

Rozanne Oliver: On a Summer Journey: Wet, Green, Painful, Creative

Sermon for Seekers

Sunday, Aug. 4, 1996

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On a Summer Journey: Wet, Green, Painful, Creative

Today as we celebrate communion, we also celebrate the beginning of an adventure in the life of our community, especially for the nine or ten of us who leave for El Salvador Thursday morning.

We ask for the blessing and prayers of the community as we set out. I wanted to say a few words about our anticipation at the point of embarking, with the expectation that you'll hear afterwards about the experience of it all. John is going to say some of what the journey is for him at the end.

Just as we are on a journey that may reshape us in ways that we probably can't even imagine, our community is on a journey into the future that will reshape our life together. So perhaps you may choose to think about both of these threads.

For the past several weeks, the words of the liturgy — wet, green, painful, creative — have been intriguing to me, as I've thought about our journey. We've all recognized that these words are appropriate to the Washington summer this year. A wet, green summer. Lots of rain. Lots of swimming — at least for me in between showers — with the wetness and coolness of moving through the water call forth a shift of body and spirit to a different way of being than do office hours and daily home routines. My summer so far has had a share of pain as well — disruptions and disappointments and tensions in the office — the daily struggles at home where we all three bring our frustrations and fatigue at the end of the day. And creativity — some of that, too, but more on that word later.

The gospel for today is a wonderful story, too, and the feeding of the five thousand reminds me of Ron Arm's sermons about "enough" another word from our liturgy. There would be plenty to mine in that story for the trip as well, but I'm going to choose to stick to these four words – WET, GREEN, PAINFUL, CREATIVE.

WET, GREEN

Let's put these two together. Besides being a good literal description of our expectations of the Salvadoran rainy season, wet and green have some other meanings for me. Although the slang is somewhat dated, we all should recognize: "wet behind the ears", "just a green kid", or "greenhorn". Not to mention "you're all wet!", meaning, you don't know what you're talking about! Well, despite our best preparations, we're all wet. Most of us know only a tiny bit of Spanish. Just as important, our trip is something brand new in our experience, and we don't exactly know what we're doing.

Most of us have learned not to expose our ignorance and that being inexperienced and "dumb" is shameful. We forget that whenever we commit to doing something, or learning something new, we might feel stupid or fumbling or lost. We were watching a movie called "Three Wishes" last weekend, where the widowed mom trying to start her own business confesses to the stranger who is her guest "Sometimes I feel so lost!" And the mysterious guest replies, "That's because you're an explorer. All explorers feel lost sometimes." So we have an opportunity to "recover a beginner's mind and a child's wonder" as Thomas Moore says in *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*. It's a wonderful opportunity for us to be wet and green, and I want to thank John, who has reminded me of that somehow. And I invite you to think of us getting up on Friday morning in Santa Ana not knowing what our day will bring!

PAINFUL

Painful obviously isn't fun. What's painful in going to El Salvador. Well, it might be a lot of things. Susanna will not be able to go with us because of her recent illness. It is painful for the rest of us not to have her with us. I have been looking forward to getting to know her better on the trip. It might be the memories of the civil war, and the role our government played in supporting it for some years.

For some of us, it's the anticipation of the pain and discomfort of seeing

abandoned street kids who are addicted to sniffing glue, people who live in economic poverty that makes us feel guilty about our wealth. Jackie and Dave struggled before our trip with whether it would be more loving to send the money being spent on the trip directly to Dr. Vicky rather than going.

For Bob, John, and me, it isn't a first visit, since El Salvador is John's land of birth, and his home for his first three years. John has deep feeling about his return.

On my two short stays in El Salvador in 1988, when John was adopted, it was sad to see the very young girls carrying heavy loads of water jugs on their heads and young boys carrying sticks on their backs for firewood - usually seen from the highway heading up steep hills to their houses we would call shacks. It was hard to be surrounded by children at the orphanage, whose loving caretakers couldn't give them what they needed.

I also think of feeling lost and "not good enough" as I think of my first days of being a mother in El Salvador, when I was almost as bewildered as my almost-three-year-old about what was happening.

CREATIVE

What's creative that's going on here? "Creative" sounds a little abstract compared to "wet" and "green" and "pain". I was conjuring up words like "blooming", "ripening", "mystery". I was thinking of vines, ferns, and bromeliads growing in trees. I was thinking of birds of paradise and parrots.

This is really is good stopping point for describing our beginning point. Because what God is creating with us through this journey is a mystery. We can't know the outcome - how it will shape and reshape our individual lives, or the life of our community. It's the jumping off point, where the unknown begins.

When I set out on my first really big adventure, to study and live in Italy for a year, on my first transatlantic flight, I stayed awake and stared at the dawn as the plane flew towards it. I made many flights across the Atlantic after that for work, and I've always loved watching the day creep into the sky in a plane - despite the fact that I've been a nervous flier in the past. I've always thought of Ps. 139, *Even if I take the wings of dawn and dwell at the end of the western sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand will hold me fast.* Here's to setting forth-for us on this trip. And for each of us on our journey each new day.