

PART FOUR



Given Moments

God, who seeks always to be in dialogue with us, can use unpredictable ways to start the conversation. Because grace permeates everything, a wide range of places, people, experiences and times can lead us through the doorway of prayer.

Anyone who has been separated from a loved one can appreciate the experience. Our memory is stirred by the smallest encounters: a perfume, a favorite food, a snatch of music, a line of poetry. Suddenly, a face flashes before us; the beloved person is vivid in the mind. Defying distances of time and space, we come together again. Such a joyous reunion reveals the wonder of prayer: We are together again with God.

Travel Prayer

“Flight 77 now departing from Gate C-3.” Am I the only one who hears that familiar announcement as a call to prayer? To many folks, travel represents dreary motels, holding patterns and plastic food. I claim it as unique opportunity.

Travel gives the everyday a fresh-scrubbed, morning face. New places and people have a sheen, a newness, an abundant energy lacking in familiar routines. Experience on a trip has a special edge: the surety that when the homebound flight takes off at 11:19 from Concourse C, everything left undone and unsaid will remain so. It’s a lot like life: no second chances, no dress rehearsals. This is it.

On a recent trip, the whistle of the homebound train echoed an image from Anne Tyler’s *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*: “He had missed an opportunity. It was like missing a train—or something more important, something that would never come again. There was no explanation for the grief that suddenly filled him.”¹

Travel intensifies our intuition that everything is on loan. Like library books that eventually must be returned, challenges and chances are offered once. Knowing the due date, I live with more awareness and clarity. I taste the tart and the sweet; I savor the beach knowing I’ll soon be back in the blizzard. I may not see my long-distance friend for another five years, so I relish our rare conversations.

I also gain a new perspective on life back home: what is askew, what is cherished. Travel allows a fresh start. Robert Frost had this vision when he climbed his favorite birch tree:

I’d like to get away from earth a while
And then come back to it and begin over...²

Recently, when I traveled to a hot-spring pool, I realized that my swimming strokes were not really necessary to keep me afloat. The wonderful buoyancy of the water held me. That trip taught me something about trust, in the clear, graphic way images communicate.

From the purely practical standpoint, travel offers a temporary suspension of all the details that weigh me down. When I'm not trying to figure out a jiffy way to camouflage leftover pot roast, or hunting for two minutes to finish filing three remaining fingernails, it's liberating in a spiritual sense. Certain that I can stay seated throughout breakfast, I can inhale the warm fragrance of my blueberry muffin. Knowing that no child will interrupt, I can start reading a novel. I can fully enjoy the daisies when I'm not burdened by their care. Someone else's weeding and watering gives me the chance to take the "long, loving look at the real" that is contemplation.

In a new setting, I needn't argue, analyze or describe. I can enter in. Wonderfully unhurried, unpressured by the usual domestic and job constraints, I can see with my whole self. The stultifying routine is interrupted; I can indulge my latent capacity for exploration. A new hiking trail? park? museum? lake? I am completely engaged. No one in this city knows me; no one phones; no one cares about my uncoordinated clothes. Not bound by utility or convention, I can soar in unexpected ways and savor the surprises. The sense of play which is vital to contemplation thrives in an unfamiliar locale.

When God wanted a word with the people of Scripture, God called them to the desert. That vast solitude set the scene for extraordinary revelations. Even though I board a jumbo jet, I see my travels in the same light. "Give up what you are," God invites, "to discover what you can become." The journey metaphor for the spiritual life may be overused, but it still contains seeds of truth. When I am far from home with its usual comfort and props, I am more conscious of my ultimate vulnerability, my absolute reliance on God.

Walter Burghardt, S.J., speaks of a world thirsting for people who know and love God personally. If these thirsty people touch me and do not thrill to the touch, they abide in loneliness, in the terrible absence of God. If I come across as one who has not looked long enough and hard enough at

the real, I fail them.

So I take the chances and rise to the challenges that travel presents. The agent keeping track of my frequent-flier miles probably doesn't guess the hidden agenda of my trips. But I have found the skies friendly, and the path beckoning to the heart of God.

Notes

¹ Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (New York: Knopf, 1982).

² Robert Frost, "Birches," in Richard Abcarian and Marvin Klotz, eds. *Literature: The Human Experience* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), p. 74.

Prayer in Cramped Places

"How can I pray when I'm constantly driving, working, cooking, doing laundry or picking up toys?" My friend's question touched a familiar chord. I, too, feel trapped in a spiral of constant activity that leaves little space or time for quiet, uninterrupted prayer. To most busy people of our century, long hours filled with contemplation are relics of an earlier, unhurried era. Yet we still hunger for the depth and meaning prayer can bring our frantic days.

Perhaps the answer lies in wordless prayer, gestures and images that can fit between stop signs or can fill the mind and heart as we unload the dishwasher. Such prayer does not require the long process of centering, nor a hasty search for book or Bible; we simply sink into God for a few peaceful minutes.

We can turn to these forms when we are exhausted, annoyed, distracted, depressed or busy. One morning I was so tired I tried to heat my coffee in the refrigerator instead of the microwave. I was grateful then to Joyce Rupp, O.S.M., for a sequence of gestures to start the day in grace, no matter how groggy I am. I begin by raising both arms to heaven (also a welcome stretch for a crotchety spine). That reach thanks the Creator for the gift of another day. Then I extend both arms outwards horizontally to symbolize compassion with all humankind. The next gesture is opening and cupping my hands. The motion speaks of willingness to receive whatever surprises God may send today. Finally, both arms crossed over the heart say, "I will spend this day with you, God and Friend."

Throughout the day those early morning gestures resonate. A whiff of perfume, a favorite song on the radio, a compliment? Ah—remember the cupped hands. A call from a friend in pain recalls the gesture of solidarity. A difficult situation at work? I approach it in grace.

Like the gestures, the images of prayer can grace unexpected places. Curtis Bryant, S.J., writes in *Orphaned Wisdom*:

...God loves life
in its failure
as much as in its
fruitfulness.¹

The image that reminds me of God's broad acceptance is our family at dinner. Don't think for a minute that it's the placid, psalmist's scene of olive plants around the table. The phone is ringing, the rolls are burning, and someone is rushing off to a meeting. One child sulks over a poor grade; another exults because he made the soccer team. One daughter twirls a lovely braid of auburn hair, while another laments the odd effect of over-plucking her eyebrows. Throughout the meal, I inconsistently dispense criticism and heap praise. ("Use a napkin, not the tablecloth!" "You finished your homework—yeah!") When failure and fruitfulness sit close enough to pass the potato salad, I praise the God who created this scene.

Michael Moynahan, S.J., draws another image in the same book. He describes a giant oak tree with its branches reaching out:

Together,
one mighty,
open palm of praise.²

Now when I see winter branches scraping the sky, I think of the hand of God. In spring, the branches cradle birds. When tempted to panic, I remember that palm holding me.

Attending a talk recently, I was struck by one thought in it: We live in temporary shelter, but always dwell richly in the embrace of God. I realized the full truth of that image later in the week when I traveled to a convention. A friend and I had decided to stay at an inexpensive motel, but I began to realize *why* it was so cheap when I saw the cinder-block walls and brownish-green camouflage-colored bedspreads. Hearing the people next door screaming curses, I imagined rapists in the hall and drug dealers in the parking lot. With fear and trembling, I phoned my friend. He invited me to his room and met me with a reassuring

hug. Then all the tawdriness faded, the flutter of fear quieted and we could laugh together.

In a way, we always dwell in temporary shelter. Yet the presence of God can make every dwelling a home. Knowing God's faithfulness helps tame the worst situation and allows us to see its humor and transience. Despite chaos and fear, the God of the large embrace abides always.

Notes

¹Curtis Bryant, in Michael Moynahan, S.J., *Orphaned Wisdom: Meditations for Lent* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 53-54.

²Moynahan, p. 15.

Clouds and Cracks

An early morning flight on a mosquito-sized airplane helps me see the frailty of the human constructions we lay upon chaos and mystery, trying to control the unfathomable. If you travel as much as I do, you're constantly adjusting your schedule as time slips in and out of different zones. Then just when you think you've got it straightened out, Daylight Savings Time comes along. The changes could have a dizzying effect but, on this trip, I've begun to see them as cracks in our carefully constructed facades.

How often I've felt the stress of too much work, too little time, or longed for another hour or two in a day. How I've rushed to be on time, or created maneuvers to kill a little extra time. With this insight, it all seems laughable. We Anglos especially, who live with one eye on the watch, need this playful reminder that time is not absolute; many things are more important. It's almost as if the hands on the clock, usually stationary and precise, are waving and clapping.

So, too, with perspective. Over the airport hangs a slate grey sky, flat and bleak. But like the clock, it's not the final reality it might first seem. As the plane climbs 26,000 feet, its silver wings cut cleanly through filmy clouds, as though appearances could so easily be shredded. At this altitude, against a cobalt sky rear mountain ranges of clouds—Rockies, Appalachians and Himalayas, studded with Grand Canyons. They are sculpted from puff instead of granite, like soap bubbles or shampoo.

It's nothing new to speak of the perspective gained from flying. Taking her first flight in aviation's pioneering days, Karen Blixen wrote, "so this was it. Now I see and understand everything." In the film version of her story, *Out of Africa*, Meryl Streep simply reaches forward for a silent squeeze of pilot Robert Redford's hand.

In Sheldon Vanauken's *A Severe Mercy*, two young lovers fill the cockpit of their plane with lilacs. Then as the plane swoops and loops into the dawn, blossoms stream back in their wake. The wife calls her husband, "my golden

one," and years later when she lies dying, repeats that name. He comments, "I knew all she was remembering: lilacs and flight into the mystery of the dawning and me standing there in the light."¹

John Shea proposes that Jesus gained the same kind of perspective when he climbed the mountain to proclaim the Beatitudes. Looking at the people from that height, he could see that poverty and grief didn't have the final say. He didn't deny the harsh realities of people's lives, but he kept his sights on God's daughter or son. That identity cannot be diminished, no matter how threatening the circumstances. The outer person might present a sad, decrepit shell, but Jesus saw beneath the surface to the blessedness within. The theme of the Beatitudes is, "Do not make absolute your present state; do not forget the underlying blessedness."

When I was in college, Shakespeare taught me the gaping difference between appearance and reality; now an airplane ride reinforces the message. Perhaps the distinction is also captured by William Lynch, author of *Christ and Apollo* and *Images of Hope*. This Jesuit priest spent a lifetime studying the imagination. As his own death approached, he tried for a realistic imagination, one which "stays with the facts, all the hospital facts," rather than succumb to the culture of denial.²

At the same time, he followed Christ, whose own death was simultaneously a passage into nothingness and a movement to life. As Lynch lay dying, he imagined the journey ahead as a trip, "not so much vertically 'up there'; as ahead, in the unknown future."³

His image has special significance after my voyage through cloud country and shifting time. How much is beyond us, utterly incomprehensible? Could death itself be such a scrim, seeming so final, but in reality, merely a gauzy veil between us and those who have died? Could the limits we place on reality be false, easily upset by a change in time or altitude or perspective? That might make some people feel insecure, but to others, it's a marvelous invitation past the appearance, into unfolding layers of unguessed reality.

Notes

¹Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 40.

²William Lynch, "Death as Nothingness," *Continuum* 5 (Fall, 1967), pp. 459-469.

³David Toolan, "Some Biographical Reflections," pp. 134-135.