

It was 1981, and I was reading in Thomas Merton, "New Seeds of Contemplation."

Merton was both a mystic, and rooted, embodying in his life and in his work a paradox that expressed a Gospel journey. I was drawn to his work, and in my own life recognized the threads of a common pilgrimage: a search for a place to belong.

As the son of an Air force Sergeant, I grew familiar with home by its absence. The postings came every two or three years, and when I left home for college my travels continued in the same pattern: my first year in Vancouver, three years in Winnipeg, back to Vancouver again, and then two years in Fresno, California. Never enough time to set down roots, but in that wandering my sensitivity to roots increased.

But that isn't the whole story. My father bought two acres of land in 1968, and then six acres on a hillside in Yarrow, BC. He cleared land, and his children helped. He planted trees and taught me the rudiments of pruning. His own roots in central Manitoba on a small farm found new expression. And his love of all animals and trees, and especially fruit trees, was passed on to another generation. My father retired around 1978, but he is a gardener still, and everywhere I have lived I have planted trees.

Michel de Certeau tells that in modern Athens the vehicles of transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a "metaphor" - a bus or a train. Stories as metaphors help us to organize our memories, and memories root us in place. They select and link places together, and relate them to our lives and the lives of others. To de Certeau, "Every story is a travel story - a spatial practice."¹

Thomas Merton, mystic and priest, trying first to escape the world, perceived that the path to life was in and *through* creation. Life became sacramental: the created world a window opening toward God. All around him creation was continuing – the dance of the Lord in emptiness. He saw imperfection not as lack of completeness, but as the playground of grace. He would have heartily approved of the words of Bruce Cockburn:

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 115.

Light pours from a million radiant lives
Off of kids and dogs and the hard-shelled husbands and wives
All that glory shining around and we're all caught taking a dive
And all the beasts of the hills around shout, "such a waste!
Don't you know that from the first to the last we're all one in the gift of grace!"²

Somewhere in Modernity we became insulated from the world God loves, sheltered behind protective barriers that were fraught with fear. Separating the sacred and secular, the physical and spiritual worlds, we came to believe that driving across town to attend a church in another neighbourhood could faithfully express our call to follow Jesus. We didn't see how we had divorced mission and incarnation, and how we damaged the fabric of the gospel in making worship an out-of-this-world experience. Futurist William Knoke argues that we are entering a "placeless society" where the difference between near and far is erased³ and where the longing for a place to call home will only increase.

The Gospel response is simple: to recover the practice of parish and become Jesus body.

Hands – to wash and to serve with.

Feet – to walk in our neighbourhoods and spread the Gospel of peace.

Hands extended – to welcome our neighbors home.

Let's welcome them where they live, telling the Gospel story. Sean Benesh writes of the need for churches to be developed with walkability as a key value. Why? Because "it elevates the chance for investment in the local neighborhood that otherwise might be missing if the church is built and grows based upon the auto-based commuter mentality."⁴ The commuter is the consumer and tourist, viewing the world through a pane of glass, and not entering into the lived story of the neighbourhoods they visit.

Today "missional" is all the rage. If mission is the sending impulse, incarnation is the rooting and deepening one. Henri Nouwen reminds us that we must convert hostility to hospitality – and this is a call

² Bruce Cockburn, "In the Falling Dark," 1976

³ William Knoke, *Bold New World: The Essential Road Map to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Kodansha America, 1996).

⁴ Sean Benesh, *Metrospiritual: The Geography of Church Planting* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2011) 156-157

to prayer.⁵ It is in prayer that we will discern the Spirit in the rhythms and textures of the neighbourhoods to which we are called, and which Jesus died to redeem.

BIO

Len Hjalmarson lives with his wife Betty in Kelowna, BC. He is co-author of *Missional Spirituality* (IVP: 2010) and an adjunct professor of ministry at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Chicago.

⁵ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (San Francisco: Image Press, 1986)