

The Long Road

Genesis 45:1-15

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The spiritual journey is slow and mysterious and unpredictable — and it refuses to be rushed.

I recall a friend of mine telling the story of when he and his brother were just boys, it was summer break, and their parents were off to work on a summer day. They were hungry, and so they decided to bake a bunt cake — you know one of those big, circular cakes that usually have a dense texture.

They found the recipe in the cookbook. They made sure they had all the ingredients. They mixed the batter, and poured it in the bunt cake pan. The recipe said to cook the batter at 250 degrees for an hour and a half.

But, they were hungry, and were feeling a bit impatient. They didn't want to wait an hour and a half. That's when the two brothers had a brilliant idea. They decided that if they doubled the oven temp to 500 degrees, the cake would be done in half the time. So they cranked the heat up and set the timer for forty-five minutes.

He said that when that cake came out, you could have used it as a bowling ball. It was absolutely inedible.

The spiritual journey is like that — it can't be rushed.

It's an incredibly emotional scene, and it had been a long time in coming. Joseph, betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery years ago, now stands in the position of power over them. Which way will he use it — to redeem them or to punish them?

Years had past. Joseph was still just a boy, a mere adolescent when they sold him into slavery. Now he was a man — and not just any man. He was the second in command of all of Egypt, answering only to Pharaoh, himself. He had the power in this moment to literally take their lives in his hands. With a single word, a single gesture he could have them jailed or, worse yet, executed.

The whole story — the previous seven chapters of Genesis, to be exact — had been building up to this moment. Will Joseph kill his brothers and exact his long-awaited revenge or not?

He sends everyone out so he can speak to his brothers alone. The doors close with a thud. A moment of silence. And then Joseph breaks down in tears. In fact, "he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it" as far as Pharaoh's house.

"I am Joseph," he confesses through gulping sobs. "Is my father still alive?"

His brothers can't believe it. They're speechless. Their jaws are on the ground.

He invites them to come give him a closer examination, and as they do, he explains to them that it has all suddenly become clear to him — like someone just turned on a light switch. What they meant for evil all those years ago, God meant for good (Gen. 50:20).

The scene closes with Joseph hanging on the necks of his brothers, crying tears of joy, being smothered in kisses of brotherly affection, and, for the first time since they threw him in that pit, sharing in brotherly conversation.

As an adolescent, I always thought of Joseph as a “hero of the faith. As I read it, God had endowed Joseph with special powers, which he used to fulfill God's purposes in the world. Best of all, he didn't have to study or work hard for those powers. They were just given to him. And they made him unique. In a sea of normal, Joseph was special. I mean, what teenager wouldn't want to be Joseph?

But as I grew up, and as I grew more mature both emotionally and spiritually, I began to read the story of Joseph in different way.

I'd read the early parts of the story — the parts about how he was his father's favorite and he received preferential treatment, the parts where he didn't have to shepherd the flocks like his brothers, the parts about how he had a special robe to set him apart, the parts where he had dreams about his brothers and his parents bowing down to him and *how he went out of his way to make sure they heard about those dreams* — and I began to interpret Joseph not as a hero of the faith, but as a spoiled, arrogant brat, cocky and brash.

I knew his type. They strutted around the high school pushing less popular kids into lockers and making others feel small with their sharp words. Often times, *they* had really nice clothes, too. That didn't mean they were decent people.

So what happened between? What happened between 17-year old Joseph and second-in-command-of-all-of-Egypt Joseph? What happened to change the brash, arrogant, self-centered Joseph into the Joseph who could have ruined his brothers for what they had done to him, but who chose forgiveness and reconciliation instead?

That, to me, is the *real* miracle of this story. It's not that God used the misfortunes of Joseph's life for good. God is *always* doing that — and has even done it in my life. The *real* miracle of this story is that somehow, beyond all understanding God took someone as self-absorbed as Joseph and used his life to transform him into someone who would choose forgiveness over payback.

Frederick Buechener said it like this: “Almost as much as it is the story of how Israel was saved from famine and extinction, *it is the story of how Joseph was saved as a human being*. It would be interesting to know which of the two achievements cost God the

greater effort and which was the one he was prouder of" (originally published in *Peculiar Treasures*).

It's my favorite line from a song I don't particularly like, and a band I don't particularly care for. The band is The Lumineers, and the song is titled, "Flowers in Your Hair." The line goes: "It's a long road to wisdom, and a short one to being ignored."

It's a long road to wisdom, and a short one to being ignored.

Joseph's story, it seems to me, is the story of the long road. It's a road we Christians often refer to as "the spiritual journey."

And, frankly, it is a journey that is *often* filled with betrayals and plot twists and tragedies and abandonment and brokenness and heartbreak. That's because the spiritual journey is not one over which we have absolute control.

We might like to think we do. We might like to think that we can chart it on a map or plot it on a timeline. We might like to think that if we do "A" and "B," the end result will be "C."

"If I read my Bible and I say my prayers, God will answer them."

"If I go to church and I serve those in need, God will bless me."

But of course, the journey toward spiritual maturity isn't as easy or as predictable as algebra. The hard truth of the matter is that sometimes we read our Bible and say our prayers, and they go *unanswered*. And sometimes we go to church and we serve those in need, and our lives still fall apart.

The hard truth of the matter is that the vast majority of the spiritual journey has nearly nothing to do with what we *do*, but with what is *done to us*. And it is how we choose to embrace what happens to us that has the power to either ennoble us or embitter us.

You're betrayed by the very person who swore to love you and care for you "til death do you part." You give your life and loyalty to a company that fires you months before you can collect a full pension. You go in for routine bloodwork, and come out with an appointment to see the oncologist. A tree falls on your truck. Your dog breaks its leg. Your friend has a stroke. You fall while on a hike and injure your leg. You're suddenly working from home as both an employee of your company and as your child's teacher.

Whether we realize it or not, the spiritual journey is mostly made up of those things that happen to us — with or without our permission.

I keep thinking this week of a story I've shared with some of you before, but I think it bears worth repeating. It's the story of a former professor of mine.

His name is Dr. Stephen Brachlow. At one time, he was an up-and-coming professor of Christian history. He had completed his Doctor of Philosophy from Oxford and had literally written the book on the history of the Puritan tradition, a book many seminaries still use as their primary text for such Church history classes.

You might expect such a scholar to walk around with pomp and circumstance, as if the world ought to bend around his presence, but that was not the man I knew. That's because his life took a sudden and drastic turn around the time his son, Andrew, turned 17.

"Andrew was diagnosed with schizophrenia when he was seventeen and a junior in high school. Previously unknown in the family, it changed Andrew's life dramatically. Over the next few years, this very intelligent, kind, and selfless guy, gradually spiraled into the irrationalities of the illness.

He soon lost touch with normal social graces, paid little attention to his body odor and hygiene, had an increasingly altered vision of reality that led to obsessive behaviors and paranoia. He sometimes heard voices and responded to them, believed that dogs barked because they knew what he was thinking, and occasionally saw beams of light emanating from his forehead.

For the first four years, Andrew held things together fairly well — at least publicly. He saw his psychiatrist and took anti-psychotic medication. But during his junior year in college, it all caved in on him.

One of the many baffling things about schizophrenia, psychiatrists tell us, is that the illness itself often prevents those who have it from knowing they have it. So at the age of 21, Andrew decided he was not mentally ill and never had been. He fired his psychiatrist, threw out all his meds, and very quickly descended into even deeper paranoia.

Believing the campus police and other students were out to kill him, Andrew fled the campus and, for the next three years, roamed the US and Canada homeless — making his way from Minnesota up to New York, then all the way west to California and up to British Columbia, and all the way back east to Quebec City by hitchhiking, riding on freight trains, sneaking onto Greyhound buses, or, as he sometimes did, simply by walking — sustaining himself by dumpster diving, soup kitchens, or by handouts at the backdoors of restaurants.

Throughout all of this, and in the intervening years since, Andrew has been hospitalized and jailed more times than his parents can now count. For the past ten years, Andrew has been living in Bangor, Maine, where he is now very well known by the police...

Dr. Brachlow and his wife keep in touch with Andrew. He visits them two or three times a year for a few weeks at a time, and they talk by phone most every day.

But during a recent sabbatical, one of Dr. Brachlow's goals was to spend time with Andrew. So, Dr. Brachlow and Andrew set out on a month-long camping trip. They made their way from Maine, through New Hampshire and Vermont, down around the southern tip of Lake Erie, eventually across the upper peninsula of Lake Michigan, and on into Minnesota.

When they arrived at the family cabin on a chilly, breezy late September afternoon, Andrew jumped out of the car, ran to the lake, stripped down to his underwear, and leapt off the dock and into the lake for a swim. As Dr. Brachlow stood on the dock, bundled up in his ski jacket and wool cap against the wind and cold, he says he was amazed at the sheer visceral exuberance he saw in Andrew as he swam across their little bay and back.

Over the past two decades of having to deal with the reality of Andrew's schizophrenia, he says he has often wondered, 'Where is God in all of this?'

As Dr. Brachlow looked on at his son swimming in his underwear that day and asked himself "Where is God in all of this?" he says he came to a stunning realization:

"I wasn't going to find God by running away from Andrew's reality, wishing it could be otherwise, *but rather by entering into it*, just as God did in and through our own weak and vulnerable flesh."

So for the rest of the month-long camping trip, he leaned into Andrew's reality, hoping to catch a glimpse of God — even as it all seemed like wilderness to him.

After a few days, he noticed that the car began to smell like pickles, which puzzled him until he watched Andrew make one of his inimitable sandwiches: a slice of bread with lettuce, McDonald's french fries, grape jam, a slice of cheese, some squares of Cadbury chocolate, a little ketchup, and finally a good dose of brown vinegar, which of course, explained the hint of pickle in the car.

On another day, Andrew woke up with a scratchy throat and congestion. They stopped at a drugstore, where he bought a large bag of Ricola cough drops. As they drove down the highway, Andrew proceeded to drop several lozenges into a 1-liter bottle filled with equal parts ginger-ale, tomato juice, and chocolate milk. "He likes mixed drinks," Dr. Brachlow jokes. After a taking a couple of swigs of that concoction, Andrew calmly inserted a lozenge up each of his nostrils, then tucked the package with the remainder of the lozenges down his shirt collar to ward off the congestion in his chest.

But among these many eccentricities, there were also times of great tenderness and deep calm. At night, Andrew would often slide his sleeping bag over right next to Dr. Brachlow, like a small child — which, in so many ways, he still was. He also had the habit of resting his hand on Dr. Brachlow's forearm while he drove, which "as his father, [he] found both endearing and comforting."

Then there was the morning Andrew asked Dr. Brachlow to shave his face. Anytime Andrew tried to shave, he'd nick up his face terribly, and so had stopped even trying to shave, but that morning, he was very calm and trusting. As he held his father by the waste to keep his balance, Dr. Brachlow ran his electric razor very carefully over his face.

"So," asks Dr. Brachlow, "did I find God in all of this?"

"Not always," he answers. "But thinking back on the journey, I think I often did in odd, unexpected ways. I still grieve the tragic loss of "the Andrew who might have been" had his life not been so altered by schizophrenia. But at the same time, I can't shake the sense that Andrew and his illness, even in its most grotesque and bizarre qualities, has functioned for me as a doorway to the sacred."

Where is God in all of this?

Like Dr. Brachlow, I don't always know. But I find holy comfort in the truth that just as God was with Joseph, so God is with Andrew and with me and with you.

And that, I believe is the secret of the spiritual journey —
to realize that there is no mountain so high, no valley so low;
no path so crooked, no place so desolate,
that God is not already there, waiting to be with you.
Amen.¹

¹ So much of this is credited to a homily Dr. Stephen Brachlow delivered in Chapel at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Richmond, VA sometime between Fall 2009 and Spring 2012.