

Chapel Talk
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When my two year old son, Joshua, trudges off to bed at night, he carries with him certain provisions for a journey he does not truly wish to take. Child psychologists and parents will tell you that children fear bedtimes not only because of the dark, but also because of the separation from family or activities happening elsewhere in the house. In a sense, Joshua tries to pack up the playroom with him to bed. His survival techniques include his blanket, Teddy the bear, plastic figures of Batman and Robin, Lego pieces, cheese crackers, a tool box, McDonald's Happy Meal toys, perhaps a plastic spatula, a Battle Troll and Nunja turtle stolen from his brother, Matchbox cars, a Thomas the Tank Engine book, or his fire truck with two ladders. It is an heroic and comical sight watching him assemble and attempt to transport these staples upstairs. What he takes with him to bed tells us how he feels that particular night; and when he awakens at 6:00 a.m., what he clutches with him from bed reveals the nature of that night-time journey. For Joshua, these objects symbolize the journey: like ancient societies who buried the dead with their most important belongings, Joshua's eclectic possessions characterize and fortify him for his passage into morning. Without being consciously aware of it, Joshua has a story to tell, through these talismans, of his survival, of an emotionally significant experience in his life.

I began to understand Joshua's evening ritual this vacation in part because the news was filled with tales about survival: the blizzard of '93; the 114 climbers from a Michigan prep school who endured five days in the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee during the blizzard; the families still caught in Waco, Texas; the thousands of people who lived through the explosion at the World Trade Tower; the recent movie, Alive!; the daily horror in Sarajevo. In each of these situations, the story of survival was almost more astounding than survival itself -- because the journey manifests our humanity; it spotlights, sometimes painfully, our marrow and sinews and mettle.

One story in particular struck me over vacation. Jane Pauley on NBC featured a young couple, who, with their five month old baby, drove across Utah last Thanksgiving to attend a family funeral. But they got caught in a snow storm, took back roads when the interstate closed down, then unknowingly drove about 15 miles on an abandoned highway before stopping when the snow made it too dangerous to continue. After two days huddled in their snowbound car, they set off by foot to find help. They were not experienced hikers, nor were they equipped for such conditions, yet they knew they would freeze to

death if they stayed in their car. After trudging 30 miles in the barren wilderness of northern Utah, they stopped on a desolate ridge. There was no sign of life or help anywhere. The father decided to go back while the mother, her feet too cold to walk any further, crouched with the baby in a tiny cave -- in reality, a closet in the rocks -- to wait for help. The father walked back to the car, then went in a different direction another 20 miles before he was discovered by a rancher. This was now eight days after they first got lost, three days after he left his wife and child. Rescuers miraculously were able to follow the father's footprints back to his wife and child. All survived.

In the hospital room, where the parents were learning to walk again after losing most of their toes, Jane Pauley's cameras recorded visits by a variety of Hollywood producers who wanted to make a movie of their ordeal. The mother, in search of a producer who would understand her experience, asked one director, "So, what do you think our story is about?" Her desire to be accurately retold mirrors Hamlet's when he tells Horatio "to tell my story"; it explains why famous people write autobiographies but fear biographies: that mother's wish cut to the heart of how we live meaningful lives. The account, the story, the myth of the journey has a value of its own. How we face that challenge, how we experience it, what happens during the journey -- all these uncover our humanity, our backbone, our purpose. In the end, that mother's question is asked of all of us: "What is your journey's story?"

There is little revolutionary or original in these thoughts. People have been struggling forever to figure out what their story is, how to tell that story, how, as Virginia Wolf says, "to make of the moment something permanent." We have been on a long journey together at this School. The seniors, for example, are on an ever shortening march to graduation. All of us are involved in a variety of expeditions -- each class, play, musical group, team, corridor, relationship is a journey; and almost all of them end, one way or another, in about ten weeks. But grammatically speaking, in the phrase "the journey to graduation" or "the journey to summer vacation," the subject -- the most important element -- is "journey," while the object of the preposition is "graduation," "summer vacation."

What will be our story this June as we look back on the spring term? What will we make of these moments together? Like Joshua venturing off the bed at night, what will be our provisions, our staples, for this trek? Yesterday, perhaps providentially, my wife received a letter from Jenny Kern, Class of '83, writing about her life since her graduation ten years ago:

I am often reminded of my senior page quotation from Paul Theroux,

The Old Patagonian Express: something like "it's journey, not the arrival that matters." At 27 years, I believe that is true, In fact, "the journey" is everything we do, are and will become. In terms of my professional life, I would not have guessed 10 years ago that I would be finishing up law school and preparing to learn the ropes as a civil rights attorney. Career responsibilities since SAS include teacher, coach, the ministry, therapist, lobbyist, public policy maker, attorney, and the journey continues.

Jenny goes on to talk about her spinal cord injury in 1985 which left her paralyzed, her move from New York City to Berkeley, California, her marriage this summer, and trips to friends and family. She concludes:

The journey is mostly full and usually complicated -- never dull.

The arrival? I guess I'm too busy to think about it --

As I write, an elevator is being installed in my home -- New dimensions!

Jenny's confession that she's "too busy to think about [the arrival]" should be our legacy this spring, for the faculty, the seniors, the underformers. There is much to be done in these ten weeks.

I have always loved to climb mountains. Initially, when I was a child, it was for the conquest, the exhilaration of the height and the majesty of the panorama; and, if truth be told, it was the thrill of beating my brothers and aged parents to the top. But as I grew older, I realized I liked the path better than the peak. Paradoxically, there was more to see on the trail, more to think about, more to share with others as our legs stretched up the slope, more to experience than that brief shining moment atop the usually cloudy and blustery summit. As I follow Joshua up the stairs, gathering a few of his fallen treasures, I sense his wisdom of and responsibility toward this essential journey. There are unknown trails and trials ahead, as there should be. What are your provisions? What will be your story?