

Chapel Talk  
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Last summer my three boys, our dog Millie and I loaded up the family station wagon and drove eleven hours to see the Roaches and Tallulah near Niagara Falls in Canada. In recent years I've realized that for such Odyssean voyages you actually pack twice: once for where you are eventually going, and once for the trip itself. And I've also come to understand that on many occasions, the trip itself can be just as significant as the ultimate destination. Maybe, just maybe, the passage is more important than the arriving.

During our seemingly endless journey last summer across the back roads of New Hampshire and Vermont, and then the entire width of New York—can you imagine how depressing it was to spend over five hours just getting to the New York State Thruway, to be greeted by the big green mileage sign announcing “Buffalo, 380 miles”?—during this recreation of the Joad family's jaunts across Oklahoma and California in *The Grapes of Wrath*, a lot happened which reminded me about the uniqueness of car travel. Initially, there's the whole art and science of packing. Many years ago I realized how inadequate I was as a man when I first packed the car for a long trip, stuffing in boxes and duffle bags and sports equipment randomly—and nothing fit. As a child, I was in awe of how my father found a place for everything. Disparate objects and shapes all coalesced symmetrically, artistically—an engineering feat. He had the same skill loading the dishwasher. Men pack well—it's a gender thing, a mark of their virility from the old pioneer and cave dwelling days. We love to journey, to experience the world, to conquer foreign lands, to get lost and still pretend its part of the master plan. Yet it's the arriving that usually messes us up, and that's where the women come in to save civilization. They're the ones who unpack and make the meal and create the home and tell us wandering men what to do next. My hunch is that civilization would still be bundled, perfectly bundled, mind you, outside in the yard on a mule if it wasn't for women.

While I'm loading the car at our home in New Hampshire with clothes and coats and athletic gear and Millie's food, my boys are filling their backpacks for the trip. Carter

and Joshua pour Legos and Star Wars action figures and stuffed animals and Playmobil people and G.I. Joe men and all those accessories into their packs. It's like the reverse of Mary Poppins' magic bag as they cram those provisions into their backpacks. Of course, within the first mile of the trip, the area around Josh and Carter's feet is a sea of loose toys. Weeks after a trip is over there are still random Lego pieces underneath the floor mats or buried beneath the seat cushion. And I'm not really sure how many of those toys are actually used during a given trip—just having them around seems sufficient.

Additionally, you have to assemble pillows and small blankets, and you don your most comfortable clothes—Joshua is usually attired in his pajamas and Tower of London slippers. In the old days, say, the 1960s and 1950s, people dressed up to travel. Whenever my grandparents arrived to visit, they looked like they were going to church on Sunday. There's an expression in my family that you always wear clean underwear on a trip because if you are in an accident, you want "people" to know that at least you are wearing clean underwear.

Once the actual expedition begins, anything can happen, and I'm not solely referring to flat tires or broken fan belts or traffic or weather or the sudden and unavoidable need to go to the bathroom in the least accommodating of venues. We've had trips where we've sailed through from Delaware to New Hampshire or New Hampshire to Canada in record time, and everyone was angelic. The only common denominator to good behavior, I've found, is that it usually means people slept most of the way. It's the waking time that becomes problematic, unpredictable, scary. Car fights are epic; they begin over the minutest of issues; and they are always accompanied by the whiniest of voices, a piercing, grating tone which adds two or three syllables to every painful utterance:

“Are we there yet?”

“My arm was here first!”

“His toes are on my side!”

“He touched me!”

“Are we there yet?”

“He’s breathing my air!”

“The sun is always on my side!”

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

“You said 20 minutes ago that we’d be there in 30 minutes, and now you say it’s going to be 30 minutes again!?”

“Are we there yet?”

“Dad, I’m not feeling good.”

I have a vivid memory of a car tour through England, when I was nine. We had rented a small RV that had a primitive kitchen and uncomfortable sleeping accommodations. The meager scullery resembled one of those big plastic kitchens made by Fisher-Price. My younger brother Tom, age 8, and I were acting as any normal 8 and 9 year old boys would who’d been crunched in a car for seven hours traversing from one boring cathedral to another ruined castle to another historical marker: we were horrible. So our father punished us by announcing that when we came to the next cathedral the two of us couldn’t go in—Yippee!—and even worse, we had to stay on the floor—! I can still remember playing Matchbox cars on the linoleum tiles while our youngest brother and sister were forced to tour that dreary cathedral. We felt they were the ones being punished. My children know that dad’s furious when all of a sudden we pull over to the side of the road, the tires loudly crossing the safety ridges, the slow braking, and then, the most dreaded signal of all, the one used only when dad’s really ticked off, the ultimate indication he’s about to blow his lid—the emergency lights go on. “We’re here for a while,” Joshua’s thinking. “Sorry, dad,” a repentant Carter mumbles deeply, while Christopher continues to feign sleep.

Another essential ingredient to car travel is food. Something there is that doesn’t want healthy food on these pilgrimages. When my family travels, we eat gross food the entire trip—although we’ve tried to go to Subway recently. Chocolate chip cookies, Pringles, McDonalds at least twice, Warheads, Lifesavers, Cheese-in-a-Can, Doritos, Twizzlers, Sour Straws, unending rolls of Bubble Tape, Krispy Kreme donuts—but not a vegetable or fruit in sight. I think it’s part of the full immersion in the experience of being

uncomfortable for a long period of time. And at the conclusion of each trip, there is a new ketchup stain smearing the upholstery. It seems wrong to try to feel better during a nine-hour trek by munching on an avocado and sun dried tomato wrap. It's against the rules of engagement.

However, there's also an affirming side to human behavior during these trips, and I think it's predicated on the same conditions of eternal purgatory. We create as we wait to get to wherever we're going. We become magicians, pulling something out of nothing. You too must have marvelous ways to pass the time, fill the void, 'make of the voyage something permanent' (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*). Nevertheless, I am disheartened by the recent innovations that car companies and parents have devised to make the traveling easier on the passengers. It's such a lazy tactic to put small TVs or VCR/DVD players in cars. Yes, little children will be occupied—muted is a more apt description—but then nothing happens.

Remember all your car activities: twenty questions, the many alphabet games, landmark citing games, songs, states and capitals, license plate games, car model games; waving to people and seeing who'd wave back at you; trying to get truck drivers to honk; the silent football game. Over the years, we've devised games which confirm that Necessity truly is the mother of Invention, and perhaps Desperation is the father. When my boys were younger, we'd play the Riming Game—I'd say "cat," they'd burst out with "bat," "hat," "sat," occasionally with "yat" and "wat." We'd do the Opposite Game; I'd say "high," they'd scream "low." I'd say "water," they'd reply "desert;" I'd utter "elevator"—and there'd be silence. Last winter we were visiting a friend in Hanover, New Hampshire and ended up bringing Hen Kennedy back with us. We made up a game where I'd say a word like "elephant" or "bicycle," and Hen and the boys would have a minute to write down as many words as they could out of those letters. Carter's favorite game is Family Jeopardy. We've modified it so that I start with a question about family or his home or friends or New Hampshire: "What's the name of Aiden's new dog?" "Name two mountains in New Hampshire." "What was the name of Joshua's baseball

team last year?” All his answers are worth lots of money. We even do the Audio Daily Double by humming or whistling a few bars from favorite hymns or musicals or TV shows.

The second remarkable feature about a car trip is that this closeness and captivity leads not only to fights and tension and cars pulling over in the breakdown lane, but also to conversations, conversations that start friendships or clarify emotions or assert care and love and even concern. When I was young, my father drove back from New Hampshire to his church in Connecticut a few times during the summer to perform weddings. He'd always take one of the four of us with him, and it's hard to describe how comforting that ride was with just him. For ten hours, he was ours. Ages ago I was driving late at night with a teacher colleague, and we did indeed have “miles to go before” we slept. Initially the conversation was casual; we'd just left Fenway Park, and I think I asked him an innocuous question about his family. He replied: “Well, here's my story.” Treasures were opened that night as the headlights pointed into the darkness. Riding to the mall or the grocery store with one of my children can be a pivotal time to unite with silence or jokes or what's happening at school. Advisors and parents have told me about the remarkable ease of discussing difficult topics in a car. Since there is little eye contact, people seem to listen well and speak honestly in the car—perhaps because of the constraint, perhaps because of the interdependent nature of the journey. Odysseus and Mentor, Huck and Jim, Thelma and Louise, even Steve Martin and John Candy in that wonderful movie *Planes, Train and Automobiles*: our culture is replete with stories of the story of the trip, fables which focus on connection, survival, growth and resilience.

There is a comfort in the confinement of a car, that despite the occasionally ensuing tension—Hen told me all she remembers about that trip from New Hampshire last winter was a lot of sibling wrestling in the back seat—there is still an almost claustrophobic intensity in a car. Unlike a train or plane, you can't get up, stretch, walk down the aisle, head to the café car. The roof over your head is closer, the leg space considerably less, but maybe that tightness breeds intimacy. When my parents drove our family to New Hampshire, we traveled in a VW Square Back, a slightly smaller version

of the VW Passat. Into it we poured two adults, four children, one to two dogs, and many duffle bags. One of the four children had to be in the back area, which we fought for, even if it meant curling up with the dog, because no one wanted to sit next to my brother Tom. Even as a child he had big legs and thighs, and he always splayed them out at nearly 90 degrees, which inevitably led to major border conflicts in the back seat. The lone recourse we smaller siblings had was to torment him with the “Don’t Touch” game, an invention perfectly suited for annoyance. The object was to put our finger as close as possible to his face, ear, neck, throat *without* touching him, and see how long he could endure the torture.

So finally my parents gave in to the “Bigger is Better” American culture, and rented a VW bus for a weekend jaunt to New Hampshire, to see if providing people more area might decrease the number of fights, allow people more room to sleep, and make the trip less resemble World War III. I remember how we raced in, claimed one of the rows of those immense back seats—and for the first 20 minutes everything was serene, happy, pleasant. But then slowly, all four of us began to move forward. We couldn’t hear what the parents were talking about, and parents are always chatting about something fascinating like sex or gossip or secrets at work. Because there was suddenly so much space, we couldn’t feed off each other. It was as if those luxurious accommodations were counter to how we existed as a family. Within half an hour we were all in the second seat, and my parents realized that for better and for worse, we liked being together. We never got the van.

Sociologists and behaviorists claim that what families most need are smaller homes, places where people can’t hide away, homes where parents and children participate in and travel through common space. Large cars— besides guzzling gas and excessively polluting—and big houses work against that intimacy because they provide too much breathing room. For practical and philosophical reasons, St. Andrew’s and other boarding schools and colleges have few singles available in their dormitories: part of the phenomenon of residential schools is learning how to share four walls and a floor, not opulent quarters but livable space that must be negotiated and discovered together.

And then, just when you're craving for another double cheeseburger and super-sized fries or your third Snickers bar or are nervous about the next question coming from a parent or friend, the voyage ends. You stumble out, wobbly on legs too long cramped and sedentary. You're there. But the most significant journeys conclude not quite where you expected to land, and you're not exactly the same person as when you embarked. Odysseus suffers a physical transformation when he comes to Ithaca, symbolizing the changes he's undergone these ten years. Hopefully something has arisen during the adventure to revise the supposed purpose, to alter the way we peer at the harbor, and to modify our reason for going to this destination in the first place. My son Joshua calls this serendipity the "fun of finding things by mistake." These discoveries and surprises occur when we stay open to the process, to the experience of the expedition, and don't concentrate so myopically on the end result. We deliberate so much on college acceptances or graduation day or final grades or league standings that we miss out on the daily miracles that transpire along the way. This year is our trip, and when we reach commencement, we should look and be different; otherwise, we've thrown away the opportunity given us to explore, or to find friendships and interests and talents "by mistake." If we cling fiercely to our original itinerary then we can't encounter the mysterious yet magical fun of moving off the map. The arrival, as a friend of mine once remarked, "is when you realize you ought to re-pack your bag."

This weekend, tomorrow, next Monday, throughout the year, throughout your life, I wish those of you traveling, traveling by car, by foot, by mind, by emotion, by faith, by the heart, a healthy dose of meaningful waiting, creativity, patience, sustaining provisions, and strength to focus less on where you are headed and more on how and why you are passaging. On such journeys, you never get lost.