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COMMENTARY:

Living Between Two Worlds: Home, Journey and the Quest for Sacred Place

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE*

A little over a year ago I moved away from my home of twelve years in the Fruitvale neighborhood of East Oakland. On my last morning there, I woke early, got dressed, packed my bags and sat quietly in the cool darkness of the living room. I examined my surroundings carefully, working to etch every detail into my imagination—provisions for my journey: the gleaming oak floor, whose installation had been like an Amish house-raising, with neighbors, friends and house guests all bending to the task, thrilling with us to see the courses of brilliant hard wood grow to cover the expanse of our home; the small Persian rug beneath my feet upon which I had paced for endless nighttime hours and miles with my tiny newborn daughter Julia nestled against my shoulder; our small, draw-leaf dining room table around which we had shared intimate meals and sumptuous feasts with friends and family; the cobalt blue tiles of the kitchen counter upon which, every June, I filled glistening mason jars with the rich, dark magic of olallieberry jam.

Through the dining room window, I glimpsed our garden, a sprawling jungle when we arrived but gradually transformed by flowering plum and cherry trees, jacaranda, apple, apricot, pear, bing cherry, liquidamber, almond and mayten; by freesias, iris, daffodils, tulips, salvia, geraniums; by climbing roses, jasmine, hardenbergia, wysteria, clematis; and a few edibles—corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, onions, garlic, basil, thyme, oregano, strawberries. Beyond the garden enclosure lay our neighborhood and parish, at the center of which lay the one-hundred-year-old Franciscan church, St. Elizabeth's, home to a vibrant, mixed community with whom we had

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learned to pray, celebrate, and struggle against the rising tide of violence in our community. Stretching beyond our immediate neighborhood was another web of places—the Oakland Grill in the heart of the downtown produce market, the Grand Lake Theatre with its mighty Wurlitzer organ, Lake Merritt where we took Julia to swing, slide and feed the ducks, Joaquin Miller Park with its towering redwoods and its maze of shaded, mossy trails, the green expanse and white chalk lines of the Oakland Coliseum. And expanding the circle still further, the monastery of the Redwoods, the Abbey of New Clairvaux near Vina, Big Sur. Places of memory. Places into which I had poured myself and all the longings of my life and which reflected back to me the shape and texture of my life there.

There are also stories associated with the places I have mentioned, personal stories as well as the larger, older narratives of the place. Narrative and place, as Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko reminds us, are always woven together in our imaginations.¹ Our memories of place carry not only the texture but the narrative pulse of our lives and the lives of the communities who live there. Oakland was originally home to the Ohlones, who lived in intimate relationship to a land then covered in Oaks. Then came the Spanish—missionaries and the ranchers who not only domesticated and displaced the indigenous peoples, but inhabited and domesticated the landscape in a way their predecessors never had done, changing the composition of the place forever. A variety of immigrant communities poured in, the Irish and Germans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African Americans from the South during World War II, more recently still Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Chinese, Filipinos, and Vietnamese. Each community, each person brought stories and created endless new stories associated with the place. It was into this rich branching network of stories that I had entered twelve years before and which I was now leaving. During my time there, I had experienced the profound effects of allowing my personal story to be taken up and shaped by the deeper narrative currents of the place.

All of this came vividly to life for me that morning. The stark fact of my imminent and probably permanent departure and the rich web

¹ Leslie Marmon Silko, "Landscape, History and the Pueblo Imagination" in Daniel Halpern, ed. *On Nature: Nature, Landscape and Natural History* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 83–94.

of memories embedded in this place unleashed a flood of feelings that I could not and did not wish to stem. I found myself weeping. Yet, there was something more than sadness in those tears. There was also intense longing. But it was a longing that pulled me in different directions. I wanted to stay put, sink roots, continue cultivating my life in this place, kindling the kind of intimacy that only a long association with a place can bring. Yet, there was also a restlessness in me, a restlessness that could not be entirely satisfied in that place.

Ironically, I see now, my restlessness was rooted in the desire for another kind of home, less tangible than my home in Oakland, but at that point in my life just as important—a vocational home, a place where I could give fuller expression to some of my deepest aspirations and creative gifts than I had been able to do up until now. And it was rooted at least in part in the desire to be a member of a community, in this case a community of fellow students, teachers and seekers. But to find this home meant leaving the one I knew. It meant turning toward a new and distant horizon, the path to which was bereft of familiar markers and whose end I could not yet glimpse. The way to my new home was through a wilderness.

In narrating these personal events and questions, I do not mean to suggest that what I have experienced is somehow extraordinary or worth special mention. After all, I have not traveled so very far. Nor have I done anything particularly unusual; people move all the time. In fact, it is precisely my sense of how increasingly common this kind of experience is that has led me to mention it here. The ache I felt that morning and still feel arises from what I am coming to see is a basic tension in many of our lives and in our culture between the longing for a deep and abiding sense of attachment to place and the desire for freedom of movement and opportunity; between the intimacy and comfort of the garden and the wild unpredictability of the wilderness; between the security of home and the thrill of the open road; between the known and familiar and the unknown and still-to-be discovered.

We all live, to varying degrees, between these two worlds. We all know what it feels like to be pulled—physically, culturally, emotionally or spiritually—between these two worlds, moving now in one direction, now in another. We recognize implicitly the dangers in giving in too completely to one or the other of these impulses—stagnation and fearfulness on the one hand, rootlessness and loss of identity on the other. Nor does it seem right to suggest that we must choose one or the other. We long to be rooted and free, wrapped in security

and exposed to the testing wilderness. But what can it possibly mean to seek a balance between them, in practical terms as well as in our emotional, spiritual lives?

That is the question I would like to pursue here: Can we cultivate simultaneously the longing to form deep and abiding attachments to the places in which we live *and* the impulse to risk the unknown? Can we, that is, honor our desire for a sense of place without becoming stuck, trapped, confined, without closing off the new possibilities that beckon us forward? Can we honor our desire to venture into the wilderness, to keep moving toward ever-expanding horizons without eviscerating our sense of place? And to frame these questions within their ultimate, spiritual context: Can we hold in creative tension the sense that God is known both in the familiar intimacy of particular places and in the terror and uncertainty of the wilderness? These are personal questions that have arisen from within my own particular struggles. But they transcend the personal and touch upon a basic ambivalence toward place within our culture and within our western religious traditions. Therefore it is worth asking whether this tension between home and exile can be resolved, whether we can find a way of being both “at home” and “on the way.”

Toward the end of her long journey to Oz, Dorothy clicks her heels three times and repeats softly the words, “there’s no place like home.” We recognize in her words a deep hunger to be back in that place where she is known, accepted, welcomed. Who among us has not felt the quickening of the pulse upon the return home after a long trip, the thrill of turning that last corner, bounding up the steps, being embraced by loved ones and the rich familiar fragrance of the place? Home is native place, literally the place of birth. It is refuge, the place of last resort. In Robert Frost’s acerbic words, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in.” It is, according to Gaston Bachelard, foundational—“our corner of the world . . . our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word.” “All really inhabited space,” he says, “bears the essence of the notion of home.”²

Home in one sense means finding a niche, a nest, a refuge, a graspable space. Bachelard says this “nesting instinct,” which is nat-

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), pp. 4–5. On the sense of place developed in childhood, see: Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood* (Boston: Beacon, 1994).

ural to children, runs deep within us. "When we discover a nest, it takes us back to our childhood or, rather, to *a childhood*; to the childhood we should have had . . . the nest image is generally childish." The truth of this can be seen in the habits of any small child—venturing out on occasion, but drawn naturally and deeply to nests, refuges, small, manageable spaces. But our attraction to the nest goes deeper even than childhood, says Bachelard, perhaps recalling an ancient animal wisdom that is encoded deep within us: "Physically, the creature endowed with a sense of refuge huddles up to itself, takes cover, hides away, lies snug, concealed. If we were to look among the wealth of our vocabulary for verbs that express the dynamics of retreat, we should find images based on animal movements of withdrawal, movements engraved within our muscles."³

If a nest is a place of refuge, it is also a place from which to venture out into the world. We require not only the protection of an enclosed space but a sense of vistas opening up before us, an entire landscape in which we can feel at home. If home is *axis mundi*, it implies a world beyond and around it in which we participate and live. This sense of balance between protection and open vistas is precisely what characterizes the "savanna Gestalt," an idea biologist E. O. Wilson has used to describe the kind of place from which the human species originated and in which we still feel most at home. "The crucial first step to survival in all organisms," he says, "is habitat selection. If you get to the right place, everything else is likely to be easier." The savanna offered early hominids first an abundance of animal and plant food, as well as clear views to detect rival bands; second, cliffs, hillocks and ridges from which to make even more distant surveillance and caves that offered natural shelter and protection; and third, lakes and rivers filled with fish and mollusks and providing natural perimeters of defense. Put these three together, says Wilson, and "it seems that whenever people are given a free choice, they move to open tree-studded land on prominence overlooking water."⁴ It is significant to note that the savanna landscape includes both niches and soothing, extended vistas, a sense of closeness and expansiveness. Our lingering attraction to such landscapes is no longer dictat-

³ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 91.

⁴ E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 106, 110.

ed by the necessities of hunter-gatherer life. It is now mostly aesthetic. But the attraction remains deep and strong and owes much, if we are to take Wilson's argument seriously, to our very biological-aesthetic constitution.

But our longing for place is more than biological and aesthetic. Simone Weil claims that our hunger for place arises from deep within our souls: "To be rooted," she says, "is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. . . . A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future."⁵ One should not set Weil's comment against those of Wilson, as if the soul is somehow a discrete entity of the human person, detached from our biological and aesthetic tendencies. The soul is an expansive and inclusive term for Weil. But she helpfully reminds us that our desire to be placed in the world cannot be reduced to or explained by such tendencies alone. Cultivating attachment to a place involves a personal response, a willingness to participate in the wider culture of the place, a capacity to weave one's own story into the larger and more ancient stories of the place. It means entering into relationships of mutual commitment and responsibility, becoming part of a community. It may entail, as it does for increasing numbers of people, expanding one's sense of community to include all the plant and animal species of a bio-region, cultivating a sense of being a member of what Thomas Berry refers to as the "earth community."⁶

But do we live in a culture where it is possible, even imaginable to create such a sense of intimate place, from "nest" to "earth community"? Do we even *want* this? True, we long for the security and comfort of home. But we are also inveterate travelers, seekers, movers. Twenty to thirty percent of Americans move every year; on average Americans move fourteen times over the course of a life-

⁵ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*, trans. Arthur Willis (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1952; reprint, New York, Harper Colophon Books, 1971), p. 43.

⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988), pp. 6–12. For an eloquent defense of the primacy of the "bio-region," see: Gary Snyder, "The Place, The Region, and the Commons," in *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), pp. 25–47.

time.⁷ Evidence from a recent New York Times poll indicating gradually decreasing mobility rates suggests that the American tendency toward wanderlust may actually be waning. But in spite of this, the average distance of moves remains enormous; it is not uncommon for a person or a family to move from one region of the country to an entirely different one, often more than once.

Moving is often synonymous in our culture with “getting ahead.” We often admire and aspire to emulate those whose frequent moves signal boldness of vision, dynamism, upward mobility, a willingness to stride forth into the expanding horizons of the future. Staying put, especially staying in one place for one’s entire life, can suggest a lack of ambition, fear of adventure, complacency. “To be rooted,” says geographer David Sopher, “is the property of vegetables.”⁸

Mobility, indeed, is often necessary and liberating. Leaving home, escaping the clutches of one’s family, is a necessary step in realizing autonomy and developing a mature sense of identity. As Deborah Tall notes, “for the underprivileged or disaffected . . . mobility may represent a lifesaving escape, the eluding of oppressive inherited values and the stranglehold of tradition.”⁹ Commitment to place requires encounters and obligations which can be, for some, suffocating. Space, on the other hand, says James Houston, is “the arena of freedom that has no accountability.”¹⁰ It is not surprising, given this, to note as Robert Bellah and others have done, the immense and enduring imaginative appeal to Americans of the figure of the lonesome cowboy, riding off into the sunset. No attachments, no entanglements. On to the next frontier, the next challenge.¹¹

Space, too, can alter our sense of time, liberate us from its all-too-confining constraints. On the road, in the absence of clocks, schedules, telephones, beepers, e-mail, and fax machines, time can expand, slow

⁷ Deborah Tall, *From Where We Stand: Recovering a Sense of Place* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 89.

⁸ David Sopher, “The Landscape of Home: Myth, Experience, Social Meaning,” in D. W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 134.

⁹ Tall, *From Where We Stand*, p. 97. On the relationship between individualism and mobility, see: Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 55-62.

¹⁰ James M. Houston, “The Concepts of ‘Place’ and ‘Land’ in the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” in David Ley and Marwyn S. Samuels, eds., *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems* (Chicago: Maaroufa Press, 1978), p. 226.

¹¹ Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart*, pp. 145-147.

down (although consider how successfully we have eclipsed even this space with the masterful technology of cell phones and portable fax machines). The imperatives of *chronos* give way to the capacious richness of *kairos*. Awareness deepens. Place can be seen, touched, enjoyed.

However, if movement often implies freedom, we need to acknowledge also an element of mobility that is increasingly prevalent in our time—the enforced movement of peoples caused by economic, political or ethnic pressures exerted upon them. Here, mobility is double-edged. It is imposed from without, fueled by the violent, unpredictable forces that uproot human beings from their homes and cast them abroad into a temporary or permanent diaspora. It is, in every sense of the word exile, often bitter exile. On the other hand, the very fact of movement can also bring with it a liberation from those forces and offer fresh opportunities. The historical experience of immigrant communities in our own country reminds us of the truth of this.

There seems to be a fundamental, perhaps irresolvable tension here. Does not the aspiration toward mobility lead, in many respects, in quite a different direction from the hunger for attachment? In practice most of us make some effort at holding them in balance. But it is not easy to do. This is at least in part because we tend to push one or the other of these tendencies too far. The impulse toward mobility, freedom of movement, and detachment from place produces, when taken to extremes, not liberation and opportunity, but a new kind of enslavement—a sense of alienation, loss of identity, detachment not only from place but from one another and from the earth itself. The impulse to create a home gives us, if pushed too far, not communities but lifestyle enclaves, gated communities with armed guards; it gives us legislation that carefully demarcates social, economic and ethnic borders, that defines who is allowed in and who must be kept out. We close down our world.

It need not be this way. A recent book by Terry Pindell, *A Good Place to Live: America's Last Great Migration*, argues that Americans in the 1990s remain a mobile people, but are increasingly taking to the road precisely to stay put: "Now, in the nineties, Americans are on the move again, this time in a migration whose motivation is not economic and whose direction is not focused on any particular geographic area of opportunity. The last migration is plainly and simply the search for a good place to live in a land where such places are perceived as

increasingly rare.”¹² Here, perhaps, we see signs of a new synthesis, a willingness to move motivated by the desire to make a commitment to place and community. Still, one may ask whether even such a migration as this is free from ambiguities. What of those places left behind? Are we not in danger of treating certain places as disposable? Are there places we are willing to declare unredeemable? Are these new destinations not at risk of being overrun and becoming culturally and socially homogeneous colonies? Are they themselves in danger of becoming exclusive enclaves? Still, perhaps the recent migration toward such places in America can also help us to imagine what it means to recover a sense of place wherever we find ourselves.

The ultimate success of this migration will depend on whether we find a way of balancing two apparently divergent impulses: love and detachment. It is increasingly clear that we will need a stronger sense of intimacy with and commitment to the particular places we live than we have known until now. On the other hand, increasing population levels and shrinking resources mean that we will also need to cultivate, personally and communally, a spirit of detachment—a capacity to live lightly upon the land. Pulling off this balancing act will require engaging in another, attending to both the ethical task before us and the spiritual renewal required to fulfill it. If the urgent task is ethical—learning how to live with a new sense of balance and integrity—the source of that ethical transformation will be poetic, imaginative, spiritual, nothing less than a rehabilitation of our religious imaginations.

One way of doing this is to sound the deeper religious and mythic currents in which we move for language and images that can help us reimagine our relationship to the world. For many of us, after all, the stories and places that shape our lives, both inwardly and outwardly, include not only the local stories of our particular place and culture but also the mythic stories of our ancient religious cultures.

Sacred Place in the Bible

The tension between place and journey, home and exile permeates the Jewish and Christian religious cultures.¹³ Here we see a deep

¹² Terry Pindell, *A Good Place to Live: America's Last Great Migration* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), p. xiv.

¹³ It is a tension far more complex than has been acknowledged by many critics of these traditions. Lynn White's famous and influential essay exemplifies the common criticism that Christianity is anti-ecological. "The Historical Roots of our Ecological

and abiding ambivalence about how and where God is to be encountered. Through a particular place? Or by leaving behind all places, even the earth itself? Through the delicate texture and brilliant light emanating from this world? Or by plunging into the darkness of the unknown? Place anchors the biblical story, from the garden, to the mountain, to the holy city of Jerusalem. These are places of encounter, epiphany, promise. Into such places are poured the hopes and longings of the Jewish and Christian communities. And in retrospect, they become places of memory in which are embedded the deep knowledge of the communities' experience with God. Yet, the biblical tradition also expresses an indifference or even hostility toward place. This due in part to the apparent primacy of time in the biblical narrative. The narrative structure of promise and fulfillment shapes the story profoundly and definitively in terms of chronology, history, hope, memory. This is particularly true of messianic hopes arising from within both the Jewish and early Christian communities, which are continually being projected further and further ahead into the future, as time and circumstances dictate. There is a suspicion within the biblical narrative of the tendency to become too secure in a place, to imagine that merely being in the sacred place is sufficient for knowing what it means to live in right relationship to God. So too, there is a positive valuation of the journey, of itinerancy, of the sense of absolute dependence upon God that comes from being on the way, lightly attached to place. The biblical tradition does not offer any easy resolution to this tension. But its affirmation of both impulses and its recognition of the need for each to stand in ongoing critical and creative tension with the other is instructive.

Consider the resonance of the place names themselves. In the Hebrew Scriptures, there is Egypt, Sinai (the desert and the mountain), Canaan, Shechem, Mamre, Mt. Zion, Jerusalem, Babylon; in the New Testament, Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan river, Bethany, Jerusalem, Golgotha. These are more than mere names. They carry with them and call forth a web of narratives and events which are rooted in particular places. The biblical story can in a sense be told in terms of the texture and character of these

Crisis," *Science*, vol. 155 (March 10, 1967), pp. 1203–7. While containing much truth, it fails to acknowledge the fundamentally ambiguous character of the Jewish and Christian legacies regarding the natural world. For a more balanced reading of this tradition, see: H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

places. Nor are such places merely incidental to the story. To mention them is to conjure up the hope and longing at the heart of those stories. Places function symbolically to invite the hearer to fully inhabit the story and to, imaginatively, in any case, inhabit the place out of which the story arises.

The place of paradise, in all its mythic concreteness and ethereality, retains a strong and enduring allure for the Jewish and Christian imaginations; it is the place of origins, the place of innocence from which we have come and to which we hope, someday, to return.¹⁴ The promise of home gives basic shape and purpose to the Abrahamic and Davidic stories, opening up the hope of a place that their descendants may one day inhabit in peace and freedom. The drama of the Exodus can be read as a narrative of movement from one place to another, from the land of bondage to the land of milk and honey—by way of the wilderness. Mt. Sinai, the holy mountain, the place where God's mercy and demands are revealed, becomes a primary focus of the Jewish longing for relationship with God and with one another; it is suggestive of its immense symbolic power that Sinai would become, in both Jewish and Christian traditions, one of the primary symbols of the mystical encounter with God. Jerusalem, the holy city, becomes not only the physical, political, ritual and social center of the Hebrew nation but its mythic center also, especially in exile or diaspora. Consider the poignant cry of the exiles, found in Psalm 137. Jerusalem has been razed; the few survivors have been dragged off in chains to Babylon. Their captors taunt them, asking them to sing "Songs of Zion." But the captives cannot sing: "How could we sing the Lord's song/in a foreign land?" they demand. It is impossible to sing of the heart's deepest hunger, impossible to pray, when one has been so severely, radically dislocated. No surprise then that this same longing for home should find expression in the plaintive cry of Diaspora Passover celebrations: "Next year in Jerusalem!"

In the New Testament, we see a similar appreciation for place, both concretely as well as symbolically. Particular places figure prominently into the Gospel narratives as *loci* of significant epiphanies or encounters, and mark turning points either in the life of Jesus, his disciples, or in the biblical narrative. The immersion in the river Jordan and in the Judean wilderness mark two significant thresholds

¹⁴ See Jean Delumeau, *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

for Jesus, following which his own sense of identity and mission are crystallized and strengthened. For Jesus' friends, Peter, James and John, the transfiguration at Mt. Tabor illuminates both Jesus' identity and what it will mean to follow him. At a climactic moment of Luke's gospel, Jesus "sets his face toward Jerusalem" indicating clearly where the last act of his life must unfold. And he weeps for Jerusalem, the symbolic center of the Jewish community which has now become the source of fiercest resistance to his message. Finally, it is hard to overlook the significance of home and homecoming for Jesus. This is captured most powerfully in Luke's gospel, in the parable of the prodigal son, a story so utterly soaked in the compassion that lies at the heart of Jesus' life and teaching that it has been rightly called a Gospel in miniature. The entire Gospel message, the kingdom of God, is here imaged as a homecoming, a sweet, long overdue and poignant return to one's native place.

It is significant, as Amos Wilder and other New Testament scholars have pointed out, that Jesus uses such basic natural and agricultural images to ground his parables of the kingdom. The growth of trees, the freedom of lilies and birds of the field, the casting of seeds, the harvesting of wheat, the upwelling of springs of water, the churning of the sea, the blazing of light, the taste of fresh bread—such tangible, palpable, natural images permeate the stories and give shape to the imaginative world of the Gospels. Jesus' teaching has what Wilder calls a "mythopoetic" quality to it—its images reflect a poetic sensitivity to the texture of landscape and an awareness of the immense mythic power of images drawn from that landscape to create a new imaginative world, a world that Jesus invites his hearers to enter.¹⁵ It is a sacramental vision of the world, in which the sacred is suffused within the physical, palpable world. The Bible as a whole, as Wendell Berry reminds us, "leaves no doubt at all about the sanctity of the act of world-making, or of the world that was made, or of creaturely or bodily life in this world. We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy."¹⁶

But if home and place figure so prominently in the biblical narrative, it is also true that there is a significant strand of thinking that ques-

¹⁵ Amos Wilder, *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths: Essays on Imagination in the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

¹⁶ Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 98–99.

tions the necessity and meaning of attaching oneself to place in this way. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets denounce the pagan “high places”; identification of the holy with particular places is seen as idolatrous. The prophets also warn the Jewish people, especially the Royal leaders, of the dangers inherent in identifying themselves too closely with the holy city of Jerusalem in the absence of a deep ethical commitment to the imperatives of the covenant. Jeremiah declares to the citizens of Jerusalem: “Put no trust in words like these: this is the Sanctuary of Yahweh, the Sanctuary of Yahweh, the Sanctuary of Yahweh!” (Jer. 7: 4) It was precisely their tendency to do this while at the same time remaining oblivious to the needs of the poor that led, in the view of Jeremiah, to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. But Jeremiah announces not only judgment for this inappropriate attachment to place, he claims that exile itself presents extraordinary new opportunities for the Hebrew People. In Jeremiah chapter 29, Yahweh says to the exiles: “Build houses, settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce; take wives and have sons and daughters. . . . Work for the good of the country to which I have exiled you; pray to Yahweh on its behalf, since on its welfare yours depends” (Jer. 29: 5–7). Scholars such as Daniel Boyarin and Walter Brueggeman see in this Jeremian vision an extraordinary and significant reversal and criticism of earlier Davidic claims to the land, to the holy city of Jerusalem.¹⁷ Here in its place is a theology and spirituality of *galut*—exile and diaspora—seen as the new locus of encounter with God. It is significant that the symbolic center of Jewish identity that emerges from within the exile experience is not the temple or the city of Jerusalem but the scroll. This effectively liberated Jews from their dependence upon place and created the possibility of multiple (potentially infinite) centers throughout the diaspora.

Closely aligned with this idea of a permanent exile is the positive valuation placed upon the journey in the Hebrew Scriptures (even though the liberation and intimacy with God found in the journey is always being undermined by fearfulness, doubt and misgiving). We see this clearly in the Exodus account, which sees movement as the

¹⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 242–260; Walter Brueggeman, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), pp. 107–129. See also, Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Summer): 693–725; W. D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism: With a Symposium and Further Reflections* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992).

means of liberation. Exodus 15 records the joyous “Song of the Sea,” one of the purest expressions of ecstatic thanksgiving found anywhere in the Bible; significantly the song erupts on the far side of the passage through the Red Sea, when the people recognize that their liberation has been effected. They have passed through. Embarking across the desert, they learn to cast their gaze constantly ahead, to give acute attention to what Xavier Leon-Dufour has described as the “mobility of God,” the dimension of God that is manifested and symbolized by the itinerant pillar of fire, leading the Jewish people forward through the wilderness. They also learn to live in tender and vulnerable relationship with God, receiving in the midst of their wandering the manna that is mysteriously provided for them each day, and only for that day. But there is also increasing grumbling about the precariousness of this existence. Moses’ followers become so desperate that they plead with him to return them to—of all places—the security of the land of their captivity. In spite of this, later generations of prophets would look back wistfully to this journey through the desert, seeing here a vision of what it means to depend utterly on God’s goodness, to launch oneself into the precarious but intimate embrace of the wilderness.

In the New Testament, we also see a resistance to the wrong kind of attachment to place and a valuation of the journey. Jesus declares to the Samaritans that soon true worshippers will look neither to the Samaritans’ holy mountain nor to the Jewish holy city of Jerusalem, but will worship “in spirit and in truth.” And, as Marcus Borg shows so clearly, Jesus subverts the corruption and exclusiveness of the Jewish purity system centered symbolically upon the Jerusalem temple by proposing in its place an alternate vision of compassion. In doing so, he also proposes an alternative symbolic center, the open table, rooted in compassion and realized in a meal during which all those previously marginalized are invited to eat and celebrate. In place of the previously impermeable social and religious borders that often excluded women, the infirm, gentiles, and sinners, Jesus proposes a religious vision of permeable borders, a new community characterized by freedom of movement, and universal access to the holy.¹⁸ There is also an uneasiness with home and family in the Gospels, seen in the “hard sayings” that call for the followers of Jesus to sever all

¹⁸ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 46–61.

relationships with family and set out on the demanding path of discipleship. We see too Jesus' recognition of the particular difficulties arising for him from preaching in his home place—a prophet is never recognized in his own home. Jesus' own commitment to itinerant preaching, crystallized in his saying that “the Son of man has nowhere to rest his head,” not only defined his own uneasy relationship with place but set in motion a consciously itinerant ethos within the early Christian community. St. Paul too, would remind the Christians at Philippi of their fundamental homelessness, asking them to remember that their “true homeland is in heaven” (Phil. 3:10).

Nor do matters become simpler in the Christian communities' post-biblical experience. The ascetics of fourth-century Egypt plunge headlong into the wilderness as a way of seeking God beyond all boundaries, while also affirming that the key to salvation is to “sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.”¹⁹ St. Benedict includes the vow of stability as a central element of early monastic spirituality, at least in part in response to the problem of “gyrovagues,” monastic wanderers and pretenders who showed little capacity or proclivity for commitment and responsibility to the monastic way of life.²⁰ Celtic monks on the other hand flung themselves into their tiny currachs, seeking to realize in their own lives the spirit of exile. The Christian tradition has affirmed the importance and necessity of icons, the natural and deep-seated desire to place God in the cosmos; and it has been suspicious of them, wondering whether they represent a form of idolatry or an unnecessary limitation of God's transcendence. Throughout the entire history of western spirituality, two paths to God have stood in uneasy tension with one another: the *via positiva*, which seeks God through the mediation of symbols and created realities, and the *via negativa* which insists that God is only to be found in the darkness beyond all images.²¹

¹⁹ Moses 6. *The Desert Christian: Sayings of the Desert Fathers. The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. by Benedicta Ward (New York: MacMillan, 1975), p. 139. See also Abba Daniel's comment: “God is in the cell, and, on the other hand, he is outside also” Daniel 5 (Ward, p. 52). On the enduring appeal of the wilderness in Christian spirituality, see: Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991).

²⁰ *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed., Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), p. 171.

²¹ See Belden Lane, “Landscape and Spirituality: A Tension Between Place and Placelessness in Christian Thought,” *The Way Supplement* 78 (Spring, 1992).

It is difficult to see how such basic and fundamental tensions between place and journey, home and exile, light and darkness can be reconciled. Yet, the passion for place and the power of journey appear to be so closely bound up together that they cannot be untangled. Can one be simultaneously at home and on the way, secure and unstable, located within clear boundaries and constantly moving across boundaries, attached to place and detached, grounded in the present and yearning toward the future? This seems to be, against all logic, or probability, precisely what is called for. This paradoxical tension signals, I would suggest, the kind of exquisite balance we must maintain in learning to respond to the touch of God upon the soul, in learning how to live in this world. It is a tension that runs to the heart of the Jewish biblical tradition which, as Harry Berger notes, “sets the tent against the house, nomadism against agriculture, the wilderness against Canaan, wandering and exile against settlement, diaspora against the political integrity of a settled state.”²² So also with Christianity. The phrase “living between the times” has been used to describe the existential posture of Christians, a restlessness of spirit that comes from knowing that Jesus has been and continues to be in our midst, but has not yet been fully manifested. Perhaps we need to imagine ourselves, as Philip Sheldrake has done in his recent book on Celtic spirituality, as “living between two worlds,” or as “living between two places”—home and the unknown horizon stretching before us—or as living in a paradoxical state of precariousness and security, at home and in exile.²³ Perhaps, in other words, we need to imagine ourselves as being *both* on the way and at home.

What would it mean actually to live within such an imaginative world? To live in two worlds simultaneously? Or to live between two worlds? It means at least two things, I think. First, it means learning to live within the creative, imaginative tension of metaphor. Consciously striving to place these seemingly divergent impulses in relation to one another may require the same risk and have the same creative effect upon us that a metaphor does—exploding our previously

²² Harry Berger, “The Lie of the Land: The Text Beyond Canaan,” *Representations* 25 (1989): 123. Cited in Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, pp. 253–54. Boyarin (p. 254), commenting on Berger, argues: “A vision of Jewish history and identity that valorizes the second half of each of these binaries and sees the first as only a disease constitutes not a continuation of Jewish culture but its subversion.”

²³ Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Two Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995).

limited understanding of the world, compelling us to live simultaneously with the “is” and “is not” implied by metaphorical tension, and opening us up to ever-expanding horizons of understanding and meaning. In concrete terms, this will mean searching out new metaphors, new images, to help us live more deeply into the rich ambiguity of our relationship between place and placelessness.

For example, consider the image of the dancer that the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard uses to understand the meaning of faith as it is expressed in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son. Kierkegaard asks: What does it mean to trust that utterly and deeply, to suspend all expectations and yet be filled with hope? It is, he says, like the movement of a dancer: “It is supposed to be the most difficult task for a dancer to leap into a definitive posture in such a way that there is not a second when he is grasping after the posture, but by the leap itself he stands fixed in that posture. Perhaps no dancer can do it—but that is what [the knight of faith] does.” Pretenders, those who merely posture and mimic faith, can be spotted by the awkwardness of their movements, their vacillation, especially in the instant they touch the ground. “But,” says the philosopher, “to be able to fall down in such a way that the same second it looks as if one were standing and walking, to transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime and the pedestrian—that only the knight of faith can do, and this is the one and only prodigy.”²⁴ One should not imagine such an act to be easy. It is, Kierkegaard says, the most difficult thing of all. It presupposes immense and difficult struggle, even agony. But in that moment of release, all is transparent. Abraham is poised between two worlds, having leapt into the unknown (with a transparency of belief) and now descending into a new world, leave-taking and homecoming, faith and uncertainty, stillness and motion, fused in one fluid gesture.

Or consider the image of “hovering” found in the work of medieval theologian and mystic Richard of St. Victor. Images of birds he has seen in flight help him to evoke the highest forms of contemplation:

One may see . . . [other types of birds] suspending themselves in one and the same place for a long time with trembling and often rapidly vibrating wings and, through motion, maintain themselves motionless by their agitation.

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, “Fear and Trembling,” in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. by Robert Bretall (New York: The Modern Library, 1938), p. 121.

Or in the words of Hugh of Fouillo, "I shall both fly and rest."²⁵ One thinks here of the hummingbird, perfect stillness in motion. The idea of a "coincidence of opposites" was familiar to most medieval thinkers, but often yielded no real sense of union between the opposites. Yet, Richard of St. Victor is working with a slightly different, more subtle perspective here, one that Ewert Cousins has described as a "coincidence of mutually affirming complementarity."²⁶ In doing so, he is attempting to hold together in one image a single reality that seems to be two realities. He is trying to give meaningful expression to that which is inexpressible, namely the way in which human beings can maintain deep within themselves both the motion of yearning and the perfect stillness of attention, thus entering into and participating in the dynamic stillness of God.

Or, finally, consider the journey that is no journey described by the Trappist monk and writer, Thomas Merton. Toward the end of his life, Merton gave a talk to the Sisters of Redwoods Monastery in which he described for them his sense of authentic contemplative prayer. He wanted to dispel the notion that prayer is complicated, that it involves a long and mostly frustrating quest for an elusive, remote goal. With the model of technology, he said, you have horizontal progress, where you start at one point and move to another and then to another. And the danger is that you will translate this technological imagery into your prayer life, and set out building a veritable lego-castle of prayer. "But that" he says, "is not the way to build a life of prayer. In prayer we discover what we already have. You start from where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize you are already there. We already have everything but we don't know it and don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess."²⁷ *We already have everything*. We don't have to go anywhere. Except of course that we do have to go somewhere, deeper and deeper into the center.

²⁵ Cited in Steven Chase, *Angelic Wisdom: The Cherubim and the Grace of Contemplation in Richard of St. Victor* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. xiii.

²⁶ Ewert Cousins, *Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978).

²⁷ Thomas Merton, cited by David Steindl-Rast in "Man of Prayer," in *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p. 80.

The exquisite poise and grace of the dancer at the apex of his leap . . . the stillness in motion of the hovering bird . . . the journey that is no journey. These three images of faith and prayer both affirm the fundamental ambiguity raised throughout this essay and offer the promise of some kind of resolution of that ambiguity, a recognition of the "coincidence of mutually affirming complementarity." But we need still to ask, I think, what are we to do? How are we to deepen within ourselves this sense of motion in stillness of which the mystics speak? Can such a deepened awareness change in any perceptible way how we live in the world? Can it help us to resolve the tension we have been considering here between home and exile?

Here lies the second task—learning to cultivate our own poetic voices. By poetic I mean primarily the capacity to pay careful attention, to describe the intricate texture of the world we inhabit and to tell the stories of the places we inhabit and the worlds we move between. Joseph Wood Krutch, that wonderful chronicler of the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico noted: "It is not easy to live in that continuous awareness of things that is alone truly living . . . the faculty of wonder tires easily. . . . Really to see something once or twice a week is almost inevitably to have to try to make oneself a poet."²⁸ The work of poets has perhaps never been more important than it is in the present moment, when we are in danger of losing so much that is irretrievable. Fortunately we are not alone in this endeavor. All around the country regional writers and poets are digging in, paying attention, offering us lovingly textured visions of particular landscapes, helping to show us what it might mean to reinhabit the places in which we now live. They are creating the equivalent on our continent of what the Australian Aborigines call "Songlines," that intricate network of sacred places, celebrated by those who know them in ever-expanding sung narratives.²⁹ The poets in our midst have learned the lesson that these Aborigines know so well, that "an unsung land is a dead land." In singing the songs of our land, they are challenging and inviting us to join the chorus, to tell the stories of our journeys, of our places, to keep the land alive.

²⁸ Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Desert Year* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 37–38.

²⁹ Bruce Chatwin, *Songlines* (New York: Viking, 1987), pp. 2, 13. For an extraordinarily sensitive reading of this practice, see: Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

That is what I am struggling to do in my own current place, the city of the Angels, still for me a place of exile but gradually becoming home. A city of constant movement (tectonic, automotive, social, cultural) yet with its own distinct sense of place—from the shaded canyons of the Santa Monica mountains to the rough-edged and quirky Watts Towers. A good place to be at home in. And to venture forth from. So too I am looking more closely at the religious traditions in which I am grounded—Judaism and Christianity—traditions that invite us to be at home in the world and not entirely at home, that cherish attachment to place and warn against idolatrous or presumptive attachment to place, that invite us to dwell deeply in the “holy places” where God is revealed and call us forth into the unknown where God is also revealed.

An ongoing tension, requiring of us suppleness, imagination and courage. Mary Oliver, in two early poems, invites us to consider what it might mean to live between two worlds, or deeply within two worlds—seeking the sacred within the yet-to-be-explored horizons of the wild and in the most familiar places of home.³⁰ “Like Magellan,” she urges, “let us find our islands/To die in, far from home, from anywhere/Familiar. Let us risk the wildest places,/Lest we go down in comfort, and despair.” But another figure also beckons to her imagination. In “Going to Walden,” Oliver writes:

It isn't very far as highways lie.
I might be back by nightfall, having seen
The rough pines, and the stones, and the clear water.
Friends argue that I might be wiser for it.
They do not hear that far-off Yankee whisper:
How dull we grow from hurrying here and there!

Many have gone, and think me half a fool
To miss a day away in the cool country.
Maybe. But in a book I read and cherish,
Going to Walden is not so easy a thing
As a green visit. It is the slow and difficult
Trick of living, and finding it where you are.

³⁰ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), pp. 238–239.



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