

The Pull Toward Home

My daughter wanted to hitchhike from Montana to Michigan and back again, so I did what middle-aged fathers do best: I woke at 2 A.M. worrying about it. Rae was almost twenty-three at the time, so there wasn't much I could do to stop her. This delightful young woman—who brings a contented smile to my face when I think of her—is brimming with adventure and independence. When she called with her hitchhiking plan, I protested for a time and then pronounced that if she lives to be thirty she will probably have a wonderful life. Perhaps by then, I thought, she will have enough wisdom to balance her daring spirit. Several years ago my wife, Lisa, wrote a book called *Growing Strong Daughters*. It worked. We grew three Very Strong Daughters. Now I tell her she should write a sequel, *Coping with Strong Daughters*.

Perhaps I am a light sleeper, or maybe it is just that 2 A.M. is ideally suited for the contemplative in me. Many years ago I gave up fretting about being too sleep-deprived to function the next day, and now I mostly enjoy unexpected middle-of-the-night awakenings as opportunities to mull

over the contours of home. Sometimes I resort to worry—as I did the night after Rae’s hitchhiking pronouncement—but most often it is a time of grateful reflection, prayer, imagination, and anticipation. Sometimes I gaze at Lisa as she sleeps, thanking God for blessing me with such a partner, and wonder where the years have gone. Sometimes I count other blessings. There are many more blessings than sheep in the world, and blessings are easier to count because they do not all look the same. Sometimes I pray for those I love—my family and friends—and for those whom I am still learning to love. Sometimes I think back, remembering earlier days of life, reliving poignant moments, regretting the selfish grasp of sin that I know too well, and basking in the amazement of God’s grace that is so much bigger than my sin. Sometimes I think about the accelerating pace of life and wonder what it will be like eventually to pass through the fearful gate of death. I picture what waits on the other side. Though I fight against doubts that linger uninvited in the agnostic shadows of my faith, most often I dare to dream of a place of utter peace and goodness. And sometimes, as I imagine that place of exquisite beauty where I am embraced by a God who loves boundlessly, I slip back into a peaceful sleep until a playful bird outside or a golden oldie from the clock radio wakes me for a new day.

I am not alone. Most of us—perhaps all of us—spend ample time mulling over the stories of our lives. What wakes you in the early morning hours, easing into the quiet of your consciousness? What keeps your mind occupied late at night as the repose of sleep eludes you? Maybe you choose better times than the middle of the night for these quiet moments of

reflection, and find your mind wandering as you are sitting in traffic, waiting in the grocery line, sitting in a meeting, sipping a mocha, or walking in the park.

As we reflect and ponder, a common task motivates our thoughts. Each of us is building a story—a pathway to explain where we have been and where we are going. We are making sense of things, looking at the past in the light of the present and the present in the light of the past, forecasting a future and, perhaps, daring to place our fragile hopes in it. We are placing ourselves in context, both historically and interpersonally, as we think about friends and lovers, hitchhiking daughters and risk-taking sons, communities to which we belong, themes of the past and dreams for the future. We tell ourselves the stories of our lives even as we are living them out.

If you and I live for seventy-five years, and if we spend five hours of each week contemplating the story of our lives (it is probably far more), then we will devote over a million minutes to the task over the course of our lifetime. And if our dreams at night are also spent figuring out the meaning of life, then we should double or triple this number. We are people with stories, and our stories reverberate in our minds, relationships, dreams, wishes, and goals.

LEANING TOWARD HOME

Although each of our stories is different, I am writing this book because I believe a common theme runs through them. In one way or another, our stories are about finding pathways toward home. There is a homeward lilt in our step, an inclination of

our hearts toward that which is familiar and safe. When I say we lean toward home, I mean it on multiple levels.

At one level it is very literal. We want to be home when we are stuck in traffic. We want those we love to be home—physically and emotionally—so that we can share our lives together. As Rae contemplated her hitchhiking adventure, I wanted her to make it home, to get back safely to her rented house in Missoula where she could resume her normal life: reading at coffee shops, biking and backpacking in the mountains, hanging out with friends, and working at the Americorp position that keeps her a hair's width above the poverty line.

When I travel, especially when I travel overseas, I am eager to come home to Illinois as the trip nears completion. There is something deeply comforting about being home and something transient and disquieting about being away. Those stationed at faraway military bases eagerly await the day when their tours are complete, as loved ones place magnetic calendars on the refrigerator and tally the days until the anticipated homecoming.

Home calls to us, tugs at our emotions, pulls us back to places of familiarity. Even those who have rarely had a home—such as foster children—yearn for its imagined refuge and respite. It is such a strong idea, such a powerful metaphor, that we yearn for it even when we have not had a happy or real experience of its power.

At some deeper level most of us feel the tug of home in a figurative sense. Some worry because a teenage child who resides two doors down the hallway seems to live far from home in every meaningful way. Sometimes we lie awake thinking how far away from home we ourselves have drifted.

What started as a small temptation has become a runaway train—a major life crisis. Or perhaps you are in a marriage that seems far from home—two souls sharing a bed and nothing else. For some it is the unresolved challenges of a childhood home that keep bubbling up and making a mess of life.

At still another level we yearn for an ultimate, even transcendent, home. Sometimes we see through the fog of our daily distractions and recognize how much we yearn for God, for our spiritual home, for that divine embrace of spiritual centeredness that tells us all will be well even when life seems difficult. Maybe you, like me, find yourself longing more for your heavenly home with the passing years, because many of those years expose new layers of loss and brokenness. We find ourselves marching slower with the tempo of aging, facing the fact that some of our hopes and dreams may not be realized this side of eternity. Often we are disappointed and disillusioned with the unfolding drama of life. But even our capacity for disappointment speaks to some intrinsic knowledge that things should be better.

Longing for home is good, a winsome reflection of the way we are created. God is tugging at our hearts, inviting us back to the security of divine love. Intuitively, we know we are crafted by God for something beautiful, and we yearn for it, but this longing is simultaneously sad, reminding us that life in this world is not always as tidy as we wish. Spiritual writers have often referred to life as a pilgrimage, a journey in which we mature through toil and struggle, all the time yearning for another day. This is the great paradox of yearning: it reveals both our noblest desires and our greatest burdens.

PHONING HOME

Some days we glimpse our yearnings more clearly than others. I recall a day in 1993 when I was far from home—more than two thousand miles away from my family in Illinois. I spent the first part of the day taking an intense six-hour oral exam for board certification in my discipline. Within the first twenty minutes I knew that the examining committee was not about to pass me. I found the next five hours and forty minutes agonizing, shaming, and brutally demoralizing. And that was the easy part of my day.

The next part involved driving an hour to my parents' house—the house where I grew up—to discuss their recent decision to be divorced after nearly forty years of marriage. My sister and I both knew it was the only decision that made sense in their situation, but nevertheless our family discussion that evening, and the subsequent losses, would be excruciating. The shame I felt earlier in the day, failing an exam I had spent two years preparing for, was trivial compared to the shame my parents—both of them good parents—felt in ending their marriage. I had my own sadness to bear with the dissolution of my family of origin, but it was even more difficult to watch their pain. It still is.

Between those two events, as I drove down the Sunset Highway west of Portland, I had a compelling urge—like *ET* in Stephen Spielberg's 1982 movie—to phone home. At the next exit I found a pay phone, called home to Lisa's familiar and comforting voice, and my soul burst. Without even offering perfunctory small talk I began weeping uncontrollably. These were not the tender tears of a sensitive man, but a

child's heaving sobs erupting in a grown man's body, as if something I had held back for many years could no longer be contained. I cannot recall another time since childhood when crying had such power over me. Between breathing spasms I spoke of my dismal performance on the exam and how I dreaded the evening ahead. Lisa did what I hoped she would do: she sutured my ruptured soul with her listening ear, her kind words of empathy, and her expressions of love. After twenty minutes of comfort I wiped the tears from my cheeks, climbed back into my rental car, and continued down the Sunset Highway.

At that point in my life, in 1993, Lisa and I had recently come through some difficult years. I wasn't sure how she would respond to my vulnerable cry for help. Yet still I yearned to call, because intuitively I knew that my partner of many years was as close to an earthly home as I could find. Her soft words seeped deep into my being, comforted me, and reminded me how much I need her. Lisa and I both recall that broken day as a profound moment of connection and renewal in our marriage. It was a moment of coming home to a place of secure love. Those twenty minutes of conversation, punctuated by pay-phone static, brought together the paradox of life.

Everything good and everything broken converged in those moments of talking with Lisa. We live in a toilsome and broken world, constantly surrounded by struggle, yet we are also immersed in the hope of love. On that day I felt as though my professional life was a failure, but that was just the surface story. When my emotions erupted, I knew there was a

deeper story that could never fit into a primitive taxonomy of good and bad because that story—like all of our lives—was a convoluted mixture of both.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF HOME

Longing for home has three dimensions: past, present, and future. We look back to the past, remembering the good, regretting the bad, wondering how things could have been different with some different choices. As we look back to memories of days gone by, we also look around to contemplate life in our present-day existence. Whether you live alone in a basement apartment or are part of a bustling multigenerational family in a three-story farmhouse, you are probably trying to make sense of it all—to connect the joys and sorrows of yesterday with the opportunities and challenges of today. And of course, we look ahead to the future—wondering, planning, dreaming, fearing.

Past

I have had more than a decade to reflect on that phone call to Lisa and the deep primordial emotion that erupted that afternoon, and I now recognize what I saw only dimly then: the deepest currents of pain were about a grown man looking back, wishing to cling to the security of childhood. I wanted to put on my baseball glove and play catch with my dad in the front yard or to walk in the back door of our farmhouse and be carried away by the aroma of my mother's latest homemade pie. Maybe we could climb in the old Chevy and drive north to the Puget Sound for a vacation like we

used to do. Perhaps the Coleman camp stove would still be in the cellar, and once again I could wake from a good night's sleep in the big green and yellow tent to the smell of bacon and the promise of a good day together as a family. All the good memories, all the beautiful things of childhood, were swirling in my mind, and I longed to have them back. My family of origin—which, like most families, had always been a mix of beautiful and broken things—was about to become visibly shattered. I knew it had to be this way, but I wished it didn't. I looked back and longed for the security of long ago.

As I have talked with hundreds of others about their childhoods, I have discovered that my journey is not unique. We look back with wistfulness, sorrow, celebration, remorse, and all sorts of other emotions.

Your life and mine are real and immediate, but they also reflect the greater story of the cosmos. We are a story within a story. Humans were created in the Garden, in a perfect home, teeming with life, filled with wondrous sounds, glorious colors, and fragrant smells. In Eden there was harmony, laughter, connection with God, and safe intimacy between Adam and Eve. In the beginning God created a place of secure love.

We no longer live in Eden, yet we are close enough to catch a glimpse every now and then. And with each glimpse we yearn to be back in a place of perfect peace and acceptance. I agree with psychologist and spiritual director David Benner, who said, “Deep down . . . something within us seems to remember the Garden within which we once existed. Part of us longs to return; we know that this is where we belong.”¹

Weeping in that phone booth along the Sunset Highway was all about that longing to return. With my tears I cried out to be back in the Garden of my childhood, playing catch with my dad, enjoying a long conversation with my mom, or laughing with her because she made six varieties of blueberry pie to see which one the family liked best, singing happy songs about another good day. We were created for Eden, but we live east of Eden.

Present

Living here in the present means living in paradox. We envision neat and tidy homes, with attractive gables, weather-resistant vinyl siding, and shiny new plumbing, but so often we end up mopping flooded basements, letting every possible horizontal surface accumulate with junk mail and other clutter, and living life to the endless rhythm of a dripping faucet. Our homes, like our lives, are complex. We long for peace and repose as we walk in the door, and sometimes we find it. Other times we enter into conflict, cynicism, bitterness, and the scars of unhealed wounds. For some, home is a place of comfort and sanctuary from the tumults of life, at least some of the time. For others, it is a place to yearn for such things. And in the yearning we again see our instinctual leaning toward places of secure love. Even those who have never known a good home know enough to be depressed about it, or angry, or dissatisfied with life. They know they are created for something better than they have experienced.

On that dismal day in 1993 I missed Lisa—not just because I had been out of town for a few days, but because Lisa and I have crafted a lump of familiarity together that we

know as our home. Like our tangible home, our relational home is not perfect—we have some leaky faucets in our marriage—but it is a place of refuge and encouragement and hope. Close relationships are like that. Each of us has relational homes with friends, family members, communities of faith, or lifelong partners.

Again, the story functions on two levels—the immediate and the metaphorical. The here and now is real enough: the leaky faucets and vinyl siding, the laughter filling the family room, the lint filter on the clothes dryer that we forget to clean, the gentle words of understanding, the stacks of junk mail, the children who pretend to cringe as their old parents kiss, the hassles over who sweeps the floor or sanitizes the toilet, the embraces of love. But there is another story, a grand story, and it has a here and now also. That is the story that began with Eden and ends with heaven, and it sometimes seems that forever got sandwiched in between. It is a story of a God who invites us into relationship.

It is sometimes difficult to see that God loves us more than we can imagine, and always has, and continually calls us to rest in a place of secure love. Most of us look for love elsewhere, thinking it will be more tangible or powerful or immediate than God's love. We easily wander down the path that leads away from God, squandering our inheritance on that which we hope will bring pleasure, even as over and over we find it brings no joy. Yet we are not forgotten. Gazing down the long, dusty road that once carried us far away, God eagerly awaits our return. Our divine Father is poised to run and embrace each of us—though we are befuddled and wayward prodigals—and throw a homecoming party in our

honor. Sometimes in the still of the night, or in the majestic beauty of a snow-capped mountain, we can hear the thunderous rhythm of God running to meet us, to welcome us home.

Someday the security of God's love will be very tangible, but for now it is fuzzy and indistinct in our vision. Sometimes we experience it indirectly through the beauty of prairie grass, the gracious smile of a forgiving companion, a body that heals from infections and diseases, laughter in the company of good friends, and the simple goodness of life's many blessings.

Some have grown deep enough in faith to see God's love in their struggles and pains, perhaps even in the face of death. They have grown deep through the discipline of prayer. When we pray, we catch glimpses of the one who invented love. Spiritual writer Richard Foster states it so winsomely: "And he is inviting you—and me—to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. . . . For too long we have been in a far country; a country of noise and hurry and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And he welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation."²

Foster is not referring to shopping-list prayer: "God, give me this and a little of that, and please hurry up because I've already been waiting a long time." Instead, he refers to prayer that aligns our hearts with the pulse of God's presence in the cosmos. In this sort of prayer we learn to listen, to sit in awareness of God's presence, to love the things God loves

and to hate the things God hates. Foster refers to prayer as a way of life, a posture of humility in the presence of the divine. It is this sort of prayer that leads us home to God as we learn to rest in the safety of divine love.

Future

Home also has a future tense. Though I didn't recognize it at the time, my angst at that pay phone and my desire for home were also directed forward. Without even knowing it I was looking ahead, drawing on my Christian faith to understand the present in light of the future. Several weeks later my eleven-year-old daughter, Sarah, asked if her grandparents would be married in heaven. Her question took me by surprise. As I stumbled through a sophomoric answer, I began anticipating a place where sadness is consumed by joy. It is hard to picture our new creation—the new heaven and new earth—but I suspect there will be green and yellow tents and baseball mitts and countless opportunities for healing conversations. I imagine the homecoming feast described in the Bible will include families and stepfamilies spanning dozens of generations. The wounds of the past will be set aside, and we will celebrate a new home where everything is set right.

My musings in response to Sarah's question were founded on my Christian faith, which at this point in the middle of my life shapes the way I see everything. I believe we are people with a future that will last much longer than our present bodies. If you are like me, you are skilled at ignoring this—going about daily business as if the matters of this mortal life deserve your full attention. Many of us work, raise children, get promoted, coach Little League, save for retirement, buy a

house, travel, retire on a lake in the Ozarks, and life goes on. Or does it? Eventually it ends. Beneath each life event there is a subtle motif of immortality, the possibility of heaven, which always lurks in the background. This is our telos instinct—the hope of an ultimate Home that draws us beyond the details of daily life to look for a loving God. If home is a place of secure love, it is most surely found in the arms of the one who loves us first.

Pastor and author Mark Buchanan writes of our instinctual longing for heaven in his book *Unseen Things*. He was asked to preach at a funeral service, and after almost two hours of testimonials from friends of the deceased he tossed aside the notes he had prepared and simply spoke of the possibility of Home:

I don't care what religion you belong to or would never belong to, what beliefs you profess or scorn. I would bet a sweet purse that every one of you in this room has an instinct, and that the instinct is sharp as a razor right now. The instinct is that the world is not enough. The instinct is that this world isn't big enough, long enough, deep enough to contain or explain even one single life in it. The instinct is that death, no matter how natural its causes, is always unnatural, a brusque intruder, a gloating enemy, and that death shouldn't be allowed to have the last word. The instinct is that we weren't made for this world only. We were made for eternity. The world is not enough. Did you think it was?³

The Christian story ends in a place of perfect peace. We believe our sins are already forgiven, but in heaven they will be removed. And we will no longer be held hostage by the

sins of others. There will be no more survivors of sexual abuse, no more gambling addictions, no selfish spouses, no hunger or racism or oppression of any form. Everything will be right again, and we will be back home as if we never left—still nestled in the Garden, basking in the radiant light of God’s glory and breathing in the comfort of eternal love.

THE SOJOURNERS’ WAY

So it is. We sojourn as children of Adam and Eve in a broken world, instinctually longing for that place of life and comfort and rest that we call home. Although these yearnings are somewhat bound to the here and now—where we have pay phones and divorce—they also reflect something more eternal and foundational. We long for a place of rest and security that can never fully be found in our earthly pilgrimage. Whether we look back toward Eden or forward toward heaven, it is the same inner urge that compels us to reach beyond the nomadic existence of this broken world and to search for our true spiritual home. As spiritual writer Frederick Buechner reminds us, we are not living in “the last truth about the world but only the next to the last truth.”⁴

When we look around the nooks and crannies of our lives, we see this yearning for the last truth—for home—everywhere. Even if we fail to recognize home’s pull, we cannot escape its influence. From the moment our eyes crack open in the early morning until our weary bodies fall into bed at night, we are filled with a desire for home. And in the in-between times, as we drift into our dreams, our hearts and minds are still pulling us home.