

Going the Distance When You Can't See the Road
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A long time ago, before cell phones, I was working in a church in Fresno. My new husband worked in the computer industry in San Jose. Every Monday morning, after spending the weekend with me in Fresno, he would drive blind through the tooley fog to get to work in Cupertino. Until he arrived at work and called me, my heart was in my throat. That road was scary, and he was driving fast.

We were in love. We wanted to go the distance. We thought we knew the road, but we couldn't see much.

I think that road was a metaphor for our marriage. We drove too fast. We over-drove our headlights. We couldn't see where we were going, but, as Winston Churchill said, "Damn the torpedoes"---we went full-speed ahead. Eventually we crashed.

Life is like that. You think you know where you are going, but there are roadblocks and detours. There are unexpected curves, slippery surfaces, and tooley fog. You can't always see the road ahead.

We like to believe we're in control. We pretend—like little children—that if we don't step on a crack, life will turn out as planned and mother's back will remain intact. We watch *The Secret*. We visualize. We pray. We work hard to manifest life the way we want it, or think it should be. Sometimes we even work hard to manifest life the way we think God wants it to be.

And then, crash----when we least expect it.

And in spite of all our careful calculation and navigation, life veers from our planned direction. There's a big pot-hole. The road zigs where we thought it was going to zag. We get lost. Maybe we end up in a ditch, or worse. We're not sure where to go or what to do next. Sometimes it's a small setback or detour and you can get back on the road. But other times, your journey and who you thought you were is irrevocably broken, like a vessel spoiled in the potter's hand, and you're left wondering what happened and what, if anything, God can do with the remains.

It happened to me. I don't usually tell my own story when I preach, but this week something is compelling me to share myself with you more personally. I hope you don't mind. Because I think there may be something in it that could be of use to you.

This episode begins in the summer of 2007. I had recently fallen back in love with the great love of my youth. I was lecturing at our camp in Fryeberg, ME, looking forward to sharing a beatific week with my beloved in a house we had rented on the coast of ME, when I found a small group of Swedenborgians in Western MA wanted a minister and were willing to help build a church. It had long been my dream to build a church from

scratch—the same way I like to cook. All fresh ingredients, combining tradition and innovation, and putting classic things together in a new way to make a new dish that stimulates, nourishes and fulfills. I had a vision of a NEW New Church for the 21st Century.

I was willing to go the distance to make it happen.

So, after nearly a year of proposals and negotiations, with the support of my partner, I put what I could fit into my little Saturn and the rest in a storage pod, which was still sitting on my curb, awaiting pick-up when I drove off on my new adventure, feeling like Louise, without Thelma. I had high hopes. The stars seemed aligned. I had found a pot of gold in the form of a bequest that had languished untapped for over 80 years, for the express purpose of building a new church in that area, which contained just enough money to get the job done right with a “launch large” strategy.

Surely it was meant to be. Surely God was with me.

But life turned out very differently from what I had planned.

After a successful feasibility study, just 4 months after I arrived, and a month after my pod was delivered to Massachusetts, with all my stuff, the funding committee pulled the plug on the entire project. I was stunned and devastated. For the first time in my life I felt defeated. My life was in a ditch. I clung to my love, as all that was left of value in my life.

Five weeks later, my beloved partner was killed.

You can only imagine where that left me. Broken. Bereft of all meaning in my life. In a mere six weeks my entire world had shattered—my career dream, my sense of mission, and my love. Not to mention my livelihood. I was left with nothing, wondering what had happened and why, and most of all, where God was.

Why had I been led to this, if this was what was going to happen? Did I misread the signs? Where was God in such misfortune?

I had well-meaning friends, who said things like “Why did you create that?” or “Wow, God must have really had to get your attention to have something like that happen.”

We can’t help but ask why. As if God trucked in evil and murder. As if we were the center of the universe. As if God arranged to have terrible things happen to teach us a lesson! What ego!

The Psalmist, too, faced terrible things. Think of the frequent references to enemies and enmity, to the smashing of infants’ heads upon rocks. This is a violent world. And, in that world, we wonder where God is.

I will tell you where God was. But first, let's be clear: God was NOT in the act of what happened. That happened because human freedom sometimes turns toward evil, the delight in destruction. And God, in infinite mercy and wisdom, lets us have that freedom.

But God was there in every moment of my pain and healing, like the potter's hand in today's scripture (Jeremiah 18:1-6).

Friday morning, October 24th 2008, I was waiting for the 9:30 AM plane from Hartford to seek my love. She had been missing since Wednesday night. I went to the gate and pleaded, "Please get me to Palm Beach. Get me on any plane. It's a matter of life and death." I was still waiting when I got the news that they found her body in a parking lot. My scream, like the keening of an Arab woman, pierced the veneer that covers the anxiety of the airport lounge. It was the sound of my world shattering. The woman at the gate understood. She rushed over with a security guard.

No doctor, no, No drugs. I would take this straight. I accepted a single malt Scotch, and let the woman usher me to a room inside the Business class area where I could be kept away from the poor, stunned passengers, who wanted only to get to their sales meeting or their weekend rendezvous without disturbance. Who could blame them? I was a mad woman with nothing to lose, having just lost everything.

The woman let me call my friends. I never considered not going the distance that day, although I had no idea of what lay ahead. This angel of mercy held the plane until I was calm enough to board. When everyone else was seated, she ushered me to the first seat in the front.

I bid her goodbye with a hug and a heart-felt "thank you" for her ministries. "How did you know?" I asked her.

A tear formed in her eye. "The same thing happened to me five years ago," she said, returning my hug.

In that moment I understood how God's love prevails in the face of evil.

The Potter's Hand was in the miracle of the perfect job to sustain me and allow me to be of use, as a social worker with traumatized teenagers. I was perfectly at home.

The Potter's hand was in the help of the old boyfriend who had developed a new neurological protocol for healing brains from trauma, who offered me thousands of dollars worth of treatments for free.

It was in the love and guidance of the six friends and colleagues who gathered from around the country, and met with me by teleconference every week or two for months, until I was able to make my own decisions again.

And so it went. God's healing, regenerating hand leading me, step by step, into the light, re-forming me into something new. I could never again be who I had been; I was irrevocably changed, but I could be better. The shattered glass of the pot I was, was being reworked into a stained glass window, for the greater glory of God—a window that tells a story, and has its own color---but is sufficiently transparent to let the light shine through and beyond itself.

I was still willing to go the distance, but for a long time I could only see a step or two ahead—worse than driving in tooley fog, it was more like walking through a blizzard in the moonlight. You can just see a few inches in front of you. There is no way to plan where you are going. You have no idea. You can only take the next step and trust that God knows. Not that God has a plan; it is more like God has a hope, and like a GPS, every time we get thrown off our route, whether by circumstances or our own willfulness, God tries to re-route to get us on the best road for where we need to go. So you just take that one step.

I am reminded of a story I heard recently about a young man who went to work with Mother Teresa in Calcutta. When he met with her he asked, “Mother, you are so clear and purposeful in what you do, while I am so lost and without direction. Would you pray for clarity for me?”

She laughed, “Young man, clarity is greatly overrated. I have no clarity at all. But I do have trust. I shall pray for trust for you.”

Now I can see a few feet ahead instead of a few inches, but I still can't plan far like I used to, Instead I trust. I go slowly. I don't want to out-drive my headlights. I know God is with me. I know that, like the spoiled pot in the potters hand, I am being re-worked “ as seems good to him” —or Her. I am being regenerated through the very events, which, though God did not make them, God can bring goodness from. God's love does not leave, no matter if I am in the highest heavens or if I make my bed in Sheol. All darkness is as light to God. So we may go through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, as I did, but God will be with us. God is remaking us, in our brokenness, into something new—as we are willing---like the Nation of Israel.

If you are willing, God will remake you from the pieces of your brokenness. It may not fit your picture of who you thought you were, or your plan for where you thought you were heading. But if you can let go of that and can open your heart, God will be there, at every crossroad, in every ditch, in every broken pot and spoiled piece of clay saying “Come to me, and I will give you relief and hope. I will make good of this terrible thing. For where I am there is only hope and goodness, and I can be anywhere. I can follow you wherever you go, into the darkness or into the light, it is all the same to me. I am with you forever.

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹*If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*

¹⁰*even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

¹¹*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"*

¹²*even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."* (Psalm 139:8-12)

Let us pray, "Oh immortal and most merciful God, help us to know that we don't need to see the road ahead. We can trust that you are with us in every moment, not to judge and punish us, but to redirect us to your path, to turn all ill to good, to shed your light on our darkness, to shine your infinite love upon us, in hopes that we will be become disciples, willing to go the distance."