

## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: ALL IS LOCATION

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I suspect that this will be the last opportunity to introduce myself as the “minister’s wife” or the “parsnip.” I also want to express one more time my thanks to the congregation for all of the cards and well wishes that you sent during my surgery. Because of the healing that you accomplished, you are now blessed to hear another sermon from me.

Before Susan left she reminded me to explain that the “body is a temple” in the sermon. “It is?” I asked. ( I have found that my preaching responsibilities have become less frequent in recent years...) But in keeping with Susan’s wishes, I will talk today using not only Christian references, but also Buddhist references such as the Vietnamese writer, Thich Nhat Hanh, and a scientific writer, Brian Green, from his book, “The Fabric of the Cosmos”. Let me begin by telling you some stories.

My daughter Rebecca reminded me of what it means to be lost several years ago. It was in 1983, 27 years ago, on the first day of daylight savings time in Danvers when my daughter, Becca, was 8 years old that she said, “Dad, let’s get up early and go for a bike ride before school!” “OK” I said. Although my mother had grown up in Danvers, I had not moved back here until 1977, and there were a lot of new roads that had replaced former fields and farms. Soon, I was riding down streets that I hadn’t been on before. As I came to the end of one such street I stopped to think about the next turn. Becca was studying me carefully and blurted out, “Dad, are we lost?” “Yes and no,” I said. “We are in North America,” I lamely asserted. (My parenting skills were rather poor in those days.) This was a totally unsatisfactory answer to her and she became quite upset with me. It was hard for me to explain to her that even though I didn’t know exactly what street we were on, I knew that we would readily come out to the main road that I would recognize. How could I explain that it can be possible that we are sort of lost, but not really lost?

Her question stayed with me for several years. I have realized that we humans spend much of our lives trying to orient ourselves or to locate ourselves, most always according to some sort of map or chart, or fixed point with the aid of a compass or a GPS. It seems that we are always headed somewhere. If we get lost, we can get upset. Is not all of scripture, in fact, about being lost or being found: the story of the lost sheep; the wise men following the star; the Israelites wandering as if they were lost after they left Egypt...the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm... our own journey as Christians toward a place called “Heaven?” Here is another story.

I remember one afternoon, maybe about 10 years ago, when Dave Johnson and I were returning from a cruise up to Maine along the coast together. For those of you who have not sailed with him, David is a world class navigator. As we approached the Isle of Shoals off of Portsmouth, NH, headed back to Salem harbor, a sunny and clear afternoon quickly degraded into a near blinding fog, such that it was hard to make out the bow of our own boat. The sun was setting and it was getting dark. We could see from a chart that there were some rocks extending into the water off to port (left, for you land lubbers). Our trusty hand held Magellan GPS came in handy, as it was programmed with all of the buoys and waypoints that we needed. It proved to be accurate within a couple of feet as we could see the faint shadows of the buoys as we passed them in the fog. David kept calling out compass headings with moisture dripping off his glasses until we rounded a point and drove into safe harbor in total darkness and fog for the night. The GPS saved us from some real headaches associated with running over rocks eleven miles off shore in a fog, and left us feeling confident that we were “located”. (Sorry, Dave, but I get quoted in sermons a lot.)

If you stop and think about it, we live on a planet that is like a small ship located in the vacuous sea of space. If we think about trying to locate ourselves, we can only hypothesize the size and shape of this sea. If we take Loretta Laraga's camera and open the lens to "infinity", we cannot even then get a complete picture of the cosmos. Even though it is an estimated 13.6 billion years old, theoretical physicists wonder whether the cosmos is curved or flat. As a matter of fact, they are now questioning whether there really are such entities as time and space. Perhaps there are smaller particles that we cannot see that are the building blocks of time and space! Cosmologists hypothesize nowadays that we could be living next to a parallel universe. We don't even know whether there are any other life forms or inhabitants like us in the cosmos. If the cosmos began with a big bang as some believe, it is impossible at present to see further back in time beyond that explosion. We cannot account for what happened behind this great curtain, this great fog bank. To say that "time began" is in itself paradoxical if, in fact, there is no such thing as time. How can a cosmos come from nothing? What is the genome of creation, the organizing principle? Why do we exist? How do we exist? We must acknowledge, in this respect, that all of humanity, (not just the Israelites wandering in the desert), are in the same boat. The 6 billion people of the world are but a small crew on this vessel....**one** human family.....moving for the moment apparently safely through the fog of mystery, in a context which we recognize, but cannot and do not fully understand.

Location, location, location! Where are we? Where are we headed? Why are we? Are we lost?

In just the same way that the modern GPS provides an uncanny "God's eye" map of where we are at any given moment geographically on a very small planet, so does our theology attempt to locate us in the vacuous mystery of our position and **meaning** in the cosmos or in eternity, the largest possible frame of reference. Theology, or the definition of the nature of God, can be seen as an "**ultimate spiritual calculus**" of sorts....the application of words to that for which there are no words. As we attempt to define God, we also define ourselves. In our daily lives we walk about the well defined stage set of our lives, homes and neighborhoods quite secure that we know where we are and who we are within our own categories. We have names for ourselves and for places. It is like being in a play with the stage set with props in a given way. We easily forget that we ourselves are a mystery. We humans struggle to understand that which we cannot describe; we are limited by our experience, our senses, our mental capacity, our ability to comprehend. Christ says, "If I have told you of Earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you of Heavenly things?" We have no other way to describe our experience than by words and stories that are Earthly.

Let us turn from the largest possible lens on Loretta's camera to the smallest possible setting. Let's look into another smaller universe, the human brain. In this age of neuroscience, in which the human brain is rapidly being mapped, it becomes more and more apparent that our own functioning is as awesome as that of the cosmos. Did you know, for example, that, as individuals, we are only aware of 1% of all the decisions that are being made within our body at any given time? 99% of the decisions happening in our bodies at this very moment are happening beyond our awareness. When I first heard this statistic about the body that I thought was mine, I began to realize that maybe I am just renting a body rather than owning one! Did you know that each human brain has 100 billion neurons ...and that each brain has the capacity for hundreds of trillions of connections? (one dollar of US debt for each connection?) Did you know that the brain itself has the role of integrating and balancing various parts? There is a logical computer-like part in the left hemisphere to process linear details and there is more poetic meaning-making, big picture, part in the right hemisphere. So one part of the brain deals with the world by logic, and another part of the brain is more reflective and analogical. Then there is the seat of our emotions in the mammalian limbic system which serves as an automatic alert system for our need to defend ourselves or run away: fight or flight. Did you know that

within the human personality there are different parts, maybe even different selves? We seem to be hardwired to be territorial to establish security and safety.....to protect ourselves from perceived enemies. And, because so many of these functions are automatic, it becomes increasingly difficult for us to control or regulate our energies, our worries and fears, and our alert systems. In addition to all of these systems, Dr. George Vaillant points out in his book, "Spiritual Evolution: A Scientific Defense of Faith," the following: "Positive emotions – not only compassion, forgiveness, love and hope, but also joy, faith/trust, awe and gratitude arise from our inborn mammalian capacity for unselfish parental love." Yes, in addition to the selfish traits of evolving human nature, there is also scientific evidence for the human trait of selflessness which is at the core of all major world religions. And it is the task of the human brain to integrate and balance all of these disparate systems.

And so it may be true that our bodies are not only temples, but that they house the location for our struggles between good and evil, between love and hate, between impulse and thoughtfulness.

It is within this very personal home of the human body that we define our goals and set our course on our life's journey for prosperity, for success, for good health, for great relationships, for financial and personal security...and in the process of devotion to these goals we become overwhelmed by competing demands, by unforgiving schedules, by standards and expectations of performance for the sake of ourselves and our loved ones.. Sometimes our families suffer or we become symptomatic. We cannot shut off our minds from running 24/7. (I recently heard the story in the media about Toyota vehicles that speed up unpredictably and I thought for a minute that they were talking about HUMAN BEINGS. We become fatigued and discouraged. Our circuits are jammed. We cannot sleep. We become addicted to a myriad of chemicals ("How about a drink? How about a joint?") or other self destructive pursuits which only further wear us down. We sacrifice so much of ourselves that our lives become empty, not full. We tune out and become preoccupied and disconnected from others. We are too busy to CONSIDER THE LILIES. At this point we are in life, but not alive. We are not aware of what is going on around us in the moment. We cannot appreciate what we have, as we can only contemplate what we have lost.... or stand to lose. We cannot be aware of another order in the world besides the very Earthly treadmill that we run everyday. It is only at this moment when things get so bad, that a door within us can open to spirituality, to peacefulness, to acceptance, to balance, and to wholeness....through mindfulness.

The very essence and the very heart of our Faith is love and compassion. "Love your neighbor as yourself and walk humbly with your God." This is not only true of our Christianity, but also of the other major world religions. There is a shared sense of humble awareness and awe for the mystery of our lives and of nature and of the cosmos. The Buddhists suggest that going deeply within ourselves and listening deeply to others is the path to the realization that we really are one in spite of our differences, and historic disputes and wars. To my way of thinking it is sad that the description of the "God" by Faith institutions has become over time more and more territorial and organized by human nature. That is, the various religions of the world have fallen prey to the human impulse for territoriality, to struggles for dominance, to self righteousness, to attacking and defending and to warring, to including and excluding. Indeed, even Christian communities have attempted to act as exclusive gateways to heaven. The very social organizations which carry the story of God as the personification of love and peace are themselves subverted by the wildness of the human nature. All of us in the human family have the possibility to laughing together, creating and building together, imagining together, dancing together, learning together, and listening deeply together. Religions must embrace one another rather than reject one another. The process of including and excluding people from church membership predicated upon social differences of custom or of certain ethnic or sexual identities must cease. The use of religion to condemn those who are socially or culturally different is

merely the subjugation of God for the human purpose of arrogance. Churches are not meant to function as fraternity and sorority houses that “cut” people “who don’t fit.” The task of human survival in the future will depend upon the balancing and integrating of human differences rather than their punishment.

In like manner, there must be a reconciliation and collaboration between science and religion. Albert Einstein himself believed that religion and science truly need one another. Science needs a soul and religion needs a brain. The scientific way of knowledge and the spiritual way of knowledge can be valued for their different, yet legitimate perspectives, realizing that we are all in the same boat. The very heart of science and the very heart of religion can open to one another and learn from one another.. Only in this way can our ship avoid running upon the rocks and reach safe harbor. If we are to survive on this human journey, we need to be saved....saved from ourselves, we need integration we need balance between all of the extremes of our lives.

Dad, where are we? Who are we? Are we lost?

I recently took a day long training in Buddhist meditation and mindfulness led by a Vietnamese woman whose father is Tic Nat Hahn, who has written in his book, “Living Buddha, Living Christ,” about the synergy between Buddhism and Christianity. In hindsight the most powerful exercise that I learned was what is called a walking meditation. With each slow step that you take, you whisper quietly to yourself: “I am home; I am home; I am home; I am home with Christ, I have arrived, I am home, in the here and in the now....I solid, I am free, in the Ultimate I dwell...breathing calmly and slowly and completely.... No matter where I am, I am home.....be only in the present moment for that is the only reality. The past is gone forever, the future is right now. Yes, we must plan and build and grow; yes, we can accept what is.

All of a sudden I realized that the Location is not only the destiny, it is the journey itself. The Jews were at home during the Exodus from Egypt even though they didn’t realize it. They would rather have been slaves in Egypt than to be lost in the desert, but they weren’t really lost. Jesus was at home on the Cross, even when he was dying.. Home is both the journey.....finding your way through the fog.....even when you think you are lost.....and it is the place where you arrive. The fact that we are alive is a scientific mystery AND it is Heavenly. Yes, we must plan and build and grow; yes, we can accept **what is** in the moment. **HEAVEN IS HERE AS WELL AS THERE. THIS IS THE GARDEN OF EDEN...RIGHT HERE.**

“What a waste of time this is,” I said to myself in this training. I am not home! It wasn’t until later that I realized that I was living off balance, that the center of gravity for my life was always somewhere else, that I was never satisfied with my present location, that I had to work hard to get to some place where I could feel security and safety, and success. This Church has been both a location and a journey. It is a very safe and accepting place, but always changing and growing and in transition. My body and yours are temples, locations, with energies, sacred mysteries, on sacred journeys.

. Jesus said, “Consider the lilies; let tomorrow worry for itself.

Dad, where are we? Are we lost? Are we afraid?

“YES.....and NO, Becca. **We will never be lost.**

AMEN

