are what take us away from our focus on God. There is a bit of grandiosity in this: that we feel we

are so centered in God. Our sense of security in our own ability to maintain our focus on God may be a pride that leads to a fall. In truth, God comes to us out of the dark—out of the blue—and we may not be open to the distraction, to what God is saying to us because it is so counter to what we think or believe.

The invited guests could not see past their vocations to the banquet of the Messiah. A story like this told in the home of a well-known Pharisee had obvious connotations. Pharisees were the most pious of religious people. Nothing keeps us from fellowship with God like a good hearty religion. Religion is about destination; Christianity is a journey.

Christ calls us to let go of our compulsions—our ways of holding onto God and godliness—and to let God hold onto us. The master in the banquet parable told his servant to compel people to come to the party, "make them come in." This compelling refers to the ancient custom of taking invited guests by the arm and bringing them into the house, even pulling them in. "Yes, yes, come in! Sure, but it can wait. You must come in—just for awhile, okay?"

Bunyan depicts this drawing invitation in *Pilgrim's Progress* as Christian's arrival at the true beginning point of his journey: the Wicket Gate. At that point, the gatekeeper, Goodwill, pulled him forcibly through lest he become a target for the devil's arrows at this crucial threshold.

What a picture of grace! God's invitation has a compelling force; we are drawn into God's house.

There is a progression to Jesus' parable. First and initially, the Israelites of standing were invited. Before telling the story, Jesus had observed how his fellow guests were concerned about sitting in the seats of status. No doubt, Jesus' depiction of the invited guests in the parable had a double meaning for those sitting

with him at the table. Paradoxically, in the story it was the guests of status who refused to come to the party.

Secondly, when the invited guests reneged on their RSVP, the host invited the marginalized Israelites—those with handicaps—who were religiously ostracized by the Pharisees. Religion demands perfection and condemns shortcomings. Levitical law allowed no place in the Temple for the physically and mentally imperfect. Christ calls us to accommodation. This was a radical move in the culture of the day (a move we're just beginning to make in our day).

Thirdly, and most iconoclastically, the travelers were compelled into the party house. This group may have included the most unworthy sort by Pharisaic standards: the Gentiles. People of different race and language at God's party? Unspeakable! Can't you hear the fabric of society tearing?

As previously uninvited guests on their way to somewhere else, the last two groups were required to make the greatest adjustment in response to the invitation. Unlike those who had time to prepare, these downcast and outcasts had to respond on the spur of the moment. Their capacity for distraction was greater. It is yet another way Christ turned the world upside down. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. The focused are shut out and the distractible are pulled in.

The spiritual journey begins with our making space for God, not at our initiative, but at God's. God throws quite a party, if you're willing to be distracted. Distraction is not only a virtue of the spiritual life, it is an indispensable quality.

The distracting Spirit is like the wind rustling in the trees. Leaves are very distractible. If we are distractible, we will be easily moved by the Spirit of God.

Vocations of Distraction

The three vocations of place, livelihood and relationships referred to in the above parable can be seen as a paradigm for distraction. In looking at the developmental aspects of these vocations, we see the signs and seasons of moving into adulthood. Through the distracting call of Christ our vocations are transformed from self-oriented compulsions to avenues of discovering our significance in God's universe.

Making Our Place in the World

First there is the field: the vocation of making our place in the world. How we make our place in the world measures our relationship to God. I imagine a young man receiving his share of the family farm, a woman being endowed with family heirlooms, or a man expanding his business.

I remember the feeling of purchasing my first home. As a thirty-year-old doctoral candidate, I took a pastorate in a traditional, urban neighborhood of my hometown. I felt a profound settledness. It was my place, not a landlord's house, nor my parents' home. The age of Jesus at the outset of his ministry, I was carving out my own niche in the world. Would the Son of Man, who had "no place to lay his head," call me away from such a place? Five years later, I discerned that God was calling me to leave. Not only did I leave this place, but I gave up having a place of my own while I finished an internship in counseling. The crisis of adjustment for my family was stressful. I now have a deeper appreciation for the difficulty the invited guest had in leaving a field to go to God's party.

We must make our place in the world. We will do it either in a manner that enhances our lives spiritually or in a way that detracts from our true humanness. Place-making requires the elements of time, depth and

creativity. Time enough to establish oneself. Depth enough to put our roots down to the water tables of community. Creativity enough to fashion our place as an expression of our truest nature.

I've met persons who seem to have never fully landed. They are caught up in dream-chasing to the extent that they carry through with few of their creative notions. The stories of their lives are disjointed series of half-written fairy tales without the depth of meaning found in a cohesive narrative. This is distraction in its negative, shadow sense.

As in many spiritual realities, truth exists between the extremes. At the other extremity of distracted place-making are root-bound individuals. They are so tied to the earth of their place that they can no longer make it their own. Their place is defined by mothers and fathers, mother-figures and father-figures, in such a way that it stifles their own self-definition. The chief symptom of their stagnation is a persistent, simmering anger. Sometimes masked in depression, the bitterness can be heard in the cynical powerlessness of their language and self-assessments. Otherwise, it spells out a choking moralism and judgmental disposition toward others, especially toward the free-spirited. Their story is the story of their clan: canonical, sacred, unquestioned, hiding shameful wounds behind secrets and secret sin. Like the age-old incantations of a ritual, the spell-binding story defines the person and his or her place in life.

Our life's story is the account of our finding our place in the world. Jesus told the story of a person who found a treasure hidden in a field, reburied it and gladly went and bought the field. This kingdom parable is a picture of distraction. Do we find the kingdom or does it find us? Did the man become a treasure hunter or a treasure finder? Did he compulsively go digging in fields the rest of his life or did he settle down on his treasured field? The treasure is not the field of our lives,

but what we find in the field. Our place in this world is the gift found in distraction. The serendipity of the find became the story of the man's life—The Man Who Found the Treasure in the Field. Likewise, our story reflects our basic disposition toward our place in life: hunting or finding.

While hiking in the Texas hill country, I was discussing with my wife Thomas Moore's book, *The Enchantment of Everyday Life.* Moore refers to the ancient religious practices of discerning the spirits of a place before deciding to build. Just then, Marlena pointed to a large flat rock under our feet on the trail. The rock's natural indentations formed the clear picture of a face—to us a scowling face. "Looks like we just met one of the spirits of this place," I remarked as I took a photo. The developed picture sits on my desktop, but now the rock's face is more inviting and happy. Perhaps the rock was reflecting *my* spirit at the time.

One's story can either reveal or conceal. I grew up in a religion that valued stories. It was important to be able to "give a testimony" of God's work in our lives, past or present. In the formality of this storytelling, I heard the self-descriptions of my fellow congregants. Some testimonies were full of stock phrases and cliché meanings, finished and polished in neat packaging, designed to impress and uphold carefully-crafted self images. They either whitewashed the obvious or hurtfully broadcast secrets in a public confessional. Other testimonies had a richness and individuality—works in progress—bearing the signature of grace. These stories rang true with an authentic tone, giving greater light into the soul of the storyteller.

Our story portrays our place in the world and our aspirations for enriching our place. A good story enlightens both teller and hearer to the sense of journey. The story of a life-enhancing place carries both the thread of meaning spun from the wheel of generations

and the recipes of healing potions distilled from the laboratory of life's experiments. It offers a bookbinding for the journey's saga of mountains and valleys, conflicts and covenants. It is a display case for artifacts of legends and a drawing board for blurry blueprints of visions. Standing in such a place is like attending a celebration.

For Israel, the place of greatest distractibility was the Exodus, a life-defining journey from slavery to promise. This story embodies the soul of the nation and many stories were spun from this central legend: stories of mighty kings and captivities, victory chants and lamentations.Israel's greatest figures were sojourners. Abraham, a "stranger in a strange land." Sarah, the mother of a nation. Moses, the leader of the migration, and his mother who courageously cast him afloat in the Nile to be found by Pharaoh's daughter. Elijah, the prophet who discovered God in the stillness of Horeb. Daniel, who in Babylonia discovered that God's power and presence is not limited to a certain land. Though focused on the land, Israel's soul was not in the land, but in the journey of God with the people who traversed the land. The Scriptures record the epic of God's recurrent distraction of the nation from their land to the journey—and the many heroes who caught sight of the vision.

The outset of the journey of Christ could be described as a call to begin forming the story of one's relationship with God. As our story forms, so our place in the world takes shape.

Making a Living

The second excuse mentioned in the story of the banquet is the team of oxen: the vocation of making a living. No casual acquisition, a team of oxen was a pair of matched beasts of burden with such power a man could move mountains in behalf of the family's subsis-

tence. The ancient culture was heavy on a man to make a living. "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (I Tim. 5:8 KJV).

It is precisely this crisis of livelihood that confronts us at midlife. In light of the passing of time, we begin to question the meaning of our work. Does it fit us well? Are we stressed out over it, and why? Some people decide to retool with education and embark on a new career. Others find ways to redefine their work, integrating their growing self-definition into what they do for a living. Work becomes more interwoven with the fabric of life in an enriching way.

A juncture for better or worse, midlife can also be a season of disintegration when the meaning of life, much less work, escapes us. I have met many on the journey who have not transcended this crisis. Self-destructive behavior often results—at work or home—as if their call to distraction is more like the seducing sounds of the mythological Sirens who lured ancient sailors into ruin. It is imperative to discern the call of Christ from the compulsions of myth.

Myths are stories and symbols that carry the meanings and values of culture. Often we are not conscious of these myths that influence us so profoundly. Every family has myths that are passed from generation to generation but are stories never told. It is as if these untold stories create a compulsion that we are powerless over and doomed to act out. The role of the son or daughter, the drive to succeed or fail, the meaning of pregnancy, abuse, addiction: all can be the subject of mythic compulsions.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the songs of the voluptuous Sirens enticed sailors to their treacherous shores. Odysseus ordered his crewmen to plug their ears and lash him to the mast so they could resist these ruinous enchantments. But these Siren compulsions could be

transcended. The music of Orpheus aboard ship with Jason and the Argonauts was more enchanting than even that of the Sirens. In response, the Sirens cast themselves into the rocky waters.

This myth portrays something of the nature of myth itself—and the power of distraction. We, like Odysseus, in seeking freedom from the forces that bind us, are bound to re-enact over and again the drama of our mythic compulsions. But Christ, like Orpheus, sounds a tune that is eternally more spellbinding and enrapturing. In hearkening to the call of Christ, and being subdued by it, we are freed from our compulsions and the myths that produce them.

We will hear a call in midlife surrounding vocation. Will it be the distracting call of God urging us to health and faith or the destructive call of social myth?

Shadowy myth produces compulsions of extremes. We are either adrift in isolation or moored at the harbor of culture. We are either lost to ourselves or self-absorbed. We are either bound in powerlessness or deluded into thinking we are society's sovereign. The vocational call of Christ frees us from these extremes. Three distinctive qualities of Christ's calling are community orientation, the enhancement of identity, and the clarification of authority.

Christ calls to community. Distraction becomes destruction when divorced from the matrix of community, as the story of Samson and Delilah illustrates. Samson knew he had a power, but he lacked the gifts to discover its purpose. His culture applauded his violent pursuits and even credited his behavior to the Spirit of God. He lacked a community that could provide an interpretive culture within which he could discern the true meaning of his gifts. The culture of the Judges-era Israel is documented in the refrain, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." Without an interpretive, integrating culture, Samson's life was like a mighty

sailboat with no rudder, acting on pure instinct. He identified the source of his power as on top of his head, rather than in his heart. With his head shaved, he was blinded. When vocation comes solely from others, it can be taken away by others.

The medieval guilds are a picture of how vocation, identity and community are naturally linked. Many names derived from these guilds, such as Smith, Cooper, and Carpenter, give evidence of how identity is garnered from vocation and community. In contrast, the mythic compulsion of self-employment holds that we choose our own vocation as solely an expression of individualism. A key to striking a balance between the rule of culture and the freedom of the soul is identity. We must discover who we are, and that discovery can take place only in the context of relationships and shared history.

Christ calls to identity. Samson lived his life as a man whose purpose was imposed upon him by parents and society rather than discovered from within. His life was that of the terrorist: carrying out the political agenda of a nation under the dictates of a foreign power.

Rather than being a man of great strength, Samson was a strong man. His strength was his identity rather than his identity being his strength. He had split off his *being* from his *doing*. The mythic compulsion of dissociation tempts us to define ourselves by our doing, to separate our living from livelihood.

In the modern American psyche, self-esteem and livelihood go hand-in-hand. The term vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, "to call") captures this mythic compulsion. We use it to describe the way we make a living: carpenter, computer programmer, or sales representative. We think of ourselves most easily in terms of what we do for a living. We are what we do.

As Jesus called Peter the fisherman to be a "fisher of men," so Christ invites us to transcend our livelihood

but not deny it. Many New Testament writers found their highest calling in being a "bond slave of Jesus Christ." By seeing themselves as servants of Christ, they maintained a perspective on work that allows for deep spiritual meaning. Paul made tents at night so he could do ministry during the day. The body, for Paul, was a "tent" and his mission was to weave for others a heavenly tent by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. The two were not separate—work and identity—but linked. Our work does not define us, but reflects our self-definition. Identity is based on relationship with Christ. Yet, meaningful work expresses our personal mission—to give glory to God—as stated in the Rule of St. Benedict.

Christ calls to authority. From the rock of identity flows the spring of authority. Authority is the power to make a difference, to express our gifts and claim our place in the world. Livelihood and authority are bound up together.

Authority is recognizing our limits as well as our powers. Culture, at its best, provides a structure of authority that enhances creativity and freedom. Without the circumference of authority, we are left to our natural inclination to be sovereigns in our own realms—the mythic compulsion of power. Power struggles are a major symptom of this mythic compulsion. Distraction is opening ourselves to a transcendent power that transforms our self-sovereignty into servanthood.

Samson had power but no authority. He could kill people but not govern them. He sought revenge, not justice. He sought love and received manipulation. He tore down magnificent buildings but left no abiding structures to carry on his mission.

Our vocation of livelihood is a channel for our creative, nurturing, and self-defining gifts. Christ distracts us from the mundane tedium of the work-a-day world to a sense of giftedness; we *possess* gifts and we *are* gifts. From our sense of giftedness we can offer ourselves to

others as companions of the journey in a community that creates a shared history.

Making and Maintaining Relationships

Marriage was the third excuse offered by the invited guests in Jesus' story: the vocation of making and maintaining relationships. Relationships require a dynamic balance of inclusion and exclusion, of saying Yes and No. Here the man welshes on one social commitment for the sake of another, choosing to be with his newlywed wife rather than attend the banquet of a friend. His fault lies not in maintaining a healthy boundary around his relationship with his family but in seeing the banquet as violating that boundary.

Some of Jesus' harshest teachings reflected this difficult distinction. As if to hammer home this element of the Messianic Banquet story, Luke follows it with one of Jesus' most pointed statements, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:6). Rather than a discounting the importance of family, Jesus was emphasizing the spiritual foundation of all relationships.

As a marriage and family therapist, I echo the current emphasis on strengthening family life in our society. For years, the indicators of divorce rate and the number of children growing up in "broken" homes has indicted the American family. Did Jesus downplay this emphasis on strengthening the family?

As with the other vocations of distraction, Jesus did not come to destroy but fulfill. Christ does not exclude good family life; He saves it. Christ distracts us from our focus on our family to the deeper meaning of relating.

Our most profound sense of identity comes from family. Our DNA—characteristics of appearance, personality and temperament—derive from our parents. Just as significant, if not more so, the formative atmo-

sphere of our childhood family life also plays a important role in influencing our styles of relating. Studies show that we replicate our family-of-origin relational patterns, not only in our families-of-creation but in the workplace. How can we deny our family?

One of the marks of solid adult development is making the transition from family-of-origin to family-of-creation. The old rules and norms of our childhood family are evaluated and new rules are written, for better or worse. As a counselor in proximity to a nursing school, I hear this clash of rules often in the stories of my female nurse clients seeking a professional identity in a male-dominated medical world. Trying to juggle their self-expectations of being a good professional, good mother, good wife—and unconsciously, a good daughter—they are overwhelmed. The inner voice of parents says to stay home and raise the kids and make a home for their husband. Yet, their aspirations for a career cuts short their time. The callings feel mutually exclusive as if success in career means failure at home, not because they are indeed failing but because they cannot measure up to all these lofty ideals. A sense of alienation from God and feelings of anger toward God soon ensues, unless these women find more self-affirming feminine images of career and calling.

As I listen to the stories of my depressed counselees, I can hear the haunting voice of my own guilt. I am an empathic listener in the counseling office. Am I this good a listener to my family? How can I justify the long hours at work when I should be spending more time at home? Do I use work as a way of avoiding family life?

The Gospels paint a surprisingly antagonistic picture of Jesus' relationship with his family. His birth uprooted the family. They moved out of the country to save his life from Herod the Great, who had all the little boys of Bethlehem slain in his attempt to annihilate the "King of the Jews." I wonder if Herod's horrible para-

noid act is reflected in Jesus' sense of self as one who "did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34)?

The tension between Jesus and his mother appears in the almost humorous account of the family leaving him behind in the temple during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Finding him in the temple, Mary expressed her grief and relief. Even at age twelve, Jesus rebuts his scolding mother by asking, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49).

Jesus' first miracle is set in the context of an apparent manipulation by his mother to rescue a short-sighted host who did not provide enough wine for a wedding banquet. "Woman, what do I have to do with you?" was Jesus' response.

At one point, Jesus' mother and brothers were obviously convinced that he was insane and came to take charge of him. When told that his family had come to see him, Jesus referred to his disciples, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:49).

Is this Jesus, who supposedly never married or had children, to be our model of family relationships? The question is meant to create a dilemma's horn. Obviously, the Gospel accounts of Jesus' family life are obscure at best; there are other indications of warmth and commitment. What I believe Jesus taught and modeled in his relationships with family was a deep form of spirituality, as well as a flair for yanking the chain of his audience. The distraction of Christ is to a relationship with God where nothing else, and no one else, interferes. When we are free to love God, then we are free to love others.

Marriage, too, is a journey. It is a life-long sojourn of two growing, developing persons. What happens when one partner moves into a deeper relationship with Christ

than the other partner? Or, when one moves away from their relationship with Christ? How can spouses share a common faith, yet maintain their spiritual individuality?

Frederick Buechner describes the marriage made in heaven as "one where a man and a woman become more richly themselves together than the chances are either of them could ever have managed to become alone."[15] Christ calls us to come outside of ourselves, transcending our self-absorption, to a place where we can find our true selves in God.

The parable of the party, like so many of Jesus' teachings, confronted the xenophobia of the culture and speaks to our struggles to relate to persons of difference. Only as we develop a sound sense of who we are can we respectfully relate to others. Relationship then becomes less about uniformity between two persons and more about celebrating uniqueness and personhood.

In Erik Erikson's model of psychosocial development, intimacy follows identity. For Erikson, identity is the crisis of adolescence; intimacy the crisis of young adulthood. A developmentally successful adolescence prepares us for developing the capacity for intimacy, which is so important for marriage.

Paul calls for a mutual submission of husband and wife to one another based on a mutual commitment to Christ in Ephesians 5:21, "Submitting to one another in the fear of Christ." Those who try to impose a hierarchical interpretation on this passage miss this central thesis. One of the greatest challenges to the spiritual journey is marriage—maintaining an intimate connection while growing uniquely in our relationship with God. Paul recognized this and saw marriage as a metaphor of spirituality and faithfulness. Faithfulness in marriage is rooted in our faithfulness to the transcendent nature of marriage as God's design, as shared history, and as an

acknowledgement of the goodness of committed companionship.

In making and maintaining relationships, we express the true nature of God as relational—as traditionally understood as a unity of Father, Son, and Spirit. In Christ our relationships take on new and sacred meaning.

Community in Distraction

The spiritual journey is more than just a personal matter. We are called into a community of sojourners. It follows that distraction is also a community phenomenon as Christ calls us, as part of a group, to God into a new way of being. While this book is primarily about our individual journey in Christ, I want to touch on some of the dynamics of groups in distraction to the extent that these dynamics affect our relationship with Christ.

Loss of Focus

In my experience, and according to many group dynamic theories, groups actually spend just a fraction of their time and resources accomplishing the objectives for which they were formed. This lack of focus can be seen as a nonproductive waste or the necessary precursor to effective group work. Periods of unfocused mulling can indicate an emerging movement of the Spirit.

The early church languished in disarray following the ascension of Christ, or so it appeared. In fact, they were waiting for the infilling of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus had instructed. At Pentecost, the church found its focus.

Spiritually, groups need a period of creative chaos in order to make room for a fresh movement of God. Old structures of group identity and norms wane as the labor pains of a new structure are felt.

During this season of decomposition, group members are wise in discerning whether the nondirectedness

is a matter of group dysfunction or a stirring of God. There is a knack to sensing the difference. If the dispersion of group focus follows quickly after a major decision, it could be symptomatic of a premature action, mistaken direction, or a breakdown in group cohesion. Seasoned sojourners, however, have a sense of the cyclical nature of distraction in group process. It just seems time for a fresh breeze of the Spirit. Settledness, stirring, fervency and waning: all are important aspects of the spiritual rhythm of groups.

Conflict

A conflict arose in the early church because the Greek-speaking widows felt left out of the daily distribution of food. The apostles' response is a classic one in conflict management. They saw the conflict as an opportunity to enhance the quality of the community and opened up the leadership of the church to include Greek-speaking persons. In so doing, they avoided many of the pitfalls groups get into during conflict.

Conflict is an occasion for discovering a new meaning for a group's existence or adapting to a new direction in God's leading. According to Bruce Tuckman's theory of group process, conflict is a normal part of group life. For Tuckman, groups naturally go through a repetitive cycle of forming, storming, norming and performing. Storming is a way for groups to establish norms, or agreed-upon behaviors, which make effective group work possible.[16]

In society, when storming is done well it is called elections; when it is done poorly, it is called terrorism. Faith-based groups often have built-in ways of looking at conflict which virtually guarantee that the conflict will be acted out destructively. By espousing a theology that conflict is sinful, a group is locked into a destructive manner of conflict. First it is suppressed, then it is inevitably expressed as judgmentalism or coercion.

Seeing conflict as a signal that the group is changing frees us to refrain from blaming and judging others. Groups in positive distraction have found a way to utilize conflict as a natural, wholesome, and integral part of group re-formation and vitality.

Christ is Calling

The journey of Christ waits for us. Those who keep journals of their reflections often observe a thread that runs through various entries. Christ continually leads the way if we are open to follow.

The journey of Christ is a paradox: the more we follow a set path, the further we drift off course. The psalmist prayed that God would lead us in the "paths of righteousness," the worn, well-known trails of God's guidance. Jesus defined the way as a relationship with him, "I am the way." It is not the path that we are to follow, but the Pathfinder. We naturally assume that we are to discover and create the way, as if cutting a trail through a jungle. There is some truth to this. The journey is one of discovery and co-creation. We do blaze our own trails with Christ. As soon as we begin to plot the path, however, we've already drifted off course.

One common construing of the journey of Christ is that it is like flying by instruments. As long as we attend to the dials in front of us and respond accordingly, we'll make it to our destination. The dials of direction are the Scriptures, the inner witness of the Spirit, community wisdom, and so on. There is truth to this. But, what is the destination that we're striving for? Heaven? Perfection? Self-esteem? Success?

Christians of the flying-by-instruments school inevitably become distraught by their inability to stay on course. They fall asleep at the wheel. They start looking at the scenery out the window. They fly through overcast skies and get scared. They receive conflicting signals from the dials. Sooner or later they lose their focus

on the instruments. Then what? How can we keep from being distracted *from* Christ?

Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." The yoke is designed for two. Christ invites us to be yokefellows, to journey with God. The journey is not about the destination, it is about the yoke that binds two together. It is about relationship. The destination, if you must have one, is union with Christ.

The paradox is this: not that we are distracted *from* Christ, but that we are distracted *by* Christ. One of Jesus' metaphors of his own saving purpose was a shepherd who leaves the flock to seek out the one lost sheep. We, like sheep, have gone astray, says Isaiah. We live in a perpetual state of focus, not on Christ but on the issues of life. It is not we who seek out Christ; Christ seeks us out and distracts us away from our preoccupations. Jesus said, "My sheep know my voice." Shepherds lead their flocks; sheep follow out of a sense of familiarity. Perhaps what Jesus meant was that our following Christ is contingent on knowing that we are Christ's followers.

Right in the middle of our busy, preoccupied lives Christ calls. Christ calls to us, and the moment we lift our heads to listen, the journey begins.

Prayer of Distraction

My prayer for today is that no thing will have such brilliance as Christ,

That no interruption will seem as a discontinuity, but rather a leading of the Spirit,

That no memory will seem as a wound, but as a reminder of God's healing,

That no fear will seem as a fortress against hope, but as an occasion for God's deliverance,

That no attraction will seem as an allurement from righteousness, but as a celebration of the beauty of God's creation,

That no conversation will seem as idle words, but as a moment for God to speak,

That my heart will be still in the peace of God,

That my mind will be clear with the light of God, and

That my soul will be satisfied with the goodness of God.

Amen.

Reflection

When did you first become aware that Christ wanted to have something to do with you personally?

What is your number one preoccupation?

How do you suppose Christ gets your attention? How does Christ distract you?

To what or whom is Christ inviting you?

In what ways would you describe your life's journey?

What is your calling? In what ways does your work reflect that calling?

How has your image of God changed?

Have you ever felt pursued by God? What do you remember of that experience?

Who are your fellow sojourners? Detractors? Are you a sojourner or a detractor?

When Christ invites you to "sit still" what illusion keeps you involved in activity?

Describe an experience when you have been distracted from darkness by a "flash of grace."

When does your focus on what is "good" show out a graced distraction by God?

What is your personal authority? How do you claim your power? . . . or live with your limitations?

If you are part of a religious group, how does that group deal with the "storming" phase? Does this phase lead to coercion and judgmentalism or new life and grace for the group?

Endnotes

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