

“Homeward Bound” by Billy Amoss

April 23, 2017

Second Sunday of Easter



How do we know where we belong? Where is home?

This week death has visited me twice.

On Thursday evening our beloved representative in Palestine, Costa Mustaklem, a Jerusalemite, an observant Christian and an Arab, died of metastatic cancer in Switzerland, where his wife and children live. He was a wonderfully kind and intelligent person, hard-working, openhearted, easy to love. And yesterday I learned that my 95-year-old cousin, Rosanne Blake, who with her husband Mel took me and my family under her wing when we first moved to Washington in 1988, is in hospice and on morphine to ease the pain from her Parkinsons Disease. Rosanne is a practicing Catholic. Her remaining life can be measured

in days now, perhaps only hours.

Part of our Christian tradition – today most vocally expressed by Christian evangelicals – puts forth the belief that this world is not our home, that our earthly body is just a temporary residence for our spirit, thus only spiritual things matter because they last forever, and that our real purpose on earth is to please God by pursuing spiritual matters – witnessing, reading the Bible, praying, or attending church, doing charitable work – so that when we die we can go to our true home, called heaven.

This dualism between spirit and body, heaven and earth, is one part of the Christian tradition that has thoroughly permeated evangelicalism, says Michael Wittmer, professor at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. Wittmer takes issue with the evangelicalism that Rick Warren preaches in his wildly popular book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. In his book Warren cautions that we must avoid feeling at home in the world, and that “life on earth is a temporary assignment,” and that those Christians who think earth is their home “have betrayed their King.”

So back to Costa, my Palestinian friend, and my cousin Rosanne. From what I know of them they were both at home in the world and embraced life unreservedly. Deeply religious, they put their minds to thriving on earth, which manifested itself in a noticeable generosity, kindness, loving families, an appreciation of other people, a good sense of humor, and taking pleasure in gathering with friends over good food and wine.

Costa and Rosanne practiced a Christianity that allowed them to be at home in the world.

When I was 11 years old, my family moved from Europe to New Orleans, where both of my parents had grown up. We had moved

to Germany when I was a year old. My father ran the office of an American steamship company in the old Hanseatic city of Bremen. We lived in a German neighborhood, I went to German Kindergarten and elementary school, and my brothers and I spoke only German with one another, and English with our parents. When my father's shipping job took us from Germany to Belgium, my brothers and I attended the local schools there just like in Germany. Now there were four languages spoken in my family, and with that, four cultures: my younger brother and I attended the local Flemish (Dutch) school, and my two older brothers attended the French lycee. At home my brothers and I continued to speak only German with one another and English with my parents. Even though Belgium was different from Germany, the cultures and values were quite similar, and it took me only a few months to feel at home.

But after only one year in Belgium my father was transferred to company headquarters in New Orleans, which meant that the family would now leave Europe forever and live in the Big Easy. When my parents told us about the move to the U.S. I burst into tears. I remember that this was a spontaneous reaction; there was no conscious thought that gave rise to it. We had visited New Orleans several times in earlier years when my father was on home leave. It was the place where my grandparents and cousins lived, and I had always had good experiences there. But it was a place we only visited every two years. It was not home. So when my parents told us we were leaving Europe and moving to New Orleans, I knew that I was leaving the place where I felt at home.

For years afterward I tried to recover this sense of home. The first thing I did when I graduated from college was to move to Munich, Germany to teach English. I wanted to answer the question that had haunted me ever since I left Germany as a child: Did I belong in Germany or the U.S.? Where was my geographic place of belonging in the world?

It took me less than a year to realize that even though I

loved my childhood friends and was attached to the German language, life in Germany was too orderly and predictable. I yearned for the messiness of life in the U.S., so after a year I moved to New York City. My search for home was now transferred to the U.S. and a city – New York – in which I could be completely anonymous and start all over again figuring out who I was and where I belonged.

On Easter morning Kate and I got up while it was still dark and drove the 30 minutes to Wellspring to attend the Easter sunrise service. The moment I stepped out of the car at Wellspring I felt a warm current of energy suffuse my body. It was a welcoming energy that had no words. We entered the space called the Center, in which a table had been converted into a simple altar graced with Easter lilies. The altar was set against the wall of glass doors that face east and through which we could see the first light filtering through the trees and falling on the sloping meadow beyond. There were no more than 25 of us. Some of the attendees we knew well – and loved – from our retreats at Wellspring. As we sat in chairs facing the altar and the sun rose and the service began, the sensation of warmth in me grew and brought me to the verge of tears. The sensation was one of supreme peacefulness and harmony and lasted the entire service and into the brief social time afterward. I could not sing the hymns during the service, because every time I tried my voice caught in my throat. Marjorie's sermon was luminous and touched me deeply with its affirmation of the connection of our lives to the natural world. (If you haven't already done so, go to our Web site and read it!)

I have no words to describe adequately my experience on Easter morning, but I can name what it was in general terms: I had left ordinary awareness and was in what Cynthia Bourgeault and other Christian wisdom teachers call spiritual awareness. So what is ordinary awareness, and what is spiritual

awareness?

“Ordinary awareness is the mind as it usually thinks, and our sense of ourselves tied to that way of thinking.” It is a state of mind marked by random thoughts and associations, what the Buddhist call monkey mind. What makes this chaotic thinking tolerable is the ‘the self-reflexive “I” with its constant set of self-referential questions with which it probes and measures the universe: “How well am I doing?” “Is it safe here?” “What did he mean by that?” “Am I okay?”

While ordinary awareness is useful and important to our ability to function in the world, it’s also a mode of perception that can lead to feelings of isolation, stress, self-absorption, conflict, confusion, monkey mind, all swirling around ME, ME, ME. The world is split between subject and object. As Cynthia Bourgeault says, “because it sees itself as separate, (the mind in ordinary awareness) will always perceive itself as somewhat endangered.”

By contrast, spiritual awareness “perceives through an intuitive grasp of the whole and an innate sense of belonging. It’s something like sounding the note G on the piano and instantly hearing the D and B that surround it and make it a chord. And since spiritual awareness is based on harmony, the sense of selfhood arising out of it is not plagued by that sense of isolation and anxiety that dominates life at the ordinary level of awareness.”

Here’s a list of feelings that arise out of spiritual awareness: wholeness, harmony, kindness, generosity, inner peace, purpose, compassion, belonging, WE, WE, WE.

So spiritual awareness offers a very different sense of home and belonging from what we perceive in ordinary awareness.

How might this relate to our Gospel reading for today about Thomas, who refused to believe in the risen Jesus unless he could see him and feel the marks of crucifixion on his body? Thomas and, for that matter, the other disciples are stuck in

ordinary awareness, which cannot recognize the divine presence because of the limitations of its mode of perception. And so he insists on experiencing Jesus in a state of ordinary awareness as a condition of becoming a believer. Mercifully, for Thomas's sake, Jesus appears to the disciples a second time with Thomas present and offers him physical proof of who he is.

But we – you and I and all of us who call ourselves Christians – are asked to perceive Christ in a state of spiritual awareness, to believe without seeing and touching Christ, which is a much more demanding task, one that requires us to cultivate openheartedness, mindfulness, and compassion. This is why the Gospel says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Cynthia Bourgeault (there she is again!) says that spiritual awareness – that perception that all is health, all is whole – is only possible through a daily practice, and the one she advocates is called Centering Prayer. But even with a spiritual practice such as Centering Prayer, we cannot command spiritual awareness. It must be cultivated very intentionally, yes, but ultimately it is a matter of Grace as to whether or not we actually experience it at all – and whether we experience it more than just once or very rarely. But our practice – whether it is Centering Prayer or another form of meditation – is the essential foundation upon which the small Self, the small “I” with its goals, fears, desires and issues, grows into, penetrates an awareness of a vastly larger and authentic Self. Making this journey is one of an interior awakening to the Source of all that exists, and opening ourselves to that Source, which is the Beloved.

I want to end with a poem by James Agee, set to music by the wonderful contemporary American composer Morten Lauridsen. Agee is best known for the text he wrote to go with the photographs of sharecroppers in the South during the Great Depression in a book entitled *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, published in 1941. He was a man acquainted with sorrow. But Agee knew something about spiritual awareness, that wonder we

experience when, in our absolute aloneness in our journey on earth, we experience the wondrous harmony of the universe and our connection to it. I am going to read the brief lines once, and then I will put on the music and ask members of my mission group, Eyes to See, to join me in using an InterPlay form to move to the piece.

Here is the poem:

Sure on this shining night of star made shadows round,
Kindness must watch for me this side the ground.

The late year lies down the north. All is healed, all is health.

High summer holds the earth. Hearts all whole.

Sure on this shining night I weep for wonder
Wand'ring far alone of shadows on the stars.

Note: The quotes in this writing are taken from Cynthia Bourgeault's book, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening. Rather than rephrasing Bourgeault's beautiful writing I decided to quote entire passages the better to capture her original and compelling use of language to convey her ideas.